Pushing Beyond Positionalities and Through "Failures" in Qualitative Organizational Communication: Experiences and Lessons on Identities in Ethnographic Praxis

Peter R. Jensen[1] iD, Joëlle Cruz[2],
Elizabeth K. Eger[3], Jenna N. Hanchey[4],
Angela N. Gist-Mackey[5] iD, Kristina Ruiz-Mesa[6],
and Astrid Villamil[7]

Following the discursive turn, qualitative scholars have played a significant role in organizational communication. In her methodological survey, Stephens (2017) found that approximately two thirds of the articles published from 2001 to 2015 in *Management Communication Quarterly* (*MCQ*) used at least

[1]The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA
[2]University of Colorado Boulder, CO, USA
[3]Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, USA
[4]University of Nevada, Reno, NV, USA
[5]The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA
[6]California State University Los Angeles, LA, USA
[7]University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

Corresponding Author:
Peter R. Jensen, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Alabama, 203
Reese Phifer, 901 University Blvd, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0166, USA.
Email: Peter.Jensen@Ua.edu

some qualitative research methods. Despite this prevalence of qualitative research in the flagship organizational communication journal, discussions about qualitative methodologies and their challenges are rare. Furthermore, we seldom read about the "backstage" of practicing qualitative research (Tracy, Eger, Huffman, Malvini Redden, & Scarduzio, 2014), particularly in *MCQ*. This forum responds to the need for scholarship that looks behind the scenes on qualitative organizational research, specifically on organizational ethnography and the importance of researcher identity in such projects.

Organizational ethnography involves long-term researcher immersion in (and with) organizational field site(s) and culture(s) and often employs multiple qualitative methods including participant observation, textual analysis, and interviews to craft rich and nuanced accounts of organizational communication. In recent years, the practice of organizational ethnography has spanned contexts and organizational types, ranging from corporations (Wieland, 2010) to interorganizational cooperation (Barley, 2015), nonprofit organizing (Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015), and indigenous organizing (Cruz, 2017). Although researcher positionality statements are becoming more common in organizational communication research (e.g., Cruz, 2017; Herrmann, 2018; James & Zoller, 2018), their bounded nature usually falls short of revealing the complex and circuitous ways in which researcher identity/ies inform all aspects research.

In this forum, we specifically explore the transversal issues of an ethnographer's identity/ies across organizational contexts, including homeless shelters, employment agencies, African street markets and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), exiled Cuban communities, education programs, and large corporations. By engaging these topics from our respective positionings, we explore how fieldwork contexts interact with social identity/ies, ambivalently facilitating and hindering the research process.

Our work offers an important methodological contribution to enrich discussions of identity in organizational ethnography praxis. We grapple with and analyze the negotiation of firsthand accounts, illuminating how social identities not only are salient while conducting fieldwork but also shift and change over context and time, bringing forth meaningful theoretical and methodological nuances. Negotiating our own identities with participants creates the potential for more relevant and reflexive insights that can enrich organizational communication inquiry. Through examining such negotiations and taking researcher identity as a central component of research processes, we center an aspect of ethnographic research that is largely elided in publishing.

This forum proceeds in two distinct parts. First, each author presents vignettes of their experiences reflecting on the role of their identity/ies in their ethnographic research. Second, drawing from our mutual experiences,

we discuss four lessons for researchers and practitioners to consider how to (a) move beyond traditional positionality statements to incorporate changing contexts and feelings; (b) be attentive to communication when negotiating identities in context; (c) tread with caution, care, and courage; and (d) reframe failure as productive.

Researcher Vignettes

Building Trust and Managing Rejection: Researcher Identity and Access in For-Profit Organizations

Astrid Villamil

I am a Latina critical organizational scholar who researches diversity and inclusion processes in organizations. I approached the chief diversity officer (CDO) of a large private Midwestern corporation after seeing their diversity initiatives and the valuable role of their employee resource groups (ERGs). My goal was to investigate the relatively unexplored communication dynamics of ERGs (Douglas, 2008). I followed this initial contact with carefully crafted emails grounded in intentionality and clarity.

In building a relationship with the CDO, I was intentional in three ways. First, I highlighted the range and depth of the organization's diversity efforts. Second, I argued that researching the ERGs would be a unique, beneficial opportunity to advance the organization's diversity and inclusion goals. Third, I used my cultural identity and academic credentials to position myself as a curious rather than critical organizational diversity theorizer, hoping to dissipate any suspicion or apprehension. In addition, I deployed two clear messages: I concretely outlined my research goals and articulated a description of the research process and tangible outcomes for the organization. Ultimately, I crafted a sales pitch that aimed to present myself as an ideal and trustworthy candidate.

After months of corresponding and providing clarifications, the decision makers remained apprehensive about the nature of my research inquiry. Uncertainty about three possible unintended outcomes of my research project lingered. First, they had uncertainty about a potential breach of confidentiality that could lead to a public relations (PR) scandal or unwanted public attention for the organization. Second, decision makers wanted to avoid the possibility of finding unanticipated organizational flaws under the scrutiny of my research. Finally, organizational leaders could not visualize my role as a researcher and remained unable to see me as an amicable agent instead of a

suspicious threat. For example, in one of the email exchanges, the CDO asked, "So is this [research] for a paper you'll publish? Is it to better your expertise in this field? and who and how will it be shared outside of [organization]?" I provided an itemized response addressing each concern and looking to lower uncertainty levels by explaining the nature of academic publishing. In another email, I stated, "The audience of these academic journals is highly specialized—my readers would be a core group of academics who study communication processes in organizational settings," and I also attached a sample academic article pdf. I highlighted paragraphs showcasing the framing and language used to ensure the privacy of participants and organizations as research sites.

Suddenly, when the path to my research plan seemed promising and there was a tentative start date set, the CDO left the company. His exit meant the end of my only entry point to the organization and a definite research halt. I tried to revert the decision and politely advocated with the CDO before he left for the viability of the research, but it led to no change; after all, the organizational members had felt continuous trepidation about making the organization available for academic inquiry. My vignette reveals how failure and externally interrupted research attempts in organizational communication should be more carefully examined as they might be more normal than the publication outlets show. By centering researcher identity, and openly discussing access failure and interrupted research, organizational communication scholars can produce more productive ways to gain research access to an organization.

Making Sense of "Peter the Intern"

Peter R. Jensen

It's a little after 9 a.m. on my third day of observations, and I'm sitting across a large, well-worn desk from Annie, the program director for Midwest Safe Family (MSF), a shelter for individuals experiencing homelessness. After some idle chit-chat about vegetarian meals (I had just shared my recipe for sweet potato tacos), Annie, a tall, always well-dressed Black woman abruptly declares,

> Now Peter, I don't know, I don't know what to do with you . . . if you were a social work intern I could get you doing some cases . . . if you were a counseling intern I could get you doing some cases . . . but I have to be honest I just don't know what to do with you.

At that point, I agreed with her, as I largely did not know where I, as a white male researcher in a predominantly Black and female organization, fit in.

During my initial meeting to discuss my research with MSF administrators, I had mentioned a desire to volunteer as I had during previous projects (e.g., Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015), and the suggestion had been met with enthusiasm. However, I soon found that volunteers played little role in the daily life of MSF, and as a result, I felt adrift. Annie tried to find things for me to do, but ultimately, I was simply given the empty intern's office and left to my own devices. Without a volunteer position to guide me, I spent my first 2 days at the shelter wandering the building, making notes about the wall decorations, copying documents, and sitting in the entryway as the clients came and left, trying and failing to strike up conversations with the receptionist and clients as they came and went.

