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Tales of Working Without/Against a Compass

Rethinking Ethical Dilemmas in Educational Ethnography

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Introduction

Television reports on another police killing of an African American man in a US city. A Black Lives Matter movement begins to influence how Americans think of themselves. An African American kindergartner happily skips to school in a place where the school windows are broken and teachers are in short supply. A contemporary political candidate for President of the United States proposes to close the borders to all Muslims. The world faces a Syrian refugee crisis. Rich people get richer off other people's labor whilst those laborers get less of the market value. The World Bank exacerbates the poverty of some of the poorest countries on the planet. Sexual violence runs rampant across nation boundaries. In this world, it would be impossible for me not to ask the question: "How can one be right in-the-world?" Me, the white, middle-class, middle-aged, middle-minded citizen, parent, grandparent, partner, friend, professor, and researcher? What differences does a (my) life make to a world of violence, inequity, anguish, and oppression and to this same world of love, art, creativity, compassion, and hope? The question of being is at once a practical and an ethical one. Whatever I do in the world (ethnography included) is who I am in the world, though not, of course, the totality of who I am and not once and for all.

Throughout this chapter I ask both (a) how do we as a community of scholars come to think of ethics of this or that? and (b) how do I, specifically, behave ethically? Forging these questions in the context of educational ethnography has led me to a new kind of ethnography – a participatory ethnographer where studies *with* people engages us all in new opportunity spaces. I begin the chapter with an ordinary theatre encounter through which I begin to the pose the questions of truth and ethics in performance. I link an ordinary sense of ethics with research practices by tracing changes in my own thinking of ethics retrospectively. I draw on post-qualitative and new materialist thinking to pose a challenge to this history of my own strongly agentic way of conceptualizing research ethics. At the end, I propose a critical, participatory approach to ethnography capable of collectively creating a space of opportunity for ethical imagination, consciousness-raising, and articulation.

Truth in Acting

I recently attended an emergent theatre performance in my community. Here the emergent theatre process restarts each academic year with a series of workshops and gatherings. The theatre is predominantly student run. Student participants ask themselves to think about social justice. They spend months talking with one another, performing experiences together, and working toward that which might be new. Eventually, they prepare a staged performance through which they perform their many thought-pieces. One of the pieces in yesterday's performance involved two young men in a poem duet: police-man and Black-man. One of the young Black guys acted the role of a Black man having to think of the possibility that the police might kill him while another young Black guy acted the part of a police officer, worried that he could die at the hands of a young Black man. The performance asked us to imagine the second young Black guy getting into the role of the police, finding that role within himself. There was no resolution in this poem duet – only the uncomfortable framing of two experiential performances set in the context of two subjects placed in one scenario. The juxtaposition of the two subjective experiences along with the juxtaposition of the actors with their characters was left complicated. After the entire show, all of the performers sat on the stage for a talkback session. An audience member asked the second young Black man what it was like to be in the role of the police officer. His response (echoed numerous times during the talkback regardless of the question) was that he just acted really honestly, "more honest" than he was able to be in "regular life." I have been thinking about what that means. *Being* honest through fiction – more like *doing* honesty? Consistently, the actors said being on stage allowed them to more honestly enact modes of thinking and being that they found stifled and disallowed in "real life." The script creation, reflection, performance was extra-ordinary. By making the performance aspect explicit, they were able to enact possibility and newness. From their perspectives, the stage facilitated the truth-telling. This second young Black guy in the scene had to find a way to see himself as scary, as a potential threat to a police officer. What makes this "more honest"? Spivak (1993: 22) claimed that "What I cannot imagine stands guard over everything I must/can do, think, live." This honesty the actors/ participants spoke of was of a freeing-up of the possible range of ways of being/being-ness and doing/doing-ness. These performances were opportunities for the youth to *act through* an intersubjective imagination that is not a mere representation or story of one's experiences. Representation and voice, as we commonly use these words in methodological literature, would be insignificant ways to think about the honesty of which they spoke.

I was reminded of a point Gillian Rose made in her 1996 book *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation.* Rose wrote, "Though tyrants rule the city, we understand that we, too, must constantly negotiate the actuality of being tyrannical" (1996: 122–123). Rose uses the phrase "activity beyond activity" to talk about the "fallible and precarious, but risk-able" mutual self/other claims of being (p. 13). "The risk refers to the constitutive positings of each other which form and reform both selves. This constant risk of positing and failing and positing again I call 'activity beyond activity'" (p. 13). It is in this way that we can think about the described fragmentation of the subjective which has been a motif in some poststructural and postmodern writings. As St. Pierre (2008) suggests, we do not need to use postmodern philosophy to argue

that the subject doesn't exist, but instead we can use postmodern sensibilities to acknowledge the fallible and precarious positing of the subject in order to notice what is involved in its positing.

In the social scene of "the cop and African American (poorer) male youth," we can see that aspects of the roles, the subjective and identity claims enabled through the roles, the contemporary context of the relationship between the two, and other relevant contemporary social movements (like the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States) rest on a social ontology – that is an ontology that is social in its nature (Carspecken 2003) which is both communicative and relational. Imagination was at play in the way the youth positioned themselves as characters (through roles, subjective and identity claiming). Their awareness of the contemporary context and social movements impacted how they scripted and acted in the scene. The poetic form articulated the emotional structure of their relationships (primarily through fear). This dramatic exploration happens coincidentally and in conjunctive relation to actual real Black people being killed – specifically identifiable people.

