

# Using Celebrities to Teach Autoethnography: Reflexivity, Disability, and Stigma

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As an empirical qualitative researcher and professor focusing on personal narrative and the performance of daily life, I maintain that thoughtful, careful analysis depends on the ability to listen, observe, and then interpret. Self-reflexivity, the practice of continually questioning one's own interpretations of self and others, is paramount to one's success. Kristin Langellier asserts that personal narrative research is "a story of a body, told through a body that makes cultural conflict concrete." The researchers, as present audiences, "bear witness" to others' stories and must be able to situate their bodies within culture in relation to others (Park-Fuller). The multifaceted nature of impressions can be difficult to learn, because researchers see, hear, and understand through only their individual bodies. For this reason, before interviewing others to create a personal narrative analysis of another's story, I ask students to enact an autoethnography in which they become their own research participants, drawing upon their experiences to create an autoethnographic text to share with one another before interviewing others. In order to provide a subject that students will find familiar, this autoethnographic assignment focuses on applying a critical lens to individual reactions to celebrities in the mass media.

Autoethnographic analyses of reactions to celebrities in the mass media can make the importance of researcher self-reflexivity and positionality tangible in ways that can transform understandings of human interaction. Within the class I define researcher-reflexivity as the

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realization that the event of collecting data as a qualitative researcher is an act of meaning-making, with bodies entangled in cultural discourses that value some identities over others, with shared understandings always vulnerable to reinterpretation. Autoethnography moves beyond autobiography to describe the cultural tensions that enable and constrain our bodies in the daily interactions through which we come to understand others and ourselves. Focusing on our reactions to celebrities we are exposed to through the mass media (i.e. television, film, popular music, magazines, and advertising) enables us to see our interpretations in juxtaposition to others, which can also reveal how our embodied experiences and cultural locations shape our interpretations. This awareness potentially allows students to access researcher-reflexivity on a personal level, rather than simply an accepted methodological position. The students are able to map their bodies' roles in the co-creation of qualitative findings with their classmates.

### Finding Meaning through Culturally Recognizable Identit(ies) in Popular Culture

For the purpose of this course, I define popular culture identities as bodies that are largely recognizable because they are widely distributed through the mass media. Students often shorten this description to “celebrities” which works well for the assignment. As cultural members we have repeated moments throughout our lives that involve exposure to celebrities through the mass media. Many of these experiences (the times, locations, and reactions) are forgotten, but some of these experiences remain vivid, and through our comparisons, identifications and contrasts, form who we are compared to these recognizable bodies. In this essay, through moving from memories of a celebrity, to conducting an autoethnography of the memory in the formation of self, to discussing these interpretations face-to-face with others, I describe how I use, and

how I teach students enrolled in qualitative research courses to use, autoethnography to offer insights about popular culture and to map how identity is formed through cultural interactions.

Carolyn Ellis asserts that “*autoethnography* refers to the writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (37). Students are often startled at the idea of analyzing their own experiences as autoethnographic research as opposed to the more familiar practice of interviewing others. The instruction to “place [themselves] in the center of the text” (Giorgio 407) and analyze their understandings of themselves through their responses and reactions to a celebrity they know only through mass media exposure is often unsettling. However, they quickly embrace the assignment, seeing how their understandings of ethnographic field notes and thick description easily translate to autoethnography. They are able to create the first part of the assignment, entitled “The Interaction,” with ease.

On the second day, I ask students to choose one to two critical-cultural studies theories—e.g., Gender as Performance (Butler), The Beauty Myth (Wolf), Unbearable Weight, (Bordo), Eating the Other (hooks), Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell), Compulsory Heterosexuality (Rich) and Compulsory Able-Bodiedness (McRuer)—and then use these theories to analyze the interaction and its cultural significance in a column marked “My Interpretation.” This step follows Grace Giorgio’s instructions to “attend to the cultural and political tensions between lived experiences and their meanings and ethical concerns about representations of self and others” (407). This two-step autoethnography that separates the story from the analysis allows students, as new researchers, to see their stories as data to analyze, to become their own participants and recognize themselves as bodies telling stories entangled in cultural meanings that both facilitate and restrict their interpretations and responses.

