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# COMMENTARY

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## Autoethnography: A Limited Endorsement\*

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In this commentary, we wish to draw from Kathryn's experience in Askole to complicate the argument we developed in favor of an autoethnographic sensibility in the earlier article in this issue (Butz and Besio 2004). Just as we used David's first-person singular voice in much of that article, we use Kathryn's voice here to reflect the central influence of her research circumstances on the points that we make. We will return to the first-person plural voice in the commentary's conclusion where we attempt to synthesize the lessons of our two sets of research experiences.

### Introduction

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My principal concern is that we must be cautious about applying autoethnography in certain contexts and situations. This concern is tempered by my growing enthusiasm for the concept, particularly the potential it has to contribute to innovations in geographic field research and representation. I find the conceptualization of autoethnography developed in "The value of autoethnography for field research in transcultural settings" (Butz and Besio 2004) compelling, and over time my endorsement of an autoethnographic sensibility has become much less limited. What I have to say here is less a critique of that paper than a continuation of the dialogue between David and me about how to make autoethnography a progressive and integral part of postcolonial research. Like other geographers concerned with colonialism's remaining presence in geographic research (Jacobs 1996; Sidaway 2000; Nash 2002), we wish to move beyond ruminations about our discipline's coloniality and into the realm of anticolonial praxis, and we think that autoethnography can help with that project.

At the outset of our conversations about autoethnography, I was intrigued by David's description of how an autoethnographic sensibility enriched his understanding of transcultural relations in Shimshal, his "place" in those relations, and his field research practice. The heuristic seems to work well for the field of

transcultural relations he shares with his research subjects. However, I am hesitant about the potential for an autoethnographic sensibility to contribute to productive transcultural political effects among those I research and in the field of transcultural relations I share with the villagers of Askole. My research in Askole was primarily on women's and girl's lives within the context of a changing set of material circumstances in the village. While that was my main focus, gender relations in the village were an important part of that research. My concerns about the political efficacy of autoethnography are situated predominantly in gender interactions in the village but also in a regional political field.

My doubts relate mainly to the political aspect of David's argument and are rooted in epistemological and methodological concerns, as well as in empirical contingencies, including the differences between Askole and Shimshal (our respective fields), especially Askole men's and women's speaking positions within their local fields of relations. My main concern with David's articulation of autoethnography is that it attributes too much representational significance to a particular form of transcultural expression. Moreover, it may understate both the importance of other types of political agency that circulate at the community level and the fact that many groups within a community, and indeed whole communities, may be structurally denied access to productive autoethnographic

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expression. For example, in Askole, community members often articulate their wider political goals locally—to one another—as dissatisfaction with regional and international powers, but these are rarely expressed within or outside the village as a coherent political statement along the lines of the Shimshal Nature Trust. In terms of my own practice of an autoethnographic sensibility, I worry that the gendered relations of communicative power that exist in Askole—particularly between me and my research subjects—may insert me into Askole villagers’ autoethnographies in ways that are more problematic and more difficult to use productively than David’s experience acknowledges. In outlining these concerns below, I follow the progression of the previous article from epistemology through methodology to politics.

## Epistemology II

As David notes, one of our central responsibilities as researchers is to produce representations of others. I am drawn to ethnography—“the writing of culture” (Clifford and Marcus 1986)—because ethnography utilizes an epistemological position that prioritizes the particularity and context-dependent nature of knowledge (see Clifford 1988, 1997; Katz 1992, 1994; Herbert 2000). One of the foci of feminist geography has been to examine researchers’ positionality and how it contributes problematically to the geographies we write (Raju 2002; Staeheli and Nagar 2002). I used the method of participant observation for my own research in Askole because of its potential to represent in ethnographic form the messiness of daily life and the ways that “messiness” is an integral part of research. James Clifford asks of ethnography (1988, 25),

how is unruly experience transformed into an authoritative written account? How, precisely, is a garrulous, overdetermined cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes circumscribed as an adequate version of a more or less discrete “other world” composed by an individual author?

What David and I have called an autoethnographic sensibility is appealing because it offers additional ways to make the transformation Clifford talks about a more transparently “garrulous, over-determined cross-cultural encoun-

ter,” one where the transcultural relations of power inherent in the research process can be apparent in the resulting ethnography. One way I engage with my representational concerns is by attempting to answer the question, how can autoethnography help me understand my positioning in the field, my imbrication in the where of my research practices (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 2)? My answer to that question is complex and unsettling.

