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Vulnerability as best practice?

'Minority' autoethnography in hostile worlds

OTSO HARJU

ABSTRACT This article discusses the role of autoethnography in 'minority' academic fields such as transgender studies. While supportive of the epistemic and political ambitions related to practices of studying (through) the self, the text focuses on its practical limitations. Specifically, it discusses the potential lived implications of autoethnographic writing for already precariously located 'minority' scholars. The text charts epistemic-ethical backgrounds that support the use of autoethnography within 'minority' scholarship. It suggests that such methods work in contexts where academic labor and publishing take place within essentially liberal democratic frameworks, in which 'minority' scholars are respectfully met. However, the current literature on 'minority' academic labor suggests that this is rarely the case. The article stresses the need to think and teach 'minority' research and writing in time and place. Such methodologies can, depending on the context, opt for an autoethnographic presence but also for an active push towards giving 'less' of oneself to one's texts.

KEYWORDS: *autoethnography, methodology, transgender studies, academic work*

ABSTRAKTI Artikkeli käsittelee autoetnografian roolia akateemisten "vähemmistöalojen", kuten transtutkimuksen, metodologiana. Teksti tukee autoetnografian episteemisiä ja poliittisia päämääriä, mutta kiinnittää kuitenkin huomiota autoetnografiaan liittyviin käytännön ongelmiin. Artikkeli esittää, ettei autoetnografisen (läpi)näkyvyyden aiheuttamaan prekaarien "vähemmistö-tutkijoiden haavoittuvaisuuteen kiinnitetä tarpeeksi huomiota. Teksti analysoi autoetnografista tutkimus- ja kirjoitustyyliä tukevia, esimerkiksi transtutkimuksessa yleisiä episteemisiä ja eettisiä taustaoletuksia. Tutkimuksen tekeminen oman itsen kautta voidaan nähdä mielekkäänä käytäntönä tilanteissa, joissa akateeminen ja yhteiskunnallinen ilmapiiri tulkitaan liberaalin demokraattiseksi. Tällaisessa ilmapiirissä myös "vähemmistöt" voivat luottaa muiden perustavanlaatuiseen kunnioitukseen. Nykyisen yliopistotyötä kuvaavan kirjallisuuden valossa näin kuitenkin harvoin on. Artikkeli painottaa tarvetta ajatella "vähemmistö"-autoetnografisia metodologioita aikaan ja paikkaan sidottuina niin kirjoituksessa kuin opetuksessakin. Autoetnografiaa voidaan ajatella tietyissä konteksteissa toimivana lähestymistapana, kun taas muut tilanteet voivat suosia tutkijan taktista vetäytymistä tekstistään.

AVAINSANAT: *autoetnografia, metodologia, transtutkimus, yliopistotyö*

Introduction

In 'minority' fields of social sciences, such as transgender studies and intersecting fields, autoethnographic research approaches hold an epistemically and politically privileged position (see e.g. Macdonald (2013), Pearce (2020) and Steward (2017) for both overviews and examples). Researching (through) oneself – or the minority groups/identities one (so to speak) 'belongs' to – is seen as both producing more meaningful knowledge *and* challenging power imbalances thought to be prevalent in traditional non-autoethnographic work. While all contemporary ethnographers must engage in some form of self-reflexive practice, 'minority' autoethnographers use themselves and situations they are already (forced to be) in to illustrate mechanisms of unequal social structuring. The use of the embodied and positioned self as a tool and source of meaningful knowledge is carried through to the autoethnographer's published writing, often in powerful detail. A reader of well-written autoethnography can often feel a profound connection with the analytic narratives provided.

Like the numerous scholars cited in this article, I too attach significant potential to autoethnography within 'minority' fields. Yet this text raises questions regarding the practical viability and related political sense of promoting autoethnography as the preferred or even (ethically) most advanced practice for already vulnerable, structurally precarious scholars. The intervention here is related specifically to published autoethnographic *writing*, not toward autoethnography as a method of collecting data. I argue that, as autoethnographic writing can be highly seductive, the burdens and risks for marginalized scholars associated with it can easily be overlooked. As I see it, this needs to be more carefully and context-specifically accounted for when teaching or setting personal examples in autoethnography.

I argue that, to view autoethnographic publishing as realistically viable, one must adapt an essentially liberal view of academic life and the community of (potential) readers. In such a view, individual researchers who write their lives, bodies and struggles into their work meet an audience that is, if not engaged, then at least non-violent. Arguably, this rarely corresponds to lived realities, in which 'minority' academic labor is often both done and presented in highly precarious and hostile surroundings (thus, it is 'minority' work).