So, when Annie said that she was similarly at a loss, I suggested the only solution I had come up with during the previous weekend of contemplation: I asked for opportunities to shadow or to sit in on meetings. She immediately sent me downstairs to join the daily group meeting that was starting. Running down to the office, I was greeted by a short Black woman in her 50s named Janet. She asked me whether I'm "the intern," and I responded that I am a researcher. She gave a noncommittal "oh," and we headed to the focus group meeting, where she proceeded to introduce me (not for the last time) as "Peter the intern."

Despite my best intentions and constant refutations of the title, I did let myself become an intern in many ways. I had a staff sign-in sheet, a box for mail in the front office, and continued to make use of the intern's office for interviews or to gather my thoughts. Allowing myself to inhabit that discursive space provided both me and the staff and administrators at MSF a script to follow. Even though I wasn't a "social work" or "counseling" intern, new doors were opened to me through the intern identity label. I was able to sit in on case management meetings, I shadowed Janet as she worked with the clients at the shelter, and I was given "lessons" on how the shelter worked.

I also believe that their willingness to teach carried over when I engaged in more overtly research-oriented activities, most specifically interviews with staff. With relationships facilitated by my "Peter the intern" alter ego, I learned the "real story" about the compromises that organizations like MSF made to continue shelter operations. Likewise, the staff at the shelter sought to disclose to me what it was "really" like working at the shelter and the struggles they experienced. Although many of the staff members revealed sympathetic feelings toward the women with whom they worked, many also revealed an underlying distrust of their clients.

However, although "being" an intern at MSF helped me relate with the staff, it obscured other sources of data. My role as an intern aligned me with staff and their interests and, as a result, facilitated an, at best, distant relationship with the homeless women at the shelter. The interviews I was able to secure with clients were guarded affairs, and despite my best efforts, I left the interviews certain that the homeless women had revealed little of their genuine concerns about life at MSF through their carefully worded, short answers. What this meant was that although I had garnered insight into why MSF organized around homelessness the way it did, I lacked an understanding of the consequences of those organizing practices.

"I'm So Happy You're Black . . .": Racialized Disclosure During Ethnographic Fieldwork

Angela N. Gist-Mackey

> You have to learn who you are as a fieldworker, as a writer, and as a self. And you have to learn how—and where—those activities are meaningfully connected. (H. L. "Buddy" Goodall, 2000, p. 7)

Vignette 1: Identity convergence. In July 2011, I was working on a research team using interviews and photovoice to explore unemployment (Dougherty, Schraedley, Gist-Mackey, & Wickert, 2018). I rescheduled an interview twice with Tina, a 53-year-old African American woman who formerly worked as cleaning staff due to Tina's transportation issues. She lived in the housing projects, and there were no convenient places to meet. Plus, the temperature was 85° and Tina struggled with health problems, so walking in the heat was not an option. I offered to interview her in her home. I'd never been to "the projects" before. Even as a *poor* graduate student, I had the classed privilege of owning a vehicle to transport myself. When I arrived, Tina opened the door smiling and said "Hi, I'm so happy you're Black. I was uncomfortable 'cause I thought I'd have a White woman in my home." Tina's explicit comments led me to believe identity convergence in our shared race positively influenced data collection.

In August 2013, I was working on my dissertation, a critical ethnography, of two unemployment support organizations (Gist-Mackey, 2018). Reminiscent to my experience above, a participant disclosed she did not have a car, so she would have to cancel our interview. I offered to come to her home. Cherry Pie was a 67-year-old Black woman who previously worked in

data entry. We had an in-depth conversation, discussing societal issues Black people face in the United States regarding employment discrimination. Cherry Pie often referred to "us, Black people." After the interview ended, Cherry Pie said, "Over the phone, you know, I thought you were White." She laughed, then said, "It was nice to meet you."

Tina and Cherry Pie's assumption of my racial identity as White were based on telephone conversations, and specifically my vocal performance of identity using Standard English Vernacular. They were relieved to "see" me for who I was, which prompted authentic interactions in their homes. My economic capital as a car owner allowed me to access to low-income participants, and our convergence of identities influenced the interviews, leading to richer data because of who we were together: Black women.

Vignette 2: Identity divergence. Horseman was the chair of the entrepreneurship committee at Executive Career Transitions, a white-collar unemployment organization, one of my two dissertation field sites. I was scheduled to interview him after a networking group meeting in August 2013. I arrived at a private athletic club for the networking meeting. I observed the parking lot as Goodall (1994) recommends, noting the difference between my Toyota Corolla and the Range Rovers, Mercedes Benzes, and Jaguars. I walked in and told an employee, "I'm looking for Regional Networking Group." She escorted me to the room and peered inside, then looked at me. She looked inside again and then looked at me and said "Are you *sure* this is the group you're meeting?" I noticed the demographic difference between the group of middle-aged, upper-middle-class White men and me. I made eye contact with Horseman, who waved me in.

This was an "invitation only" group where established entrepreneurs invited select novice entrepreneurs to present business plans. The first presenter introduced his firm, which offered human resource and payroll services to private practices. In closing, he requested names of private practice owners. Members pulled out their smartphones and gave him contact information for their personal doctors, lawyers, dentists, and so on. At the end of the meeting, the man sitting next to me told me he wanted to know more about the unemployment of White men. He said no one was researching that, and it would be a great area for me to study. I nodded in disbelief, knowing unemployment statistics for White men were favorable when compared with most other demographic groups. His marking race implied my marginalized identities were unimportant in this homogeneous room of privileged race–gendered–classed identities.

In this White, masculine, upper-class space, my identities were rendered insignificant; these members dominated the space. This example showed how insular networking systematically hoarded economic, cultural, and social capital via "invitation-only" boundary work. I cannot fully articulate the way my combined race–gender–class identities influenced data collection with these participants, as they never mentioned my identities. Social norms eschew racism/sexism, so such ideologies manifest more subtly (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Yet, it would be naïve to claim identity divergence did not influence the research because identity politics are inherent to research.

Becoming American, White, and Chinese in the Field

Joëlle Cruz

Citizenship played an important role in interactions during my organizational ethnography of a food market in Monrovia, Liberia. I studied market women's susu groups, which are informal indigenous credit associations (Cruz, 2017). My participants did not perceive me as African despite my best efforts at convincing them that I was Ivorian on my mother's side. At the beginning of fieldwork, I was often viewed as "American," a perception reinforced by the English I spoke, my mannerisms, and my perceived softness and privilege. The women tried to shield me from "rogues" or thieves on the rare occasion I accompanied them to Gobachop, one of the biggest food markets for suppliers, that has a treacherous reputation. Citizenship was compounded by race, as I was called "White" or "Chinese woman" inside and outside the market. The term "Chinese" ties to the framing of Chinese citizens as a powerful socioeconomic group in postconflict Liberia. Toward the end of fieldwork, my citizenship and race shifted as I came to be associated with Africaness and Blackness a bit more. Despite this shift, I remained generally suspect to participants. In the following vignettes, I relate key interactional moments during which tensions around citizenship, race, and ethnicity coalesced.

Vignette 1. The rain had stopped, and I went back to my friend Kumba's market stall. She declared that she was now going to interview me, signaling a shift in my positionality from researcher to participant. She had told another market woman, Sisia, that she had the special gift of finding out information from people. She asked me, "Who is sponsoring you?" She added that I wasn't married, didn't have a boyfriend, or any man paying anything for me, which I acknowledged as correct. Here, Kumba was pointing at my independence as an

unattached young woman. I told her that I did it all by myself, receiving no help from my parents. I was teaching two classes in exchange for a tuition rebate and a small salary to "eat." She also asked me whether I would date someone who was Black, to which I said yes. I mentioned that everybody in the United States referred to me as Black and that no one noticed I was light skinned like she did. She concluded, "you're Black American then." I said "no," indicating that I didn't have American citizenship. Previously, when Kumba had inquired whether I ate very spicy food, I had shared that my mother was Ivorian. Sisia, who had gone away momentarily, returned to Kumba's stall and received a detailed report of my "interview." Kumba seemed to side with me at last, mentioning that I was African. She described how I left Africa to study in the United States and had a scholarship.

