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Engaging Ethics in Postcritical Ethnography: Troubling Transparency, Trustworthiness, and Advocacy

Jessica Nina Lester & Allison Daniel Anders

Key words:

advocacy; ethics;
ethics in practice;
postcritical
ethnography;
relational ethics;
transparency;
trustworthiness

Abstract: In this article, we engage with some of the ethical challenges we faced during a four-year postcritical ethnography that focused on the resettlement experiences of Burundians with refugee status living in southern Appalachia in the United States. We discuss how we navigated decisions about what and how to share all that we learned, particularly as we sought to protect and honor what participants shared and experienced. Broadly, we frame our decision-making process in relation to the notions of ethics in practice and relational ethics. Notably, we complicate commitments to transparency, trustworthiness, and advocacy, as we examine issues of responsibility and representation. We conclude by offering three considerations or "lessons learned" for qualitative researchers, including the: 1. value of generating a layered account of experience; 2. potentiality of experimental forms of writing, and 3. importance of foregrounding relational ethics.

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1. Introduction

In this article, we discuss the ethical challenges we faced when engaged in a four-year postcritical ethnography (NOBLIT, FLORES & MURILLO, 2004) centered on the resettlement experiences of Burundians with refugee status living in southern Appalachia in the United States. Specifically, we examine how we navigated decisions about what and how to share what we learned, observed, and experienced. Despite a relatively long history of writing about representational practices in qualitative research, including the negotiation of the crisis of representation (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986; GEERTZ, 1988; MARCUS & FISCHER, 1986) and the inextricable connections between one's methodological, epistemological, and ethical choices (ORTEGA, 2005), some scholars have suggested that "researchers [often] offer very little, if any,

analytical consideration on representational issues in their end texts. Who or what is being represented by an investigation is rarely addressed" (MANTZOUKAS, 2004, p.995). We orient to this lack of attention to representational issues as a call to engage more deeply with considerations of the ethics and the (im)possibilities of representation, particularly when engaged in research contexts already marked with trauma, loss, and violence (TAMAS, 2008). [1]

Notably, DENZIN (2017, p.15) suggested that critical ethnographers work "under a promise" to "protect" what participants share with us. In this article, we complicate the idea of protection and the layers of relationships we navigated in relations of force always already present (FOUCAULT, 1990 [1976]). Specifically, we complicate commitments to transparency, trustworthiness, and advocacy (MADISON, 2012) and examine issues of responsibility and representation, framing our ethical decision-making process with GUILLEMIN and GILLAM's (2004) notion of ethics in practice and ELLIS' (2007) notion of relational ethics. To frame our discussion, we draw upon the methodological literature about representational ethics, and representations of loss, trauma, and violence. Additionally, we engage with literature that attends to pursuits of justice in postcritical ethnography. First, to contextualize our discussion, we provide an abbreviated overview of our ethnographic and community work and then discuss how we have come to frame and understand our ethical engagements. After discussing some of the literature surrounding representational practices in qualitative research, we specifically consider representation from a postcritical perspective. We draw upon examples from our ethnographic work to illustrate how we navigated unanticipated events in the field, our methodological, epistemological, and ethical responses, and the complexity of representation. [2]

2. Overview of Our Ethnographic and Community Work

In 2007, approximately 250 Burundians were resettled in Riverhill¹—a small, predominately white, monolingual, industrialized city located in southern Appalachia in the United States. Notably, some of Riverhill's residents embraced Burundian families, while others positioned their arrival as problematic. Prior to arriving in Riverhill, many Burundians lived in refugee camps in Tanzania, a country that in the early 2000s instituted new policies that limited Burundians' rights to naturalization and ability to own property (UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, 2007). Thus, staying in Tanzania was difficult for many of the Burundians. The Burundian people experienced years of flight from ethnic violence, with the transition to the United States being filled with further loss as many families were separated (ANDERS & LESTER, 2015a). [3]

Beginning in 2008, we engaged in community work with Burundian families (ANDERS & LESTER, 2011). Whereas the work initially involved an interdisciplinary research team (ANDERS & LESTER, 2015a), our work eventually became a four-year ethnographic project that emphasized issues in public schools and the community. Broadly speaking, we explored the socio-

1 Throughout the article, pseudonyms are used when referring to participants and locales.

political, cultural, economic and educational contexts that shaped the resettlement experiences of Burundian children and their families, particularly as they navigated school and community spaces. [4]

