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Invading ethnography: A queer of color reflexive practice

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Abstract
This article proposes *invading ethnography* as reflexive practice that disrupts normative representations of gender and sexuality. Writing from the perspective of the queer of color, this reflexive practice plays on the idea of the ethnographic researcher as an alien entity that invades a social setting, thereby calling attention to ethnography's colonial history. I model this practice by sharing an ethnographic narrative from my research with a Ghanaian community in Houston, Texas. Rather than contain reflexivity to a methodological appendix or footnote, *invading ethnography* strategically interrupts the ethnographic narrative to illustrate how normative assumptions about gender and sexuality not only shape the organization of social spaces, but also inform ethnographic possibilities. In so doing, this article performs a decolonial option by destabilizing the powerful position of the narrator through an interruption of the ethnographic narrative.

Keywords
African immigrants, autoethnography, community, queer of color critique, reflexivity

> Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be.
> (Toni Morrison, *Sula*)

In *Aberrations in Black,* Roderick Ferguson (2004) imagines the thoughts running through the head of 'some drag queen, whose nerves had been tried.' Watching Chicago School sociologist Conrad Bentzen invade the space of a South Side Chicago party for black queers, the queen thought, 'Oh, there goes another

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white boy tourist come to slum with faggots' (Ferguson, 2004: 31). This imagined perception of Bentzen performs a reversed analytical gaze from the perspective of the subject of ethnographic inquiry. But furthermore, the construction of the ethnographer as 'another white boy tourist' is instructive. It offers a biting critique of practices of normative urban ethnography, which include an invasion of people of color's personal space as part of an exotic interlude from normativity. In fact, the tired queen whose words Ferguson imagines appears in Bentzen's text as a 'huge mulatto with wide shoulders and narrow lips... [wearing] a white satin evening gown that reveal [*sic*] the unmistakable breasts of a woman' (quoted in Ferguson, 2004: 40). A 'transgendered mulatta' who Bentzen renders an abject subject ('a lascivious creature that strikes the normal as extremely repulsive') is given her voice back in Ferguson's book and she reads the sociologist for filth. Her brief (imagined) thoughts, when juxtaposed against Bentzen's, reveal the logics of US sociology's urban ethnographic lens, which extends a racialized heteropatriachal normativity to mark some subjects as perpetually aberrant. This lens is firmly attached to ethnography's colonial history, which as Robin Clair (2003) has argued, evolved through different colonial periods.

This article proposes *invading ethnography* as a reflexive practice that disrupts the racialized heteropatriarchal lens of normative urban ethnography. Ethnographers study places, people, and organizations about which they may have intimate or no knowledge. Their research, which includes meticulous observations and analysis, reveals critical and rich qualitative insights into how people in organizations, communities, and social groups sustain these social units, contend with disparities, and engage with a broader social world. At the same time, ethnography is rooted in colonial expansion (read: invasion) and its contemporary iterations are yet to successfully escape these ties (Lincoln and Cannella, 2009; Tomaselli, 2001; Willis and Trondman, 2002). Although anthropologists and other interdisciplinary scholars who use ethnographic methods have historically been reflexive of this colonial history, mainstream US sociology has yet to critically confront the colonial heritage of urban ethnography. *Invading ethnography* plays on the idea of the ethnographic researcher as an alien entity that invades a social setting, thereby calling attention to ethnography's colonial history. My use of the term 'invading' builds on Nirmal Puwar's (2004) conceptualization of space invaders as bodies who appear out of place in a given social space. Puwar argues that this out-of-placeness reveals how unequal relations of power construct some spaces as exclusive to certain types of people. In theorizing *invading ethnography,* I am extending the concept of space invaders as a practice of reflexivity in sociology's urban ethnography. This reflexive practice brings to light how the privileging of certain bodies can obfuscate the ways in which the ethnographer's embodiment is implicated in their research.

In the pages below, I model *invading ethnography* by sharing an ethnographic narrative from my research with a Ghanaian community in Houston, Texas. Rather than contain reflexivity to a methodological appendix or footnote, this reflexive practice strategically interrupts the ethnographic narrative to illustrate

how normative assumptions about gender, race, and sexuality not only shape the organization of social spaces, but also inform ethnographic possibilities. This strategic interruption builds on the work of black feminist and queer of color ethnographers including Marlon Bailey (2013), Felly Simmonds (1997), and Gloria Wekker (2006), who challenge the norm of unmarked research positionality and ask us to contend with how the researcher's positionality, body, and erotic subjectivity produces ruptures and continuities that allow for ethnographic insights. The reflexive practice proposed in this article makes three key contributions to efforts to decolonize sociology's urban ethnography. First, *invading ethnography* interrogates how privileges associated with a perception of heterosexuality and conformity to binary gender allow the researcher to 'fit' into normative spaces. Examining these processes provides insight into a crucial but under-theorized way that qualitative methods rely on bodies to make sense in different social contexts. Second, in retrieving reflexive accounts from the ghettos of methodological appendices to give it a prominent place on the stage of the ethnographic narrative, this article critically explores how the researcher disrupts or reproduces a social space in order to illuminate two process: first, how different people can embody the position of social researcher; and second, how social spaces contend with the invasion of foreign and familiar people by producing hierarchies of belonging. Finally, *invading ethnography* performs a decolonial option (Mignolo, 2011) when it destabilizes the position of the researcher as a non-disruptive, merely innocent observer, by interrupting the ethnographic narrative with the ethnographer's disorientations, which ultimately lead to analytical insights.