Vignette 2. I visited Lapu at her stall, and she asked me about life in America. Another one of her friends, who sold goods next to us, joined the conversation. Lapu asked me whether it was true that people bought clothes in America and discarded them just a few days later. I said that it wasn't the case, and they could discard them a few months after. Lapu also said that Americans only wore dongafle (used clothes) and not African clothing. She added that there were no African clothes in the United States. She also asked whether it was true that people would throw away their cars the very same day they bought them, to which I replied "no." She also wanted to know whether people could walk in the streets wearing no underclothes. I responded that most people wore underclothes. Next were questions about the plane. Lapu inquired about the price of a round trip plane ticket to the United States, and I told her it cost around US$2,000. She said that she could buy a house for that price in Liberia. She also asked whether the plane could stop and come down on the ground when people wanted to use the bathroom.

Around 11:40 a.m., I told Lapu that I was going to "get something small to eat" and left. When I returned, Lapu and her neighbor engaged in a conversation about White people always being on time in contrast to Black people. Lapu used me as an example and said the following, "See the woman here, she said she was going away for 20 minutes, and she came back exactly when she said she would." Lapu later told me that one of the customers had asked whether I were Kumba's daughter. Lapu wondered how the woman could even believe that fact because Kumba was Black and I was "bright." As I was playing with my hair, she asked me whether it was real. She mentioned that she thought it was a weave, adding how she believed I really liked this weave during my time in the market (where I wore my natural hair throughout my fieldwork). She asked who had the soft hair in my family, and I said that it was my dad.

Using Methodological Flexibility to Disrupt Normativity in the Field

Elizabeth K. Eger

During my doctoral program, I worked on a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant for COMPUGIRLS (CG), a social justice-based computing program for girls of color (age = 12-18 years) to become technologists in their communities and pursue future tech education and careers. Organizations like CG can be impactful in the United States where technology is characterized by whiteness, heteronormativity, and masculinity, and occupational segregation excludes women of color disproportionately. For example, Latinas and Black women occupy only 1% and 3% of technology jobs (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015), and girls of color face barriers beginning in K-12 education, families, media, and more (Ashcraft, Eger, & Friend, 2012). My CG research included a 2-year ethnography of two Denver cohorts, including 160 hours of participant observation with Catherine Ashcraft, a co–principal investigator (PI). As a White, cisgender woman focused on difference in my research, I valued CG's social justice organizing. However, even in inclusive organizations like CG, inequities and barriers inevitably surface and require reflexivity to continue researching ethically.

In a published essay examining CG, my colleagues and I presented a vignette where one cohort experienced challenges during a virtual world assignment (Ashcraft, Eger, & Scott, 2017). Missing is the backstory of how on-the-spot methodological flexibility enabled us to challenge exclusion stemming from our positionalities: the girls as young women of color participants and me as a White, intersectional feminist, critical ethnographer. Herein, I illustrate how I responded to participants' intersectional critiques with my methodological toolbelt.

In the final "VWorld" course, girls designed their own virtual world social justice projects. However, their first assignment to create VWorld avatars automatically placed the girls into bodies of a default cisgender woman avatar named "sexy female" who was thin, with large breasts, white skin, and straight hair (see Ashcraft et al., 2017). Layla (African American, age 12) immediately replied, "Woah, they put us in some tight clothes!" As the girls began to change the avatar's features, she added, "That's weird, they make you pick your breast size." The girls also encountered a system glitch where they could not change the pigment of their skin away from a white norm, and VWorld lacked programming for hair options besides stereotypically white hair. While the CG teacher, Claire, emailed VWorld for programming changes, I noticed the frustration building in the room, which became

especially palpable because Claire and I were White cisgender women. We shared an experience of marginalization with the girls from the restrictive, normative, hyperthin, and sexualized feminine avatars. However, Claire and I occupied privileged positions because our skin and hair were "default." Noticing the girls' anger and disappointment at the end of class, I asked whether they would like to talk more in a future focus group. Focus groups were not a part of the study design, but I believed we needed space to unpack the cisgender femininity and racial stereotypes the girls experienced.

Adding the focus groups yielded important critiques of the whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity of the VWorld program *meant to* inspire the girls. The girls immediately recognized the "sexy female" avatar was not for their benefit as women in the game but instead for a male spectator. Layla explained, "I don't think it would have been attractive to any guy who came," and other girls believed the default body was what women are "expected to have," sparking a conversation on beauty and surgical modification. They also critiqued how the default hair and skin was for White people, thereby voicing their embodied experiences, which Claire and I could only observe. Layla added, "I think at the beginning they should have like an option like about the skin color that you want." Naveah (Latina and African American, age 13) echoed Layla, "Cause like they're basically telling you, you can't choose any other skin color but white."

After two focus groups, we workshopped five email drafts to VWorld. The letters explained the girls' experiences, "One of us wanted curly hair, another nappy hair, and another braids, and none of us could easily find . . . options for all types of hair and ethnic backgrounds." They also offered technological solutions like using "similar technology to the Nintendo 3DS . . . [to] make your avatar immediately look like you based on the photo capture." I later argued that this enabled the girls to become technosocial change agents challenging injustice via technology (see Ashcraft et al., 2017), even when VWorld failed to respond to our letter.

Importantly, adding focus groups and drafting an intervention letter required my responding immediately to what I perceived to be a crisis in both the CG curricula and in my research. Due to postpositivist norms, many organizational researchers may have ignored the opportunity to not "bias" data with intervention. Instead, my exemplar reveals how making a critical methodological intervention with my participants led to not only a turning-point experience that the girls lauded later but also richer, more impactful research.

Organizational scholars can intervene in moments of vulnerability and exclusion in their research to recenter inclusivity. Methodological interventions

become even more significant when we observe research inequities in relation to identities where we occupy privilege. Intervening with VWorld was paramount, because to simply watch the girls contend with avatar standards that erase their identities would uphold the whiteness, heteronormativity, and patriarchy that I work to dismantle in my research. Instead, creating space to critique together and support the girls' leadership of their own intervention became a research imperative. Thus, we must consider the following: How can we use methodological flexibility to disrupt inequity?

Sharing Gender, Culture, and Language With Female Cuban Political Exiles

Kristina Ruiz-Mesa

When researching "your community," sharing culture, gender, language, and experiences can be both beneficial and detrimental to a researcher. I offer my reflection as a Cuban American/Puerto Rican researcher who participated in an oral history project with Cuban women who came to the United States as political exiles between 1959 and 2009. The project explored narratives of exile, race, gender, work, social class, and community through oral history accounts from various exile communities in Miami, Florida. The participants shared about the loss of their homes, families, communities, businesses, and careers during and after the Cuban Revolution, and discussed their (re)integration into the workplace upon their arrival in the United States. I highlight how complex intersectional identities can create instant connections with participants and potential struggles for a researcher. Here, I provide a brief excerpt from one of the oral history sessions, discuss the emotional labor of doing ethnographic work as an insider, and suggest caution for organizational scholars conducting research in a community that has experienced trauma.

