Doing Autoethnography

Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway,
Tony E. Adams and
Derek M. Bolen (Eds.)

Foreword by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner

SensePublishers

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CAROLYN ELLIS AND ARTHUR P. BOCHNER

FOREWORD

In this book, twenty-two writers take up the challenge of doing autoethnography. They treat their own lived-through experiences as primary data and sites of moral responsibility. They invite you, their readers, to come away with an appreciation of what it felt like to live through what happened and to make sense of it. They reveal themselves to themselves, and to you, seeking a perspective on their experience that neither they nor you had before they did autoethnography. As auto-ethnographers, these writers integrate emotional, spiritual, and moral parts of themselves with the intellectual and analytical in order to hold on to the personal connection to their experience that inspired them to do autoethnography in the first place. They eschew the conventions of disinterested and impartial analysis, choosing instead to point their inquiries toward "acts of meaning" associated with the lived processes of creating and managing identity, making sense of lived experiences, and communicating it to others.

You, their readers, play an important role in their pursuit of doing autoethnography. After all, the truths of autoethnography exist between story teller and story reader. These writers want you to engage with their struggles with adversity, to empathize with the too often heartbreaking feelings of stigma and marginalization, to identify with the difficulties they experience in finding words to express pain and disruption meaningfully, and to want to do something yourself to assist fellow sufferers. In other words, they want you to interact with their stories, using all the senses available to you, feeling each story's tensions, experiencing their dilemmas or contradictions, and living in the reality of the story for a time. They want you to take what they have done and engage with it, allowing yourselves, perhaps even forcing yourselves, to consider the ways in which their stories relate to your life and to find in this connection some truth about yourself. This is the gift they offer you in what they have done. What will keep the conversation going is your willingness and conscientiousness to enter into dialogue with these stories, maintaining an openness to "otherness" and a dedication to social justice, ethics, and moral imagination. As we like to say to our students, autoethnography is not a spectator sport.

Unlike much of the writing one finds across and within the social sciences, you should find these stories a pleasure to read. These writers are determined to communicate with you rather than simply to impress you with their intellect or theoretical acumen. They care about how you may react and engage with their stories. They write in a revealing and passionate way because they are seeking connection, desiring to evoke something deep in your guts and your heart that will allow one consciousness to reach another, yours to theirs.

We heard a number of these stories when they were first presented at the *Doing Autoethnography* Conferences. If you're like us, you will find it difficult to put the book down, once you start it. Many of these stories will take you into the depths of suffering in the human experience, including mental illness, divorce, abuse, male rape, male violence, ambiguous loss, stigmatized bodies, brain injury, learning disability, physical illness, dislocation, and the secrets we keep about the associated pain. Though authors do not eschew their pain, they don't dwell there; instead, they enact resistance, adaptation, and resilience as they write to uncover for themselves what these experiences mean and forge connections to many of you who may have felt similar disruptions in your lives. You will realize that you are not alone and neither are they. You will journey with them in their search for sexual, racial, ethnic, and gendered identities, at home and work. You will be taken into relationships between partners, colleagues, siblings, mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, teachers and students, counselors and clients.

We were delighted to experience the ways in which these writers, many of them new to autoethnography, introduced and experimented with novel modes of expressing and performing lived experiences and concentrated on new frontiers of inquiry including materiality, new media, and technology. As you move through the pages of these stories, you will be accompanied by autoethnographers struggling to hold onto a story yet realizing that sometimes the right thing to do is to let it go. And, you will become involved in—and sometimes share through your own life and work—the breathtaking moral and ethical issues that arise as authors seek to unveil their experiences yet stay acutely alert to the dangers and responsibilities they hold to intimate others and to the groups, families, and organizations implicated in their work and their lives.

Thanks to Derek for spearheading the *Doing Autoethnography* Conferences for five years. He handled the ice storms and electrical outages with grace and class, allowing the conferences themselves to take center stage and prosper, providing a safe space for new and old scholars to gather, to share, to learn, and to celebrate autoethnography together. Thanks to Sandy, Tony, and Derek for gathering and editing these papers and making them accessible to a wider audience. We look forward to future conferences and eagerly anticipate the next volume. This volume brings us joy and security about the future of autoethnography as embodied by the young talent and loving hearts of these writers.

Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner
Franklin, NC (in the middle of nature)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the contributors of this collection—without them, this book would not exist. Their enthusiasm, responsiveness, and patience have been treasured. We would also like to thank Peter de Liefde and Michel Lokhorst for their support, as well as the opportunity to publish with Sense Publishers.

SANDRA L. PENSONEAU-CONWAY, TONY E. ADAMS, AND
DEREK M. BOLEN

1. DOING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I sit in the classroom-turned-conference room on the first floor of Manoogian Hall at Wayne State University, taking in an evocative narration of the power of music in autoethnography. As the presenter drums, and my closed eyes take me far from Detroit, Michigan (United States), I notice a definite change in the atmosphere. All goes quiet, a momentary and collective feeling of confusion. The lights have gone out in the building. It may be the middle of the day, but it's also a wintry November afternoon. Outside the door's window, I notice what seem to be conference assistants moving swiftly one direction, then another, likely wondering what happened and how to remedy it. Our little collective in our first floor room remedies it on our own—the presenter keeps drumming, we return to closing our eyes, and take in the magic that is autoethnography.

* * *

In 2010, (then graduate student) Derek Bolen had a vision: to create *Doing Autoethnography*, the first conference that focused solely on autoethnographic principles and practices.[1] *Doing Autoethnography* would tap into a burgeoning interest in, and build upon a rich history of, conferences foregrounding ethnographic and qualitative research, specifically the *Ethnographic Alternatives* Conference hosted by Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2000) and the annual *International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*, which Norman Denzin started in 2005.[2] Derek's vision was a success: the *Doing Autoethnography* Conference has occurred five times (2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

Across the five conferences, thousands of attendees from more than ten countries have attended hundreds of presentations, more than a dozen workshops, and multiple keynote addresses. While some attendees participated in one conference, others have attended all five. There have been many publications connected to conference discussions and presentations,[3] and, as of this writing, the Doing Autoethnography Facebook page has more than 800 members.

Uniquely, Derek sought to create generative space for those newer to autoethnography. Such a personal and identifiable method of research certainly brings with it a host of anxieties associated with the revelation of personal experience, reliving one's past, the craft of writing, confrontation of struggles, and so on. And so, in the beginning, and aside from workshop presenters and keynote speakers, conference attendees were largely limited to graduate and undergraduate

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students. In that first conference held in November 2011 at Wayne State University in Detroit, attendees found support in one another. Derek certainly aimed high, and achieved it.

In addition to the unique focus of the conference, Derek's organization also merits praise. Every year, the conference has been free; there were never any submission or registration fees, and all programming was open for general admission. Most years, Derek even secured on-campus lodging available for a nominal cost, and sometimes the sessions had free food and coffee. Although adequate funding is increasingly difficult to secure for such an event, we hope that future *Doing Autoethnography* Conferences can meet such impeccable standards.

Yet, there have been some hurdles. In 2011, all of the power went out in the building where the presentations were held. But the attendees pushed through, sitting in darkness as the presenters used cell-phone lights to present their work. In 2014 and 2015, there were ice storms, cancelled flights, and dangerous roadways. Across the years, there have been a few fussy attendees, as well as fiery disagreements about the use and significance of personal experience in research. These hurdles aside, each conference has been infused with passion and support.

After the fifth *Doing Autoethnography* Conference (2016), the three of us decided to assemble a collection of essays that would capture the essence of the first five years of the conference. We submitted a proposal to Sense Publishers, which, as this book demonstrates, was positively received. We then had the difficult task of determining who to include. We began by scanning all five years of the programs. Given that the three of us assisted with every conference, as well as attended many of the presentations and workshops, we had a good sense about which presentations would be critical chapters. We also sought to include chapters by those who attended the conference multiple years and chapters based on presentations that generated large audiences and important conversations.