Locating sociology's (urban) ethnography in a colonial tradition

Anthropologists, cultural theorists, and other interdisciplinary scholars have critically explored the colonial heritage of their methods and epistemologies, and sought ways to address how this historical relationship informs their use of ethnography. The same cannot be always be said for sociologists. Anthropologists in particular, have produced critical scholarship exploring ethnographic methods' complicity with colonialism. Likewise, the discipline has thought through processes and strategies for decolonizing these methods. For example, James Clifford and George Marcus's (1986) edited book *Writing Culture* revisited questions about the colonialist tradition embedded within ethnographic methods and, turning to postmodernism, sought ways to address this tradition. Confronting the issue more explicitly, Faye V. Harrison's (1991) edited volume, *Decolonizing Anthropology*, focuses on the methods and reflexive practices of activist anthropologists who challenge canonical binaries that reproduce global inequalities including racism, heterosexism, and economic exploitation. In similar fashion, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) considers how the 'imperial eyes' of contemporary researchers in marginalized communities, specifically indigenous communities, reinscribe colonial relations, thereby producing partial and Orientalist knowledge about the other.

Decolonizing methodologies for Smith (1999) means empowering historically researched communities to become researchers themselves, drawing on indigenous ways of knowing to produce knowledge that more accurately represents their social world. Anthropological and interdisciplinary efforts to improve on ethnographic methods are intentional about examining how colonial ways of knowing weigh on the methodology and sociology's urban ethnography can learn from this intervention.

In part, sociology's inability to effectively critique its colonialist underpinnings is because its central concepts are detached from questions of imperialism and colonialism (Bhambra, 2007; Go, 2013; Mignolo, 2011; Steinberg, 2007). A result of this analytical shortcoming within sociology is manifested in urban ethnography's origin story, which largely credits researchers at the University of Chicago with introducing the method to the discipline. In *The Urban Ethnography Reader*, for example, the sociology student of ethnography learns the anthropological origins of ethnographic methods as a means of 'studying ''exotic'' members of traditional societies' (Duneier et al., 2014: 1). The colonial impetus behind ethnography is discounted in favor of a discussion about the use of 'urban' in contemporary sociological ethnography. Urban distinguishes contemporary ethnography from anthropological studies that took place in 'traditional' communities of 'a few hundred or at most a few thousand people' (Duneier et al., 2014: 4). A postcolonial reading of this distinction reveals how assigning the labels 'urban' and 'traditional' to different ethnographic contexts can be mapped onto a colonial framework. For example, Anne McClintock (1995) has examined how normative assumptions about working classes as a race apart from the elite educated citizenry at the center of the British Empire mapped onto ideas about the colonies and colonized people. An engagement with postcolonial criticism in urban ethnography might find some similarities between colonial projects and how 'others' are represented for the elite educated readers of urban ethnography. Mindful of this colonial connection, urban ethnography research projects can productively find ways of addressing this fundamentally flawed feature of the methodology in a contemporary context by emphasizing how knowledge is produced contextually and through unequal relations of power.

Invading ethnography advances a critique of sociology's urban ethnography by inviting the critical perspectives of those whose bodies are marginalized by this method into the ethnographic narrative. The body that invades ethnography is often marked as matter out of place, Puwar's (2004) 'space invader'. Theorizing from that body and from that out of place-ness makes possible a reflexive practice that challenges 'the universal epistemic code', which imagines Western ways of knowing the world as simultaneously universal and exclusive to the west (Mignolo, 2011: xvii). The universal epistemic code silences how colonialism structures what we know of the world and instead imagines Europe and the Western world as the center and site of knowledge production – everything else is local and therefore marginal (Bhambra, 2007; Mignolo, 2009). Invading ethnography illuminates the situated-ness of knowledge production beyond the confines of the field

through decolonial thinking. As Mignolo (2011: 91) writes: 'The first step in decolonial thinking is to accept the interconnection between geo-history and epistemology, and between bio-graphy and epistemology that has been kept hidden by linear global thinking and the hubris of the zero point in their making of colonial and imperial differences.' This first step requires an intentional reflexive practice, to which I turn next.

The place of reflexivity in ethnographic accounts

Ethnographers increasingly engage with reflexivity as a way of interrogating some of the assumptions and biases they bring with them into their research settings. Reflexivity addresses the assumptions that the researcher might take with them into the field, examines how their presence shaped the social setting, and consequently avoids producing a flawed sociology (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). For example, a reflexive account of the drag queen in Bentzen's narrative above might have been more critical of how the researcher drew conclusions about the normal and the repulsive. In this instance, interrogating the sociological discourses that constructed black neighborhoods such as the one in which Bentzen conducted his research as nonheteronormative and sexually excessive might have yielded a different reading of the scene (Ferguson, 2000).

