Chapter 23

Of Embodiment and Ether: Masculinities and Negotiating an Understanding of Complex Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is an autoethnographic account of a scholar’s journey toward understanding his experience of the complexity of community, both physical and virtual, and how he began to understand, in relationship with others, the interplay between the two. Related to the centrality of relationships and community in physical and virtual spaces, this work explores how young men use technology and social media, particularly Facebook, texting, and video games, to establish, maintain, and strengthen in-person relationships and community ties. It also provides a narrative of researching and reflecting on research and reveals how digital technology can play a significant role in reaching out to and connecting with others.

INTRODUCTION

Guyland is the world in which young men live. It is both a stage of life, a liminal undefined time span between adolescence and adulthood that can often stretch for a decade or more, and a place, or rather, a bunch of places where guys gather to be guys with each other... But it would be a mistake to assume that each conforms fully to a regime of peer-influenced and enforced behaviors that I call the “Guy Code,” or shares all traits and attitudes with everyone else. It’s important to remember that individual guys are not the same as “Guyland.” (Kimmel, 2008, p. 4)

In the above passage, Michael Kimmel (2008) alludes to the community spaces in which young men bond as “guys” in the company of other guys. In these spaces, which cumulatively comprise “Guyland,” Kimmel (2008) notes that masculinity represents a largely homosocial experience in which guys perform masculine scripts under the
gaze of other guys. When I first read *Guyland* while working on my dissertation in 2010, the very term conjured mental images of some dystopian “bro” fantasyland, a sort of hyper-masculine amusement park, in which guys wear, in Pollack’s (2006) words, gender straightjackets and enact hegemonic, archetypical codes of masculinity—the “Guy Code,” the posted rules of the park. Just as a small boy might dejectedly hang his head and shuffle away from the line leading to the roller coaster after failing to measure up to the height requirement to board the ride, many, perhaps most, of the Guyland guidelines seem to make little or no sense to the affected patrons. I am coming to discover that many, to one extent or another, keep on boarding the rides because the ties that bind in Guyland are woven from the fibers of vegetation overgrowing the fields of a culture of fear and shame. My own incursions into Guyland have occurred in various spaces: in sport and locker rooms, classrooms, intimate relationships, social media, workplaces, military barracks, my family, and the heralded halls of academia. Guyland is, indeed, ubiquitous. Yet Kimmel (2008) also notes that the “Guy Code” is far from universally observed. Listening to the stories of other young men and, in that context, reflecting on my own life, a crucial aspect of my understanding of my masculinities is emerging through a sense of resilience and agency nurtured in relationship and community. This newly emerging understanding expresses that community relationships built on trust, acceptance, and inclusion offer the spaces to reframe vulnerability, socially stigmatized as weakness, as the courage to critique, reframe, and often reject the “Guy Code.”

In this work, I provide an autoethnographic account of my journey toward understanding my own experience of the complexity of community, both physical and virtual, and how I am beginning to understand, in relationship with others, the interplay between the two. I frame my work on negotiating an understanding of the complexity of community in the context of my masculinities research, specifically the work I began in 2009 for my doctoral dissertation (Burns, 2011). A powerful theme that emerged from that work related to the centrality of relationships and community, which the young men with whom I worked explained, existed both in physical and virtual spaces. Most of the young men use technology and social media, particularly Facebook, texting, and video games, to establish, maintain, and strengthen in-person relationships and community ties. This resonated with my own use of such technology. Thinking to my dissertation work, I realized that technology had played a significant role in reaching out to and connecting with these young men. Revisiting and reflecting on this work, their stories have helped me negotiate an understanding, however transitory and imprecise, of the importance of community to me in the context of my own masculine experience.

**BACKGROUND**

**Interpreting My Being in the World: Story as Method**

*Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of “horizon.” The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon whether it is near or far, great or small (Gadamer, 2004, p. 301-302).*

I first read Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* in preparation to write my dissertation, and his concept of horizon told a counter-narrative to that of objectified knowledge. The negotiation of
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