In Askole I position myself as a Western feminist researcher in relation to the male and female subjects I research, and that means also in relation to how they position me. As might be predicted on the basis of non-Western and Western feminist critiques of the myths of global sisterhood (see Mohanty 1991; Wolf 1996), the two perspectives on my positioning are difficult to reconcile. In addition to trying to understand and respect the ways the women in Askole position me as a researcher, I also have to understand my positioning as a researcher in the community in relation to the other Western researchers who preceded me. Askole villagers have known and worked with some of these researchers; others from the more distant past are remembered second-hand. I have to understand the dimensions of my unruly, garrulous, overdetermined, transcultural research experience in my field site in terms of these uneasily intersecting positionings: as gendered and within a context of colonial and postcolonial knowledge making.

I am not the first person to do research in Askole, but one in a succession of Western travelers and researchers, “sahibs,” who have come through the village nosing around and asking questions (Besio 2003). Most of my predecessors have been British or North American males, and only a few of them have described themselves as researchers. Most were travelers and tourists. Regardless of whether I identify myself with these earlier visitors, the people in Askole that I work with consider me a part of that colonial lineage. I am clearly one of the sahibs, aligned with them by my “race,” class, and “outsiderness,” if not by gender and sex. I position myself as a Western woman and feminist, and simultaneously—through local constructions of “researcher”—as masculine and colonial. It is from this location that I reflect upon the messy colonial underpinnings of my epistemological authority—one of those

masculinist and paradoxical spaces of knowledge in which many feminists find themselves (Rose 1993). David comfortably constructs himself—and is constructed by Shimshalis—as masculine and conducts research mainly among and with men. In addition, his research in Shimshal is less associated in his subjects' minds with a lineage of colonial predecessors, for a number of historical and geographical reasons. He perhaps experiences a less contradictory and less unsettling positioning in his field site than I do, a position from which he can stably represent his subjects' autoethnographic self-representations. My subject position in Askole is destabilized by a double displacement: I am gendered male and marked as colonialist.

The uncomfortable subject position I experience in Askole is, I realize, a product of my research subjects' efforts to engage with me autoethnographically. Their autoethnographic construction of the researcher in their midst, as I came to understand it through the way I was positioned in the village, helps me to recognize villagers' constructions of me as a masculine, colonialist knowing subject at times, although certainly not at all times. The construction of me as masculine and colonialist researcher is an autoethnography I resist, given my own desired subject position, but one I feel compelled to engage with, because it is their autoethnography. To paraphrase Pratt (1999, 47) my research relations are transcultural, and "involve encounters where [indigenous populations] break open traditions of denial and trivialization and force dialogue in which many [Westerners] would not willingly engage." I cannot deny Askole villagers' construction of "researcher" as masculine and colonialist, nor do I willingly want to accept it. I use this lesson of an autoethnographic sensibility to understand my own research position in Askole in order to implement a more progressive postcolonialist methodology, one that begins to reject the mantle of colonialist and masculinist knower.

## **Methodology II**

I cannot deny my subjects' construction of researchers as masculinist and colonialist because that would be to ignore a powerful autoethnographic expression and a significant historical truth. However, that recognition is in itself an important methodological statement in favor of

attending to the autoethnographic characteristics of our subjects' interactions with us as researchers. It requires that we expand our understanding of autoethnography beyond text and verbal expression to include a wider assortment of autoethnographic practice and become more attentive to their representations. It requires that researchers respond with a different sort of ethnography, one which begins to reject its colonialist and masculinist characteristics, not by denying these characteristics, but by acknowledging its research subjects' recognition of them.

I came to this point of view late in the research process, while I was "writing it up." When I was in the field, I did not feel much like a feminist or even an anticolonialist. What I felt was a disturbing disjuncture between my subjects' construction of researcher and my own. This tension only became productive—richly autoethnographic—as I wrote my research up. In trying to sort through my research material, I began to accept that a variety of different types of practices (textual and nontextual) can be understood productively as autoethnographic. Unlike Pratt (1992) and David, I do not understand these expressions as necessarily deliberately autoethnographic; I think they can include unintentionally transcultural expressions of agency and desire, as in the case of Askole women's practiced construction of me as researcher. This departure from Pratt's conceptualization is helpful for understanding a wider range of expressions that engage with asymmetrical relations of power, especially in the research process. This use of the heuristic of autoethnography helps me be more attentive to the nuances of Askole females' expressions of resistance and accommodation. It forces me to recognize the women I study as transcultural subjects and speakers, whose self-representational concerns are no less significant than their male counterparts, even though they lack a wide autoethnographic audience. The scale of Askole women's autoethnographic interactions is smaller than Askole men's (and much smaller than for the men David works with in Shimshal), but their autoethnographic practices are significant for their own lives and for what researchers can learn from them. The example of Askole women's relationship to photography illustrates this significance, and begins to suggest why I am wary about autoethnography's political potential.

