Southern Cross University

Nollie Nahrung

Unstraightening: Ethical adventures with queer heterosexuality in an open text

Abstract:
Charlie Rich sang that 'no-one knows what goes on behind closed doors'. And with the (normatively bedroom) doors firmly shut, the heteronormative privilege to privacy is invoked, drawing the doona of homogeneity over heterosexuality. Yet what may be gained from opening closed doors from the inside?

Ethical writing considerations will be explored in the context of why, through the creation of an autoethnographic text for my Honours research project, I have decided to reject the privilege of privacy to examine my lived experience of heterosexual polyamory. This discussion will engage with the productive debates surrounding queer heterosexuality to explore the possibilities and limitations of writing against normativity while simultaneously holding a position of heterosexual privilege.

In doing so, this paper will consider how the construction of an open text, that includes tools (scalpel and pencil) and spaces (blank right hand pages) for the reader to respond, may acknowledge the limitations of speaking about the self by opening the project to other voices and experiences.

It will outline how the construction of such a text supports a belief that autoethnography holds significant potential to promote research as dialogue, or conversation. Yet, through constructing a text as the site of intended reciprocal exchange, what are the ethics of placing both author and reader in positions that may prove unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable?

Biographical note:
Nollie is an honours student in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University (Lismore campus). She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Queensland and a Bachelor of Multimedia Studies with Distinction from Central Queensland University.

> If structuralism and poststructuralism tell us that we only have access to the world through a grid of language, as a linguistic convention, this notion of narrative performance tells us: that may be true, but that's not the only point, because we're interested in more than epistemological questions. We're also interested in the ethical questions that make it possible to think in political terms. In other words, our goal is not simply cognition or gaining understanding, but also, and importantly, acting in the world (Huffer 2001: 19).

How might an autoethnographic text act in the world? What purpose might it serve and how might the form of the text articulate this purpose? As a heterosexual author who seeks to fracture hegemonic heterosexuality, how might an open text contribute towards an anti-normative knowledge project while acknowledging the limits of my subjectivity? And, in doing so, how might such a text engage the key ethical concepts of responsibility and recognition in my relationship with the reader? These issues surround my Honours research project, which uses an autoethnographic approach to examine my experience of heterosexual polyamory.

'Polyamory' is a hybrid word comprised of Greek and Latin roots, literally translating as 'many loves'. As Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse (2006: 515) summarise, '[a]t its most basic, the concept of polyamory stands for the assumption that it is possible, valid and worth-while to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person'. Different to polygamy (which grants one person multiple 'opposite sex' spouses) polyamory enables each person to engage in multiple-partner relationships, and although heterosexuals may practise polyamory, it is not specifically heterosexual in character. Thus, in moving outside boundaries of the monogamous, heterosexual couple and the nuclear family, polyamory evidences the potential to enact relational and family modes that may contest heteronormativity and destabilise hegemonic heterosexuality's ideals about gender, sex and sexuality.

Heckert (2010: 265) writes that, like anarchy, polyamory is often dismissed as 'nice sounding but fundamentally impossible'. In writing about the practice of polyamory in my own life, I seek, in some small way, to harness the political dimension of autoethnography, to show the possibility of our lives as sites in which broader hierarchies of power might be questioned or resisted (Wilkinson 2010: 252). In addition, I feel that speaking of this experience is important because, as Smart (1996: 176) writes '[w]e know about the appalling abuse some women experience in heterosexual relationships, but we still know virtually nothing about how women in non-abusive relationships are negotiating their sexuality'.

While a discussion of sexuality is only one part of my project, it provokes interesting questions due to the complex intersection of privilege and marginalisation, conformity and resistance that enable and inform my experience. Although heterosexuality is ostensibly about 'opposite sex' desire, it operates as a silent and unmarked category that constructs a social as well as a sexual identity (Hockey et al. 2007: 9). From the sheer dominance of representations of heterosexuality in popular cultural texts to the ability to marry, heteronormativity is relentlessly enshrined in sociocultural systems

(Hockey et al. 2007: 23). Within this framework, non-heterosexuals must disclose themselves, either "coming out" or remaining closeted, while heterosexuals enjoy the luxury of seldom being required to announce, think about, justify, or explain their sexuality (Thomas 2002: 17). Yet understandings of heterosexuality as a 'monolithic, unitary entity' (Jackson 1999: 164) fail to acknowledge that some expressions of heterosexuality, such as polyamorous practice, may serve to challenge the idea of a hegemonic heterosexual identity and are marginalised or excluded within heteronormative discourses.