"Bueno . . . ya tú sabes!"[1] *Mila said in a raspy Cuban accent accompanied by a sarcastic laugh and eye roll as she told the story of how she lost her home, her business, and her country. As we sat on pale blue plastic-covered chairs, with the sweet aroma of Cuban café still lingering in the kitchen air, I intently listened as Mila told me of love, loss, and perseverance. She shared stories of armed Cuban guards coming into the business that she and her father built, knocking stock off of the shelves, and yelling for Mila to leave or face the consequences. At 88 years old, Mila was vocal about her life being closer to the end of the story than the beginning, and yet the vivid details and her emotive facial expressions made it feel as though I was there standing*

scared with her behind the counter of her corner pharmacy in the outskirts of Havana watching men with guns callously destroy the business she painstakingly built.

As I sat and listened to Mila, her almost cavalier approach was a sentiment shared across the faces of the more than 20 Cuban women I had the privilege of interviewing over the last 4 years of collecting oral histories. Each time I asked about their lives, the women smiled, laughed, or simply smirked as if I heard a story like theirs 1,000 times. To participants, stories of struggle, loss, pain, and resilience were ubiquitous in exiled Cuban communities. After the Cuban Revolution, hundreds of thousands of Cubans worked to build some semblance of normalcy in the United States and soon learned that their new normal would last a lifetime.

Hearing the oral histories of the Cuban women, and sharing in gendered experiences, cultural practices, and a distinctively Cuban Spanish accent brought an unearned trust and sense of kinship. Having never met most of the women before our oral history session, I was astonished and humbled that they would share such intimate details of their life. My ethnicity, gender, and ability to perform communicative practices unique to this population garnered me access to stories that would be otherwise nearly impossible to collect. Throughout oral history sessions, I began feeling guilt and mounting pressure because of the suffering they had endured. My participants generously shared their oral histories, and I was tasked with the responsibility to precisely and painstakingly translate (from Spanish or Spanglish to English) their expressions and stories and find outlets to amplify their collective voices.

Along with the responsibility and pressure, there was also lingering emotional labor that stemmed from listening to horrific experiences while being culturally expected to maintain a composed appearance. Cuban women, particularly those who were educated and raised in strict Catholic homes, were disciplined to maintain an "educated manner." In Spanish, this is "educada," which refers to someone who knows how to act appropriately in public. Regardless of social class, upbringing, education, or occupation, the participants expected that I listen attentively, provide nonverbal feedback through intense eye contact and head nodding, and maintain a professional demeanor as an educated Cuban American woman. Out of respect for the participants, I acted as a perfect Cubanita[2] and dressed conservatively, spoke formally, laughed politely, and maintained emotional control. My embodiment of expected verbal and nonverbal practices and strict adherence to traditional communication norms provided a safe space for participants. They could share intimate and painful details with someone who recognized and appreciated their cultural norms.

My promise to each participant was to tell as many people as would listen about their struggles and victories and how they fought for their homes, work, families, and their island nation. This unapologetic positionality as a researcher comes from a critical understanding of oppression and privilege and respect for the participants' experiences. When writing about this project, it was challenging to capture their varying emotions, trauma, and gendered and racialized experiences. For organizational scholars, attention to participant voice, researcher performance, and positionality become especially vital when conducting research in tightknit communities who have experienced trauma and where trust is paramount. Researchers should be cautious of unearned connections and remain mindful of the research purpose.

On Transcription and Time Travel

Jenna Hanchey

Time travel: Part 1. I knew what was coming, and there was nothing I could do about it. A year-and-a-half after the interaction took place, I_1 listened to the audio recording and knew exactly what I_0[3] was going to ask that high school student. I_1 also knew what followed: a defensive atmosphere in the room, anger at probing questions, and walls quickly erected around the students' conceptualizations of their own intercultural and interracial relations.

"No, no, no, don't say it! Ughhhhhhhhhhh." I_1 moaned as I_0 began to say, "Can I ask you a question?" words that would trigger subjective defenses in the reflection session I_0 was helping to lead. I_1 took off my headphones and threw them onto my desk in frustration.

I_1 was transcribing the first of four reflection sessions I_0 assisted in facilitating with a high school student group on a "service and leadership" trip in Tanzania. The students were predominantly White, upper-class teenagers from all over the United States. They spent the last week of their trip at the NGO where I_0 was conducting my dissertation research. Until this point, the students were teaching English in Tanzanian schools and developed undisturbed—and problematic—notions of how they were bringing necessary help to those in need.

I_0 was asked to cofacilitate reflection sessions by the U.S. American manager of the NGO. I_0 had been living on the NGO grounds for weeks, engaging in participatory anticolonial research with the Tanzanian organizational staff and Western managers. That is, while I_0 was analyzing the politics of relations between managers, staff, volunteers, donors, and the local community, I_0 was also working with organizational staff to decolonize them. For the most part,

this had gone well. But I_0 had not reckoned with how difficult it can be to catalyze reflexivity in high school student volunteers. I_1 had to listen, every painful step of the way, as I_0 made the volunteers less reflexive, rather than more.

As I_2 wrote this essay, the frustrating experience with transcription helped me understand how identity categories are not enough to politically engage with reflexivity. Across time, I_{0-2} have been a White, U.S. American cis woman of steady employment. But although these categories remain relatively stable, I am part of a continual reconstitution of their meaning—and my own—through subjective relational processes that hold political import.

Time travel: Part 2. Let me try to witness again: I_0 attempted to inspire reflection with high school students and failed. But why was I_1 so uncomfortable with my failure that I_1 could not even face typing my statements onto the page? As I wrote elsewhere (Hanchey, 2018), a colleague astutely pointed out that the reason I_0 pushed the students so hard was to prove my own reflexive skill. If I could get them to understand their position as neocolonial, White-savior voluntourists, then it would prove that I_{0-2} had noticed all the political aspects of my own neocolonial relations and taken them into account. Which, of course, I had not.

I_2 began to realize that my extreme discomfort with listening to myself speak emerged from my inability to face my own neocolonialism as a researcher. Transcribing the audio recordings of my reflection sessions, I_1 was faced with the reality that I *am* these students—and I failed to notice it. I_1 paced about the room in agitation to avoid facing that I_{0-2} am also a White savior, using fantasies of doing good to foreclose understanding of my own racialized and neocolonial presence.

I hope I_n am not done throwing down my headphones, pacing about the room in agitation at myself, and covering my ears in a futile attempt not to hear what I_{n-1} said. The greater mistake would be if I_n did not recognize my own agitation, did not pay attention to my subjective temper tantrums—if covering my ears were an end, rather than a beginning. I_n have made, am making, will make mistakes; the worst mistake would be cultivating an ability to ignore them.

Lessons From the Field

In our vignettes above, we discussed our researcher identity/ies in diverse stages of ethnographic praxis. We explored how our identity/ies fostered connections and understanding, prompted new insights, and created unforeseen barriers and challenges. We now reveal four lessons for organizational

ethnographers from our collective analysis and discussion of individual reflections. We encourage ethnographers to reflect on how they can (a) move beyond positionality in writing to incorporate changing contexts and feelings; (b) be attentive to communication when negotiating identities in context; (c) tread with caution, care, and courage; and (d) reframe failure as productive. To honor our own backstage processes, we first wrote this section through individual responses to driving questions from our vignettes and added further backstage details to our vignettes. After editorial feedback about redundancies, we rewrote our individual reflections into new collective lessons for our readers.

Move Beyond Positionality in Writing to Incorporate Changing Contexts and Feelings

Our first lesson is that thinking in terms of positionality cannot capture the complexity of power in ethnographic research. Identities are not fixed and constant but rather contextual products of the researcher's relations. In this section, we move beyond static categories to demonstrate the shifting dynamics of identity and intensity of feelings. The authors recognize that this move requires conceptualizing the writing process in ways that move beyond masculine, White, Western norms to incorporate alternative forms, feelings, and embodied knowledge.