On the third day, I assign students to groups to first read their stories and then provide their personal analyses. The conversations gain momentum as they exchange memories of their reactions to celebrities experienced via the mass media and how their understandings of self, formed and reformed through their ongoing references. Students first encounters with peer response are in-person rather than anonymous written evaluations that allow detached, impersonal critique. This classroom interaction is inspired by Craig Gingrich-Philbrook's assertion that autoethnographers must "[navigate] how others encourage them to understand themselves . . . to both see another interpretation but also [resist] the less useful understandings by writing back against the grain of the taken for granted" (617). In their exchanges, students are able to access researcher standpoint as they see how their interpretations of popular culture identities merge and diverge with one another. Sometimes in these struggles, I'm consulted with, asked to weigh in, to use my PhD and title to be the authority on who accessed the correct cultural interpretation of a given celebrity. Although I will clarify the fundamentals of the theories they apply, I continually re-direct them back to their interpretations, reminding them that resisting one another's interpretation does not imply failure, but reveals complexity of positionality, power, and privilege. The shared familiarity with the shared data from mass-distributed popular culture allows them to trace how their personal experiences, contexts, values, and understandings influence their interpretations of a familiar personality in relation to another gains clarity. The importance of their own bodies as vessels of understanding cannot be ignored. Below, I offer my story that can serve as an example of this assignment, and as a model for researchers new to autoethnography.

### 1998: The Interaction – Salem Massachusetts

It is October and I'm a new student at a small liberal arts college on the North Shore of Boston. I have been cast in a local street theatre that re-enacts the Salem Witch Trials in a show for tourists. It is my first paid theatre job and I am honored to have been chosen as an improvisational street actor as well as cast in the Fall show as a newly auditioning member of the Theatre Department. I seem to be having better luck in college than high school and feel optimistic about the future. One of the directors/theatre professors, Norm, from my college, calls to me as I'm leaving the dressing room.

“Do you want a ride back to campus? I'm heading there.”

“If you don't mind.” I say as my face gets hot. I'm blushing. I blush easily.

“Of course not! I want to get to know Ms. Julie-Ann Scott who has just arrived on the theatre scene.” I smile, flattered and nervous. My legs are tight from all the walking that day and Norm reaches across to pull me up into his red jeep when I have trouble lifting my foot high enough to gain the necessary leverage to climb in. As I buckle my safety belt I feel small and unimpressive. Norm commands space, with a pock-marked face, steel gray hair, and large smile. He is both approachable and severe at the same time. As a new theatre student I am simultaneously drawn to his warmth and intimidated by his intensity. I also feel deeply indebted to him. Rumor has it that he tends to cast the same actors over and over, so being cast early was good sign for my future in the theatre department and local acting scene. He turns and smiles at me as I'm pushing my hair out of my face that is whipping into my eyes from the open window.

“Has anyone ever told you that you look like a young Terri Hatcher?”

“Really?”

He smiles large. “I go back and forth thinking about which celebrity you resemble. You have moments of Natalie Wood, or maybe Allyssa Milano. You are *unremarkably* attractive, and that’s good, you’re nice to look at but your face doesn’t have a dominant feature. It’s not standout so you can morph for characters. You can play a lot.” There was a pause as he finished. I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Um, thank you. I hope to get cast a lot. So far my luck has been good since I got here.” I wonder if standout features might be better, and feel a moment of self-consciousness I work to disregard. I remind myself that if a director sees something he likes, embrace it.

“It will keep being good. You’re good. How is your foot doing? Is it feeling better?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been limping. Did you hurt yourself?”