This collection offers original chapters that made it through the selection process, as well as through multiple revisions. Together, they address many overlapping themes: identity norms and negotiations; issues tied to race, gender, sexuality, size, citizenship, and dis/ability; exclusion and belonging; oppression, injustice, and assault; barriers to learning/education; and living in/with complicated relationships. The chapters show autoethnography in practice, and interrogate autoethnography ethically, theoretically, relationally, and methodologically. Some provide clear resolutions; others seemingly provide none. Some authors highlight conventionally positive aspects of experience; others dwell in what might be understood as relational darkness. Some experiences likely resonate with many readers; others likely feel unique, unusual, exceptional. These chapters also pose questions to readers: What is the role of resolution in an autoethnographic story? How does a positive-negative dichotomy function in autoethnography? How does autoethnography invite identification in the midst of storying both the familiar and the strange?

We envision multiple uses of this book. It should appeal to attendees of the annual *Doing Autoethnography* Conferences, as well as people interested in, but who could not attend, the conferences. This book could be used as a primary text in

undergraduate and graduate courses about autoethnographic research and personal narrative, or as a supplemental text in courses about writing and/or qualitative research. (Given the short length of the chapters, each could serve as a model for a final course project.) This book could also serve as a resource for new and established researchers who have an interest in autoethnography.

As demonstrated by the *Doing Autoethnography* Conference and this collection, autoethnography has amassed a significant following. Courses devoted to autoethnography are taught at many colleges and universities, and scholars from numerous disciplines use autoethnography in their research.[4] Numerous books, edited collections, and special journal issues foreground autoethnographic practice,[5] and prominent texts about qualitative research include chapters about the method.[6] We look forward to many more years of *Doing Autoethnography* and to assembling the next collection of essays from conferences yet to occur.

NOTES

[1] Autoethnographers use personal experience to describe—and sometimes critique—cultural beliefs, experiences, practices, and identities. They engage in rigorous self-reflection in order to identify and interrogate intersections between self and society, as well as show "people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). For comprehensive accounts of autoethnography, see Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015), Bochner and Ellis (2016), and Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013).

[2] In form, we intended for this book to resemble past conference collections such as *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics* (Bochner & Ellis, 2002) and *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (Short, Turner, & Grant, 2013).

[3] Publications with ties to presentations at *Doing Autoethnography* include Adams (2012), Crouse-Dick (2013), Doshi (2014), Hopkins (2015), Ivey (2015), Meyer (2015), Pensoneau-Conway, Bolen, Toyosaki, Rudick, and Bolen (2014), Purnell (2014), Smith (2015) and Toyosaki and Pensoneau-Conway (2013).

[4] Scholars in numerous disciplines have used autoethnography including, but not limited to, accounting (Haynes, 2017), nursing (Sealy, 2012), music (Bartlett & Ellis, 2009), criminology (Sollund, 2017), physical cultural studies (Smith, 2017), media studies (Dhoest, 2014), anthropology (Toor, 2017), human resources (Sambrook, 2016), communication (Bochner, 2014), and sport management (Cooper, Grenier, & Macaulay, 2017).

[5] Numerous books (e.g., Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Bochner, 2014; Boylorn, 2017; Denzin, 2013; Ellis, 2004; Spry, 2016), edited collections (e.g., Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Short, Turner, & Grant, 2013; Wyatt & Adams, 2014), and special issues (e.g., Adams & Bolen, 2017; Berry & Clair, 2011; Manning & Adams, 2015) foreground autoethnographic practices.

[6] Qualitative research methods texts with chapters about autoethnography include Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2005, 2011, 2017), Leavy (2014), and Lapan, Quartroli and Reimer (2012).

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ROBIN M. BOYLORN

2. BITTER SWEET(WATER)

Autoethnography, Relational Ethics, and the Possible Perpetuation of Stereotypes

I was honored to give a preconference lecture for the fourth annual Doing Autoethnography conference (2014). At the time, my first book, *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience* (Boylorn, 2013a), had recently won some prestigious awards, and I was anxious to talk about the process of *doing* that "ethnographic autoethnography" (Chris Poulos, personal communication, May 23, 2014). I was also interested in reflecting on the consequences of potential mischaracterization and misappropriation of rural black women, as a result of the work. Because black women are routinely misrecognized as tropes or controlling images, I wrote *Sweetwater* to push against those images. However, the process of doing autoethnography is not limited to our good intentions.