In calling attention to understanding the *time* and *place* in which methods take place, I am inspired by, for example, trans scholar Ruth Pearce's discussion of "methodologies for the marginalized" (Pearce 2020). Like Pearce, I stress that "marginalized researchers should not be held individually responsible for their own survival; rather, they require the active support of research communities and institutional frameworks" (ibid, 806). I want to broaden the discussion of ways of achieving this to include consciously choosing to resist the autoethnographic pull. In her work, Pearce uses autoethnography powerfully to bring forth the multiple precarities and traumas of "researching while trans" (2020, 813). Her aim is to change these from private to public issues. In a sense, by publicly giving *more* of herself to her writing now, Pearce expects rewards for the collective in the longer run. Without challenging the meaningfulness of this tactic in the right settings, I contrast this with the "fugitive" (Moten and Harney, 2004) idea of giving – so to speak – *less* of oneself to one's writing. I argue that the latter might be not only personally but also collectively more pertinent in any number of situations in fragile academic settings both locally and globally.

A discussion around giving 'less' will force (auto)ethnographers to confront practical epistemic and moral questions that are seldom dealt with in chapters, books, or courses on methodology: How does one imagine 'minority' scholars' responbilities toward (upholding) institutions and concepts like academia or science? What does one owe to one's imagined readers, publishers, or, for example, employers in terms of methodological transparency or political authenticity? How do we decide when issues such as personal safety, good scientific praxis, or gains for marginalized communities clash?

The article is structured as follows: The next section charts what I see as the core methodological (epistemic-ethical) tenets in what can be called politically ambitious 'minority' academic fields such as transgender studies. The push toward autoethnography can be understood as arising from these tenets. Conversely, a critique of autoethnography – or a refusal to personally engage in it – can be understood as an epistemological and political failure within the relevant disciplines.

In the section after that, I turn to political theorist Chantal Mouffe's (2000) work around agonistic and antagonistic views of social interaction. I use these metaphors to discuss different ways in which the relationship of the 'minority' researcher and surrounding academia and society can be conceptualized. I argue that the idea of public autoethnography as a "liberatory strategy" (cf. Skeggs 1998, 37) hinges on imagining the work happening in an agonistic, i.e. essentially liberal, setting. I then stress the need to take social antagonism seriously when thinking about academic writing.

Finally, I identify some potential strategies to develop along both agonistic and antagonistic lines. In very different ways, such strategies aim to de-individualize 'minority' academia in ways that would benefit and support precariously positioned or marginalized scholars.

Power and marginalization

Autoethnography can be seen as part of a larger group of research practices that aim for greater vulnerability, transparency and accountability within politically ambitious disciplines. Fields utilizing autoethnography include feminist studies, post- and decolonial scholarship, critical race or caste studies, queer and trans studies, crip studies, and indigenous studies (e.g. Adjepong 2019; Bishop 2021; Chen 2014; Dutt 2018; Griffin 2012; Hancock, Allen and Lewis 2015; Ocasio-Stoutenburg 2021; Ortiz-Vilarelle 2021; Schiffer 2022; Skott-Myhre et al. 2012; Yalamala 2020). I locate this text within transgender studies, heavily intersecting with debates in critical race studies and

post- or decolonial work. The use of the shorthand 'minority scholarship' is not any numerical marker but a categorization expressing disciplinary marginalization and the political ambitiousness that characterizes the relevant fields.

The use of the word 'minority' also calls attention to a central methodological distinction between autoethnography as discussed here and its 'majoritarian' forms: whether a self-positioning in research and public writing happens via a form of power held or some structural marginalization experienced. Much of 'classic' reflexive (auto)ethnographic work is focused on questions relating to the researcher as powerful in different ways (e.g. Baviskar 1996; Rose 1997; Skeggs 1994; Stacey 1988). The researcher's power is thought to take several expressions: physical, economic, discursive, and so on. Power can reside in something one 'does' (such as a way of listening or writing) and/or something one is categorized as 'being' (such as white), and needs to be addressed at every step of research, from planning to publishing. In this strand, autoethnography has been used to understand various dominant positions, such as whiteness and class (e.g. Lundström 2010).

In such work, as in primarily non-autoethnographic forms of, for example, feminist ethnography (see Skeggs 2001), the reflexive focus is on questions of *how* or *if* it is possible for powerful and privileged researchers to try to mitigate such power through methodological choices regarding fieldwork and writing. Through the practice of "critical autoethnography", "the researcher, more than likely a member of the dominant culture" is thought to be "able to understand herself as an oppressor" (Tilley-Lubbs 2014, 268). In some readings, "radically vulnerable" research practices and writing (Curley et al 2022, 1052; Page 2017) can also help the dominant-culture scholar (even if only momentarily) to move *away from* power, toward a "world of solidarities" (Curley et al 2022, 1052).