Moving toward Being Ethical in Ethnography

The question of what it means to be an ethical educational ethnographer is not isolated from how we contemplate, confront, and engage ourselves/are contemplated, confronted, and engaged as ethical beings with/in the world. For ethnographers who interact as present participants in the ongoing lives of people, we are involved with others in ordinary ways – ways that mean our personal sense of ethics and our ethnographic sense of ethics are not separate from one another. As Barad (2008) puts it, "The attending ethico-onto-epistemological questions have to do with responsibility and accountability for the entanglements 'we' help enact and what kinds of commitments 'we' are willing to take on (including commitments to 'ourselves' and who 'we' may become)" (p. 333). "Education ethnographers place themselves in the practical domain of everyday life where the course of one's ethical actions is much more interdependently and situationally forged not prior to the conduct of research, but as part of the process itself" (Dennis 2010). Beach and Eriksson (2010) draw on Gudmunsdottir (1990) to claim that "*ethical positions are value committed* and concern the establishment of a way of being for oneself and a crafting of relations to other individuals and groups in which these values can be reflected and lived out in one's research practices" (2010: 135). Thus, "Decisions about what is or is not ethical in research are … often made inside ongoing research activities guided by first-hand experiences and influenced by commitments to scientific, ideological, and political goals, beliefs and practices" (Beach and Eriksson 2010: 130, citing also Malin 2003, Lather 2006, and Dennis 2009a). As such, they are inevitably criticizable (drawing as they must on fallible commonsense rationales) and creative (as they require a new and fresh opportunity to act anew). By the end of this chapter you will see that I have transformed the question "What does it mean to be an ethical ethnographer?" to "How can we engage in ethnography ethically?" with a shift toward *we* and *practice/performance*.

In this chapter, I explore what it means to rethink ethics for educational ethnography given post-qualitative methodological convers(at)ions and the deconstruction of the modern subject.[1] As our academic conceptualizations of the subject have become

increasingly fragmented and our claims to truth have become troublingly microscoped, we have to wonder what this means for the strongly agentic conceptions of ethics that are operating in contemporary research thinking – even the motivation to behave ethically. This chapter begins with my own starting place,[2] complicates that with my reading of post-qualitative and critical materialist ideas, then, re-examines some of my own earlier work on ethnographic ethics in order to rethink ethics as situated relational risky engagement. If we toggle between concerns for (1) what brings us to think of ethics in this or that way? and (2) how can I behave ethically?, we will find a new way of thinking of ethics which focuses on acting *with* others on/with context to create spaces of opportunity for imagination, consciousness-raising/awareness, and articulation. Each moment in the ethnographic trajectory can be thought of in this way.

Ethics and Methodological Theory

In a special issue on ethics and educational ethnography, Beach and Eriksson (2010) found consistency between the philosophical orientation claimed by individual educational ethnographers and their conceptualizations of research ethics. Not surprisingly, their study suggests that theoretical orientations are linked with ethical conceptualizations.[3] Yet, MacLure (2011) found that those who espouse a poststructuralist theory (which ostensibly challenges the entire act of doing research – St. Pierre 2014) seldom make that theory manifest in the methodology, let alone the ethics. Thus, the gap between methodological practices, including ethical engagements, and poststructuralist theory has not been well traversed, it seems. In this section of the chapter, I will write about my own starting place identifying with criticalist and feminist theories. Then, I will put my own thinking into relief through a reading of post-qualitative ideas (particularly St. Pierre's 2000, 2008, 2014) and critical (new) materialism (particularly drawing on Kuntz 2015).

A Critical Communicative and Feminist Way of Thinking "Ethics"

To date, my scholarly thinking about ethics has developed from two streams: the communicative ethics of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action (1984, 1987, 1998, 2001 particularly) including Phil Carspecken's work with these ideas in critical methodological theory (1996, 1999, 2003 particularly); and the communitarian ethics of feminist theorists, particularly those who think about care (Benhabib 1992; Tronto 1993). Beach and Eriksson (2010) reported that there was synergy amongst those ethnographers who identified themselves as critical and those who identified themselves as feminist. This resonates with my own scholarship (Korth 2003; note that all publications cited as Korth are by Dennis writing as Korth).

In response to a perpetual unequal arrangement of opportunities, material wealth, education, civil treatment, and so forth, my attraction toward critical communicative and feminist ways of thinking is a desire not only to understand, but also to engage: engage myself; engage the world which I participate in making; and engage the world which is given materially and seems beyond my own doing. These ideas of engagement are wrapped up in how I think of myself as ethical. In this brief subsection, I want to articulate the ethical perspectives that have been guiding my ethnographic work and my social commitments to date.

I think of ethics as intrinsically practical: while there may be a disjuncture between one's thoughts and talk *about* ethics and what one actually does, the talk and thinking will inevitably point toward *doing* – ethics are always already *practical*. That practical aspect is bound up with what has been thought of as social, political, historical, and interactive contexts. In other words, the specific is always already part of the context. The researcher is not abstracted from the contexts of practice. The meaning of my specific actions will carry reconstructable inferences to broader ethical principles that are tethered to those specifics. As people engage in understanding my actions through tenuously assumedly shared principles, beliefs, assumptions, and so forth, when they interpret my actions to mean such and such, they simultaneously make inferences about me. The contextuality of the acting, including the mode of action itself, is the practical instantiation of me, and of the kind of person I end up being in the world. My use of "being" is not meant to indicate a stable sense of self on the interior of my body, but instead is meant to indicate a dynamic sense of being that is *staked moment by moment*. Thus, what is instantiated is not a static structure, but the self as its own claimer along with the structures drawn upon (e.g., being masculine means being tough) for the specifics of the mes being claimed and the I–me relation itself (which is instantiated as the process of I claiming myself).[4]