In the lecture, I wanted to hone in on what it meant and might mean to do harmful autoethnography, particularly when you are a member of a marginalized group whose story is offered as generalizable. How is telling a representative story problematic? What happens when our stories can be used against us?

Accordingly, *Sweetwater* was an achingly beautiful tribute to my community, but it could also be read as an indictment of it. In 2016 I began working on a revised edition of *Sweetwater* (2017), which offers a new framing to the stories, a response to critiques and reviews, excerpts from a *Sweetwater* forum, and an opportunity to re-engage how writing *Sweetwater* was a bittersweet experience.

In the following lecture, I wrestled, for the first time publicly, with what it means to write an autoethnography about black women that exposed them, and me, as equally stereotypical and extraordinary. I reckon with the ways that they are implicated by my telling of a story that is ours, not just mine. As a black woman autoethnographer, I am always concerned about the possible perpetuation of stereotypes in my stories, and I struggle with what it means to tell these stories (Boylorn, 2014). The lecture transcribed below engages those questions, introduces my theorization of blackgirl (one word) autoethnography (Boylorn, 2016a), and discusses ethical engagement that rescues secrets while preserving relationships.

* * *

I would like to thank Derek Bolen for the invitation and opportunity to participate in the preconference tonight. I also want to thank each of you who made an effort

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to be here on the eve of the fourth Doing Autoethnography conference. And as I tend to do, I want to recognize those whose work, vision, mentorship, friendship, love, guidance, and support have made my blackgirl autoethnographic life possible. Those folk include colleagues, former teachers, co-writers, editors, mentors, family members, black woman warriors, allies, friends, and my mama, to name a few. In particular I want to acknowledge Bud Goodall, Carolyn Ellis, Art Bochner, Stacy Holman Jones, Tony Adams, Chris Poulos, Mary Weems, Mark Orbe, Marsha Houston, Bryant Alexander, Cynthia Dillard, and the writers in this room, those I have already read and those I will yet read. Thank you for making space for my words and filling this space with your presence.

I stand on the shoulders of giants and my work follows a legacy of folk who didn't have the platform, or the education, or the opportunity, or the microphone that I do. I endeavor to always use my place and space to acknowledge whose I am and where I come from. So to that end I thank my family, my rural roots, and the women of Sweetwater who selflessly and generously shared stories about their lives, helping me re-imagine my own. To the Crunk Feminist Collective, I am grateful to join my voice in a symphony of others doing the work and literally, so many times, putting our lives on the line, our business in the street, our reputations on the forefront, our vulnerabilities in the air, our anger on display, our sadness on the threshold, our weakness on the windowsill, our hearts at the open door. My work would be meaningless without witnesses.

The title of my lecture tonight, *BitterSweet(water): Autoethnography, Relational Ethics and the Possible Perpetuation of Stereotypes,* is based on my first baby, *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience*, a project conceived of 10 years before it was born, based on my thesis *Finding Voice: African American Women in the New American South*, and my dissertation *Southern Black Women: Their Lived Realities*. Sweetwater is a commentary on my autoethnographic life's work, which began with my very first autoethnography, called Working-class Black Girl. I presented it in 2002, at a small regional conference not unlike this. I was terrified to be sharing my story to strangers, none of whom were calling themselves autoethnographers. And, as is oftentimes the case, I was the only blackgirl in the room. My voice and legs shook as I stood in front of a podium, reading words out loud that had only previously been read by my professor. It was an autobiographic confession of my lived life and the ways my race, gender, and class were interconnected, shaping my life and experience. I worried about how I would be seen, and more so, how other blackgirl women would be seen, after I put all of our business in the street. As the saying goes, wherever you go, there you are. And there I was, truthtelling for the first time in public and feeling free.