What I call 'minority' autoethnography is focused on discussing the researcher not only as dominant but also as a structural underdog working in the margins, someone who can bring in thought and "encourage multiple voices" (Macdo-

nald 2013, 133) not found in 'mainstream' academia. Obviously, people's real positionalities are complex and partially mutable (one can be, for example, white *and* trans), which means that questions relating to power do not disappear but are simply made more complicated. Through "giv[ing] voice to marginalized groups" (Krug 2016, 173), 'minority' autoethnographic voices are "collectively" thought to "challenge the status quo [and] contribute to positive social change and move us to action" (Krug 2016, 173). The movement is, in a way, the opposite of the one above: from marginalization toward (collective) legitimacy.

This above difference can also be characterized as relating to the assumed relationship of the researcher to the academic "machine" (Spivak 1993). If, in 'mainstream' power-focused (auto) ethnography, the researcher is pictured as somehow part of the university system – or at least aiming or willing to become so – the view of the individual researcher in 'minority' autoethnography is much more ambivalent. Here, the researcher–academia relationship is usually viewed as more prosaic and conflicted. For example, using Patricia Hill Collins' classic expression, Ruth Pearce views "trans scholars as an example of 'outsiders within' the academy" (Pearce 2020, 808). In this view, universities are seen as being interested in one's well-being or being accommodating of 'minority' thinking only when this can be capitalized on (see e.g. Living Smile Vidya and Semmalar 2018 and Tuck and Yang 2012 for discussions of this). Thus, when the 'minority' researcher works and speaks, this is not thought to be from a position of academic legitimacy or safety. 'Minority' autoethnographers also routinely turn their critical gaze on academic institutions close to them (e.g. Nicolazzo 2017; Pearce 2020), a move that is seen as actively resisted by academia (see do Mar Pereira 2017 Wacquant 1989).

In these two modes of autoethnography, vulnerability means very different things. In situations where the academic employs critical methodologies to reflect on their power, vulnerability means epistemic and potential ethical/political gains (and, perhaps, a reputation as a progressive scholar). In 'minority' situations, it means calling attention to one's intimate conditions of existing in unequal and violent surroundings. Vulnerability is then not a choice but something that is ever present. This ever-present nature of precarity also sets such work apart from any number of studies that explore the researcher's vulnerability vis-à-vis a specific, particularly challenging research setting somehow 'voluntarily' entered by the researcher[1] (e.g. Anand 2011; Lundström 2010; Perone 2010).

Epistemic and ethical underpinnings

The privileged position held by autoethnography in 'minority' scholarship can be seen as resulting from both various desires and demands. The importance of the former is not to be underestimated. For variously marginalized and precariously positioned scholars, being able to bring forth one's own experiences in a 'legitimated' context can be extremely meaningful and gratifying. The impact is not limited to oneself but potentially reaches anyone able to recognize themselves in the writing.

Here, however, I focus on the push toward autoethnography arising from what I argue to be three central epistemic and ethical/political assumptions present in 'minority' scholarship. As the moral and knowledge-related ambitions of such work are always intertwined, one can also see the three as different aspects of the same thing.

First, as noted in the introduction, different 'minority' traditions (like many 'majority' ones, too) put heavy emphasis on personal experience, positionality, belonging and/or identity as a source of understanding and specifier of knowledge (e.g. Elliot 2010; Mills 1997; Tuck and Yang 2012; Yancy 2015). In ethnographic terms, one can say that marginalized scholars have "methodological capital" (Gallagher 2000) not accessible to others. Settings intimate to oneself are understood to be known differently and more profoundly than settings or questions one approaches from the 'out-side'. As positions are complex and often contradictory, autoethnography is also seen as particularly suited

for "queer [work] in the sense that it 'embraces fluidity, resists definitional and conceptual fixity, looks to self and structures as relational accomplishments and takes seriously the need to create more livable, equitable and just ways of living'" (Macdonald 2013, 13; quoting Jones and Adams 2010).