This practical being-in-the-world is active. It is through this practical being, rather than against it, that I find opportunities to struggle (Davies 2010). There is an undeniable attention to universal process (procedures) in Habermas's work and in some of the feminist scholars I cite (see Benhabib 1992, for example). Inferences to *universality* can be reconstructed when understanding an act because they are internally connected to what is foregrounded in the meaning. They can surface, should one be asked to justify one's ethical actions communicatively, but often they are left tacit. For example, if I intervene when a high school bully is picking on another student and then I tell you about having intervened, there is a tacit claim to universality (however wrong it may be) that any one of us, acting in his or her most ethically astute way, would have intervened given the specific context of my acting. Now, let's say I also imply that no one should question the ethics of my having intervened. In this case, there is dogma attached to the universality of my claim – dogma being the refusal to allow questioning. You respond by saying, "Maybe you should have hesitated before intervening." In responding that way, you have challenged the potential dogma and you have opened up an opportunity for me to recognize the possible fallibility of my own claim and you have tacitly requested greater inclusiveness. In my view (Korth 2006), universality requires diversity as *openness* and *inclusivity* (not a foreclosing on what one might do), admitting that one's actions can and should be justified to those whose lives (including the life of the planet, for example) are affected by them. Then it makes sense to think of one's ethics as always having something to do with one's openness to one's own fallibility and to the lives/ideas of the others (broadly speaking here) and the general inclusivity of the "conversation." To be open to one's own fallibility means risking the identity-securing assumptions that one habitually claims through everyday practices. To be inclusive means that one necessarily stakes one's self in a broader "we" position, assuming in a potentially fallible way that others can also identify with this "we." The other must be included, and then, of course, the other changes the way one relates to one's self. Thus, openness and inclusivity are intrinsic (and often implicit) to universal aspects of claiming. This is particularly salient to those claims I think of as ethics. These two universal principles are themselves

about relativizing and relating one's knowledge and understanding (even of the personal kind) to the network of relations within which one is inevitably enmeshed. These universal principles require a practical location. They are always already practical and are reconstructable from practice. They can function as procedural opportunities in the sense of affecting one's conscious way of being with others, so that I might ask, "Wait, was this situation as inclusive as it could be?" This universality is not a form of absolution as is sometimes assumed. It is antithetical to any notion of universal that denies fallibility and inclusiveness.

Building on the idea of practical contextualization is the notion of *relationality*. Many of the dichotomies of social science philosophizing (self/other, subject/object, norms/values, researcher/researchee, ideal/real, theory/practice, material/immaterial) have been lately undermined and deconstructed in contemporary modes of thought as "intra-relational" (Barad 2008) rather than binarial. The relational way of thinking does not have to imply two distinct "things" or "processes" which are somehow externally and descriptively linked to one another. Instead, we can think of the relational way of thinking as intra-relational, internally co-emergent, *within* rather than *between.* It is in this sense that I refer to relationality as both epistemological and ontological. Relationality defies the dichotomies and describes instead a situation where, in order to think ourselves, we have to think others.

Through this relational, communicative social ontology, I cannot see *either myself nor knowledge, in general, as neutral.* Once one accepts the contextual nature of being/acting/knowing, it is impossible to think that such being/acting/knowing could be described as neutral. Knowledge, truth, and of course being and acting are always positioned (Korth 2005a, 2005b). Even reconstructable universals are not, in the end, neutral universals. They can be thought of instead as claims that have the likelihood of winning the broadest free assent (Carspecken 1999), would such free assent be possible – an imaginary possibility.

My Reading of a Post-qualitative Way of Thinking "Ethics" and Critical Materialist Ethics

I engage post-qualitative and critical (sometimes referred to as "new") materialist ideas (linked through their uses of Foucault) to challenge my own ways of thinking about ethnographic ethics. Please recognize that where I fail to understand any thinker here, it is my failing. I am not trying to posit something about others that they would not posit themselves, but rather use my own understandings of these works to propose something new for ethnographic ethics. As such, I am drawing on two important and insightful writers in each of these current traditions – Elizabeth St. Pierre and Aaron Kuntz. I use their work to wonder what it means to think of ethics with subject and agency displaced from the center. I will briefly introduce their work as I understand it and then point out how it influences my way of thinking. The dialogue provides an opportunity to reimagine ethics as we think the self-absorbed/absent subject of postmodern hypersensitivity (Gergen 2000) alongside the ever-present self of conventionally privileged, modern humanism (Phillips 2006).

St. Pierre (2014) has described her use of the phrase "post-qualitative" as an undoing of her work on subjectivity. She experienced an irreconcilable disjuncture between the methods of doing qualitative inquiry as she had learned them and the way she was

philosophically learning to think/unthink truth and meaning. Primarily drawing on Deleuze and Guatarri, Foucault, and Derrida, St. Pierre tells us that regular ways of doing qualitative business became undoable for her, perhaps epistemologically inconceivable, ontologically impoverished, and ethically problematic. In its undoing, she began using Deleuze and Guatarri to (re)think subjectivity. In the end, she has contended (2008) that she did not study subjects, she studied subjectivity (a substantive topic, not a person). This qualitative undoing stayed with her. In her own words:

> Someone suggested I begin a new qualitative study, and I entertained that possibility for about thirty seconds. I hadn't done a "qualitative" study since 1997, two years after I graduated with my doctorate, and that study had been an impossibility for many reasons. Whenever I thought about doing qualitative research in the ensuing years, I froze up and went to the movies instead. It's not that I hadn't been reading, writing, thinking, and inquiring relentlessly. I just couldn't do qualitative research. It was unthinkable, so undoable. (St. Pierre 2014: 9)

For St. Pierre, using conventional humanist methods became/was all along incommensurable with, and ultimately unthinkable through, the poststructural philosophy she had been reading. The disconnect between these two gave way, in the end, to her poststructural sensibilities and eventually she found herself unable to do, teach, or write qualitative research in the ways it had been done. More recently, she has helped people entertain a critique of business as usual amongst qualitative research in education. She (2014) suggested that if qualitative researchers let go of more traditional ways of thinking/doing social science with humanism at root, we might put the productive analyses of the "posts" to use (2014: 3). She even wondered whether *doing research* was at all thinkable without the "knowing subject" of humanism (p. 14). Now that's a riddle to think on! Certainly, one would have to question what ethics might mean with that "knowing subject" missing in action.