Audience members thanked me for allowing them access to an experience they were unfamiliar with, for trusting them with my truth, for being my bare boned blackgirl self. The panel moderator, stunned to silence, remarked, "that was a beautiful piece of literature." I didn't know if her response was a compliment or criticism, but I was grateful for the opportunity to share parts of my life that I had always kept secret.

My blackgirlness (one word, no space) has always centered and situated my autoethnographies, even before I knew I was writing autoethnography. I can't tell a story without my blackgirlness coming out, in my language or way with words, in my culturally-centered situatedness, in my consciousness and intentionalities, and in the signals and clues I leave for readers who share my blackgirl standpoint or background. But still, I am protective of my inner blackgirl, and sometimes concerned about the implications of blackgirl storytelling and the ways I inevitably participate in the perpetuation of stereotypes. This was uniquely the case with Sweetwater, because I was not just telling my own story, but generalizing by telling the stories of a community of women, who would invariably come to represent each other and me.

In this process I have realized that intention, however well meaning, does not always dictate reception. I can't protect myself or other black women from the ways my stories might reinforce misguided mischaracterizations of race, gender, and class. But that is one, of a few things, I want to talk through with you tonight. In tonight's lecture, I am going to talk about *Sweetwater*, I'm going to talk about blackgirls (no space) and blackgirl autoethnography, and I'm going to talk about what happens when the stories we tell, tell stories (read: lies) on us.

Sweetwater was my contribution to the academy, in order to create and situate narratives that were largely absent during my own education, and a contribution to my community, a location that was the center of my world and the place of possibility that surrounded my transitions through blackgirlhood. *Sweetwater* is the beginning of an ongoing narrative I continue to tell in individual autoethnographies and will extend in a forthcoming book project, *Blackgirl Blue(s),* where I will more explicitly detail blackgirl autoethnography.

I want/ed *Sweetwater* to push against assumptions about black women. I wanted *Sweetwater* to humanize them, to challenge one-dimensional representations of them, to prove mythic and stereotypical tropes are incapable of capturing our essence, to offer a counter-narrative to fictional accounts of our lives, and to offer stories that were not prescriptive or rigid, but rather nuanced and fluid. That was my intention. I know black women to be brilliant, masterful, resilient, resistant, and brave. But I also know black women to be self-righteous, mean-spirited, indignant, head strong and a little ratchet. If *Sweetwater* was going to represent the lives I witnessed, the life I live(d), the stories I collected, and the themes that emerged, then I was faced with the conundrum of writing a story that was ethnographic and autoethnographic, and that resisted and embodied stereotypes.

In the conclusion of *Sweetwater* I reflected on why I felt an autoethnography about rural black women was important, but also why I felt it was somewhat problematic. In addition to the possibility of participants recognizing each other's stories in the final manuscript (Tolich, 2004), I was also concerned about how they would respond to the representations I developed, namely those that were stereotypical. In order to write a story that was ethically responsible I knew I would have to embrace stereotypes as well as challenge them, especially those parts that I found to be close to the truth. This meant exposing the positive and negative aspects of rural black women's lives. Since I knew that so many of the issues I

would be bringing to light about rural black women were stereotypical, I feared what those declarations of lived experience might mean—for them and for me.

When I endeavored to write *Sweetwater* I committed to writing a story that was accessible to the participants who took part in the research while simultaneously being evocative and provocative for the reader (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015; Goodall, 2000). My intention was to bring voice and intentionality to the representations of rural black women and their lives, which have routinely been marginalized, silenced, and overlooked (McLaurin, 2001). It is/was important to me that readers experience some kind of resonance with the story, the place, and/or the characters. In many ways, as Bud Goodall taught me, that is the call of good ethnographic storytelling (Boylorn, 2016b; Goodall, 2004, 2005).

METHOD

I conducted interviews, transcribed and thematized them, created a chronological timeline, translated the interviews to stories, and modeled my autoethnography accordingly (focusing on and responding to the same themes and topics that emerged from the interviews). I wanted to tell a parallel narrative that represented what it was like to live in Sweetwater in the 20th century, over three generations.