3. Ethical Engagements

In our ethnographic and community work, we have been informed by GUILLEMIN and GILLAM's (2004) well cited delineation between procedural ethics and ethics in practice. GUILLEMIN and GILLAM described procedural ethics as being mandated by ethics review boards, which generally is designed to ensure privacy and safety for human subjects. DENZIN (2010), as well as other scholars (e.g., LINCOLN & TIERYNEY, 2004), have pointed to the limitations, and at times, even inappropriate application of external ethical guidelines to qualitative research paradigms. Like KUNTZ (2010), we discovered a focus solely on procedural ethics to fall short of the everyday, unexpected ethical choices that we faced in our ethnographic work. KUNTZ (p.429) argued that when researchers "fixate" on "procedural ethics, there is little space available for self-reflexive examination of how our studies are implicated by learned assumptions concerning representation." [5]

In contrast to procedural ethics, GUILLEMIN and GILLAM (2004) offered the idea of ethics in practice, which refers to the everyday ethical concerns that arise in the very doing of qualitative research. These are ethical concerns that can often not be foreseen nor are they generally addressed by ethics committees and boards. Rather, as GUILLEMIN and GILLAM (pp.264-265) highlighted, these are often dilemmas in the sense that "there is a stark choice between different options, each of which seem to have equally compelling ethical advantages and disadvantages." Notably, ELLIS (2007, p.4) framed another dimension of ethics as relational. Relational ethics constitutes an "ethics of care," as well as a "feminist ethics, and [a] feminist communitarian ethics." More particularly, relational ethics calls upon researchers "to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversation" (ibid.). As such, relational ethics foregrounds human dignity and "connectedness between researchers and researched" and "researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (ibid.). More practically, some qualitative scholars have written about the actual practices they engage in as they pursue relational ethics. For instance, KUNTZ (2010) wrote of his use of analytic memos as a way to engage in relational ethics and move away from the common fixation on procedural ethics. [6]

Broadly then, in this article, and more particularly in our ethnographic and community work, we have sought to embrace the notion of ethics in practice and relational ethics, as we have assumed, like ROTH (2008, §13), that: "Ethics is all about human relations, and ethnography, in writing and writing about the people, not only describes the nature of these relations but also requires and presupposes a relation from which the knowledge about human relations can emerge." As we have engaged a relational ethics, we have sought to lean heavily into the scholarship focused on ethics in qualitative research, and more

particularly, the literature that engages with issues of representation. We consider these methodological discussions next. [7]

4. Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Research

There is a substantial body of scholarship focused on ethical considerations in qualitative research. Indeed, as ORTEGA (2005) suggested, "methodological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions are intertwined" (p.317). Thus, perhaps it is unsurprising that ethics, defined in varying ways, is commonly discussed within the qualitative community. Indeed, nearly all introductory qualitative research texts attend to ethics in qualitative research, at least to some degree. Further, and more particular to the focus of this article, there is a long history of writing about the ethics of representation in qualitative research, particularly in relation to ethnographic and historical research (e.g., ABU-LUGHOD, 1991; CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986). [8]

The qualitative research methods literature concerning representation has provided important insights regarding how qualitative researchers might engage with the ethics of representation and address the "tension between the desire to know and the limits of representation" (KORO-LJUNGBERG, 2008, p.231). When discussing alternative writing formats (e.g., poetry, hypertext, etc.), many of which are employed by postmodernist/poststructuralist scholars, KORO-LJUNGBERG pointed to the place of alternative writing practices as a means to place into question "authorial presence" and "loosen certainties" (ibid.). Here, representations of findings and all "sources of textual authority" are understood as potentially "problematic" (p.233). Similarly, KUNTZ (2010, p.426) wrote of the boundedness of representation in his own qualitative research, stating: "I sought to resist complete representation, or the creation of a grand narrative regarding my participants' lives." Broadly, qualitative researchers have claimed that what we come to represent is always already situated (HARAWAY, 1988), partial (GOODALL, 2000), and positional (NOBLIT et al., 2004). And, indeed there are always gaps in our tellings, as much remains untold (KROG, 2000). [9]

More particularly, some scholars have written about the consequences of partial representation. For example, RALLIS (2010) discussed an example of an ethnographic study wherein participants ultimately questioned how the researchers represented them. RALLIS argued that the researchers privileged their interpretations of school practices over their participants', failing to incorporate participant perspectives. MURILLO (2004, p.156) noted, "Many researchers have been complicit in colonial agendas by assuming expert authority, having not questioned their particular positions of privilege, enabling the voyeuristic objectification of their research participants, and self-serving strategies of representation and text-making practices." [10]