Kuntz's (2015) text *The Responsible Methodologist: Inquiry, Truth-telling, and Social Justice* articulates a *critical materialist ontology* with its ethical implications. He draws on Foucault, Barad, and thinkers in the posthumanist movement to engage methodological activism from a deontological place (a subject-decentered place). Kuntz develops an intersection between critical materialism and Foucault's *parrhesia* to provide the theoretical foundations for an engaged methodology of social justice. He critiques what he refers to as the "logic of extraction" through which material contexts are severed from meaning, methodology is reduced to technique, data is separated from material, and proceduralism sets limits on transformation. In the first place, this logic of extraction produces an untenable distancing of the researcher from her own partisanship. Rejecting the tenacity of that extraction, Kuntz suggests that the situatedness of one's historical, political, social, personal participation in knowing and coming to know means that the researcher *is* inherently *active* in the practices of knowing and critique (2015: 29). Kuntz encourages researchers to engage "in work that changes the very political relations that inform our identities … [to] risk ourselves … [to] generate new ways of becoming" (p. 29):

> Operating according to *logics of extraction* brings with it superficial ethical stances regarding methodological risk and responsibility. Shifting away from such logics makes available newly emergent formations of these key terms and

practices; it changes what we do as critical methodologists, why we do it, and it makes available emergent possibilities for yet-to-be-recognized daily practices of living. As a result, new possibilities for inquiry as social justice work become available. (Kuntz 2015: 62–61)

New materialists acknowledge and give expression to the ontologically active nature of material and contexts while forging a deconstruction of the distinction between being and non-being. There is an acting back or resisting of objective claims made by humans and a meaning field horizon of context that is not entirely in the control of the actor/subject. Kuntz (2015) describes matter as "active, fluid, and productive" and "indeterminate" which "affects the world" (p. 83). He provisionally concludes that there is a pragmatic link between truth and the "material contexts that make the utterance possible – truth-telling as materially situated critique" (p. 110). Kuntz draws on Simpson (2012) to say that truth-telling "is performative in that it dwells in relationality, is never complete, and acts upon the contexts in which it becomes" (p. 111).

Both thinkers, St. Pierre and Kuntz, and the original texts they use to think with, provide an opportunity for educational ethnographers to question "business as usual" with respect to ethics.

Theoretical Tensions

By thinking of tensions that arise from these three sets of ethical insights (mine in contrast with St. Pierre and Kuntz), we are able to refuse a dichotomous description of them and refrain from "choosing" between. Tensions are productive in terms of resonances that allow us to think them both: imagine the way tension on a string affects the sound that resonates from it. The middle is where the sound is produced.

Universality as non-absolute. Universality as presupposed internally, not imposed externally. "If there is no absolute truth to which every instance can be compared for its truth-value, if truth is instead multiple and contextual, then the call for ethical practice shifts from grand sweeping statements about truth and justice to engagements with specific, complex problems that do not have generalizable solutions" (St. Pierre 2000: 25). If we take this point to heart, we have to be clear that we do not take the universal aspect of meaning to be absolute in substance. As discussed earlier, the universal aspect is open and inclusive (relative and relational), which makes its assumptions amenable to query. Kuntz (2015) argued, "*Because I am forever in-relation, I have a responsibility to engage; I am never free to pretend a disassociated stance*" (p. 73, italics in original). This non-absolute, intra-relational way of thinking of the universal aspect of ethical claims brings forward, also, the responsibility to justify those claims – a justification that cannot stand on externally imposed maxims alone (see also Kuntz 2015: 73). Justification of one's interpretation of what counts as ethical implies something about one's commitment or stake to the ethics themselves. One makes an inferential link between the self one is staking and the ethical claims one is making – "ethics" never only refers to what one should expect from someone else, but what others should, in principle, be able to expect from the one.

The difference between an externally imposed ethical maxim and an internally reconstructed universal is important. We can look at this through the commonly articulated maxim: "Do no harm." The interpretability of what is meant by harm and the manner through which particular actions might result in harm is lost without the context

(though we know that some maxims more commonly hold up than others). We might be able to reconstruct the belief that one should not harm others from our ethical actions, but this is not the same as imposing a mandate externally that says "Do no harm." When the claim is reconstructed from within the activity or pattern itself, it is already internal to the meaning of the particular. The universal in this case is not abstracted from the particular or vice versa, rather they are intrinsically and necessarily linked. They are internal to how the actor acts. And, they can, in principle, be questioned (criticized) unless dogma restricts this. It is the external mandate and association with absolutism and dogmatism that we will refuse to accept. We want to distinguish between this universalism and the universal aspect implicit to the meaning of ethics.

Subject as becoming being – both agency and structure. By accepting the multipositionality of truth, we accept the possibility of a de-centered subject. In other words, for one person to be able to recognize various positions, the relative and relational nature of truth and its contextual dependency, one would have to be positing a subject capable of *being* decentered from her own experience. One potential of decentering is the opportunity to recognize the structures involved in systematic conceptualizations used to think "agency," "subject," and "truth." Kuntz (2015) similarly argued that "responsibility is given new dimensionality as an ethical orientation toward refusing habitual, commonsensical responses that stem from normative rationalities. Considerations of methodological responsibility in this rethinking, must extend beyond procedural ethics to the very ability to encounter and relate within unknown ways of knowing and coming to know – an epistemological and ontologically oriented place of indeterminacy" (p. 88). He argues that responsibility is always partial. I interpret this to mean that Kuntz is advocating for an ethics that supports our refusing the habits and norms we have just taken for granted even though this leaves us in an undetermined place, a place where we might not know how one should act. What we let go of is the pretense of an omnipotently knowing subject to replace it with a subject who can decenter/is decentered from some of the normative structures through which she has come to know herself and her own experience. This subject arrives with others open to the possibility of new contexts for knowing one's self and new norms through which one can become.