Photographs comprise part of my record of participant observation in Askole. Photography is a common way of collecting ethnographic data; it is also potentially an objectifying one, especially within a colonialist framework of research (see Ryan 1997; Schwartz 1996). For that reason I did not intend to publish photographs of my research subjects, but simply use them as a field record. The more I think about the photographs I took of women and girls, and the context within which they were taken, the more convinced I am that they can be understood productively as autoethnographic not ethnographic expressions. Askole is a Shia Muslim community where not everyone accepts photography. Men and boys generally allow themselves to be photographed freely, but women and girls are “supposed” to disapprove of being photographed. Many do, but some do not. Women often asked me to take photos of them and their children, and we would find an out-of-the-way location in a field or empty room where the women would pose for photographs. At these times and in these spaces, I felt much more gendered female, sharing with them a clandestine moment “for women and children only.” My photographic subjects explicitly instructed me to give the developed photographs only to them and, especially, not to show them to their male family members.

My reading of these photography sessions is that the women used me strategically to help them create representations of themselves in an idiom and medium that was more mine than theirs, perhaps for purposes of resistance and accommodation that were more theirs than mine. These interactions are examples of efforts by my research subjects to produce themselves as selves for themselves, and simultaneously as others for their others, where the scope for the expression of self and other is limited severely by the need for secrecy. The photographs are direct, but wary, expressions of agency and discourses of resistance to local norms of modesty and of masculine control. Certainly, I cannot say for sure if resistance to male domination is the way that the women in Askole would describe their actions. What I am suggesting is that these interactions made me aware of the ways that gender privilege in Askole is practiced in various strategic ways in the social spaces of the village. In itself, this is helpful ethnographic “data” about gendered interactions.

While stringent limitations on their circulation constrain these photographs as autoethnographic or ethnographic texts, they are thus revealing as autoethnographic practice. The circumstances of their production forced me to see them in the context of localized gendered interactions and in the context of an exploitive history of colonial and travel photography. The women I photographed utilized a stereotypical colonialist native/sahib interaction for their own ends, in the faith that I would not access my sahib position and betray our secret—a momentary and calculated suspension of their construction of me as masculine researcher.

## Politics II

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Among women and girls in Askole there are few instances of autoethnographic expression that are even as direct as the photographs I took. Askole women’s directly autoethnographic endeavors—attempts bravely and coherently to represent themselves as selves to outsiders simultaneous to representing themselves as selves for themselves—are almost inevitably repressed and reconfigured by the weight of the numerous available discourses and practices of women’s subjugation. How, then, can those subjugated aspects of women’s self-understanding survive the conditions of subjugation and denial in which they must exist? Only by nurturing, rather than risking, themselves. Everyday practices of resistance, at their most “infra,” are the expressions of that nurturance.

Sometimes those practices of resistance are also autoethnographic practices, as when, at every turn, my research subjects engaged me in a transcultural dialogue about my knowing position. These practices are cautious, indirect, and tentative. Askole women’s access to an audience of outsiders is so constrained that to represent my research subjects’ communicative agency in terms of autoethnography, as David has done in Shimshal, may be to misrepresent their tactics (which are focused much more locally than transculturally) and overstate their interests in representing themselves beyond the community. Thus, women’s almost silent autoethnographic voice helps me to understand the constitution of social hierarchies within Askole, and in the context of transcultural relations with the wider world.

Askole men have more access than do Askole women to an autoethnographic realm of expression because of their frequent interactions with trekkers, mountaineers, and development workers. I have heard Askole men refer to colonial explorers and contemporary mountain climbers to make claims to transcultural knowing similar to Shimshalis' claims. But these do not, at the present time, feed into a coherent and proactive politics of engagement. Rather, Askole men's autoethnographic expressions take the form of a sort of scrappy, piecemeal, and reactive resistance to outside powers, without engaging directly with threats to the community's autonomy and territorial control (which come from a number of directions, including government, military, and the trekking tourism industry). It may be that an autoethnographic sensibility, in the case of studying Askole men and women, is less important as a way to foreground autoethnographic expression than as a way both to account for its muted role and to illuminate alternative practices of everyday resistance and accommodation (Scott 1990).