Second, the focus on the experiences and particularities of the knower is not simply motivated by (some imagined 'purely') scientific grounds. Instead, the epistemic question of who can know and can know what is deeply connected to the political question of who should know and what. This is often also seen as the more pressing issue. For example, Talia Bettcher calls trans scholars' "first person authority" to trans knowledge "ultimately a kind of ethical authority" (Bettcher 2009, 101). While scholars often disagree on the details of the epistemology (e.g. on the question of how literally to take the epistemic blindness of non-insiders, or whether meaningful second-hand experience can exist [cf. Bettcher 2009]), 'minority' scholarship produced by experiential/structural 'outsiders' (i.e. those not belonging to the group under scrutiny) is met with insider responses ranging from skepticism to categorical exclusion. The dissemination of 'minority' academic knowledge is said to be – first and foremost – the task and right of people somehow part of said marginalized group (e.g. Macdonald 2013, Elliot 2010). This insistence on more horizontal scholarship is seen by 'minority' scholars as a legitimate response to years of having been violently studied down upon (cf. Clare 2017) by more powerful others.

The third facet of 'minority' paradigms that I want to highlight here becomes clear from the previous two. In studies focusing on any given axis of social power (e.g. gender, race, class, or any combinations of these), perspectives documenting marginalization are given epistemic-political precedence. What this means is that, despite the overall focus on personal experience, not all claims to such knowledge are considered equally interesting. While experiences of marginalization (of being oppressed, violated) are seen as providing critical sharpness and interesting thinking, experiences of structural power are seen as limiting one's ability to understand the situation

(e.g. Mills 1997; Minoo 2020; Yancy 2015). Thus, as trans scholar Aaron Devor (2006) has noted, the response to one's work depends heavily on whether one is read as an insider or not. Because of these epistemic/ethical demands, it becomes important that the 'minority' scholar aiming for insider status "acknowledges" or "discloses the emotional, psychological, and physical impacts of being [variously] targeted" (Zaharin and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2022, 99). Through this, the researcher can stake a legitimate claim to 'belonging' and, connectedly, to 'knowledge'. Obviously, beyond being "targeted", belonging is also claimed through the disclosure of more agentic experiences or emotions such as rage or joy (e.g. Griffin 2012; Stryker 1994). Nevertheless, these also ultimately derive their legitimacy through (indirect) reference to a preceding marginalization.

As positions, kinds of belonging and/or identities are differently visible to readers or other interested parties, disclosure will have to take different forms in different autoethnographies. Further, while some forms of marginalization can potentially be strategically hidden, others cannot. Different kinds of individual belonging can also be seen as saying more or less about people around the person in question, i.e. potentially affecting a different number of people. It is also important to understand that specific kinds of marginalization become intelligible in relation to the contexts and political discourses in which they exist; some are more readily understand-able by specific readers than others (cf. Brown 1995; Berlant 2000). What this means is that while the presence of shared discourses around certain mechanisms of marginalization might allow an individual researcher to position themselves through reference to them, a person writing from a less well-known setting will have to spell things out in greater detail. All such factors affect how the writer can or must disclose their position.

Agonism and antagonism

The previous section noted the way in which epistemic and ethical ideals can be said to push 'minority' scholars toward increased autoethno-

graphic disclosure in their writing. Here, I turn to a discussion about the scientific and social climates in which 'minority' work is thought to take place. I use political theorist Chantal Mouffe's (2000) work on agonistic and antagonistic cultures of societal engagement as metaphors through which to think about academic work. I argue that autoethnography, in order to be presented as a truly viable epistemic-political ideal, hinges on having an essentially 'liberal' understanding of the nature of academic engagement through publishing. Furthermore, I argue that the author-figure of autoethnographic writing has – already before being published – taken on an 'individual' and 'authentic' form, suitable as a subject engaging in liberal dialogue. This can be considered somewhat surprising, as criticism of (Eurocentric, white, male, cis, straight) liberalisms form a core strand of progressive or radical disciplines across the board (e.g. Corrigan 2019; Guru 2011; Schwartzman 2006).

Mouffe's (2000; cf. Smith 1998; Gormley 2020) theories of democracy deal with the nature of public engagement and can help us understand what is thought to happen when academic texts, including 'minority' autoethnographies, reach publication. Yet the shaping of the subject of public engagement already happens in the process of writing. This subject becomes, despite autoethnographers 'willingness' to "embrace fluidity" and "resist definitional and conceptual fixity" (Jones and Adams 2010, 212), both individualized and portrayed as authentic. This is, as I see it, largely a product of the enforced individualism of academic institutions demanding recognizable 'authorship' (see e.g. Lund 2012). Yet it can also be understood as arising from the methodological ideals I discussed in the previous section.

The epistemic-ethical background of prioritizing personal experience and legitimate 'minority' belonging focuses on a singular author. While autoethnography, like all social science, uses examples to discuss social (shared) issues, it does so by drawing upon the personal life of the knower. Moreover, the demand for disclosure or transparent positioning means that the knower is also to be individually knowable by the reader.