Similarly, post-qualitative insights encourage a "critical ontology of (self)," "summoning those still-missing persons" in "what is to come" (St. Pierre 2014: 15). This suggests to me that one aspect of the ethics of post-qualitative approaches would involve both *an openness* to the potential of what has not yet been available *to be* through the status quo thinking and *an inclusiveness* to a broader myriad of ways of *being.* Following Deleuze and Guatarri, St. Pierre asks, "what if we recognize that I is a habit whose claiming could be insignificant?" (2014: 15). To be open to our own insignificance is to accept the fallibility of our own existence-as-it-is in the world. In agreement with Foucault (1988), St. Pierre (2014) attended to agency as the freedom to "refuse what we are" (p. 5 in St. Pierre 2014, with quote drawn from Foucault 1982: 216). Such a refusal implicates an "I" who can refuse the structure and experience through which I come to claim my self (me). Mes are produced, in part, through structures we do not purposefully choose (Winkle-Wagner 2009) and sometimes do not fully recognize *along with* aspects of the self for which *we would* claim responsibility. Claiming *responsibility* is itself not a wholly agentic process, as one's sense of responsibility is similarly composed of structure and agency. The decentered subject has no choice but to recognize the otherness of the self through both the way in which our agency is wrapped up in how we think of ourselves

multipositionally and in the way in which structures external to our conscious agentic field operate through our agency. For example, I want to help those with whom I am working, and this motivation makes it easy for me to feel like I am choosing to be nice – actually *I am* choosing this, but my choosing isn't the whole story. *Being nice* is also a tendency for American women of my age. And many of us would have trouble *not thinking* of being nice as either something to be or something to actively resist – something to make trouble over!

Key insights for ethnographic ethics can get foregrounded through a theoretical hum of Kuntz's, St. Pierre's, and my ideas. This brings me to thinking of ethics in the doing of educational ethnography as (1) *being with*, (2) involving the multipositionality of truth, (3) affording challenges to/refusals of habitual ways of being and telling the truth, and (4) opening up new ways of experiencing one's self and the way one talks about one's self as valid. They are connected with individual actors through imagination, articulation, and awareness.

Doing Educational Ethnography Ethically or Thinking "Ethics" through Educational Ethnography

Educational ethnographers have been conceptualizing[5] their ethical practices as inclusive of and in tension with the procedural requirements of IRBs for some time now. In addition to that conversation, it has been also common to talk about the ethical practices in terms of dilemmas researchers face in the field (Dennis 2010). In this way, the ethnographers reflexively explore identified dilemmas relevant in the field (see, for example, Fahie 2014), in analysis (see, for example, Childers 2012), and in writing (see, for example, Small 2015) where research ethics were problematized through practice. In fact, it is not that uncommon to define ethics in ethnography as responses to encounters in the field (Beach and Eriksson 2010). The tendency in writing and thinking about the dilemmas researchers face in the field is to write about the ethical demands and, then, deliberate principles or experiences ethnographers might use to work through those ethical demands. My own work had adhered to this same tendency (Dennis 2009a, 2010 as examples). While eschewing the idea that research ethics can be reduced to an articulated set of a priori absolutes, the focus of the methodological conversation has become so locally contextualized that the reflections are personally insightful and conceptually interesting, but fall short in terms of momentum for newness – there is a recapitulation of thinking that goes something like this:

> The ethical education ethnographer enters the field with good intentions having been legitimized through review board approvals. This education ethnographer is self-aware and reflective and understands her theoretical and ethical commitments at the outset. These are called into question when facing encounters in and out of the field that raise to the fore a more simplistic arrangement of ethical ideals. This ethical researcher must figure out how to act as one *must act* in such situations. The ensuing action has ethical aspects. The researcher, being an ethical person, wants to respond in the most ethical way. To do so, the researcher must have a deep understanding of the (ethnographic) situation and the ramifications of her actions for others (see Beach and Eriksson 2010: 134 for a similar description.)

What is recapitulated is the central positioning of the researcher in the dilemma itself, in defining the dilemma, and in single-handedly responding to the dilemma. The "dilemma" becomes a way of explicating one's ethics. I want to shake this up.

What if we take Barad's (2008) lead to suggest that, "Ethics is not [fundamentally] about right response to the other, but about *respons*ibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which 'we' are a part [which involves one's responses to others]" (2008: 333, italics added)? We can expand our ethical thinking, thinking of ethics, to involve being with community, together creating opportunities for caring, compassion, and ethical relationships/activities through imagination, awareness (consciousness-raising), and articulation.