I think the sort of political engagement that a sensitivity to autoethnography led David to in Shimshal would be difficult and inappropriate for me, for two reasons. First, autoethnographic expression in the case of the women of Askole is too muted, cautious, disguised, uneven, and fragmented to provide a reliable guide for the sorts of political engagement David envisions. As the photography example illustrates, autoethnographic practices are so close to hidden transcripts of resistance that for me to support them openly in Askole would be to risk revealing my research subjects' secrets, and undermining the efficacy of their resistance. I recognize there is a colonial irony in that I discuss photography in this article—revealing a hidden transcript of resistance to outsiders for my academic purposes—and I would be far more hesitant to speak about photography in Askole. This speaks volumes about the problematic politics of representation and my speaking position as a researcher. Second, as I described in the section on epistemology and in relation to the last point, my own subject positioning as a researcher in the community may be too tenuous, compromised, and untrustworthy a site from which to launch a practice of facilitation. David's positioning in Shimshal is, at least relatively, less precarious because he has developed a long-

term relationship with many men in Shimshal who have endeavored to express their transcultural representational goals to him clearly and coherently and who have actively involved him in those goals. Even if Askole males trusted my subject position as researcher more, they would still be more likely to involve my male predecessors than me in their autoethnographic projects because these male researchers are both more intimately connected to Askole's male autoethnographic elite and more effective voices in Pakistan's highly masculinist political context.

The political efficacy of an autoethnographic sensibility remains, to my mind, very much context dependent and one that researchers would have to reckon with on a case-by-case basis. I can understand why David feels more confident than I do about autoethnography's political efficacy. While an autoethnographic sensibility has guided the epistemological and methodological direction of my research in productive ways, that same autoethnographic sensibility has also yielded understandings that lead me away from direct practical involvement in Askole's (largely muted) political endeavors. It still raises concerns about representation: how do I, as an outsider, write an ethnography of the autoethnographic? Although I find writing ethnographic stories a useful starting point, because of the ways that stories highlight transcultural interactions in the research process (Besio 2003), I struggle with an answer to this question. While my endorsement remains cautious, I find an autoethnographic sensibility a productive and exciting position from which to undertake research.

## **Conclusion**

In the article "The value of autoethnography for field research in transcultural settings" (Butz and Besio 2004) and in this commentary we have attempted to elaborate on Pratt's conceptualization of autoethnography and outline how it has helped us deal with some of the epistemological, methodological, and political problems of conducting cross-cultural field research in one small corner of the formerly colonized world. We developed our case in favor of an autoethnographic sensibility from two directions, and with different degrees of hesitancy, not because we cannot agree, but rather because

we want to emphasize that its value is highly contingent. In comparing our experiences working with the concept in Shimshal and Askole, it seems that three sets of contingencies were particularly significant. First, and most obviously, it makes a big difference that, owing to differences in social and historical circumstances, the two communities have developed quite different ways of engaging in transcultural discourses of power. Autoethnography is a more explicit, formalized, and often collective strategy in Shimshal than in Askole. Second, whom we worked with in the two communities, and on what topic, is important. The muted communicative practices of Kathryn's female research subjects in Askole are less clearly explicable in terms of autoethnography than are Shimshali men's loud, insistent, and proactive interventions in the ways the community is represented by tourists, researchers, and development agencies. Third, our positioning as researchers in our research fields makes an important difference. Kathryn's contradictory positioning as a female researcher preceded by a long line of Western male researchers and travelers linking her—in her own and her subjects' minds—back to colonial-era transcultural interactions, inhibits her from situating herself in relation to local autoethnographic practices in ways that she feels can be politically productive. David has been less encumbered (although no less constituted) by his gender and by direct colonial associations and has had a longer time to negotiate a situation for himself in relation to local autoethnographic endeavors; these circumstances encourage his (and his subjects') faith that he can help responsibly to facilitate local autoethnographic endeavors. As Kathryn demonstrated in her discussion of Askole, these three sets of contingencies combine to influence the usefulness of autoethnography as a research heuristic.

This brief summary of the different contingencies at work in our respective research experiences leads us to a more general conclusion. While we think that approaching field research in transcultural research settings with an autoethnographic sensibility can yield epistemological, methodological, and political insights, we are most confident in the epistemological value of such a sensibility. In both of our cases, despite the differences described above, a sensitivity to autoethnographic expression helped us to reach a practical understanding of the already trans-

cultural subjectivity of our research subjects and the already transcultural status of any information we are able to collect about them. That is an important epistemological step beyond the "Native informant" (Spivak 1999) and a potentially fruitful basis for redressing some of the asymmetrical power relations of fieldwork more generally. ■

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