Reflexivity in ethnographic research is especially important to challenge the normalized perspective of straight white male researchers. The privileged social location of such a researcher can potentially leave him ignorant of the ways his perspective and access are sustained by and reproduce social inequality (Denzin, 2007; Zussman, 2005). But as Lichterman (2015) has rightly argued, the work of reflexivity requires an ongoing dialogue (see also Back, 1996). The ethnographer cannot assume the finality of their social location vis-à-vis their research field. Instead, Lichterman (2015: 2) proposes an interpretive reflexivity that converses 'with nuances about relations between our social positions and our claims'. This dialogue opens up new ways to think about the various awkward and successful interactions that come up during ethnographic fieldwork. Rather than assume, for example, that one's race, class, nationality, and/or gender make particular spaces in/accessible, an interpretive reflexivity lingers in the processes that might give meaning to these positionalities. Consequently, such a reflexive practice provides deeper insights into the how social interactions are stalled or made possible.

Interpretive reflexivity is not a new practice. In fact, when scholars who occupy several sites of marginality engage in a reflexive practice, they are often not in a position to imagine that one axis of their identities alone informs how they know what they know. Rather, for people of color and other marginalized people, their reflexive practices must be a dialogue between their various positionalities and how those inform their research. As Collins's (1986) foundational article 'Learning from the Outsider within' argued, such reflexivity can make visible unstated assumptions about the organizational logics of different social settings and transform hegemonic ways of knowing the world. In a different context, Simmonds (1997) has shown

how the reflexive practice of admitting her body into her sociological research challenges the limits of theory by drawing back the curtain on what constitutes an academic habitus. As a black woman sociologist, Simmonds (1997: 227) writes, 'I am a fresh water fish swimming in sea water. I feel the weight of the water... on my body.' This feeling is not merely a static positionality, but is a site of knowledge production. Theorizing from this place of discomfort is disruptive because it refuses to extend the lines of normativity by silencing difference and reproducing problematic theories. Importantly, theorizing from this place constitutes an interpretive reflexivity that critically examines how the researcher's embodiment and social history shape her final analysis.

Interrogating how the researcher's race, class, gender, etc., inform what they can learn is only one aspect of reflexivity. As the examples above have shown, these traits do not foreclose how we know what we know, but instead open up critical dialogue about the ethnographic project. But additionally, because many of these categories of identity are embodied, ethnographers must critically examine how their bodies fit into spaces they study. For ethnographers, a history of (typically) straight white men taking up this role raises questions about others' legitimate claims to doing ethnography. The assumed embodiment and social location of the legitimate ethnographer intersects with a scholar's biography to shape how they take up the space of the researcher in their research setting. In *Queer Phenomenology,* Sara Ahmed (2006) writes about how certain bodies extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. These bodies fit comfortably into spaces designed with them in mind and, in turn, the spaces fit the shape of these bodies. In this way, certain spaces and bodies are reproduced as simply going together. Consequently, when the 'wrong' kinds of bodies try to take up those spaces, these bodies produce a queer effect. (Ahmed 2006: 135) writes: 'When bodies ''arrive'' that don't extend the lines already extended by space, then those spaces might even appear ''slantwise'' or oblique.' Not only do these bodies stand out as being out of place, but the space these bodies (try to) occupy also becomes strange. This is the effect of space invaders. They are dissonant bodies that highlight the ways in which spaces are politicized (Puwar, 2004).

When it comes to ethnography, a person can successfully take up the role of ethnographer when they are legible as researchers and perceived as legitimate in their endeavors. Legibility and legitimacy are both attained when the researcher is seen as rightfully belonging in that social setting. Let's take, for example, a study of how white nationalists and anti-racists mobilized their white identities to different ends (Hughey, 2014). This study was in part possible because the researcher embodied a white heterosexual masculinity that rendered him both legible and legitimate in his research settings. Put another way, a normatively gendered straight white man might find that it is easier to simultaneously take up space in a white nationalist and white anti-racist group than it is for a legibly queer white man or person of color. Another example might be Hoang's (2015) study of how hostess bars facilitate economic transactions for high wealth East Asian businessmen, Western businessmen, and budget tourists. It can be assumed that Hoang's

(2015) ability to occupy space in different hostess bars was facilitated by her embodiment of heterosexual femininity. A legibly queer *tom,* or masculine woman, might not have the same kind of legitimacy or legibility in a hostess bar (for more on *toms* see Sinnot, 2004). Reflecting on what makes possible the researcher's ability to take up space in their research settings – their embodiment of normative gender and by extension sexuality – reveals an important underlying operative logic of the social spaces they study. That is, embodying the norms of a particular space allows researchers to reproduce the spaces they study.

Reflexivity that admits the body of the researcher has the potential to uncover the normative underpinnings that undergird embodied research practices. For those researchers whose bodies are frequently marked as out of place, the need for such a reflexive practice is heightened. For example, the black queer in a white anti-racist organization or the *tom* in a hostess bar might fail to take up space and be perceived as legitimate and legible in the field. Contrast this failure with a fictitious gender-conforming white ethnographer conducting research in a New York City ballroom, as with Jennie Livingstone's (1990) documentary film, *Paris Is Burning*. This researcher enjoys a privileged position produced by unequal power relations of race and geographic location, making her disruptive embodiment normative in that space. The *tom* or queer of color draws a different kind of attention. When these scholars engage in embodied research, what can their reflexivity reveal about the social organization of particular spaces and of qualitative research more generally? Through an examination of how my racialized transmasculine embodiment took up the space of the researcher, I discuss the ways in which embodying normative gender, which is mapped onto heterosexuality, shapes ethnographic practice. I argue that the black queer researcher, who is illegible within normative frameworks of gender and sexuality, finds themselves failing at immersion in different relational fields. Instead, this researcher might be confronted by moments of disorientation, where they become the object of inquiry or curiosity. Such disorientation, when critically incorporated into the research and subsequent analysis, radically reimagines normative approaches to ethnography. This reflexive practice transforms the project by not only revealing the workings of power in urban ethnography but also by performing a contestation between the positions of researcher as author and researcher as native informant in a queer world. I call this performance *invading ethnography*.