PICKERING and KARA (2017, p.299) discussed the ways qualitative researchers have engaged in the "ethical dimensions of their representational practice." They highlighted how ethically engaged representation is something that should be

considered throughout the research process, arguing that scholars should critically and reflexively engage with questions such as:

"what does it mean to present findings authentically when presenting speech authentically (umms, ahhs and all) only risks making your participant 'look like an idiot'? What does it mean to represent your participants authentically when you seek to evoke a sense of being there, or prioritise affective or cognitive engagement at the expense of literal accuracy? An ethics of representation must engage with these questions. Scholars have to make decisions about how to take the words out of their participants' mouths and reproduce them elsewhere. And critically, scholars must acknowledge these choices as choices" (p.306). [11]

Much of this literature implicitly, and at times explicitly, calls for reflexivity when engaging in the representation process. For example, PHELAN and KINSELLA (2013) offered guiding questions for scholars engaged in qualitative research with children, noting that scholars must remain reflexive when working to represent children. DÁVILA (2014) chronicled how she struggled with issues of transparency, perspective, and representation in her ethnographic project with refugee youth. She emphasized the important place of positionality and reflexivity in shaping representations and researcher-participant interactions. Arguably, a reflexive stance is not one that simply results in "a comfortable, transcendent end-point," but rather leaves qualitative researchers with "the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research" (PILLOW, 2003, p.193). Thus, an important practice for qualitative researchers is to decenter the "unreflexive self," in hopes of creating, as RICHARDSON (1997) stated, "a position for experiencing the self as a sociological knower/constructor" (p.153). [12]

More broadly, some of the literature around the practices associated with writing/representing participants and research sites has centered on discussions of anonymizing identifiable information and/or protecting "vulnerable" participants. Importantly, MOORE (2012, p.332) noted that anonymization is not a straightforward ethical practice, stating: "for much of history anonymity did not protect the vulnerable, but excluded women and others from authorship and ownership of their own words." Drawing upon her own qualitative research experiences, MOOSA (2013) discussed the inherent challenges of anonymization within the qualitative research process. She offered critical questions related to anonymization, including: "Did the procedures I used for anonymity actually protect my participants' identity?" and "How could I represent my participants to the point that they deserved acknowledgement and yet still ensure their anonymity?" (p.484) MOOSA argued that it is important to situate ethical decisions and practices, including anonymization practices, within one's own cultural contexts, and to approach the entirety of the ethical process with flexibility. [13]

In our own ethnographic work with Burundians, we recognized that for many ethical boards the participants we came to know would have been positioned as "vulnerable." While there is a substantial body of literature around the ethics of engaging in research with people with refugee status (see CLARK-KAZAK, 2017,

for example), there is relatively little writing specifically about representing people with refugee status (PERRY, 2011) and the process and challenges of representing trauma and loss (for exceptions see TAMAS, 2008 and ANDERS & LESTER, in press, among others). PERRY (2011) conducted an analysis of 32 universities' Institutional Review Boards' (i.e., ethics boards within the United States) websites to examine how such boards define vulnerable populations and the guidelines espoused when considering work with people who have limited or no English language proficiency. PERRY's (2011) study was precipitated by the charge from an ethics board official that working with participants identified as refugees was "inherently unethical." PERRY noted:

"While ostensibly protecting the rights of research participants, the ethics requirements (or, at the very least, the ways in which they were interpreted by IRB [ethics boards] officials) did not seem to truly respect the rights of ethnographic participants or to account for the situated contexts in which qualitative research occurs" (p.899). [14]

PERRY identified significant variation in how universities' ethics boards constructed the meaning of "vulnerable population." Further, she noted that the majority of universities drew upon the discourses of biomedicine to define and craft what it means to engage in ethical research. She called for qualitative researchers to advocate for more nuanced definitions of vulnerability and linguistically diverse people. [15]

Beyond constructions of vulnerability or even the common practices of anonymization, a central question in our own work has been: "How do we speak meaningfully and ethically about loss and trauma?" (TAMAS, 2008, abstract) Further, we recognize, like DENZIN (2017), that participants' lives and stories are shared with us "under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared with us." DENZIN noted that:

"in return this sharing will allow us to write life documents that speak to the human dignity, the suffering, the hopes, the dreams, the lives gained, and the lives lost by the people we study. These documents will become testimonies to the ability of the human being to endure, to prevail, and to triumph over the structural forces that threaten at any moment to annihilate all of us" (p.15). [16]

Yet, even as we pursue this promise, we have learned that we cannot always protect participants (ANDERS & LESTER, in press). Our representational practices are indeed limited (KORO-LJUNGBERG, 2008) and fall short. [17]