“No, um, I have spastic cerebral palsy (CP).” He doesn’t say anything so I continue. “It’s um minor brain damage at birth that affects the signal from my brain to my legs. The message to walk gets to my legs but my movements are like yours would be if someone stuck you with a pin, kind of jerky, not fluid. That’s where they get the term ‘spastic,’ I guess.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not progressive. It won’t get worse. I’m okay.”

“You have a great attitude. I admire that.” I bask in his large smile that crinkles the marks on his face into a series of charming dimples. I like him. It’s okay he knows I have CP. “Do you know what role you’d be great for?”

“What?” I immediately became excited, hoping to hear about an upcoming show.

“Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*. Really, you’re ideal. If anyone ever does that one. You should audition.”

“Um, yeah. I’ve heard that before.”

“I bet you have.” He smiles. His mood hasn’t changed.

There is a moment of silence as I looked out the window, squinting from the wind and trying to relax my jaw so he can't see how upset I am. I think of Laura from the Tennessee Williams play, described as slight, delicate, with long dark hair and a limp. There is one hopeful moment in an overall tragic play, when it seems that Laura might find love despite her painful awkwardness brought on by her discomfort with her physical difference. Williams writes at the start of the scene, “*a fragile, unearthly prettiness has come out in LAURA: she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting*” (102). I wonder about the fragility of my prospects for the stage and if I will continue to be cast in shows now that Norm knows my limp is permanent. Time will tell. He was bound to figure it out eventually.

### 2013: My Interpretation – Wilmington North Carolina

As a Performance Studies Professor who directs two theatre troupes and experimental ethnographic films at a public southeastern coastal university located in a city with a thriving stage and film community, I often have aspiring student actors ask me why I never pursued a professional acting career beyond a few paid roles while attending college. There are many reasons, including my anxious identity's desire for security, my love of writing, teaching, and theory, and the knowledge early on of the sort of schedule I hoped to keep as a parent someday that a university professor position allows and that an acting career would not. However, reflecting back and applying my methodological narrative training that enables me to understand each personal storytelling act as an ongoing co-constitution of identity and meaning between narrator and listener, I know when my story of self changed into its current direction.

My path veered away from professional performance at age 17. With my gait as fluid and appearance as normatively attractive as they could ever be – made possible through the exercise regimen the flexible

schedule of an undergraduate student on scholarship would allow -- I was still disabled. I admit for a moment during that time, being one of the only first-year students cast in a small ensemble as the romantic love interest (that had never happened before or since) had me hopeful that perhaps my physical diligence had masked my disability enough to be a mainstream actor. The conversation on that Fall day in 1998 materialized my cerebral palsied-actor body's struggle over successful acting images as it is defined by the iconic re-appearing faces of the mass media. I decided my body would be relegated to characters defined by deficient bodies, usually riddled with pity or fear. I was not inspired to take on these roles. I'm still not. The portrayal of disability in popular culture is still troubling to me.

When people start to become uncomfortably inspired by me and my disability I will sometimes joke about being Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol*: small, limping and smiling a lot. I remind them that CP is no more fatal than life in general and I'm fairly stable socioeconomically so perhaps they should find someone else for the role of that poor, "sweet innocent" inspirational cripple who acts as the "moral barometer" in their lives (Sandahl and Auslander 3). Characters such as Laura are "charity cases," holders of our pity who we can feel so fortunate to have been spared their sufferings. My mild temperament and almost-passing for normal has allowed me to avoid comparisons to an "obsessive avenger" looking to punish the individual who maimed me or the "monster/freak" that elicits horror (Sandahl and Auslander 3). Although contemporary characters such as Flynn White on *Breaking Bad* and Artie Abrams on *Glee* seem to be more complex as they are members of the ensemble rather than a metaphor or place holder, overcoming their hardships is arguably the focus of their roles, making them the "inspirational overcomers" who excel despite their impairments (Sandahl and Auslander 3).