Using a queer theory approach, such expressions may be understood as evidence of 'queer heterosexuality'. In queer theory, 'queer' is an open and fluid term which is oppositional to containment and closure. Queer theory has grown from feminist and gay and lesbian studies in the academy, and in this environment 'queer' has predominantly been used in relation to gay and lesbian subjects, although it is not always viewed as 'an acceptable elaboration of or shorthand for' these categories (Jagose 1996: 2–3). Troubling static and stable sexual identities and understanding both sex and gender as social constructs, queer theory provides tools to productively challenge the binary oppositions of male/female, heterosexual/homosexual; celebrating the 'open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlays, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically' (Sedgwick 1994: 8).

This openness creates a broad field in which queer is defined as '*whatever* is at odds with the normal' (Halperin cited in Yep 2003: 36). Thus, while including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning subjects, the openness of queer also provides scope for anti-homophobic heterosexual subjects, including those whose sexual expression is non-normative, to participate in anti-normative knowledge projects as 'queer heterosexuals' and/or write about 'queer heterosexuality' (Seidman 2010: 91). In an analysis of writing about queer heterosexuality, Schlichter (2004: 543) summarises that it falls into two predominant modes, 'testimonial form' and 'theoretical performance'. While these modes may overlap, theoretical performances interrogate heterosexuality as a subject, while testimonial forms describe the authors' personal experiences of becoming, and self-representing, as queer heterosexuals. Schlichter (2004: 550) points to the potential for testimonies about queer heterosexuality to demonstrate how individuals 'perform straightness in various ways', destabilising the heterosexual/homosexual binary in ways that may encourage antinormative modes of sociality.

Yet, Schlichter (2004: 551) also argues that many queer-aspiring straight authors neglect to discuss the role of sexuality in their lives, and in doing so may unwittingly invoke the 'heteronormative privilege to privacy'. In leaving the role of their sexuality unexamined, heterosexual authors may inadvertently reinscribe heterosexuality as 'natural', and thus reassert the privileged speaking position they had sought to destabilise. Breaking the heteronormative privilege to privacy requires what Fryer (2010: 6) calls 'thinking queerly … refusing to accept who we think we are without

having interrogated it simply because it seems natural to us'. By examining the role of sexuality in my own life, I hope to speak ethically about 'a politics and pleasure in more fragmented heterosexualities' (Smart 1996: 176) while not reinscribing heterosexuality as 'natural' nor as oppositional to other sexualities or modes of sexual expression.

In conjunction with this, the politics and pleasure evident within contemporary discourses about polyamory have an important role to play. Polyamory is becoming increasingly visible in Australia, as evidenced by the 2011 inclusion of a 'poly' float in the Sydney Mardi Gras (Polyamory Australia 2011) and an *ABC News 24* opinion piece about the marriage equality debate (Fox 2011). Internationally, in contemporary Western societies, there is an increasing representation of non-monogamous relationship structures within contemporary film and television texts (Freydkin 2010).

In this climate, as Ritchie (2010) argues, polyamory is a growing sexual story, but her analysis demonstrates that the story being told in mononormative media culture is one that focuses on the centrality of love and romantic relationships in polyamorous practice. Such focus can work to deemphasise the role of sexuality while additionally create a hierarchical division between polyamory and other forms of non-monogamy, such as the lifestyle ('swinging'). Wilkinson (2010: 246) argues that differentiating polyamory against other non-monogamous practices may be a tactical move to align it within familiar mainstream discourses of romantic love in order to gain increased acknowledgement and acceptance. This seems evident in Wagner's (2008) argument that 'putting a less radical face on polyamory' will help it become more acceptable and accessible in mainstream society. Based in the desire (or perceived necessity) of working within existing frameworks of privilege and hierarchies, a less radical looking polyamory may also be able to achieve social and legal recognition for polyamorous practitioners of all sexual orientations.