5. Engaging with Postcritical Representations

In our work, we have committed explicitly to working against a single story (ADICHIE, 2009) and neoliberal success stories of resettlement (ANDERS & LESTER, 2011; 2015a). Our choices reflect connections across our methodological, epistemological, and ethical commitments (ORTEGA, 2005). We have worked from a postcritical orientation. Much like critical ethnographers, postcritical ethnographers believe "social life is constructed in contexts of power" (NOBLIT et al., 2004, p.4). The "critical" in postcritical ethnography reflects the histories of critical theory in British and U.S. academies, particularly the application and legacy of Marxist and neo-Marxist theory in anthropological and sociological research. Influenced by work from critical theorists in Britain and neo-Marxists in the US, critical theorists in education chose ethnography as the primary methodology to study oppression and ideology (NOBLIT et al., 2004). According to NOBLIT and colleagues, the choice legitimated critical theory and the study of contexts of education in a field historically dominated by educational psychology. In critical ethnography, researchers wield their privileges, training, and resources to defend participants "whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach" (MADISON, 2012, p.6) and to produce "emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice" (ibid). [18]

To the degree that power and authority can be mediated, postcritical ethnographers ask: how might I interpret differently what I have come to understand? How might I construct representations that reflect multiple realities? According to HYTTEN (2004), we deepen the possibilities for transformation through critical theories and methodologies when we engage in collaborative and dialogic work, and produce critical analyses and representations accessible to participants. Researchers should not present research only to other researchers. HYTTEN suggested that participants have opportunities to engage in the research process in meaningful ways. Research must be accessible to the participants and participants should be prioritized in decision-making about representations. HYTTEN argued that researchers need to connect data to critical traditions and produce systemic analysis thus, making postcritical ethnography pedagogical. Ethnographers should aim for the creation of a dialogic process of "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (FREIRE, 1970, p.35). [19]

Critical (MADISON, 2012) and postcritical (HYTTEN, 2004; NOBLIT et al., 2004) ethnographers alike have argued that our primary responsibility in research is to the people we study. But as HYTTEN (2004) noted, there are dual desires for postcritical ethnographers. Postcritical ethnographers think from positions "in critical social theory while at the same time preventing such theory from dictating what is found in research settings" (pp.103-104). The dialectic tension is more transparent in some research than others (KUNTZ, 2010). Such a tension can be productive, and yet, it is just one of many challenges that demands attentiveness. The moral and political dimensionality of postcritical work is another tension. [20]

"Ethnography can never be innocent or neutral," MURILLO (2004, p.158) argued, "it is embedded in a political and moral process." As such, when postcritical ethnographers enact roles of advocacy in research, they engage in political and moral work.

"Postcritical ethnographies in an important sense are not designed but enacted or produced as moral activity. Postcritical ethnographers then must assume they exist within a critical discourse that in part makes them responsible for the world they are producing when they interpret and critique" (NOBLIT et al., 2004, p.24). [21]

It is this moral engagement that we have continued to grapple with, particularly as we seek out possibilities of critique and relationality with participants. [22]

MADISON (2012, p.98) noted: "response, response-ability, and responsibility become aligned with ethics as it relates to advocacy." Ethnographers might become an advocate when they become "aware of an issue" through their research or when they become "more deeply committed to the issue" (p.151) through their research. As an advocate, ethnographers actively engage in the struggles of participants and/or study "tactics, symbols, and everyday forms of resistance" (p.98). Theoretically, all critical and postcritical ethnographers advocate for change, varying only by degree and dimensionality. In doing so, we engage in political and moral work. "In doing the work of advocacy, whether we consider ethics or not, it is always already present within the horizons of representation and the machinations of power" (ibid.). Given the demands of the moral responsibility nested in critical and postcritical work, how do we pursue justice and practice ethics through methodological commitments? [23]

In what can be a craggy terrain of postcritical ethnography, there are trail markers to which we might attune to practice balance as we tack back and forth across multiple tensions. MADISON (2012) recommended the following considerations in approach, practice, and design. First, when an ethnographer enacts a role as an advocate, she needs to follow where participants lead, center and privilege the authority and wisdom of her participants, and recognize the evolution and different dimensions the role of advocate might entail. Second, the role of ethnographer and advocate is layered and complex. Circumstances may demand that an ethnographer ask: "which domain has *more to lose* if I choose one over the other? In which role would I be *more effective* in accomplishing something relative to this specific task?" (p.153) Third, the ethnographer must be transparent about her own convictions to her audience. Here, transparency builds trustworthiness, even if the audience chooses other political alignments. Fourth, in the examination of the relationship between ideology and data, the ethnographer must parse political commitments and representations of data so that her audience can differentiate between the two. "The reader must be able to decipher what is an empirical observation and what is a political claim" (p.155). Fifth, if and when participants share experiences of violence, conflict, or war, the ethnographer must provide cultural, historical, and political context. Ethnographers must generate complex representations of complex issues, linking where necessary local experience to geopolitical and economic contexts. Sixth, in