Though disabled actors appear more in mainstream media than decades before, I find their disabled presence somehow still reinforcing of



Robert McRuer's definition of "compulsory able-bodiedness." Just as Adrienne Rich argued that heterosexuality needs homosexuality, and arguably all queer bodies, to function as the margins to the "normal" (heterosexual) center, able bodies rely on disabled bodies to take on the role of human vulnerability, and inescapable mortality that all bodies hold. I didn't want to play that role then and I don't want to now. Despite how time and scholarship have compelled me to take on the role of disability in autoethnographic performance writing, I'm still not ready to take on any disabled character other than myself on the stage of screen, unless it's a script written and produced by me. I remain skeptical of how popular culture will treat my or any other disabled body. Norm drew comparisons to multiple celebrity faces from the mass media (though also noting my own features were not as memorable, which is why I reminded him of so many of them), the reality of my limping body being permanent shifted his comparisons from people to a single character, the created representations of lack in a script rather than an actress capable of taking on any role. This move from actress to character marked by a director/professor who I loved, respected and worked with all 4 years of school (though never again cast as a love interest, but as a child, victim, and a mythical creature), shifted my goals away from the stage and camera. Perhaps (or probably) at some level, I remain uncomfortable with my body as the representation of "not normal" because unlike other actresses playing Laura, my gait would not end with the show. I'm not interested in playing the role of limping tragedy under any name.

### The Debrief: Recounting Others' Reactions to my Story

In sharing this story with others, I've had passionate audience members argue that I should not have been discouraged by Norm's comments. I respond that overall Norm is not a discouraging character in my life story. Norm is a huge fan of me and my work. He is one of my favorite mentors

and this interaction was at the beginning of several years working together before I left the Boston area for graduate school. I adore him and I am indebted to him for the acting opportunities and training he provided me. This is not a story of Norm, or a story of Norm and my relationship, but a story of my interpretations to his interpretations of celebrities in relation to my body. His role in my life (as a director and immediate gatekeeper of my performing at the time) is important to this interpretation. Contextual factors such as how, when, why, and with whom we develop relationships can shape our interpretations of self. This notion holds true across human interactions, but becomes readily apparent through the easy access to mass mediated identities because we collectively “know” these identities, often experiencing them through the same video, audio, and still images that we use to make our interpretations. If Norm had compared me to a past student or local actress who others had never met, the story might not have the strong level of resonance, but because Terri Hatcher, Natalie Wood, Alyssa Milano, and the character from a famous Tennessee Williams play are accessible to a mass audience my interpretations become more readily vulnerable to critiques.

Those who resist my interpretation of this interaction argue that I do in fact resemble the actresses he compared me to – they often list a few other popular culture identities, usually actresses with long dark hair and not overly defined features – and I am always flattered by these comparisons though I have yet to agree that I actually resemble any of the celebrities. Others have also argued that, similar to these actresses, I look like the script’s description of Laura from *The Glass Menagerie*, who is described as slight, pale, with long dark hair and a limp. I both affirm and resist these conclusions, arguing that it was knowledge of my limp being permanent that brought this role to Norm’s mind. Before, my appearance resembled successful actresses of the contemporary era capable of many roles as opposed to a character, whose embodiment is frozen in time through a script. For me, from my location and body, my limp matters in

this conversation. My limp brackets me off from the mainstream, a confined specialty body only suitable for roles in which my deemed atypicality is explained in ways other defining features such as my hair, eye and skin color need not be justified. My abnormality surfaces in the reiteration of compulsory able-bodiedness that marginalizes it by naming it perfect for a role of a delicately pretty, but culturally-doomed limping girl. This experience can be foreign and startling to bodies marked as “normal” and those marked by disability that ascribe to the medical model’s view of bodies as diagnosable machines that breakdown and run inefficiently.