Invading ethnography

Invading ethnography employs autoethnography to disidentify with normative ethnographic approaches while simultaneously engaging them. Boylorn (2014) and Boylorn and Orbe (2014) have discussed the usefulness of 'critical autoethnography' as a way of examining one's belonging within a community. In particular, Boylorn (2014: 324) argues that the ways in which autoethnography implicates a researcher as a cultural member makes possible a critical interrogation of 'problematic cultural practices that [the researcher has] participated in'. *Invading*

ethnography's autobiographical reflexivity extends the insights of scholars of color and critical autoethnographers who have shown how thinking from their marginal social locations radically alters hegemonic ways of knowing (Boylorn, 2014; Boylorn and Orbe, 2014; Collins, 1990; Ellis et al., 2011; Simmonds, 1997; Wekker, 2006).

Discussing the politics of autoethnography, José Muñoz (1999: 81) suggested that autoethnography inserts 'a subjective performative often combative ''native I''' into the ethnographic project, thereby disturbing the hierarchical relationship between the anthropologist and subjects. Autoethnography in this instance also performs a reflexivity that does not take for granted similarities or differences in gender, race, sexuality, class, or national belonging, and their multiple intersections. In the case of invading ethnography, autobiographical reflexivity reveals the normative racialized, gender, and heteronormative underpinnings of taking up ethnography as part of a decolonial option to build a world in which many worlds can exist (Mignolo, 2011). Underlying *invading ethnography* is a commitment to a queer of color critique (Ferguson, 2004; Muñoz, 1999). This epistemological orientation critically interrogates the intersectional connectedness of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation from within in order to reveal and, thereby, transform the normative underpinnings of these formations (Ferguson, 2004; Muñoz, 1999). As such, *invading ethnography* lends a corrective to the racialized heteronormative ideological underpinnings of urban ethnography.

In addition to being a method for learning information about different social contexts, ethnography is also a performance (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Conquergood, 2002; Conquergood and Johnson, 2013; Denzin, 2003; Madison, 2006, 2011). The performance of ethnographic texts, in part, lies in how these texts represent culture and grapple with questions of history, power, and politics. Ethnography as performance begins from a reflexive examination of the ethnographer's self (Madison, 2006). Such reflexivity makes room for the ethnographer to 'unsettle taken-for granted assumptions' not only on the part of the researcher but also the social world under study and in so doing, can move towards creating a more just world (Conquergood, 2013; Denzin, 2003; Madison, 2011: 5). As part of an investment in a more egalitarian world, *invading ethnography* engages reflexivity and critical ethnography to perform the ethnographer's dilemmas in the field. Madison (2006: 322) describes how the ethnographer's performance can challenge normative assumptions about the world by relating the performative to Barthes' *punctum*, 'a break in the flow of expectation that resists the repetitive and hegemonic power to reinscribe identity and value'. Madison's *punctum* is what, following Ahmed (2006), I have referred to above as disorientation. *Invading ethnography* enacts the kind of performance Madison (2006) describes by locating moments of disorientation that the queer of color researcher experiences as productive sites for challenging the status quo (see also Denzin, 2001). This ethnographic performance is part of a reflexive contemplation of the researcher's positionality in the field. This reflexive practice presents an opportunity for queers of color to take up the space of

the qualitative researcher while illustrating the ideological underpinnings of this embodied methodology.

Below I share an ethnographic narrative that models *invading ethnography*. I follow this model with a discussion of the potential and limitations of this reflexive practice and conclude by affirming the decolonial possibilities of this performative reflexivity. But first, I must reflexively locate myself.

Locating myself

When I began the research project discussed below, I had been living in the United States for about 15 years. I moved to this country from Ghana five days after turning 15, leaving a life of relative privilege in a large bustling city, to find myself in a racially segregated, lower middle-class small town in Texas. Despite not coming from wealth, I was born into a family that expected, over time, to be part of the *nouveau riche* as Ghanaian business gained unregulated access to foreign markets. I grew up at a time when the country was still developing a middle-class. I attended one of the best schools in Ghana and, as it was with members of this burgeoning class, spoke English at home. Like many well-to-do Ghanaian families, my family had hired help – typically a younger woman, barely older than 18, who helped take care of us children. I learned to speak Akan, an indigenous Ghanaian language, from these women.

In the United States, I moved first to a small town in central Texas with my mother's sister. We were the only Africans in town. My schoolmates called me un-American for criticizing the Bush administration's war on terror. I left for college on the East Coast where I met other Africans from privileged backgrounds. Several of my mates called me un-African because I was queer. Increasingly, I spent less and less time with other Africans. That is, until I began my participant observation for this research project. These experiences, my queer Ghanaian American immigrant history, constitute the self that took me into this research project and shape my subsequent analysis. My personal history, my embodied experiences of racialization, and importantly for this research context, my transmasculine gender presentation, which disrupted my ability to fit into my research context, provided profound insights into the organizational logics and politics of belonging in the community.