addressing issues of representation, the ethnographer must also produce complex and at times multiple forms of representation. Participants constitute one audience and fellow researchers another. Forms of representation shift with the aims of connecting with different audiences. Seventh, protecting participants through anonymity and confidentiality is a process. Madison argued that ethnographers need to check and recheck for permission and consent across the research process and not just at the outset. [24]

6. Ethics in Relation and the Complexity of Practice

As ethnographers committed to a postcritical orientation, we are always interested in ways power works, but we do not always start a project with a priori questions about structural violence (BOURDIEU, 1977; FARMER, 2005; SCOTT, 1999). In Riverhill, we began with an aim of understanding the experiences of resettlement. Part of a larger research team at the outset of the project, those of us in the field of education came to know some of the demands of resettlement from a local English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher who was serving four different elementary schools. Knowing we were involved in fields of education broadly, she asked if there was anything we could do to help the children. The ESL teacher and the ESL director at the regional resettlement affiliate identified children and adults most in need of English tutoring, and university students enrolled in ANDERS' graduate course on social justice and education were paired with newly arrived children and adults. The ESL director at the regional resettlement affiliate provided training for the students to become ESL tutors and with input from the ESL teacher, paired volunteers with Burundian children and some of their mothers, and Burmese and Iraqi women. In the meantime, over the course of almost a year, we completed focus groups with Burundian men and women and interviewed individuals and various groups who worked with Burundian children and families across the community. [25]

We knew resettlement experiences meant following the paths of Burundians into public institutions, e.g., public schools (free, state-run schools), the public health department (government subsidized health services), and public housing projects (government subsidized housing). And, with parental permission, we interacted with Burundian children and sought the requisite permission from Riverhill County Schools to conduct observations and interviews in the schools. In establishing new relationships with institutions in Riverhill and needing permission to access schools in particular, we did not share that we studied issues of power in cultural and socio-political contexts. Rather, we emphasized our interest in understanding resettlement as researchers and our hope to strengthen support and resources for Burundian families. Often, we "performed neutrality to White community members" (ANDERS & LESTER, 2015b, p.2). Our whiteness and our affiliation to a nearby university marked much of our access. [26]

6.1 Trustworthiness, transparency and unanticipated tensions

MADISON (2012) encouraged trustworthiness through transparency with one's audience, but did not address transparency across different groups of participants. Indeed, in our work, committing to transparency with participants seemed like a reasonable and respectful presumption. And, we agree that ethnographers ought to practice transparency. But what we discovered was that relationships across and within community groups were complicated. Transparency shifted over time and with different groups of participants. [27]

We worked with high levels of engagement and transparency with Burundian families we knew through tutoring and who had participated in focus groups. We started out working with high levels of engagement and transparency with teachers and medical professionals, too. We worked closely with two teachers tasked with administering a school transition program for a group of Burundian children. We shared broader resources on issues related to resettlement, and connected them to a local, certified art therapist whom they could invite to work pro bono with the children. We completed empathy building and prejudice reduction workshops in local private schools and a professional development workshop for area teachers on working with children with refugee status. However, over time, our transparency became dependent on the experiences we witnessed. For example, during our interview with an administrator in Riverhill County Schools, we learned about the recent, unanticipated increase in the number of students who were English Language Learners and the need for resources for them. We learned, too, that a group of teachers had met with a state representative to try to shut down the local resettlement affiliate. The administrator explained that the state would not allocate funds for "a newcomer school for refugees" to help with transitions to public schools. Frustrated, she said, "We do not want any more [Burundians]." Subsequently, we were guarded in our communication with this particular administrator, as well as many of the teachers who worked with her. [28]

As the children progressed in school, we learned at multiple schools that teachers positioned Burundian children as targets for special education with unclear communication, and in one case, no communication with the child's parents. Rukondo, the translator with whom we worked, explained that parents did not know what they were signing when school personnel placed paperwork in front of them. School staff said, "He needs more help," she recounted. "But they didn't go into detail." Parents "signed the paper, and they didn't know. If I didn't know from Lester ... I would never know." Rukondo believed principals and teachers thought they could make decisions for "refugee people." "They [principals and teachers] thought: [we] can decide for them. They don't speak English, too much to explain to the them.' [Principals and teachers] just take their [the parents] decision." We began to measure our disclosure with particular teachers and school officials. [29]