A common thread from Cruz, Hanchey, and Gist-Mackey's vignettes is the fluidity of identity categories, negotiated in situ, across space and time, and at all stages of the ethnographic endeavor. For example, Gist-Mackey's vignettes highlight a shift of the category "race" as her African American participants initially believed she was White on the phone and were pleasantly surprised to find out that she was Black. Likewise, citizenship and race shifted for Cruz; she was alternately labeled White, Chinese, American, Black American, and African, depending on context. This fluidity complicates clear-cut ideas of data analysis, positionality, writing as a process, and data presentation.

Hanchey's ruminations on reflexivity take fluidity a step further, asking that researchers consider the impacts of their shifting subjectivities in and beyond categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and nation and across time. Rather than interrogating fixed identities, Hanchey asks how our research activities present new politics of relation to examine. In explicating a politics of relation, Carrillo Rowe (2008) examined how, "The meaning of self is never individual, but a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection" (p. 25). The authors of this forum, thus, take up

reflexivity as an iterative process, never fully achieved or fully closed, as our selves-in-relation are constantly changing.

Importantly, thinking of reflexivity as an iterative process means that it does not stop in the field, but continues into our processes of analysis and writing. Cruz notes writing limitations in organizational communication, which favor a bounded organizational design (Ganesh, 2014) when discussing one's positionality. In doing so, the processual and coconstructed nature of subjectivities is erased. To some extent, Cruz essentialized her own identity categories (e.g., woman, African) while speaking to her positionality. At the same time, naming these categories served a political purpose to align herself with market women. By claiming "African," Cruz sought to anchor her commitment to representing African women accurately. For Hanchey as a White Western woman, recognizing her fluidity is integral to challenging relations of power. However, for Cruz, the opposite can also be true—that what Spivak (1988) calls "strategic essentialism" provides a necessary point of reflection as well.

The tensions between essentialism and fluidity reflect the need for different forms of writing to deconstruct the masculine, White Western hegemony of academic form (Behar, 1997). Conversations and forums, such as Cruz, McDonald, Broadfoot, Chuang, and Ganesh (2018), are one powerful means to disrupt norms of rationality, reason, proclaimed success, linear flow, and tightly closed arguments and conclusions. We encourage organizational ethnographers to explore writing techniques that may help rethink the politics of subjective relations in fieldwork in decolonial and antiracist ways.

In this vein, our vignettes demonstrate the importance of considering feelings and embodiment throughout the process of writing. Although many ethnographers examine felt and embodied experience in the field, it is rarely scrutinized in the writing process. Gist-Mackey recounts that when analyzing, writing, and presenting the lived experiences of marginalized populations, she is simultaneously analyzing an extension of her own story rife with power disparity, struggle, discrimination, and resilience. Similarly, Ruiz-Mesa describes how her time writing about a community that has experienced marginalization is informed by her own experiences with marginalization, oppression, and privilege. As a researcher and as a person who has close family connections with Cuba and with Cuban exile communities in Miami, her personal experiences impacted her analysis and writing. Both scholars feel an embodied connection with participants deeply rooted in their own identities.

As scholars of color writing about marginalized communities, Ruiz-Mesa and Gist-Mackey cannot avoid the politics of their feelings in the same way that White, masculine authors writing about contexts typically considered

professional and objective can (falsely) present their work as apolitical and rational. Ruiz-Mesa, for instance, examines oral histories of trauma. Rather than dissect or critique these stories, she chose to collect and preserve them to uncover and explore recurring themes related to identity. She often found herself stepping back from writing to reflect on how to frame and discuss stories dealing with violence and loss in a way that portrayed them with fidelity. Struggling with the perfect translations (from Spanish to English) to capture emotions, she selected which experiences to highlight and which to leave silent to crystallize trauma, while preserving and punctuating the resilience, agency, and voice in their experiences. Gist-Mackey similarly recognizes that her participants have entrusted her with some of the most painful, vulnerable memories of their lives involving poverty, joblessness, homelessness, occupational failures, addiction, crime, and hopelessness. She frequently finds herself, when writing or presenting, moved to tears by the attempt to bring dignity to stigmatized, misunderstood populations.

The authors of this forum argue that emotional and embodied aspects of research need to be interrogated by everyone involved in the processes of writing—both authors and reviewers. Ethnographers should recognize that emotion and embodiment underlie every instance of research; however, these dynamics are easier to ignore when they fit with normative standards. As Hanchey demonstrates, it is important to examine the politics of emotion and embodiment in writing, especially—when they do not immediately seem connected to typical categories of power.

One such place where the fluid politics of identity construction require interrogation is in the reviewing process. Both Cruz and Gist-Mackey describe how reviewers can discipline writing to ascribe to Western norms that affect the portrayal of research. Cruz was pressured to adapt the structure and flow of Liberian English to meet standardized American English norms. She had to mediate the reviewer requests and her fidelity to the original market dialect, finding a way not to compromise it fully. Knowing that Cruz described her positionality in the essay, one might interpret the reviewers' comments as an implicit critique of her authority in relation to theirs, that her ethos is not enough to validate her linguistic choices. Gist-Mackey, however, found that after revealing her identity, reviewers tended to rescind critiques. Disclosing that she grew up as a Black girl in financial precarity raised by a single mother in the Midwest quiets critics, likely because it imbued her interpretations with credibility. As writers and reviewers, we must be careful to attend to the shifting politics of identity, examining why the validity of interpretations shifts with perceived identity, and the ways in which our assumptions of rigor and credibility are affected by our subjective relations. Positionality statements serve as a starting point for these concerns but fall

short in their static treatment of researcher social identity. Rather than simply stating who we are, it may be more honest and impactful to examine who we become, both to our participants and ourselves, in the research process.

Be Attentive to Communication When Negotiating Identities in Context

The second lesson foregrounds communication as it relates to shifting identities in context, from the perspective of participants and/or ethnographers. The idea of shifting identities is not novel in ethnographic work. For example, Fine (1994) blurred the other–self distinction through her discussion of "working the hyphen" in qualitative work. Our unique contribution centers attentiveness to communication, which entails the situated verbal and nonverbal practices that undergird identity shifts in context. In doing so, we revisit the fixed insider–outsider dichotomy to emphasize a process-based and dynamic understanding of organizational ethnographers' identities across various sites. We identify three key communicative practices involved in identity shifts for ethnographers: code-switching, labeling, and challenging.

Code-switching entails adapting one's verbal and nonverbal communication. In the blue-collar unemployment organization where most job seekers were young Black men from low-income jobs, Gist-Mackey code-switched to reduce social distance between the ethnographer and participants. This practice allowed her to be accepted despite her high education level. In the white-collar organization, Gist-Mackey code-switched by playing up her previous corporate career and performing gender and class in ways that minimized the social distance between White middle-aged participants and herself. Ruiz-Meza's ability to speak Spanish with an undeniable Cuban accent and use of phrases and metaphors common in Cuban and Cuban American circles helped her quickly communicatively create community and build trust with participants. In addition, she emphasized her presentation as a feminine, culturally Cuban, and educated woman.

Second, "labeling," or the deployment of identity labels by participants or ethnographers, is used to "mark" or "unmark" individuals and can serve inclusive or exclusive purposes. Cruz inhabited various identities throughout fieldwork (e.g., American, White, Chinese, Black American, African). Eventually, the label "African" allowed her to be more fully included in everyday market activities. However, her vignettes point at the precariousness of this process. At given times, Cruz's participants would unmark her as African and reidentify her as an American woman whenever her femininity, mannerisms, and behaviors, including "showing up on time," seemed foreign.