In many ways the storytelling part was somewhat instinctive. I utilized storytelling techniques to create scene and setting, and then situated the narratives I wrote about/around the emergent themes.

I interviewed nine women several times over the course of two years, where I spent summers, holidays, and special occasions in the town (including church services, family gatherings, parties, and Sunday dinners). I compiled over 30 hours of audio taped interviews, but spent several hundred hours observing, discussing, and interacting with women in the community to gather data.

As much as possible I preserved the voices and language of participants, attempting to capture the rhythm of their voices, the cadence of their moods, and the feelings evoked through their re-telling, both in my observations of them and my observations of my observations of them. Each story that is included in *Sweetwater* is intentional and some things were intentionally left out. I want to talk briefly about what I left out and why.

There were three ways I had to intentionally consider ethics when writing *Sweetwater*: 1) relational ethics and ethical considerations when writing about intimate others (Ellis, 2007); 2) ethical considerations when you are a member of a marginalized group and must be mindful about existing representations and stereotypes that you are contributing and/or responding to; and 3) the ethical considerations as an insider of the community being researched.

My specific concerns were related to representations of black women, representations of rurality, personal relationships I had with participants, and my insecurity about disguising the identity of interviewees within the community:

- Representations of black women. I did not want to reinforce existing, racist stereotypes of black women. (I will say more about those stereotypes and why they are so dangerous.)

- Representations of rural places/rurality. There are stereotypes of rural folk being backward, poor, and non-progressive. I struggled with wanting to present rurality as a distinct and unique experience and way of life without creating caricatures of my participants.
- I had personal relationships with participants and other anonymous members of my community who I interviewed and observed. I felt comfortable ensuring external confidentiality for some participants, because people outside the community would not know who they were, but people within the community would be automatically identifiable because of their biological relationship to me.
- The community members I interviewed also had relationships with each other, so while I could ensure outsiders would not recognize them, I could not guarantee internal confidentiality because they would likely recognize each other and the stories shared.

STEREOTYPES OF BLACK WOMEN

Regarding representations and my concern for contributing to and/or reinforcing stereotypical representations of black women, I struggled with the fine line between telling a narrative with verisimilitude and telling a narrative that could be used against rural black women as evidence of their inferiority. To address this, I acknowledge my concerns, I acknowledge the fact that some of these stories, women, and their actions are stereotypical, being explicit about my intention to make them three-dimensional, not one-dimensional characters. I was fully committed to offering authentic representations of them, acknowledging if/when those representations may be problematic, but also explaining that black women don't necessarily see themselves in the same way that outsiders/non-black women see them. Black women often embrace and celebrate the unique aspects of their lives that are characteristically black, stereotype or not.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2009) discusses the ways Black women are generally pigeon-holed according to any one or combination of specific stereotypes, including but not limited to the mammy, matriarch, jezebel, sapphire, and Black lady. Today these stereotypes include "educated bitches" or "bad Black mothers." These stereotypes, sometimes based on characters, are common "controlling images" (Collins, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011) used to represent black womanhood.

The mammy stereotype conjures images of slavery and the Black woman. She often cared for White children at the expense of her own. This character is rhetorically constructed as big bodied, intimidating, matronly, asexual, and nurturing. In contrast, the matriarch character is situated as a failed mammy because of her rejection of willing subjugation. The matriarch is often blamed for the plights of the Black family and community. Matriarchs are seen as "overly aggressive, unfeminine women" who "allegedly emasculate their lovers and husbands" because of her place as head of the household (Collins, 2009, p. 83).

The historical Jezebel image is related to Black women's presumed hypersexuality and lack of sexual agency during slavery. Jezebel was seen as a temptress and seductress whose indiscriminate sexual appetite condoned slave-master rape (Yarbrough & Bennett, 1999). Modern representations of the Jezebel are the hoochie and welfare queen (Collins, 2009). These representations express a deviant female sexuality wherein Black women have insatiable sexual appetites. Promiscuity and fertility are dominant traits of the Jezebel.