Bullying: An Example to Work Through

When doing education ethnography in schools it is not uncommon to witness bullying in various forms and fashions. Witnessing bullying is uncomfortable. It can resurrect memories from childhood, draw on habitual patterns of response, catch us off guard in the scene, and require local expertise in order to respond appropriately/ethically. I, and others, have written about bullying situations as ethical dilemmas for education ethnographers. Let us think about two different ethical responses to witnessing bullying as educational ethnographers. I have argued that ethnographers are always intervening in the scenes in which they are working and so intervening in a bullying scene is not really antithetical to what ethnographers are doing anyway. I took for granted the assumption that intervening in a bullying scene was the ethically right thing to do (see Dennis 2009a). Certainly, we researchers did not want to be bystanders. Intervening in a bullying scene would be a mindfully ethical intervention. However, Kofoed and Staunæs (2015) wrote that perhaps the most ethical response to witnessing bullying in education ethnography is hesitancy. "We argue that researchers should allow their research to be guided by a different compass than unproblematised intervention; namely, by orientating themselves towards the research contribution itself instead of intervention development … [which] involves declining certain forceful and insistent invitations. It may mean that researchers will have to avoid swift catch-all solutions and refuse to participate in immediate 'communities of goodness'" (Kofoed and Staunæs 2015: 26). In other words, while I might advocate for becoming part of the ethical community one is engaging with ethnographically, Kofoed and Staunæs (2015) might recommend querying the community ideas about "goodness" that are being taken for granted in order to be willing to let the research products posit changes. Regardless of whether one decides the ethical researcher thing-to-do is to intervene or to hesitate in a particular bullying situation, the conceptualization of research ethics in these writings, my own included, centers on the researcher responding to a particular situation in ways that the researcher herself can recognize as ethical according to her understanding of the situation, her particular theoretical orientation, her relationships with the community, and so forth.

When I first wrote about the ethical dilemma of witnessing bullying in a school (2009a), I raised the idea that we should willingly and knowingly intervene in the scene as people, not separating our personhood from our researcherhood (which seems in agreement with Kuntz 2015, see particularly pp. 17–18, 23–25). The bullying that we, as a team, witnessed in Unityville was structured and legitimated through social practices

of excluding newcomer students in the life of the school. In part, taking a stand against the bullying as a form of social injustice was consistent with Kuntz's (2015) admonition that critical work involves intruding on the reproduction of unjust social structures through daily practices. The intrusion is a form of emancipatory action when it exposes the fissures, contradictions, and gaps in the social fabric of the research lives (p. 24). Yet, the self-evident desire to intervene in such situations is called into question by Kofoed and Staunæs (2015), who advocate an ethical hesitancy that refrains from assuming the researcher understands the scene well enough and *knows best.* How would an ethnographer know when to intervene and when not to intervene in a bullying situation? However, this question itself is well situated within the narrative I produced above of the ethical ethnographer in the field trying to know how to best enact her ethics. In their study of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) bullying, Payne and Smith (2013) argued that peer bullying served a gender policing function that was missed when the analysis of and response to bullying followed an incident-by-incident approach. Following the leads of Payne and Smith (2013), Kofoed and Staunæs (2015), and drawing on Barad (2008) and St. Pierre (2008), I turn to new questions:

- How are we responsible and accountable "for the lively relationalities of becoming of which 'we' are a part" (Barad 2008: 333)?
- How can we question the taken-for-granted assumptions of the readily available descriptions of life as we know it so that we can begin to refuse what we are in those descriptions to live/be/do life differently (St. Pierre 2008)?

Let us use these questions as ethical orientations toward transformation through the post-qualitative, critical materialist way of thinking to see what happens to our understanding of the bullying we ethnographically participate in/through? We will not just be studying and critiquing what is wrong with/in the ethnographic scene in which we are immersed, we will be refusing to extract ourselves from the material, conceptual, and interactive webs so as to think through how we understand those scenes: "the qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world. Rather, the researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied" (Denzin 2010: 23). Along with Kuntz (2015) and St. Pierre (2014) more recently, and as far back as McLaren (1992), critical engagement has asked that researchers be willing to lose themselves, to take up the risk of calling our very notions of self and being into question. This losing leads to questioning the basic knowledge on which our habitual claims to "I" are made (St. Pierre 2014). "We must risk ourselves if we are to truly engage in activist work; we must generate new ways of becoming … a new sense of *engaged ethics*" (Kuntz 2015: 29–30). Kuntz (2015) tasks the critical scholar with "(1) understand[ing] the means by which otherwise common-sensical rationales develop, producing a host of legitimated practices; and (2) … imagin[ing] and enable[ing] new practices that extend from newly possible forms of knowing" (p. 25). With Kuntz (2015), I would like to find ways to do this as a critical researcher, specifically in my case as a critical educational ethnographer (Korth 2005a).

I am rethinking my own ethnographic ethics as "*being with*" participants in the work of materially, conceptually, and interactively imagining and transforming conditions of possibilities and ways of acting. As such, I realize that I am neither fully responsible for outcomes nor fully a bystander in the ethnographic scene, as it were. In this rethinking, I am paying attention to the inclusive aspects of claiming truth which admit to multiple

ways of understanding and positioning truth (what I referred to above as the *multipositionality of truth*). I will be thinking of what it means for ethics to afford *challenges to the habitual* and opportunities for *new ways of experiencing one's self as valid*.

To play with this rethinking, I want to contrast two papers I published from the same ethnography. Both papers dealt on some level with the bullying of newcomer, English-limited students at a high school in a town we refer to as Unityville. One of those papers (2009a) was particularly on the topic of ethics: "What Does It Mean When an Ethnographer Intervenes?" The other (2009b) is titled "Acting Up: Theater of the Oppressed as Critical Qualitative Research." In the first paper (2009a), I conceptualized the ethicality of the ethnographer as responses to particular encounters with dilemmas – in this example, bullying scenes. In this paper, as suggested above, I wrote about the ethicality of intervening, including articulating the grounds for such ethics.

In the second paper, I described a Theatre of the Oppressed workshop a graduate student and I conducted with educators at the high school in Unityville, using a bullying scenario from the data as our starting place. This second paper was not ostensibly about ethics. I wrote about how ethnography can critically engage performative critique – which jibes with Kuntz's (2015) interpretation of *parrhesia* "as more than simply being honest but is rather an act – or, more precisely, an enactment – of truth-telling" (Kuntz 2015: 111, citing Simpson 2012). Kuntz links Foucault's *parrhesia* to Denzin's 2003 performance ethnography (which implicitly links it to that second article) (p. 111). Yet my writing, my description, is decidedly limited in terms of my "being with" participants and engaging in the transformative aspects of the performance work.