Eger narrates how her participants never explicitly labeled her whiteness as a distancing element, yet she was acutely aware of differences. Like the VWorld default avatar, Eger had white skin and straight hair and could alter the avatar's body type and hair color to better depict herself. In contrast, the girls' "curly" "nappy," and "braided" hair and bronzed, brown, and black skin pigments were rendered invisible. The girls connected to Eger through collectively critiquing the "sexy female" avatar and sharing embodied experiences of performing femininity outside of normative beauty standards (e.g., age, sexuality, size). They simultaneously labeled Eger as "student," "fun," "cool," and "loud" during fieldwork, allowing for her inclusion.

Villamil explains that she initially found common ground with the organization's CDO through their shared ethnicity. However, their partnership was also marked by distinct positionalities. For example, her role as a researcher with a doctorate immediately positioned her as an outsider. Although they both communicated in English and Spanish, they seemed to communicate in different languages. As a result, this noise in communication led to a crack and shattered her research intentions. She perceives that she failed to sufficiently coach the CDO to convey her research idea to decision makers in the executive leadership team, and the message got lost in translation. In addition, her gender, age, and status were markers in this process. The CDO was a male, in an age close to retirement; as such, because she was a younger woman and did not have the same title ranking, she felt she had to hedge and defer to his opinions to avoid jeopardizing her only point of entry to the organization.

Jensen knew there were problems with the "intern" label but was initially happy to feel like his observations were getting somewhere. In his new apprentice-like role, Jensen could sit in on meetings, lead focus groups, and watch case managers handle delicate situations. Although he was quick to correct people when they labeled him as an intern, he also leaned into the role by practicing what Tracy (2013) calls "deliberate naiveté." However, as an organizational intern, he was less well positioned to get to know the clients and their experiences. Interviews with the women who stayed at the shelter were difficult to come by and represented some of the toughest interviews he has conducted.

Third, "challenging" entails pushing back against participants' worldviews and assumptions. Hanchey's participants were middle- to upper-class U.S.-based high school students who were predominantly, but not all, White. They came to the organization for less than a week and found her there already. They knew she was a researcher as well as a leader of the reflection sessions with the NGO manager. As a White woman, mostly "like them," but getting a PhD and in a position of authority, she most likely came across as a

"bad cop" to the NGO manager's "good cop." While the NGO manager encouraged the students and validated their feelings, Hanchey asked them to consider how those feelings reflected racial/colonial paternalism. Later on, she felt the students were the recipients of her displaced judgment. In sum, she both challenged these students to think differently and simultaneously reinforced the same slippery systems of White saviorism by displacing it onto them (Hanchey, 2018). Ruiz-Meza explains that participants made references to experiences that were assumed to be shared. At times, when she questioned these assumptions, she was quickly met with resistance and disappointment by participants, receiving unapologetic reminders that she was *only* half Cuban. This lesson, therefore, reveals how researchers must navigate identity/ies with participants, including through communication practices such as code-switching, labeling, and challenging. Accounting for shifting identity/ies in the field through verbal and nonverbal communication reveals complex, evolving researcher identities that impact participants' potential embrace or contestation of research(ers).

Tread With Caution, Care, and Courage

Our third lesson considers how research participants often do not, as Annie stated in Jensen's vignette, "know what to do" with researchers. This is particularly true when gatekeepers and participants are unfamiliar with communication as a discipline and it can lead to hesitation by potential participants. Likewise, organizational communication scholars entering a research site may be willing to share their expertise with participants and their organizations, but they also have reason to fear the potential of overstepping boundaries or alienating research participants.

Villamil describes the challenges she faced as she sought access to a large corporate organization. She recognized that the vernacular that academics use can alienate decision makers struggling to understand our goals in their organization. To overcome this barrier, she articulated the benefits of a healthy academic researcher–organization relationship. In particular, Villamil leveraged her expertise in diversity and inclusion to show how she would both observe and possibly facilitate or enhance the organization's diversity initiatives. She offered pro bono diagnosis, assessment, recommendations, and final report presentation to the executive leadership team.

Had the project moved forward, Villamil's organizational communication perspective and expertise could have facilitated her research and helped the organization understand the value she added. In contrast, Jensen was successful in gaining access to his organization and collecting data, but his intention to act as simply a "volunteer" and "intern" rather than foregrounding his

expertise left both him and the organization at a loss during the early stages of his project and likely limited his capacity to intervene in meaningful ways.

Finally, the reflections by Hanchey, Villamil, Eger, and Jensen all reflect unique challenges faced by organizational communication scholars who engage with their work from critical perspectives. As Hanchey's vignette displays, asking participants hard questions may lead to negative outcomes, such as limiting how participants will engage with the concepts the researcher is introducing. Villamil's experiences reflect challenges in bringing a critical lens into the field, even if, as she reflects, she refrained from discussing issues of power and ethics in her communication with the CDO. Eger and her participants contended with systemic barriers that upheld the very structures she and CG as an organization sought to dismantle. Finally, Jensen's experiences show that although it may be beneficial to refrain from explicitly discussing critical topics while negotiating access, it also limits opportunities for intervention.

Overall, our self-taught and reflexive lesson here is that ethnographers need not be silent, hidden, nonexpert observers. Eger's experiences in assisting the girls in CG to reflect on the VWorld problems and crafting a letter advocating for changes represents one instance of this. Once in an organization, organizational communication researchers may find it beneficial to allow their expertise to guide them. Although it may often be beneficial or even easier to act as an observer, sometimes, we need the courage to appreciate the value that may be added by a scholarly intervention.

Reframe Failure as Productive

A final lesson examines (fears of) failure in organizational ethnography. Villamil's vignette introduced "centering failure," which we use as a heuristic to unpack our ethnographic failures and encourage others to embrace their research setbacks. Failure becomes frightening as we find comfort in the ease of tidy fieldwork, even when we recognize ethnography is a messy craft. Using queer theory, Halberstam (2011)

> dismantles the logics of success and failure. Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may, in fact, offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (pp. 2-3)

In this lesson, we, too, reframe failure—often deemed disastrous—as generative of new theory, method, and practice. Herein, we glean three productive

takeaways focused on: access failures, failures and identities, and organizational failures.

In reflecting on her "access failures," Villamil noticed how her positionality as a Latina diversity researcher stymied her access. She struggled to appeal to corporate constituents and directed her access communication toward one Latinx gatekeeper. As the gatekeeper left the organization, her 6 months of access labor departed too. Villamil's experience illuminates two interrelated needs. We first must consider how organizational scholars can craft persuasive messages for corporate gatekeepers. Accessing doubtful organizational members is difficult, especially when researching topics pertaining to power or difference. Second, we need to consider multiple points of contact in an organization and not silo our efforts to one gatekeeper. Although setbacks also may arise with "multiple tiers of gatekeepers" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 128), cultivating more relationships may yield more robust access.

We noticed a second theme of "failures and identities," or embracing fears and failures in the ongoing process of identity negotiation in fieldwork. Each project requires us to reflect on how our identities are constituted in relation to the organization and participants. Ruiz-Mesa describes the pressure she experienced as a Cuban American/Puerto Rican researcher at the thought of failing her Cubana participants. This fear prompted her to exert great care in translating participants' narratives. She importantly names the work of her ethnography as "responsibility," fearing her writing could render her untrustworthy to retell their stories.