6.2 Anonymity, advocacy, and representation

MADISON (2012) suggested that researchers think about asking for permission to record, share information, or take photographs as an ongoing process. Researchers "must be ever mindful of anonymity and confidentiality, always checking and rechecking for permission and consent in the disclosure of names and information" (p.153). Although we recurrently asked for permission, receiving permission to represent difficult and private experiences did not make representing them easier, nor did it solve our dilemmas about what to share and with whom. We are still asking questions about how to represent experience with respect, integrity, and anonymity when experience includes trauma, loss, and violence. [30]

When Spiderman², one the children whom we came to know through tutoring, expressed suicidal ideation, our roles as researchers splintered. We had grown to love Spiderman over the two years we had spent with him after school, and we feared his death. Unanticipated and unplanned, we chose to help Spiderman's family get counseling services for him. It was a choice that ultimately changed Spiderman's educational trajectory. And it was a choice that altered our positions as researchers. Indeed, as MADISON (2012) noted, the role of an ethnographer as advocate is layered and complex. In the following scenes, we offer an account that reflects some of our ethical decision-making in practice. [31]

While reading with Spiderman and two other Burundian children in the back of their third-grade classroom, I [ANDERS] heard Spiderman say for the first time, "I hate school." You loved school last year, I thought. What is happening, I wondered. I leaned forward to ask Spiderman how he felt, and he said, "I want to stay at home." My heart broke knowing how many years he still had in front of him and how awful school could be for students of color (ANDERS, 2007, 2011). Three months later, Spiderman said, "I want to kill myself."

"I look up and see him extended across the top of his school desk. His head rests on his arms, his face turned toward me. I look into his eyes. He looks away. I cross the 5 feet between us and stand next to his desk. He has not moved. I watch the other children line up at the door under Mrs. Arbiter's instructions and note how quiet Spiderman's delivery was; no one else seems to have heard him. I peer into his 8-year-old face. He looks up at me. I search his eyes and expression for understanding. Have I understood what he has said? Has he understood what he has said?" (ANDERS, fieldnotes) [32]

In the days that followed, Spiderman's second-grade teacher confirmed that she had heard Spiderman say the same thing. [33]

Another member of the research team had secured dedicated hours for underserved populations with a private health service provider in the area, and we contacted the counselor assigned to work with Burundian community members.

2 Self-selected pseudonym.

She was willing to help, and through Rukondo, we coordinated a time with Spiderman's mother. Rukondo would translate, and ANDERS would drive Spiderman and his mother to the appointment. The family did not have a car. We invited the counselor to join us after school, so she could interact with Spiderman in an informal setting before his appointment, and she agreed. She came and watched us as we read and played with children one afternoon, but she did not interact with Spiderman. Her lack of engagement concerned both of us, but we did not consider canceling his appointment. Our fear for his safety drove our decision-making and tacit belief that talking with a counselor would help. [34]

The following Thursday, we read and played with children until Spiderman needed to leave for his appointment. We were unclear whether or not he knew from his mother that he had an appointment. When ANDERS explained where he was going, Spiderman began to cry. He said that there was an event at school to which his second-grade teacher was going to take him. The event was the following day, but we could not convince Spiderman he was not going to miss it. There was confusion and frustration as we drove across town to the appointment. From the backseat Spiderman said, "I don't want to go" and reached for the door handle.

"The doors are locked, but I place my left hand on the electronic lock on the driver's door when he begins to try and flip open the lock on his door...I notice perceptibly how angry he is and how quiet his mother is. The radio is not on and the windows are down, and I hear the traffic, and the sound my phone makes as Spiderman punches the keys. I am anxious about this drive across town now. My body is tense, and I feel regret about the position I have produced in this space. My actions are the conduit for the crossing of different cultures as I imagine introducing [the counselor] to Spiderman at the health service provider. ... Tears and frustration come in a wave again from Spiderman. I am rocked violently by my ethnocentrism and my inability to communicate with his mother...I find myself wondering why I am driving him to this appointment" (ANDERS, fieldnotes). [35]

There are many ways to think about Spiderman's inaugural trip to the private health service provider. One is that ANDERS wished she had not taken him there. But the day she drove across the river and through town, her focus was on Spiderman's safety, as she held the door lock from the driver's seat in fear that Spiderman would harm himself. I (ANDERS) did not want him to die. I did not want him to take his own life. I believed a counselor might help. This belief was predicated on my own white, middle class, and Western understandings of help. I did not know if Spiderman would share his thoughts with a counselor, but not introducing him to someone who might help was not a risk I was willing to make. I did not want to imagine his death and so worked against its possibility. However, taking away the choice from Spiderman to decide if he wanted to meet a counselor only underscores my complicity in the systems of white authority that already entangled him and his family (ANDERS & LESTER, 2015b). [36]