As a Disability Studies/Performance Studies scholar, I remember hearing an account by a disability scholar/performance artist who eagerly looked at an actor’s legs during a stage play and felt disappointed. A trained disability eye can see if an individual’s legs have the stiff, slightly askew, atrophied appearance of an actual wheelchair user. The muscles and forward point of the actor’s knees gave him away. He was a *normate* playing disability (Garland-Thomson). Disabled actors have argued to extend the Disability Civil Rights Campaign slogan, “Nothing about us without us,” a demand for disabled people’s leadership in anything having to do with disability, should extend to the stage. Only disabled actors should portray disabled characters. I do not entirely agree with this argument as biological determinism unsettles me. I’ll admit, I was excited when my trained CP eye noticed that Flynn from *Breaking Bad* really had CP, but considering how disability is portrayed in popular culture – as the defining feature of the character – I’m not sure if this emotional confirmation solves my discomfort with the actor/character. Although I’m all for disabled characters getting work, my limp being my one remarkable features that must be explained in the script reifies the compulsory able-bodiedness that demands my presence be the manifestation of “not normal.” I would love a starring role in a Tennessee Williams script, but I’d rather not be legitimized by my gait.

The multiple view points and interpretations of my present body in relation to the actresses and character from a famous play allow for the struggle over personal interpretation of a bodies that are familiar to those participating in the conversation. Now that I have shared by experience throughout this essay, as well as an activity about autoethnography I use in many of my classes, I conclude by offering insights about how others have completed this assignment.

For my students, the above debrief happens in small-group workshops in class. I remember a gay student explaining his autoethnographic interpretation of Dolly Parton as an unapologetic show of excess that inspired his own gender performance. Judith Butler's theory of performativity framed his interpretation. Some southern female students argued that Dolly's body reified gender norms they desired to overcome, interpreting her presence in their home growing up as an image of older values and feminine expectations they wished to transcend. Several students of color wove their stories of race and gender with Kanye West, applying bell hooks illustrate how Kanye's performance at a music awards ceremony is entangled in media biases that framed his body (and their own) as dangerous. Some students resisted this interpretation, arguing that Kanye seemed inappropriate and volatile. Racism, White privilege, and physical vulnerability led to a complicated struggle over identity. One student, framing her essay with Christina Fisanek's work in Fat Studies focused her story on watching the movie *Bridesmaids* starring Melissa McCarthy with a group of friends. She felt excited that an actress she physically identified with was starring in a movie, but her performance left her wondering if she could ever be anything in a group of beautiful woman but the comic relief. Some thinner students in her group countered back with how uncomfortable they felt being called "skinny bitches" by Megan Trainor's hit song. A discussion of fat stigma and thin privilege followed.

The familiarity of popular culture icons allows for readers to have personal responses to autoethnographic characters beyond the writer's descriptions and explanations. With a focus on popular culture, the audience can decide if their interpretations, apart from the autoethnographic texts before them, affirm or resist the author's account. They are also authorities interacting with the characters in autoethnographic research. Throughout these conversations, students learned that although they never have to replace their own experience with another, the realities of cultural privilege adds complexity to individual moments of isolation and/or inclusion.

In autoethnographies of reactions to celebrities, the vulnerability of story and interpretations dependance on the bodies through which they emerge is tangible, providing evidence that stories are most powerful when they are struggled over by tellers and audiences, challenging understandings of self, others, identity and culture (Pollock). Mass media offers exposure to bodies that become collectively recognizable so that we can incorporate them into our understandings of self without ever meeting them in person. Our (dis)identifications with these identities locate our own bodies in relation to tangible and shared representations of culture. Listening to *another body's* interpretation of a mass-mediated *familiar body* that counters the experience of *one's own body* allows the realization that our varied responses stem from the complexities of individual bodies and experiences entangled in shared cultural meanings. Students rarely disavow their own connections and reactions to celebrities based on others' interpretations, and that is not a goal of this practice. Rather, through this assignment, they acknowledge the reality of others' embodied experiences, even if they resist their own interpretation, and struggle together, embedded in power and privilege, toward social justice.

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