Creating community and ways of belonging

When most people think of Ghanaians living in the United States, Houston, Texas, is not a destination they might consider. Most Ghanaians in the United States do not make their homes in Houston, settling instead in places like New York City, Washington DC, Chicago or even Dallas (RAD: Ghanaian Diaspora, 2015). Yet Houston is home to a vibrant Ghanaian immigrant community that includes several formal and informal social organizations such as churches, charity groups, alumni networks, and soccer teams. This Ghanaian community is intentionally

curated to create a space in which Ghanaians who participate in the community can thrive. To participate in the Ghanaian community, one is expected to at least join the Ghana Association by paying the $20 annual dues. Ghana Association is primarily a social group that also serves as an umbrella organization for the seven Ghanaian language-based groups and two cultural associations that operate in Houston. The association also distributes information and supports the Ghanaian education charity groups in the city. Ghana Association organizes events such as picnics, Independence Day celebrations and holiday parties. In addition to its social mandate, the association has also hosted politicians from Ghana, including Vice President Amissah-Arthur, and sponsored education programming about immigration, college admissions, and other topics of interest to the community. As the umbrella organization for other Ghanaian social groups in Houston, Ghana Association also helps coordinate the community's calendar to ensure that funerals, birthdays, picnics, and other smaller social events do not conflict. In this way, the Ghanaian community in Houston maintains a social calendar that enables participation in its many social events.

Not every Ghanaian in Houston is a member of the Ghana Association. Some Ghanaians participate in the community exclusively through their churches, of which there are five major ones. The Ghana Association website includes information about the various Ghanaian churches and coordinates with pastors and church administrators to plan events. As a result, church members do not necessarily have to be dues-paying members of the Ghana Association (although many are) or any of the other language-based, cultural, or charity groups to learn about and participate in community events.

For this research, I spent 18 months as part of the community in Houston, between 2014 and 2016. In addition to this participant observation, I recorded countless ethnographic interviews at community events, and more formally, conducted in-depth interviews with 30 Ghanaians who considered themselves part of the community in Houston. My participation in the community included attending church events, birthday parties, picnics, immigrant association meetings, and informal hangouts with groups of friends. Regular attendance at church facilitated belonging in this Ghanaian community. One of the first questions that anybody asked me was where, rather than if, I went to church. This question irritated me. I did not attend church and hated the assumption that I would or should. However, over time, I began to understand that it was not simply a matter of proselytizing, but rather it was a way of locating me, finding how I belonged. If I claimed to be a Ghanaian, then surely, I was a Christian.

We are all Ghanaians, we are all Christians

The easy equation of Ghanaian and Christian was illustrated to me in several ways beyond the shock that informants expressed when they learned that I did not attend a church. At an Akan-language association meeting, the president described the group to some visitors by noting that although the group distinguished itself as

comprising members who were all from a particular Ghanaian region, really 'we are all Ghanaians'. Speaking in Twi, a dialect of Akan, he explained further that no one would describe the group as Nigerian. Houston is home to the second largest Nigerian population in the United States (RAD: Nigerian Diaspora, 2015). The comment about Nigerians reflected a general community anxiety about being misrecognized as Nigerian, a misrecognition that many of the Ghanaians I met found frustrating. As a result, comparisons between Nigerians and Ghanaians came up at almost every social event I attended. Whilst the comparisons that Ghanaians made between their community and the Nigerians in Houston is worthy of many analytical pages, in this context of introducing the association, the president's comment that stood out most to me was his acknowledgement that not everyone in the association was Akan. People are from all over, he said, but the things we have in common are that we are all Ghanaian and we are all Christians.

To this comment a group member protested, asking how do you know that? I could not hold back my chortle and was jokingly chastised for laughing at this remark. However, the point had been made. At least for some in this community, to be Ghanaian was to be Christian.

On the one hand, my observations about the equation between being Ghanaian and being Christian might have led to easy conclusions about the particular importance of Christianity to this community. However, at a soccer match one morning in the early spring, a charge against me as Muslim demanded a reexamination of my conclusions. As I stood on the sidelines with a group of three women, one of them, Sandy, turned to me.[1] Remarking that I seemed different, and in her words, 'against the grain', she wondered if I was Muslim. Her question was preceded by a discussion about Ghanaian languages. The women had been complaining that several of the men were speaking in Akan and assumed the women could not understand. On this point, Sandy asked if I was Ghanaian and whether I speak Akan. Lisa retorted that she did not understand Akan, but rather spoke Ewe, another Ghanaian language. I was surprised by the question put to me, since at this point I had been part of the community for about nine months and Sandy had known me in different contexts. Acknowledging her mistake and accepting that I was Ghanaian, Sandy tentatively concluded that I must be Muslim since, to her, I was so different.

Putting together questions about my church attendance, surprise about my claims to being Ghanaian and the literal equation of my perceived difference with being Muslim tell a different story about the meaning of Christianity in this community. Whereas, more generally, many in the community such as the association leader above might conclude that 'We are all Ghanaians, we are all Christians', Islam came up explicitly as a language of difference and ambivalent belonging. When I was accused of being 'against the grain', perhaps Muslim, with the same breath that expressed surprise that I claimed to be Ghanaian, I understood it as part of a broader narrative about who belongs and who does not. Yet, between 16 and 30 percent of Ghanaians are Muslim and Islamic holidays are national holidays in Ghana (Mahdi, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2010; Safo, 2002). Growing up, I always heard the muezzin's call to prayer in the evenings as I did my homework after school. Therefore, although a

dominant assumption of Christianity might be forgiven, noting how Islam is used to explain difference is a generative moment.