Autoethnography radically differs from other kinds of ethnography in the central way that the autoethnographic narrator explicitly strives to be recognizable (the author's name is stated in the paper, the author's life in the text). With other kinds of informants ethnographers usually strive for the opposite: to use any number of methods to achieve the protective anonymization of individual speakers. Research participants can, for example, be 'broken' into several characters within a text to ensure a de-linking of physical body/lived life and the published story. In contrast, the autoethnographer offers themselves as hyper-recognizable: this is me, my story, name, face, marginalization, conviction, trauma, etc.

The author-individual is also marked by what can be understood as a demand for a political authenticity of self (cf. Seidman and Meeks 2011). The author is to be individually morally responsible for the work, which also means that they are to be politically 'true' to themselves in what they say. Similarly to "coming out [as a] struggle for personal authenticity" (Seidman and Meeks 2011, 527), an idea present in a number of queer rights movements, the autoethnographer can be said to be faced with the choice of either "liv[ing] openly" or opting for a morally dubious life of "dissimulation and deception" (ibid, 526). This idea leaves little space for an understanding of the complex and compromised nature of lived lives.

It is then this 'authentic' scholar-captured-in-a-name that engages with the public through their writing. Thinking with Chantal Mouffe (2000), academic engagement with an imagined community of readers can be called either "deliberative", "agonistic", or "antagonistic" depending on the iteration. Not unlike 'mainstream' social sciences, 'minority' autoethnography imagines a potential community of readers. As open-access publishing is held as an ideal (cf. James 2020) and is widely practiced, potential readerships consist not only of other 'minority' scholars but any interested parties with internet access. The public creating the community of readers is imagined to be, if not understanding and interested, then at least non-violent, toward the 'minority' work. Where does this fit in Mouffe's triad of political cultures?

In a deliberative view of social interaction, Mouffe writes, "the proper field of politics is identified with the exchange of arguments among reasonable persons guided by the principle of impartiality" (Mouffe 2000, 4). This 'Rawlsian' or 'Habermasian' view is discarded by Mouffe as being out of touch with "the conflictual nature of democratic politics" (ibid, abstract [n.p.]), too naïve in order to work as a model of human engagement. Mouffe herself, famously, proposes the concept of agonistic pluralism (ibid, 15), seen as a way of conceptualizing engagement without ignoring inherent conflict, which still aims to save the possibility of pan- or trans-social dialogue.

In other words, while a deliberative model would propose that different parties can meet in some form of rational dialogue as equals, an agonistic view acknowledges inequality and fundamental difference but argues for the value of argument. In Mouffe's agonistic view, 'the other' "is no[t] perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an 'adversary', i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question" (ibid).

Translating these metaphors of society into questions of social science, one can argue that the deliberative view – where rational people come together to discuss things "reasonably" – corresponds to a classic, masculinist view of the scientific process. Such a view has been criticized by scholars of color, feminists, postcolonial scholars, and others for at least forty-plus years (see e.g. Mohanty 2003 [1984]). No writers of autoethnography would argue that researchers are disinterested parties in their own work, or that academic debates happen in 'equal' forums. On the other hand, as I read it, an agonistic model describes the process of 'minority' autoethnographic writing and academic publication. In such a model of social science, the ideas of ongoing conflicts and unequal starting points are incorporated into the production and dissemination of research. Nevertheless, the idea of mutually cognizant and open argument is retained. Mouffe sees the question of power and antagonism as "placed" at "[the] very center" (Mouffe 2000, 13) but believes in reaching meaningful progress through debate.

Debate is not "free and equal" (ibid) but (potentially) possible with every and any kind of opponent since, in agonistic thinking, "[a]n adversary is an enemy, but a legitimate enemy, one with whom we have some common ground because we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality" (ibid, 15). The utopia on the horizon can be described as a form of social-scientific pluralism, where differences can exist and clash without the 'minority' risking (threats of) violence or extinction.

Because of the textual and seemingly 'civil' nature of academic output, it is easy to understand how feelings of a relatively safe pluralism emerge. Yet as 'minority' autoethnographies such as the ones quoted throughout this text themselves note, the aforementioned "principles of liberal democracy" cannot really be said to describe the public reactions to 'minority' work, outside or inside academia (cf. Bassi and Lafleur 2022; Pearce et al. 2020). Mouffe's (2000) third expression, antagonism, might be a more meaningful word through which to approach the academic world. Like in agonism, power and conflict are at the center of this view of the social, yet staying with antagonism means disengaging from public (pseudo-)debates with "adversaries" that do not actually respect the supposed terms of engagement. If agonism is pluralist, antagonism views (current or future) social fields more in terms of fragmented groups.