When we arrived, the translator (Rukondo) was waiting for us. Eventually, we cajoled Spiderman onto the elevator. What we could not have anticipated then,

but have learned to anticipate now, was the way the principal and teachers at Spiderman's school used against him the help we had sought for him. [37]

A year after Spiderman met the counselor, we learned while volunteering in his classroom that his classroom teacher and his ESL teacher were testing Spiderman for placement in special education. The teachers charged that Spiderman was not making progress academically and believed he needed to be in special education. In fact, Spiderman was completing math on grade level, and although still a beginning English reader, was making progress. In class he was quiet, attentive, and in the morning, fell asleep around the same time every day. The teachers believed he slept on purpose. We were not certain. We had a difficult time waking him when he fell asleep and knew he had been taking medication for almost a year. We sent an email to Spiderman's doctor weeks before his next appointment. We wanted to learn if sleepiness might be a side effect of his medication. [38]

When we greeted the doctor at Spiderman's next appointment, we introduced ourselves and reminded him of our concerns. The doctor asked about Spiderman's sleep and although his mother shared he slept well at night, the doctor replied that, "sleeping at school usually means under-supervision at home." He asked a series of behavioral questions and then became frustrated with the discrepancies between reports from the school and the accounts we were sharing. His tone became terse, and he looked away from us. "I'm hearing two different stories," he said. When we asked again about potential side effects of the medication, the doctor closed the case, cataloged his responsibilities regarding risk and benefit, said that perhaps we might find a "sleep study," and asked us to leave. While Rukondo was translating to the family, the doctor began dictation. When Rukondo finished translating, the child's mother asked about the medication. In response, the doctor asked if she had "a medical degree?" He then said, "excuse me," put in his earphones and began to dictate again. We left the appointment confused and having witnessed the condescension the doctor dispensed toward Spiderman's family—language the attending nurse slept through, that Rukondo, the translator, to our relief, did not translate in full, but that Spiderman heard in its entirety. [39]

Ultimately, the child's mother asked LESTER to attend a series of school-based meetings as her parent advocate. In these meetings, the school indicated that Spiderman should be placed in a special education classroom, with minimal opportunities for inclusion in a general education classroom. Within two months, Spiderman's parents signed paperwork agreeing to his placement in a special education classroom, with his mother ultimately sharing that she was not aware of what she was signing/agreeing to. She stated: "We were still new. We didn't know what was going on. Yeah. I wish at that time I knew. I was going to ask more questions." [40]

In retrospect, we would not have taken Spiderman to the private health service provider, even though they had dedicated hours without cost to Burundian families. We would have been more explicit in sharing with Spiderman's family

their rights as parents. Although the resources existed, we made the presumption without evidence that all of the various practitioners would be helpful to Burundian families. Moreover, working through commitments to transparency and trustworthiness meant extending both to Spiderman, which we did not. We made a decision to advocate for him but not with him. We should have met with him, his parents, and Rukondo to share how much we cared for him and wished for his safety. We should have asked what he wanted. [41]

When these events, and others like them, unfolded, we found ourselves both taking up positions as advocates and being positioned by others as unsupportive of professional decision-making. Could we advocate for the needs that Burundian families identified for themselves and also work together with community professionals? Or did those in power presumptively frame advocacy as oppositional? The question remains an open one for us—one that sits with us even now. How do we share the ongoing, rampant discrimination prevalent in every day interactions between white professionals and culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse children and families—especially when those professionals have been charged with providing health and educational services? [42]

In these tensions, we reflected on the ways Burundian families explicitly named our whiteness, calling us "white women" and the way white community members spoke to us about resettlement from positions that assumed we shared their perspectives. We believe our whiteness and English as a first language contributed to some of those assumptions. Over time, Burundian adults began calling us "white women" and "teachers." The children used our names interchangeably. Our whiteness and the power that accompanies it in the US affected our relationships and our reflexive work in the project. Our whiteness, our biographies, our language, and our status as educators were a part of the questions we asked about our roles as postcritical ethnographers and advocates. Like MADISON (2012, p.153), we asked: "which domain has *more to lose* if I choose one over the other? In which role would I be *more effective* in accomplishing something relative to this specific task?" In the practice of postcritical ethnography, learning what some teachers thought and what some teachers did fundamentally altered what we shared with them, as well as what we chose to report in scholarly communications. Witnessing the doctor's unwillingness to review potential side effects and the way he spoke to Spiderman's family irrevocably altered our relationship with the private health service provider and theirs with us. [43]