The reflexive practice of invading ethnography allows me to insert my embodied experiences into the analysis, thereby avoiding a reductive narrative about African religiosity. Instead, the ways in which my body interrupted normative expectations about what it meant to belong within this community lends important insights into how queerness is suppressed and made legible along other axes of un-belonging. In this instance, the Muslim comes to stand in for the queer in a maneuver that reveals contestations over what constitute the boundaries and borders of Ghanaian-ness. The impossibility and illegibility of my queer subjectivity in this community space and indeed in the broader national imagination, facilitates an analysis that can tease out the meanings of Christianity, the marginality of Islam and the illegibility of queer gender and sexuality within the Ghanaian community.

On the one hand, queerness is excised from the community by re-signifying it as something else. In an examination of queer sexuality and the relationship between Indian diaspora communities and the nation, Gopinath (2005) has shown how queer sexuality, in particular queer female subjectivity, is rendered unimaginable within the heteropatriarchal logics that tie the nation to immigrant communities. However, within various home spaces, women's homoerotic desires are not only imagined but also enacted. As Gopinath (2005: 25) writes:

> Interestingly, it is often in moments of what appear to be extreme gender conformity, and in spaces that seem particularly fortified against queer incursions – such as the domestic arena – that queer female desire emerges in ways that are most disruptive of dominant masculinist scripts of community and nation.

Gopinath's analysis is useful for making sense of the tension between processes and performances that bolster a heteropatriarchal immigrant community and the possibility of queer diaspora. These tensions were highlighted for me through my embodiment of transmasculinity (and by extension queer female sexuality) at the Ghana Association Independence Day party.

We don't want their kind here

Every year, the Ghana Association hosts three big parties – a Ghana Independence Day celebration in the spring, a picnic in summer, and a Christmas/New Year's gala. These events complement the myriad other parties that the language-based cultural groups, alumni networks, and charity organizations host. Often, Ghana Association parties are the biggest parties that the community hosts. In March 2015, to mark the 58th anniversary of Ghana's independence from Britain, the Ghana Association rented out the Arab American Cultural Center. This event location along with the Igbo (Nigerian) Catholic Community Center and the India House hosted several of the parties Ghana Association and other voluntary groups organized. The Arab American Cultural Center is located at the end of a

long dark driveway off a major freeway in Southwest Houston. In the parking lot that evening, luxury SUVs and sedans intermingled with the occasional Japanese car. The center's large double doors opened up to purple tarpaulin banner with the logos of different language and cultural groups that comprised the Ghanaian community. As with many official Houston Ghanaian parties, in front of the banner was a red carpet on which celebrants would stand to have their photos taken by the hired professional photographer, who came prepared with his own supplementary lighting to ensure quality photos. Inside the hall, three giant glass chandeliers hung above the red, yellow and green table clothes, the colors of Ghana's flag. The tables flanked the wood flooring in the center of the room, which would later turn into a dance floor. Bordering the dance floor was a stage to the left of which stood a DJ booth buttressed by a full-sized Ghana flag on a gold plated pole and a set of peg drums. On stage right was the US flag.

The Independence Day party is an important way in which the Ghanaian community in Houston comes together to celebrate being both Ghanaian and American. The performances of Akan, Ga, and Ewe traditional drumming and dancing along with the honoring of different members of the community provide an opportunity for people to celebrate themselves as Ghanaian Americans. Such parties portray the economic success of individual Ghanaians and the community at large. What people wear, how they style their hair, and the cars they drive are indicative of the extent to which they have attained the "American Dream" of middle-class economic success. Likewise, the distribution of educational scholarships and the accolades lauded upon college graduates illustrate the community's investment in higher education. Ghana Association's parties are a stage on which the community displays its middle-class aspirations and attainments. On this stage too, the community conveys its commitment to a particular kind of racialized heterosexual respectability rooted in middle-class Christian logics.

The Independence Day celebration on 7 March began like most other Houston Ghanaian events – with a Christian prayer. Following this prayer, the DJ played an instrumental recording of the US national anthem. Party attendants in their newly tailored *kente* and other African print attire, beads, and *ahenema* or traditional sandals, placed their right hands on their chest and sang along in earnest to the *Star-Spangled Banner*. Next was an instrumental recording of the Ghana national anthem. As with the *Star-Spangled Banner*, people sang along perhaps with more passion, although the words came out slightly mumbled, as if the mass of Ghanaians in that room had forgotten some of the lyrics to their national anthem. Following the anthems, welcome addresses by the Ghana Association president and general consul of the Ghana consulate in Houston, distribution of educational scholarships, and a performance, which included drumming, and *adowa* dancing, came the most anticipated portion of the evening.[2] Around midnight, the DJ began his set of high-life music and encouraged the room to crowd the dance floor.