Whose 'academia' registers?

Ideals such as the agonistic model above must of course be thought of as utopias (cf. Muños 2019) through which to think about futures toward which one would like to push current practices. Thus, calling autoethnographic practices 'liberal' is to say that the vision of a better future is such, not that people necessarily think that it corresponds to current realities. Keeping this in mind, I argue that even well-meaning utopias risk becoming politically counterproductive or dangerous if their influence is not seriously discussed in the contexts in which they are applied. It is equally

dangerous (and condescending) to extrapolate or generalize from one setting, thought to speak for others. Specifically, I want to call attention to the heavily Anglocentric nature of 'minority' autoethnographic theory and writing. This easily influences assumptions about what 'academic lives' look like in general.

As Icaza and Vázquez write, "[u]niversities are internally and externally heterogenous", "have unique political contexts" and "historical formations" (2018, 109). There are an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 universities in the world (QS.com, 2017), of which only a tiny fraction, mainly located within a section of the Global North, registers in debates that set the tone for 'minority' studies today. Globally, nationally and within specific universities, countless different academic lives are led, with very different levels of precarity. And, while issues such as anti-trans violence are universal, they take different forms for different people. The sheer lack of information about different academic lives globally is staggering (but see Vatansever 2020, Vatansever and Kölemen 2023 for examples). Because of the inequality in academic 'prestige' and the precarity of most people's lives, stories from non-hegemonic universities and especially those of marginalized scholars almost never register among those aspiring to academic 'centrality'. Beyond universities, other academic actors (such as journals, publishers, and conferences) contribute to the control over what registers as important or even knowable 'academic life'.

The three levels of inequality in academia (international, national and intra-institutional) noted above raise further questions regarding what epistemic-political ambitions can reasonably be attached to 'minority' autoethnography. While 'minority' autoethnographers are characterized by precarity and marginalization in their environments, work that finds its way to academic search engines is nevertheless produced somehow in connection to epistemically privileged universities and institutions, and is, in this sense, "aligned with power" (Strangio 2019, paragraph 7). While being "outsiders within" (Hill Collins 1986), there still remains the precarious connection to the inside. Autoethnographic work is, of course, published elsewhere too, in online forums or on social media, but in this form, it does not enjoy academic status.

One reading of this unequal access to legitimized autoethnography would be that this simply proves the need for support of more diverse writing. If, indeed, there is a lack of writing about different (aspects of) academic lives, variously located academics could theoretically rectify this by creating knowledge about their own particular experience. The task ahead would then mainly be to provide more platforms for publishing and to disseminate knowledge of autoethnographic styles while, at the same time, pushing for a continued broadening of what is considered 'academic enough'. Through this, autoethnography would eventually become widely available for complexly marginalized scholars across contexts.[2]

In another reading, the idea that an alignment with 'minority' autoethnography would be generally alluring for marginalized scholars could be called into question. As noted in the sections above, autoethnographic research practices create further vulnerability and require resources, not simply in order to get published, but also to withstand the potential consequences. For many scholars, "[t]he need to survive the university [...] [takes] precedence over [...] academic interest" (Pappu and Satyanarayana 2018, 279 [emphasis in original]). Autoethnography, like other 'troubling' things, might be a realistic possibility mainly for people who already have a secure "job, housing and access to health care" (Namaste 2005, 22). While public displays of methodological freshness or strategic vulnerability might carry certain rewards for certain 'minority' scholars located in the right corners of progressive academia, such displays might simply solicit ostracization or abuse when utilized by less securely located researchers. Thus, a portrayal of autoethnography as a more (or the most) nuanced, reflexive approach to social science might – inadvertently or not – serve to create a sort of vanguard class of scholars, (self-appointedly) more 'advanced' than less well-positioned others (cf. Thompson 2003; Tuck and Yang 2012).

The ethics of the promotion of autoethnography as a preferred practice must be discussed contextually. If a significant part or even a majority of marginalized academics have good reasons not to bring their lives and bodies into their writing or other public work (any more than they are already forced to), promoting autoethnography as a general marker of academic quality in methodological teaching or reflection becomes unsustainable. Without paying attention to the antagonistic and individualized contexts in which most scholars work, such a demand means that the 'minority' scholar is, in a sense, required to sacrifice themselves in the name of epistemic or moral strength.

Strategies to Develop

Thus far, I have argued that the ways in which autoethnography can be said to function as a "liberatory strategy" (Skeggs 1998, 37) in 'minority' disciplines depends both on whether one approaches the idea of academic labor through a model of agonism or antagonism and on the material locations of scholars within the three-fold structural inequality of academia globally. Thinking with an emphasis on the historicity of political articulation and struggle (see e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985), I see concrete methods of research and writing as having to be both thought about and taught in reference to time and place.