Yet, I feel uncomfortable with this 'less radical face'. In addition to potentially encouraging polyamory to be defined as 'superior' to 'other' forms of non-monogamy, I fear that it might conceal that, just as heterosexuality is not a 'monolithic, unitary entity' (Jackson 1999: 164), neither is polyamory. I agree with Wilkinson (2010: 253), who argues that '[w]e must challenge attempts to define any notion of 'true' polyamory, and constantly ask who has the power to define the borders of polyamory, whose stories are given validation, and in whose interests do they serve'. Thus, I believe that surrendering the heterosexual privilege to privacy is also important in order to contribute to the diversity of stories about polyamory that might circulate, and to place such stories within a broader anti-normative knowledge project.

Although I have decided that writing about the role of sexuality in my life is ethically appropriate for the goals of my project, I am mindful of Schlichter's (2004: 551) caution that an analysis of specific sexual practices would not necessarily make for a non-normative social subject, pointing to Foucault's argument that the confessional is a technology of power. Perhaps, as Thomas (2002: 17) writes, the key to approaching

heterosexual subjectivity queerly is not to make specific heterosexual acts problematic, but to 'interrogate the contexts that make such acts meaningful, intelligible, hegemonic, to question the work of sexual signification and social construction itself'. Doing so employs the insights of Scott (1991), who cautions against the 'evidence of experience', arguing that the sociocultural context in which experience occurs must be foregrounded to show how identity and experience are enacted by historical forces beyond individual agency. For queer white subjects in nations such as postcolonial Australia, such historicising is important because although such subjects '… may be differentially recognised as speaking subjects as a result of our sexual practices, we continue to benefit on a daily basis from our nominal relationship to white hegemony' (Riggs 2006: 96). Historicising lived experience enables it to be deconstructed and examined as partial, questionable and problematic, rather than as a self-explanatory 'true' event (Jackson & Mazzei 2008: 304). This embraces subjectivity as a discursive process, revealing the constructed nature of both experience and its recounting (Berry & Warren 2009: 605).

Recognising the constructed and partial nature of experience enables it to be opened out for dialogue, rather than closed down (Berry & Warren 2009: 604). Working within a poststructuralist framework, writing about lived experience moves from the ('stable and essential') self to the subject, which is ' … constructed, hence provisional, shifting, changing, always able to be redefined and reconstructed'. In this process of reconstruction and redefinition, experience is an event open to ongoing reinterpretation that may be 'given new social contexts, competing discourses and shifting relations of power' (Jackson & Mazzei 2008: 304).

In thinking about such reinterpretation, I believe that the reader of an autoethnographic text may play a valuable role. As Schlichter (2004: 360) argues, heterosexual subjects who wish to critique heterosexuality 'will always be dependent on the perspectives of others to make them aware of the constraints of (heterosexual) subjection'. Thus, diverse peoples may bring competing discourses to a text, enabling it to be examined anew. Therefore, if experience is approached as an event that may be opened out for dialogue, rather than closed down, how might such a desire for interaction and discussion be communicated to those who receive the 'gift' (Berry 2008) of authethnography?

In my project, the thesis introduction extends an invitation for the reader to respond to the work presented. In addition to this invitation, the thesis will include blank right hand pages in the text, for the reader's 'right of reply'. Further, the print version of the thesis will include tools for the reader in the form of pencil and scalpel, which they may choose to employ in order to add to or amend the text. This approach communicates a desire for the reader to 'audience' the text: that is, to respond to the work presented. As Berry's (2008) analysis outlines, those who audience autoethnography may feel uncertain about whether or how it is appropriate to respond. As many autoethnographers reveal themselves as vulnerable subjects in their work, the audience of such texts may be reluctant to respond to the work presented even as they are impacted upon by such texts. I believe that such reluctance speaks of

a desire to behave ethically and respectfully with others, especially those who are vulnerable, and thus believe that authors of autoethnography might need to make plain their desire (or not) for engagement with the reader about the work presented.

Although my project articulates this desire for engagement, what are the ethical implications of removing traditional barriers between author and reader? Here, I would like to focus on two dimensions of ethics: responsibility and recognition. As Fiore (2003: ix) highlights, responsibility is a key ethical concept that includes accountability for one's own actions (taking responsibility) in addition to holding others accountable for their own acts. In a feminist framework, the ethic of responsibility is both relational and particular. Rather than being grounded in rigid and supposedly universal rules, a feminist ethic of responsibility is enacted through a responsive accountability that comes about through particular interactions between particular people in particular relations to each other (Fiore 2003: ix–x).