We have all felt the weight of responsibility in our ethnographic writing, stemming both from shared and divergent identities from participants. We know the fear of getting the stories and lived experiences wrong. Although we simultaneously know there is no truth to capture, we fear failure in how our scholarly voice speaks with our participants' truths in print. Jensen struggled to "get it right" with participants, hoping he could transcend the "giant gaping hideous crevasse" (Wilentz, 2013, p. 32) between his dominant positionality—White, middle-class man—and his participants. In the past, complete participation as a volunteer had enhanced his research by facilitating relationships and contributing to the organizations and participants. However, in this fieldwork, Jensen's identity as an activist and a participant–researcher failed—not because he was unable to participate, but because of *how* he participated. A volunteer/intern identity became a crutch to assuage his insecurity in the field and widened the gap between the homeless women at the shelter and him as the researcher. He still collected valuable data but laments what he might have gained if he had managed his identity differently.

Similarly, Hanchey recognizes that we will never get fieldwork "right," as reflexivity is cyclical. She conceptualizes reflexivity as Oliver (2001) does witnessing: Reflecting on our past selves is both an act of reflecting on what we (then) noticed and what we failed to notice at the time. No matter how sharpened and attuned our powers of observation, we can never perceive all power relations of which we are a part at any given moment. Even though transcription afforded her a glimpse of her imbrication in White saviorism and coloniality, Hanchey demonstrates that we cannot be finished with failure. When we witness to our past selves, we perform the impossibility of ever getting reflexivity correct, and yet, this attempt at articulating what we did not see provides us an opportunity to look again and apprehend more clearly. In sum, failure refigures the terms of not only our projects but also our selves as we build identities anew in each site and in each reflection on our past selves.

Finally, ethnographers should be prepared to encounter "organizational failures" and consider the responsibilities and consequences of their intervention as researchers and participants. Eger grappled with how to intervene when she and her youth participants noticed systemic barriers in the program VWorld used in a CG course. The VWorld program and avatar's whiteness, heteronormativity, and patriarchy directly contradicted CG's social justice organizing for girls of color pursuing technology.

This "organizational failure" example reminds us to be thoughtful and generative with critiques of our field sites. As scholars, we cannot expect an organization to be infallible simply because their members value difference or social justice in their mission. In this example, CG could not control the VWorld's exclusionary external platform. Eger feared the VWorld exclusions could undermine CG's programmatic goals, so she sought permission to hold focus groups for the girls' critiques.

Speaking out rather than being a passive observer allowed Eger to practice what she terms "methodological flexibility to disrupt inequity." Although VWorld never responded to the girls' letter, participants gained experience creating design solutions for inclusion together. Eger's swiftness to organize an intervention turned an organizational "failure" into an opportunity for the girls to become "technosocial change agents," articulating their own critique (Ashcraft et al., 2017). Thus, we can each consider how we will react to organizational failure. Do we lean toward our observer identity, writing rich field notes for future published articles where we critique what we saw, or do we seize the moment to work for meaningful, messy change alongside organizational members, even at the risk of further failure?

In sum, ethnographic work requires in the moment identity construction that will generate connection and separation, failure and success. This forum evokes consideration of access, identity, and organizational failures. The goal is to give ourselves permission and a path for reframing these failures as valuable parts of the ethnographic research process. Hiding these moments in deference to standards of clean, error-free research hinders our and others' learning.

Conclusion

Our essay highlights the backstage of our organizational ethnographies and how identities shaped our processes from design through publishing and beyond. By reflecting on our experiences as ethnographers and using them to generate lessons for future ethnographers to consider, we push toward a more complex understanding of evolving researcher identity/ies in ethnography.

"Doing" ethnographic work is intensely personal, no two people (no matter how similar their training and subjects of study) will ever "do" ethnography in the same way. Likewise, each researcher who engages in an ethnographic project will emerge from the process changed, in ways differentially distributed depending on race, gender, and nationality (Berry, Argüelles, Cordis, Ihmoud, & Estrada, 2017). Although our experiences cut across a variety of contexts and explore a range of challenges and opportunities associated with being "in the field," what is discussed here is but a small fraction of potential takeaways. The goal of ethnographic research in any context, organizational or otherwise, has never been to make universal claims, but all the same, the findings of ethnographic work are meant to transcend the contexts of study (Cruz, 2015).

Similarly, we believe that the experiences discussed in this essay may resonate with others as they conceive, embark upon, analyze, and present the results of their own labor. Moreover, the experiences and lessons recounted here may be relevant not only to organizational ethnographers but also to those who serve as gatekeepers and confidantes for those researchers. By providing a glimpse into backstage processes, we have laid the groundwork for gatekeepers to reflect on not only how to do ethnography but also how to help (and benefit from the expertise) ethnographers.

In answering the call by Tracy et al. (2014), we also seek to inspire further tales of the messiness and merriment of organizational fieldwork. More research, voices, and experiences are needed for us to reflexively practice ethnographic organizational communication research from our complex, intersectional identities as researchers with our participants. We can continue

to grow from sharing lessons from qualitative research as a field. Scholars can create and hold avenues and outlets like this forum in which unsuccessful research attempts can be framed as lessons learned and opportunities for future strategizing.

Our final lesson also importantly revealed the productivity of failure and how failures and fears should be more carefully examined, as they are more normative than publication outlets show. We thus call for other scholars to embrace failure in their research, while acknowledging fears of repercussions. Narrating failure feels particularly precarious for graduate students, contingent scholars, and untenured faculty. And yet, as social movements demonstrate, if enough of us embrace our failures together, we can change disciplinary norms. Thus, we call for purposefully narrating failure in social media, annual reviews, and publications. We collectively know that rejection is more common than acceptance in academia. What would it look like to include our failures and narrate what we learned from such experiences in our communication? We could take a cue from Johannes Haushofer and publicly post our CVs of failure (Jaschik, 2016). We can model publishing about research mistakes to enable critical insights (Hanchey, 2018). We may share our stories of failure through social media with tags like #researchfail or #ethnographyfail. Finally, we should remember that

> embarrassment, objection, and snubbing are not situations to be avoided or simply endured [in fieldwork] but, instead, are opportunities to connect with our participants, engage in potentially transformative conversations, and access tacit and unarticulated data. (Tracy, 2014, p. 464)

Finally, this essay provides insight into a spectrum of organizational ethnographies, which have been collapsed under the generic appellation of "organizational ethnography" in organizational communication scholarship. We believe that the terminology can be problematic because it paints a homogeneous and unitary picture amid a diverse landscape. To this extent, despite having reflected on common lessons cutting across our respective fieldworks, our goal is also to open a conversation pertaining to the great differences in approaches, contexts, and types of organizational ethnographies. To this extent, each vignette provides a glimpse into the unique challenges that an ethnographer may face depending on organizational form (e.g., nonprofit, indigenous, for-profit, community based), context (e.g., continental United States, West Africa, East Africa), and/or identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, age).

Regarding organizational form specifically, Villamil points to the challenge tied to translating academic language into economic and profit-based terms. This task is complicated by the frameworks, social constructs, and

vernacular used in academic research that can alienate organizational decision makers struggling to understand scholarly inquiry. Another steep challenge in for-profit settings is tied to navigating the tension between advocating for research access to an organization while maintaining academic rigor and neutrality. This is especially relevant when the epistemological foundations of the researcher are informed by critical scholarship that aims to problematize organizational structures.

As we consider nonprofit organizing, Hanchey, Jensen, and Eger surface important tension tied to a strong value-based impetus, which exerts pressure on organizational ethnographers. Such an impetus is all the more salient for ethnographers who work with marginalized and/or traumatized populations. In this case, the pressure not to further exploit and harm these participants renders the concern for representation in organizational ethnography particularly significant.