In this section, I attempt to sketch possible ways forward within what is possible without an application to a specific context. I again look at agonism and antagonism as guiding ideological metaphors for two distinct strategies to develop further. In practice, these two strategies might well be combined.

Analogous to Mouffe's (1985) agonism, the first strategy touched upon here retains the ideals of political authenticity and open dialogue as a tool of progress. However, this strategy questions the usefulness of researcher individualism and attempts to rethink the possibility of autoethnography outside that. The second, antagonistic, strategy questions the usefulness of scientific openness. This leads to more fundamental questions regarding the role of professional 'minority' academia.

Earlier, I noted how the epistemological-political ideals of current autoethnography mean that precariously located individual scholars become responsible for conveying political authenticity. If one wants to de-emphasize the personal, methods for collectivizing autoethnographic speech and possible risks have to be developed. Several autoethnographers have engaged in various forms of horizontal collective writing where the ownership of individual voices within the collective can be made ambivalent (e.g. Sisco et al 2022; Wezniejewska et al 2020). Yet, as the names in the references make painfully clear, this does not solve the issue of individual recognizability and focus, even if the number of authors rises. Neither does it affect the 'minority' scholars' need to recognizably position (disclose) themselves within the text. In order to work toward a release from the academic-as-a-name, practical changes in publishing and, for example, hiring practices would be needed. For this to work, monetary, legal and psychological support networks independent of first authorship would need to be set up. The two kinds of changes would have to go hand in hand, as a de-naming cannot happen as long as one is economically reliant on continuously working toward becoming a brand. Material and emotional safety in research would mean that autoethnography could be made in such a way that it would not matter who you 'really are'. In this development, 'minority' autoethnographic voices could enter the (assumedly) agonistic public sphere in ways that are securely embodied through personal experience yet linked directly to no-one and everyone.

Though not at all impossible, this strategy might be seen as too utopian within current academic climates. In an antagonistic view, the idea that the imagined 'public sphere' of social-scientific discussion would really desire or be willing to invest material resources in the participation of non-mainstream scholars is seen as an illusion. If one accepts the idea of the university as hostile, strategies would be "fugitive" (Moten and Harney 2004, 101). As stated in Pearce (2020) and Pappu

and Satyanarayana (2018), survival comes first. In addition, the university and broader academia can be thought of as places from which to pull out resources (whether material or immaterial) that can be redistributed among communities elsewhere. This corresponds with the idea that "the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one" (Moten and Harney 2004, 101).

These primary goals do not in any way negate the possibility of also aiming for change, for example, through vulnerable research practices such as autoethnography. The difference is that within this strand of thinking, public vulnerability in one's role as an academic is not expressed to be anyone's moral responsibility. Loyalty toward oneself and research participants, or, for example, protecting minority spaces, comes first. This, of course, does not imply that one would stop being self-critical or self-reflexive in one's work, but that the responsibility to 'authentically' bring this out in one's public writing is challenged. Agency, in this sense, can be asserted both by doing and not doing.

In an antagonistic strategy, lingering ideas of academia as a form of calling are refused. Labor, including labor within progressive 'minority' fields, is seen as akin to other forms of capitalist labor, i.e. including compromised positions and tense employer–employee relations. Public writing, autoethnographic or not, is then also viewed mainly through a strategic lens.

In my own experience, 'minority' academic life already draws on a mix of the above models. For example, 'minority' researchers clandestinely protect themselves and other people in situations that are similar to theirs. Beyond the need to state legitimate 'minority' belonging, autoethnographers learn to resist oversharing and curate 'public' personalities layered on private selves. Yet the access to such tactical knowhow is highly ad hoc and dependent on how well placed or 'lucky' one happens to be in one's own space at the university. Most learning happens tacitly, as 'officially' published texts, handbooks and university workshops systematically avoid approaching the 'dirty work' involved in practical academic labor. Reasons for this, I suspect, include the very same

over-emphasis on names and subsequent career anxiety mentioned above. Open secrets create a silent incongruence between, on one hand, what one learns and tells others and, on the other hand, what one does.