Postcritical ethnography demands we address systemic inequity. When an explicit aim of critical and postcritical research is to improve conditions, practices, and policies in the status quo, how do we detail what needs to change without coupling participants experiences with linguistic and racial hierarchies? To represent only lists of systemic linguistic and racial inequities (for example, English-only education policies; the dearth of English as a Second Language teachers; the dominance of mono-lingual teachers in US public schools; and the disproportionate representation of students of color whom teachers track into special education) without detailing the ways white authoritarian power affects

targeted children and families in the reproduction of linguistic and racial hierarchies forecloses opportunities to initiate change. Examining implications for change and working with professionals to change policies and practices means representing decisions and actions that might have been otherwise and were not. We are not convinced that analysis of systemic inequities should be de-coupled from their everyday effects. When services became potentially detrimental for Spiderman, advocacy became our primary role. Joining Spiderman's family at medical and school appointments when asked was committing to Burundian needs and a possible account of ethics in practice. Anticipating the deployment of white professional authoritarianism would have strengthened our ability to advocate; yet, knowing a broader range of possible outcomes does not make representing the process of committing any less challenging. [44]

7. Conclusions: Engaging Productive Tensions

To conclude, we offer three considerations or "lessons learned." First, we argue for the importance of representing experience in layers. In our representations of what happened at these intersections of transparency and trustworthiness, and in relation to our roles of ethnographer and advocate, we have worked hard to represent experience in layers (BOCHNER, 2009) and with context. In particular, we pay careful attention to layers of context whenever we identify harm perpetrated at the expense of children and families with refugee status. This is important for two reasons. We want to avoid reducing an individual who harms others to the role of villain (TAMAS, 2011), and we want to identify origins of suffering (FARMER, 2005). However, the origination of harm is not always bound to a singular event. Participants and researchers alike navigate cultural, emotional, and socio-political hegemonies. In our work, children and families with refugee status were positioned materially and discursively in geo-political contexts, federal, state, and local resettlement policies, and in everyday decision-making by professionals and neighbors in their communities. "The interests of the powerful are served when suffering is hidden and its origins denied" (p.17). "To explain suffering," FARMER argued, "one must embed individual biography in the larger matrix of culture, history, and political economy" (p.41). [45]

Second, we suggest that turning toward performance-centered pedagogies and experimental writing has allowed us to generate complex representations seated in relation to those who have shared their vulnerability, grief, and loss with us. At times, we have turned to experimental writing when the tidiness of academic writing and prose seemed to limit what tellings were possible (e.g., ANDERS & LESTER, 2015b). DENZIN (2017, p.14) offered that performance-centered practices are one way to engage and represent painful experiences and make visible "oppressive structures and culture." We agree with DENZIN that such practices are a way "to engage in ethical work that makes a positive difference" (p.15). [46]

Finally, we recognize that as qualitative researchers, we may not be able to protect our participants. For us, we could not protect Burundian children and their families from the Nativism, xenophobia, and racism they endure in the US. Nor

could we protect them from the authoritarian decision-making of white educational and medical professionals. Perhaps because of these conditions we have sought to produce our representations within frames of relational ethics, which calls us "to act from our hearts and minds" (ELLIS, 2007, p.4). We ask of ourselves not only what stories are we telling about our work but also what stories may be told about our work from a place in which relational ethics is centered. [47]

Given the anti-foundational contexts through which critical and postcritical ethnographers often pursue understandings and representations, CHILDERS (2011) recommended that the incorporation of "the truly troubling limits, silences, and absences at work" in the practice of ethnography become an "ethical starting point" (p.353). Recognizing the position of ethnographer as "always, already 'in trouble'" and expecting "failure in coming to know" (ibid.), participants may generate new locations of knowledge production and more honesty in representation, which might, in turn, complicate understandings. She shared (ibid.): "In a paradoxical move, I am therefore arguing that the ruptures and breaks evidenced in our research should be foregrounded, not as merely negative cases but as fully incorporated empirical materials that serve as marks of an ethically valid practice." For us, we continue to seek out these ruptures and breaks, orienting to them as productive tensions. These tension points call us to continually commit to relational ethics (ELLIS, 2007), which for us acknowledges that "clean and reasonable scholarship about messy, unreasonable experiences is an exercise in alienation" (TAMAS, 2008, §18). [48]

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