In that second paper (2009b), I articulated these questions:

- How was oppression recognized and conceptualized by the teacher-participants in reference to bullying? Most specifically, to what extent and in what ways were teacher-participants aware of the oppression of newcomer students through bullying?
- What transformations in acting and conceptualizations were evidenced by the teacher-participants through the theater work? (2009b: 6)

It is easy to see that I was writing, at that time, in a way that absented myself from the actual transforming, though I was active in the scene. Writing/thinking in this way perpetuated a way of thinking of myself as ethically acting *toward* others rather than *with* others.

Through our dramatic activities, I kept myself outside the scene – facilitating the action. This is apparent even in the way the bullying scene was described for participants in anticipation of engaging in the Theatre of the Oppressed activities:[6]

> This scene takes place in the hallway during the change of classes. A teacher is standing in the hallway. Two Latino kids are walking together down the hall and three Euro-American kids are calling the Latinos names and basically making them feel unwelcome, saying things like "Speak English or go home." "Get out of here, you dirty Mexican." The teacher is witness to the activities because the teacher is standing in the hallway monitoring students as they move from room to room. (Dennis 2009b: 75)

Notice that the teacher is witness in the description, but the describer (the ethnographer) is an *unacknowledged* witness.

The work opened an ethnographic space for transformation. By shifting, at a most basic level, how educators saw themselves involved in the scene and how the scene was organized, a change in their conceptualizing happened. For example, near the beginning of our work, the educators primarily thought of the bullying action as happening between students. Because this is how they were talking about the scene, (re)formative actions involved trying to change the way the victims or the bullies or other potential student allies, not originally part of the scene, might act differently and thereby change what happened in the scene. There was a gestalt shift in the conceptualization of the scene when teachers began to see themselves as active participants in the scene, not just as passive bystanders to the scene. It was almost as if the teachers had hoped they would not have to get involved. And one can understand why, when their first way of locating themselves more actively in the scene was to behave authoritatively in relation to the students – even making reference to sending the offending students "to the principal." Both before and immediately after the gestalt shift, the assumptions of the taken-for-granted roles and *senses of being* through which the teachers imagined themselves were definitely similar. But the gestalt shift created a crack in the scene that ultimately became a site for new thinking. Eventually, the teachers began enacting themselves into the scene in quite different ways. For example, one of the teachers walked up to the Latina victims (remember that these are other teachers playing the parts of Latina victims) and greeted the Latina students in Spanish (though the teacher felt self-conscious about the quality of his Spanish). Those teachers in character as Latina students felt recognized and those in the offending roles were thwarted in their abilities to mistreat the Latina students. The scene was rethought as an opportunity to connect with the newcomer students. It wasn't just that a new idea for acting had emerged, but that the implicit purposes of being in the hallway during the passing period were rethought. At the start, teachers were part of the hallway, and the hallway was seemingly only a backdrop for the scene. The roles and identities of the teachers in relation to the students was rethought, even if just for a moment. The teachers-as-themselves in the scene found the hallway duty during passing periods as a new opportunity – a space of possibility. Teachers who had actively advocated for and policed their school's English-only policy were now transgressing it. They were actively working against who it was they thought they were in the scene. The teachers were enacting possibility, not a description befitting their habitual ways of acting. They were imagining themselves anew. They were "experimenting with people to come" (St. Pierre 2014: 15) through performance ethnography.

Sitting amongst them, sometimes standing, sometimes talking, sometimes facilitating, but always from the sideline, was me – the "critical" ethnographer. To more fully embrace the ethical possibility of this ethnographic use of the theatre, I need to be visible in the scene. I remained unwounded, as habitually sidelined participant observer, watching with some satisfaction as the teachers began to un-think themselves in that scene. I was affected to be sure: That's not really the point. Here, I am reimagining how we might think about ethics in educational ethnography, taking seriously the idea that I needed to be in that space of possibility. Being in that imaginary space of possibility as ethnographer would open up opportunities to explore the taken-for-granted assumptions in the ethnographic intra-actions. Creating the space was a joint effort, being there was inevitable, but I – the "I" that can come to think of itself in new ways – needed to be enacting myself in the scene in new ways. The link between articulating the taken-for-granted assumptions through which we habitually act, think, and comprehend *and* the

acting subject for whom the futural possibilities for action matter can be talked about through this example.

Recently, I have been involved in a PAR (participatory action research) ethnographic effort that engages lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, asexual, and other non-binary alternative sexual and gender (LGBTA+) identified undergraduates returning to their high schools to meet with educators and share their experiences (Dennis 2015) particularly around their experiences with bullying and micro-aggression. The group of youth, who had not known each other outside of their volunteering to participate in this project, met with me and a research assistant, Zulfukar Ozdogen, for a semester to plan how they might go about the homecoming – of what the actual going home activities would consist. We met together in the evenings at the LGBT Student Services Center on campus. This center is a safe, familiar asset for the gay community on campus. We met in a small library with snacks. It was cozy. Both the dialogic and physical space was warm and inviting. The library is home to an "anything is okay" collection of books and materials. We sat in a circle in comfy chairs facing one another. And conversation came easily. Right away, it was clear that the youth did not want to go to their own high schools by themselves. This happened at our very first meeting:

> NANCE:[7] "I don't really want to go back to my school, but I would be glad to help by going with someone else back to their school."
>
> SADIE: "Would you be willing to go to your school if we came with you?"
>
> NANCE: "Maybe. As an ally."

Sadie and Nance's interchange organically established some principles for the project:

- Nobody goes home alone.
- Nobody goes in a role they are not comfortable with.
- Helping each other is a part of helping others.
- Nobody speaks for another.
- No one is "out" in a knowably more vulnerable position than they are willing to accept.