Typically, I refrained from dancing at these parties, which happened fairly often during my fieldwork. I worried that moving my body to the music would mark me as even queerer than I might already appear. But after nearly a year, I was also trying to

say yes to more, to loosen up, in case I was contributing to my sense of marginality within the community. So when an Auntie[3] pulled me to the dance floor, wrapped her arms around my shoulders, and closed the space between us, I tried to remain relaxed. She whispered to me in English, why would you leave when we could dance like this together? Hiplife artist Praye crooned over the loud speakers, 'I and my shorty are one'. The song ended and Auntie wanted a photo to remember the evening, so we made our way to the red carpet and purple tarpaulin backdrop.

The professional photographer was ready to capture the evening and allow people to pose in their freshly tailored imported wax prints. Tonight's photographer seemed especially excited to take our photo. Auntie stood behind me, turned me to face the camera at a slight angle and pulled me into her. The photographer instructed us to switch poses, me in the back, my arms wrapped around her as if we were high school seniors taking our prom photos. I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable as my arms were rearranged around Auntie's waist. As we waited for the photographer to print copies for us, some woman came up to Auntie and assuming that I would not understand, asked in Ga if I was one of her daughter's friends. I must have looked extra young that evening, college-aged in my black trousers, plaid shirt, and red Nike Jordan's, my shoulder length locks pulled back in a ponytail. I was not dressed like everyone else in bright colors, freshly hand-made and imported. Before Auntie could complete her response and claim me as *her* friend, the woman spit out, a glare in her eye, good. Because we don't want their kind here. I suppose that in addition to looking young that evening, I also appeared objectionable. Of a kind that was undesirable within the community space.

On the one hand, the community's organization as a racialized heterosexual space is immediately evident from everyday conversations about romantic relationships. For example, while conducting observations at one of the Ghanaian-owned hair salons, I participated in a conversation that clearly illustrated these racialized and sexual dynamics. One of the stylists told a cautionary tale about her friend's daughter, a Nigerian woman who married a black American man. The woman's mother threatened suicide because she believed her daughter's husband to be a terrible match. The other women in the hair salon agreed that their daughters should never marry black American men, who they described as unmotivated and incapable of heading a household. Likewise, their sons should ideally not enter into relationships with white women. A white woman will prevent them from having relationships with their grandchildren. A black woman on the other hand, preferably someone from Ghana, will always stand by her man, no matter what. 'Are you married?' one of the women asked me. Soon, I responded. As was to be expected, the women wanted to know where he was from and I carefully transitioned from speaking English to speaking Twi, a language with no gendered third-person pronouns. *Oye obroni*, they are white. Satisfied, the conversation quickly turned to how a black woman marrying a white man can be a really good thing. These generalized negative stereotypes about black men and white woman reproduced tropes on racialized sexuality while positioning black women as the moral standard on sexuality.

Over time, people would note the ring on my fourth left finger and ask about my partner. Often they wanted to know where he was from and how he felt about my frequent trips to Houston. Once someone asked, 'what is she?', wondering if my partner, assumed to be a she, was white. Or perhaps Hispanic, she added. As I revisited this episode, I realized that no one who brought up my partner ever assumed that they were black. Was I leading people to assume that I was with a white or non-black person of color? If so, was it something I said or did? One explanation for this assumption emerges from the comment at the Independence Day celebration, 'we don't want their kind here'. Whatever kind I was, it was undesirable to the community's normative black sexuality. By imagining my partner as white or at least not black, whatever their gender, many in this community rhetorically equated queer gender and sexuality with not being black or African, and constructed Muslims as marginally belonging to the body politic. In so doing, they excised queerness from the constitution of their black African community and located it in the realm of the other.

Towards a queer of color reflexive practice

As I have shown above, invading ethnography offers a language through which to grapple with discomfort and marginality. But more importantly, it reveals the ways in which embodied ways of being simultaneously challenge and lend a depth of insight to how spaces are organized and ethnography is conducted. My embodiment opened me up to certain experiences that others may not have had. Here, it is not about categories of identity alone, but also how I took up those categories and examined the interactions produced through them. By invading ethnography, I was able to reveal the different ways in which queerness is excised (through translation into a less dangerous difference – Muslim) and sanctioned in the community. Furthermore, this reflexive practice revealed the everyday discursive practices that drew on norms of race, gender and sexuality to inform the community's boundaries of belonging.

It is important to reiterate that bodies that fail to take up certain spaces according to the logics of that space cause disorientation, both for the space invader and for the 'rightful' inhabitants of that space (see Ahmed, 2006; Puwar, 2004). Sandy's reading of my perceived difference through a reference to the marginality of Muslims in Ghana is an example of such disorientation. My discomfort with that Auntie's apparent flirtation is another. As Ahmed argues, moments of disorientation are a radical opportunity to reshape spaces that do not 'traditionally' allow certain bodies to extend into them. In invading ethnography, I am that disoriented queer extending into the space of the urban ethnographer. This disorientation has the potential to inspire a practice of disidentification. Muñoz (1999) explains disidentification as a mode of dealing with dominant ideologies in such a way as to neither assimilate into them, nor counter them entirely. Instead disidentification reworks dominant ideologies with a goal of transformation. *Invading ethnography* disidentifies with normative ethnographic practices even as it engages with some of its rules and logics. This performance takes the

queer of color's experiences of disorientation as a starting point towards creating a world in which the tyranny of normativity can be curtailed. Foregrounding the queer of color's reading of the social space uncovers the normative silences of the ethnographic project and offers a more complete analysis. Invading ethnography performs the disorienting negotiation the queer of color experiences as an ethnographer in spaces designed as normatively heterosexual.