The Sapphire image combines stereotypes of the sassy mammy and the angry Black woman. The Sapphire is considered rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing (Bell-Scott, 2015; Boylorn, 2014). She is an antagonizing verbal emasculator who continuously berates and nags Black men. She is both offensive and easily offended, and aggressively defends herself or speaks her mind. Sapphire is often represented as uneducated and unsophisticated.

The Black lady is a class-specific image of the "middle-class professional Black woman" (Collins, 2009, p. 88) who is independently successful and educated. This stereotype is a unique mix of the modern mammy and the matriarch due to her work ethic and dedication to work above family. The Black lady's obsession with her own success is usually at the expense of her domestic pursuits. Often she is unmarried and childless.

Generally these black woman stereotypes dictate how black women are characterized and read (Collins, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011). The women in *Sweetwater* can be read as the embodiment of any number of these stereotypes at different points of their lives. While the women I interviewed may not be familiar with the theoretical implications of the mammy, matriarch, Jezebel, Sapphire and black lady, they are aware of the descriptions and definitions associated with the characters, and therefore themselves, and would respond to them with both resistance and acceptance.

In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*, Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) discusses a post-World War II cognitive psychology research experiment she refers to as the "crooked room" to explain how black women's perceptions and presentations are sometimes consistent with problematic stereotypes. In the experiment, individuals were placed in a crooked room and asked to align themselves vertically. Linking the findings to black women's perception Harris-Perry explains,

> When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion. (p. 29)

This misperception explains why many times black women, consciously and unconsciously, knowingly and unknowingly reinforce stereotypes through their experiences and life choices. In many ways the stereotypes box them into their circumstances, which are always intersectional, and then punish them for not having the means to find a way out.

ETHICAL STRATEGIES

The other two ethical concerns, around my relationships with others (in my family and community) and their relationships with each other, are linked to relational ethics. I had to act in a manner that protected and prioritized interpersonal relationships. While I was confident I could keep participants from being recognizable outside of the community, I was less sure I could protect their anonymity within the community, especially when there was some overlap between the stories being told and/or the stories that were well known in the community or family. I did not want to compromise my relationships so that I would not be able to go back home, nor did I want the women I interviewed to experience dis-ease in the community they still resided in. I used two specific strategies to help ensure anonymity among participants: 1) I collapsed characters so that their likeness, actions, and experiences would be indistinguishable; and 2) I used pseudonyms and fictionalization, both as a tactic of storytelling and in an effort to disguise the lives and experiences of some participants.

INSIDER ETHICS

Still, there were insider ethics beyond me writing about black women as a black woman. As a member of the community (an insider) I had access to and memories of stories that may not have been shared through interview and archival research. If/when I decided to tell a story I knew as a former community member, I had to think about whether or not the person implicated in the story would be comfortable with me sharing it. Although I had no way of knowing if their exclusion had been intentional or circumstantial, I had to decide which stories and/or details to keep and which to leave out. I made this determination on a case-by-case basis.

A second ethical dilemma I faced was linked to my ability to "pass" in the space. I was a researcher, but most everyone recognized me as just Robin, Bettina's daughter, Gert's granddaughter. There were times when I was acting as a "researcher" but being seen and interacted with as a family or community member. This means that some things may have been shared with me in confidence or "off the record" when I was recording them as data. This is/was especially true when as a researcher I interacted with participants informally (without tape recording). Again, this revelation came to me post-data compilation, so I wasn't as conscious of the dualism while I was conducting the research and could not therefore confirm their understanding that I was never not "researching."

A third ethical dilemma dealt with inner-intersectionality and absences. In other words, who was not being outwardly represented in the community and narratives and why. So, for example, while it was not uncommon for black women in the story to be genderqueer in their behaviors and presentations, masculinity being common in working-class communities, there was an absence of mention of lesbians, transwomen, women with disabilities not attributed to their age, women who were non-Christian, etc. I felt that their invisibility was not indicative of their absence, but rather the ways they are not mentioned or remembered because they