Responsive accountability is especially dynamic in an open text. In this encounter, by inviting the reader to enter into a conversation, the author expresses a desire to move away from being '… a first-person scholarly narrator who is self-referential but unavailable to criticism or revision' (Adams & Holman Jones 2011: 110). Instead, the reader is invited to comment, to talk back, to critique and respond to the work presented. In making this opportunity plain, the author acknowledges that not only might readers have something interesting to say, but that there is an ethical responsibility to listen to the responses of those who receive the 'gift' of autoethnography.

In doing so, the author may seem to put demands upon the reader. Yet, although the reader is invited to respond, there is no compulsion to do so; the text may 'simply' be read and left unremarked (although, at least two people have to 'mark' it!) or remain unread. And silence is a communication in itself, as Lovaas (2003) has explored. Until death, not to communicate is impossible, so even silence may provide critique. But for readers who choose to respond beyond silence, I seek to demonstrate willingness to listen and learn from the reciprocal gifts that others might offer. In endeavouring not to limit the ways that this interaction might occur, I further seek to acknowledge and respect the diversity of others, to invite them to be present in the text in multiple ways in order to honour alterity (Huffer 2001: 21).

In the printed version of the thesis, the pencil and the scalpel may be used to alter the text I present, but these tools might also be used to change or add to material subsequently created by the reader. As people may respond to the text in different ways, readers might engage creatively with the text as a physical object, with the photographic content it will contain, or with the written text presented, according to their own ways of knowing, skills or desires. Central to this approach is recognition. As an ethical concept, recognition requires a response to others 'on the basis of their self-conception rather than treating them according to one's own favoured way of seeing them' (Spelman 1977, cited in Fiore 2003: ix). Failure in doing so may result in misrecognition that causes disrespect, alienation, pain and harm.

In my project, I seek to avoid misrecognition by acknowledging that 'recognition does not require a stable object' (Heyes 2003: 65). Just as the author's subjectivity is in a state of flux and fluidity, so is the reader's, evidencing a process that 'does not find a definitive closure at any particular moment in its development' (Heyes 2003: 63). This lack of closure is acknowledged through the range of interactions that the reader may choose to have with the text. If the reader decides to engage, their interaction may be minimal or extensive, remain private or be shared. It may end in the erasure and removal of all that has been explored and added: an experiential working through that leaves only traces of the path taken. This scope evidences a site of engagement in which 'the speaking subject, the reader and the discursive traces themselves remain linked but porous, interdependent and open to change' (Huffer 2001: 21). Doing so communicates a desire to be accountable to the reader while recognising them on the terms they set, inviting each reader to deconstruct and recast the text if they choose to do so, and welcoming the use of diverse haptic and intellectual modes of engagement according to each reader's direction.

Roth (2009) reminds us that '[e]very act, by its very nature, changes the (social and material) world. This world is not our own, but is co-inhabited and co-constituted with others'. Thinking about how we co-constitute this world, I believe that the conditions under which the text might circulate could be used to support the political aims of an anti-normative knowledge project. Therefore, I have decided to release my thesis (in both print and digital form) under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This will enable readers to re-work and re-distribute what I present in any way they wish, simply with an attribution to the original work. In doing so, I hope that the text might split and travel in multiple directions, perhaps evidencing Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome model without beginning or end. By licensing the work in this way, I want to enable information to travel more freely outside institutional walls, to embrace potentially unknown research outcomes that may find a place in non-commercial spheres (Denzin 2003: 272) and work against knowledge hierarchies.

As the author of this text, I wonder how my project might be taken up, and what responses (including silence) it might provoke. In thinking about this, I experience feelings of uncertainty and even fear about the approach I have taken. Yet, I am encouraged by the words of Butler (cited in Riggs 2006: 88), who suggests that '[w]e're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something'. And so, I sit at my desk and write in the hope that someone might want to write back or work forward or against or with or through or beyond what I present. I sit at my desk and work on this project in the hope that I might make something that contributes to 'the opening and creation of spaces without a map, the invention and proliferation of ideas without an unchanging and predetermined goal, and the expansion of individual freedom and collective possibilities without the constraints of suffocating identity and restrictive membership' (Yep 2003: 35).

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