Finally, the ethnographic narrative above highlights the social awkwardness that ethnography can entail. In some circles, ethnographers are meant to be objective observers, silent about how their personal lives interact with their crafts. By contract, this reflexive practice admits the ethnographer's whole self as an analytical tool both in the field and in the final analysis. As Behar (2003: 24) poetically reflected, sometimes 'you yourself, the knower, didn't know fully what you knew until your wrote it down, until you told the story with you yourself included in it' Behar's reflections shed light on the ways in which emotionality and intimate connections can pop up in unexpected places and produce important insights into social realities beyond the ethnographer's immediate observational frames. But to interpret these insights, the ethnographer must open themselves up to the messiness of the craft. Invading ethnography shows how much can be known when the self is included in all its messy ways, in ways that do not preempt the finality of social categories.

Conclusion, or towards something else to be

Critical autoethnography has been one way of challenging the inequalities embedded within ethnographic methods. Queers of color have advanced this approach in various ways over the years (see, for example, Alexander, 2011; Eguchi, 2014; Johnson, 2001). For example, Otu's use of an 'amphibious methodology' for his study of *sassoi*, effeminate men in Ghana, invokes his own experiences of queerness to guide his methodological frame (K. Otu, personal communication, 19 February 2016). Otu's amphibious methodology addresses the complex relationship between individual and community identity by exploring the tensions and harmonies his queerness creates between him, his mother, and a broader national community. Through the short film *Reluctantly Queer* (Owusu, 2016), Otu turns to autoethnography to place himself firmly within the experiential frame of the *sassoi*, thereby asking his interlocutor to engage differently with his ethnographic project. Similarly Asante (2015) employs his experiences as a black queer migrant to shed light on what it means to disidentify with hegemonic norms around gender, race, and national belonging. Critical autoethnography in the examples above are 'a way of making meaning and reimagining moments with new eyes and new insight' and thereby create alternative ways of being in the world (Boylorn, 2014).

Invading ethnography positions critical autoethnography within the ethnographic narrative. By locating the ethnographer's reflexivity throughout the narrative, I show how the method's reliance on bodies coming into contact with one another can be violent and disorienting. Within my research context, my legibility as a queer black person marked my body as matter out of place. From my marginal standpoint I was

not always able to fit easily into the Ghanaian community in Houston. Likewise, my presence as a researcher was also often challenged through comments that marked me as not belonging. By staying, my presence likely violated the sensibilities of some of the people with whom I came into contact. Despite the discomforts and emotional distress that my embodiment sometimes generated while I was in the community, reflecting on these moments of disorientation, where Madison (2006: 322) locates the *punctum*, makes possible a profound reading of this community's organizational logics. Reflecting on how research participants responded to my presence in their space allows for a dialogue that may not always have been possible in the moment for fear that my project would unravel and I might lose access to my research. However, by reproducing those moments of disorientation as part of the ethnographic narrative, *invading ethnography* effects 'a break in the flow of expectation that resists the repetitive and hegemonic power to reinscribe identity and value' (Madison 2006: 322). Importantly, this ethnographic performance is not about the researcher, but instead puts the researcher's history and body in conversation with the research participants' and thereby opens up possibilities for connections that may not have previously been imagined.

Reflecting on moments of discomfort and disorientation also helps to reveal urban ethnography's colonialist underpinnings and begins to find ways of untethering this relationship. The unequal power dynamics that exist between the colonizer and the colonized might make the colonizer oblivious to their presence as an imposition. But through a reflexive examination of those moments when that imposition is made obvious, it is possible to disabuse their reader of any ideas that the ethnographer can walk through walls or fits easily into the spaces they study. In order words, making transparent those moments in which the ethnographer does not fit has the potential to levy a decolonial critique of the ethnographic method by challenging a 'zero point epistemology' that makes whiteness, maleness, and normative gender invisible (Mignolo, 2011). Recognizing that ethnography is already performative, *invading ethnography's* performance, which seeks to disorient the reader, can decolonize the method and also produce more complete knowledge about the organization of social spaces.

The epigraph for this article is a quote from Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula*. In the novel, 'something else to be' describes the possibilities that arise from the friendship between two adolescent girls. The friendship between Sula and Nel gives the girls courage to interrogate their community's norms and imagine new possibilities for being. Something else to be can also reveal how we 'envision the world and ourselves differently' (Madison, 2006: 322). *Invading ethnography* sets about finding something else to be by disturbing the normative assumptions underlying the ethnographic method. When the researcher speaks throughout the text in ways that reveal their embodied experiences of the research space, when the narrative is transparent about theorizing from the researcher's particular standpoint, a dialogue is entered not only with the reader but also with the method. In theorizing from the possibilities and limitations of my queer black body as an ethnographer, *invading ethnography* invites others like me into an ethnographic journey. The process seeks to give voice to those who are either written out of the narrative

or represented as abject, and thereby creates a world of possibility in which being other does not mean being marginal.

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Notes

1. All names have been changed to protect individual identities.
2. *Adowa* is an Akan traditional dance
3. Older women are typically called 'Auntie' as a sign of respect.

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