Before concluding, it is important to note that both strands of further development that I have noted are based on an assumption that it is somehow okay for the 'minority' scholar to work and receive payment for their work within an academic system. The marginalized scholar is either imagined to be able to resist being incorporated into the "machine" (Spivak 1993) or to simply not be desirable for such appropriation by virtue of their anti-hegemonic positionality. Yet other writers have challenged not only the idea of agonistic interaction, but also the idea that the 'marginalized' scholar could sustain a politically useful antagonistic relationship. In this view, being coopted is inevitable if one makes it to the university. Despite whatever good intentions, work in academic institutions is seen to amount to lending support to what is regarded as, essentially, a multiply violent and exclusionary system (see e.g. Living Smile Vidya and Semmalar 2018, 59-60). Faced with such systemic violence, the greater good of causing minimal harm by excusing oneself from academic participation is thought to take moral precedence.

Conclusion

This text has aimed to expand methodological discussions about autoethnographic writing by precariously positioned or marginalized scholars working in 'minority' disciplines. It argues for greater inclusion of socially situated thinking concerning what kinds of writing or publishing practices can be thought of as epistemologically and/or ethically 'best' in a given situation. I stressed the need to think of the methods for ethnographic (field) research and methods for public writing as at least partially separate entities. Methodological writing, I argued, should more clearly note the particular ways in which ethical responsibilities vis-à-vis, for example, research participants or the imagined readership of one's texts differ.

I have noted an important difference between two strands of autoethnographic writing. In the strand I called the 'mainstream' or 'majoritarian' one, the structurally 'powerful' academic attempts to use various self-reflexive strategies to move toward greater vulnerability. Depending on the reading, such moves can be thought of as either mitigating the worst excesses or perhaps even holding more radical potential for more solidaric work. In the other strand, for which I use the shorthand 'minority', writing in the self serves the purpose of bringing otherwise excluded knowledge and perspectives into academic conversations, thus forcing them to be considered as social issues. This can be described as resisting a forced-upon vulnerability (marginalization) and moving toward greater legitimacy for marginalized selves, experiences, groups, and academic disciplines.

A demand for autoethnographic reflection in 'minority' disciplines such as transgender studies can be seen as arising from the underlying epistemic and ethical/political assumptions. The most meaningful 'minority' knowledge is seen as created by personal experiences of marginalization. Conversely, indirect non-personal knowledge (if it exists) is understood as not only easily misguided but appropriative or directly harmful. Because of this, researchers need to make a convincing case for insider status in relation to whatever is being written about. As epistemic precedence is given to experiences of marginalization (rather than, say, experiences of privilege or dominance), this articulation necessarily takes some form of sharing of personal experiences of hardship. The already precariously positioned scholar is thus expected to put their precarity on display. While I stressed the meaningfulness of this as an actively chosen strategy in situations where the scholar desires it, I argued that the many potential implications and risks of doing so should be more ac-tively brought up.

I argued that the position of autoethnography in 'minority' disciplines can be seen as reflecting a specific liberal hope in relation to academic publishing. In understanding this, I used Chantal Mouffe's (2000) discussion about deliberative, agonistic, and antagonistic modes of political engagement. Mouffe's agonism – where conflict is emphasized but the belief in non-violent open debate is retained – was proposed as a meaningful metaphor for describing the utopian vision guiding 'minority' autoethnographic publishing. This was contrasted with the idea of antagonism, which can be seen as describing the practical reality of much of 'minority' work and academic life. In an antagonistic view, the possibility of open debate with "adversaries" (ibid, 15) who might, for example, wish you dead is dismissed.

In relation to this, I noted the severe lack of information about life and work at the tens of thousands of universities globally. I noted the risk of autoethnographic extrapolation, where the experiences of a small number of 'minority' scholars connected to globally privileged academic settings are used as a stand-in for the experiences of (assumedly) related 'minority' scholars elsewhere. In thinking about developments that would reduce unwanted vulnerability for precariously positioned scholars, I again followed the strands of agonism and antagonism. If an agonistic relationship is to be attained or reattained, structural changes aiming to de-individualize auto-ethnographic practice would be needed. These would focus on strengthening the material position of the individual researcher and 'minority' collective as well as on working against the need for individually (named) authorship within academic publishing and hiring practices.

On the other hand, if a more antagonistic view of academic work is adapted, writing takes on a more prosaic or tactical function. Autoethnography can nonetheless be practiced, if it is thought to benefit a particular purpose, but it can no longer be explained as a more 'advanced' or moral form of writing, or something one owes to imagined political goals.

Routinely incorporating methodological discussions along the three lines sketched in this article would, as I see it, help individual 'minority'

scholars make sense of their locatedness and help them make more informed choices as to what to write and where. ∎

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NOTES

1 Obviously, how 'freely' anyone chooses any research setting is debatable.

2 The 'absolute' marginalization of anyone writing reflexive texts in any language is, of course, very much open to criticism (see e.g. Spivak 1997).

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