Care for one another permeated the ethics that were collectively established. I was part of this conversation, but I was not leading it. I, like others, accepted the reconstructable ethical principles that began to infuse how we related with one another and with the ideas and activities we undertook in this participatory educational ethnography. This starting place demonstrates the way in which ethics can emerge through the work of the ethnography and be inclusive of the ethnographer. When the students wrote their stories to share with one another, I also wrote mine and shared it. I had never done that before, but it no longer seemed okay to me that only the youth should make themselves vulnerable through their stories and it wouldn't have been consistent with the norms we began enacting with one another. In fact, to not have shared would have set me outside the ethics they were enacting with one another. These particular enactments have universal ethical aspects that can be reconstructed, such as:

- *People should be free to choose the manner in which they participate. No one assigns roles or responsibilities.*
- *Each person is individually responsible for their own stories and what they share.*
- *We should do things that support one another, recognizing that we are vulnerable.*

Another principle surfaced in how members of the community related to the educators we were trying to work with: *Give them the benefit of the doubt/Err on the side of not interpreting them as bad people.* For example, we had virtually no response from school building administrators. After working a whole semester preparing to return to the high schools, not one building administrator returned our calls or emails. I felt really angry, but we as a group did not interpret this non-response to mean the principals were bad people. We invited the complexity of the situation into our interpretation of this non-response and then figured out how to work with that complexity. This kind of ethical principle gets right to the heart of not just behaving a certain way in relationship with others, but committing oneself to being interpretive of perspectives that don't unwittingly malign the other. Most importantly, these ethical norms were the organic manifestation of our "selves" in community with one another. They contributed to an open, inclusive opportunity to imagine ourselves new in the world, to raise our own awareness about who we are in the oppressive status quo, and to articulate our critique and our new ways of being. These new ways of being were conditions of possibility for us that worked through our ethical relationships *with* one another.

My thinking "ethics" as *being with* is more complicated and engaged in the third story and quite limited in the first. Ethics as an inclusive an open approach to the multi-possibilities of truth is engaged more explicitly and richly in the third story as well. The inclusiveness has to do with establishing our sense of we-ness as that which we cannot establish alone, but that which does not leave anyone out. The multiple possibilities of truth (*multipositionality*) are already inclusive, and ethics is our opportunity to make sure the communicative and relational space is similarly open and inclusive. Amongst those of us doing the "Project Homecoming" ethnography, that very early interchange between Nance and Sadie forged a *challenge to the habitual ways of being and telling the truth* associated with LGBTQ high school bullying stories – where personal coming out stories and expressing one's own experience as the truth was challenged by making the story collective – where we are both allies and queer, educators and educated, researchers and participant, actors and performance. We did not want to just take our individual experience and share it as "the truth" – we were not trying to represent our lives for others so that queerness might become the object of others' fascinations. Instead, we were refusing the fascination and acknowledging the other as an opportunity to be new. In this particular ethnography, we are together *opening up new ways of experiencing ourselves as valid*. These are aspects of how I am now thinking "ethics." And this returns us to these ethical formulations:

- How are we responsible and accountable "for the lively relationalities of becoming of which 'we' are a part" (Barad 2008: 333)?
- How can we question the taken-for-granted assumptions of the readily available descriptions of life as we know it so that we can begin to refuse what we are in those descriptions to live/be/do life differently (St. Pierre 2008)?

(Re)thinking Ethnographic Ethics Aloud

For me, transformation is not one side of a binary – stay the same or change – but the radical possibility of both: the retention and the resistance. This engagement involves change and retention, seeing these not as binaries but as active oscillations. I started

the chapter with my description of an emergent scene where actors insisted that their ability to perform on stage created a space where they were able to be "more honest." The two impressive African American youth I specifically described were not simply expressing on stage something they felt inside themselves so that we as an audience might plainly recognize it; they were engaged in acting-becoming the potentials/ constraints of their interdependent role set such that our recognition of it was anything but simple. Kuntz makes this point in discussing the synchronicity between Foucault's *parrhesia* and Denzin's performativity: "Refusing the already-told, normalized truths that reinscribe the traditional ways of being, *parrhesia* as performance makes possible new ways of knowing, previously unseen modes of being and becoming within the world … It [*parrhesia*] is a performed truth that simultaneously changes the performed, the performer, and the possibilities for future performances" (Kuntz 2015: 111).

The way we make claims to truth is necessarily at the heart of our conceptions of ethics. As subjects. As scholars. As educational ethnographers. As witnesses. This is because our truth-claiming is always positioned and as such will necessarily and per-formatively indicate how we as subjects are de/centered in relation to the claim itself and in relation to others differentiated through the claim. *The ways* we make claims to truth will be resourced and constrained by cultural structures, ideologies, power, and so on that must be examined and acted against/with as ethics. By collectively and inclusively articulating to some extent the conditions of action, including those "already-told, normalized truths" as well as the reconstructable universal aspects to those claims, we create fissures and cracks in the status quo that re-source the ways we instantiate and stake ourselves within the ongoing activities through which we are together engaged. Because this "together" is dialogic it must freely and responsively include the other and difference.

In my own rethinking, I have come to think of ethnographic ethics as practices in the imaginative possibilities of becoming *with* others, practices through which my own self is at stake and through which the instantiation of myself as *a self* is open and fallible. This is not the self or more traditional agent of positivist modernity or the undistinguishable subject of the postmodern assemblage. "Ethics under deconstruction is an 'experience of the impossible'" (Spivak 1999: 426; St. Pierre 2001: 2). Ethics becomes possible through opportunities to perform ethnographically what we might be. This is a new kind of ethnography – critical, performative, participatory, imaginative. It is not the ethnogra-phy of our fathers. This ethnographic practice is not only interested in what is being made sense of, but in transforming the *what* and *how* of those sensibilities.

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