Last, although our lessons may apply to a variety of contexts, we also urge organizational ethnographers to reflect, discuss, and write about the specifics tied to multiple settings. More specifically, although extensive U.S.-based ethnographies have examined traditional for-profit settings, more methodological insights are needed on nonprofit and indigenous organizing both inside and outside the continental United States. This last point raises new praxis-based questions for us, including linguistic ones. It also complicates U.S.-based definitions of an ethnographer's race, ethnicity, citizenship, and other identity categories.

We leave this essay with new lessons and new questions and ideas about ethnography, organizations, and identities and their interwoven relationships. We hope the same for our readers and look forward to generating future lessons in conversations together.

Authors' Note

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID iDs

Peter R. Jensen https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6749-8489
Angela N. Gist-Mackey https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1590-0728

Notes

1. "Well, you already know."
2. Cuban young woman.
3. Numbers after each "I" reference my shifting positionalities across time: I_0 references my self while in the field, I_1 references my self while transcribing the data months later, and I_2 references my self while writing this article.

References

Ashcraft, C., Eger, E. K., & Friend, M. (2012). *Girls in IT: The facts*. Boulder, CO: National Center for Women & Information Technology. Retrieved from http://www.ncwit.org/resources/girls-it-facts

Ashcraft, C., Eger, E. K., & Scott, K. A. (2017). Becoming technosocial change agents: Intersectionality and culturally responsive pedagogies as vital resources for increasing girls' participation in computing. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *48*, 233-251. doi:10.1111/aeq.12197

Barley, W. C. (2015). Anticipatory work: How the need to represent knowledge across boundaries shapes work practices within them. *Organization Science*, *26*, 1612-1628. doi:10.1287/orsc.2015.1012

Behar, R. (1997). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Berry, M. J., Argüelles, C. C., Cordis, S., Ihmoud, S., & Estrada, E. V. (2017). Toward a fugitive anthropology: Gender, race, and violence in the field. *Cultural Anthropology*, *32*, 537-565. doi:10.14506/ca32.4.05

Carrillo Rowe, A. (2008). *Power lines: On the subject of feminist alliances*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Cruz, J. M. (2015). Reimagining feminist organizing in global times: Lessons from African feminist communication. *Women & Language*, *38*, 23-41.

Cruz, J. M. (2017). Invisibility and visibility in alternative organizing: A communicative and cultural model. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *31*, 614-639. doi:10.1177/0893318917725202

Cruz, J. M., McDonald, J., Broadfoot, K., Chuang, A. K. C., & Ganesh, S. (2018). "Aliens" in the United States: A collaborative autoethnography of foreign-born faculty. *Journal of Management Inquiry*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1056492618796561

Dougherty, D. S., Schraedley, M. A., Gist-Mackey, A. N., & Wickert, J. (2018). A photovoice study of food (in) security, unemployment, and the discursive-material dialectic. *Communication Monographs*, *85*, 443-466. doi:10.1080/03637751.2018.1500700

Douglas, P. (2008). Affinity groups: Catalyst for inclusive organizations. *Employment Relations*, *34*, 11-18. doi:10.1002/ert.20171

Fine, M. (1994). Working the hyphens: Reinventing self and other in qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 70-82). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ganesh, S. (2014). Unraveling the confessional tale: Passion and dispassion in fieldwork. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *28*, 448-457. doi:10.1177/0893318914535785

Gist-Mackey, A. N. (2018). (Dis)embodied job search communication training: Comparative critical ethnographic analysis of materiality and discourse during the unequal search for work. *Organization Studies*, *39*, 1251-1275. doi:10.1177/0170840617736936

Goodall, H. L. (1994). *Casing the promised land, expanded edition: The autobiography of an organizational detective as cultural ethnographer*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Goodall, H. L. (2000). *Writing the new ethnography*. New York, NY: AltaMira Press.

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The queer art of failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hanchey, J. N. (2018). All of us phantasmic saviors. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *15*, 144-160. doi:10.1080/14791420.2018.1454969

Herrmann, A. F. (2018). Communication and ritual at the comic book shop: The convergence of organizational and popular cultures. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, *7*, 285-301. doi:10.1108/JOE-06-2017-0027

James, E. P., & Zoller, H. M. (2018). Resistance training: (Re)shaping extreme forms of workplace health promotion. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *32*, 60-89. doi:10.1177/0893318917696990

Jaschik, S. (2016). Sharing the failures. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/05/02/professors-failure-cv-prompts-discusson-what-constitutes-academic-success

Jensen, P. R., & Meisenbach, R. J. (2015). Alternative organizing and (in) visibility: Managing tensions of transparency and autonomy in a nonprofit organization. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *29*, 564-589. doi:10.1177/0893318915600577

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2019). *Qualitative communication research methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Oliver, K. (2001). *Witnessing: Beyond recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of cultures* (pp. 271-315). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Stephens, K. K. (2017). Organizational communication methods published in MCQ 2001-2015: Trends and pedagogical implications. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *31*, 130-138. doi:10.1177/0893318916675735

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tracy, S.J. (2014). Fieldwork horse-assery: Making the most of feeling humiliated, rebuffed, and offended during participant observation research. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *28*, 458-465. doi:10.1177/0893318914536965

Tracy, S. J., Eger, E. K., Huffman, T. P., Malvini Redden, S. M., & Scarduzio, J. A. (2014). Narrating the backstage of qualitative research in organizational communication: A synthesis. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *28*, 422-431. doi:10.1177/0893318914536964

U.S. Department of Labor. (2015). *Current population survey, detailed occupations by sex and race*. Washington, DC: Author.

Van Laer, K., & Janssens, M. (2011). Ethnic minority professionals' experiences with subtle discrimination in the workplace. *Human Relations*, *64*, 1203-1227. doi:10.1177/0018726711409263

Wieland, S. M. B. (2010). Ideal selves as resources for the situated practice of identity. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *24*, 503-528. doi:10.1177/0893318910374938

Wilentz, A. (2013). *Farewell, Fred Voodoo: A letter from Haiti*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Author Biographies

Peter R. Jensen (PhD, University of Missouri) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Alabama. His research examines how normative and alternative systems of knowledge manifest in organizing practices. He is especially interested in how these systems of knowledge manifest in response to social problems.

Joëlle Cruz (PhD, Texas A&M University) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research focuses on intersections of alternative organizing (e.g., grassroots, community-based, and social movements), culture, and gender (Third World feminisms, African feminisms).

Elizabeth K. Eger (PhD, University of Colorado, Boulder) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Texas State University, USA. Her primary research, pedagogy, and service examines difference and intersectional

organizing, organizational identities, and how work influences our lives, identities, and health through ethnographic, rhetorical, and critical lenses.

Jenna N. Hanchey (PhD, the University of Texas at Austin) is an assistant professor in the Communication Studies Department at the University of Nevada, Reno, USA. Her research is premised on a politics of decolonization, and attends to the intersections of rhetoric, African studies, and nonprofit organizing.

Angela N. Gist-Mackey (PhD, University of Missouri) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas. Her main research interests include issues of social mobility and power in organized contexts exploring the way communication is used to navigate changes in social status, stigma, and identity.

Kristina Ruiz-Mesa (PhD, University of Colorado, Boulder) is an associate professor of Communication Studies at California State University, Los Angeles. Her main research interests include the study of instructional and organizational communication practices to improve student success, diversity, equity, and inclusion in U.S. higher education.

Astrid Villamil (PhD, University of Kansas) is the associate director of professional development for the Division of Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity at the University of Missouri. Her areas of interest focus around underrepresented voices in organizational contexts and the way structural and organizational policies affect the well-being of individuals from underrepresented groups.