

Performing Mythic Identity: An Analysis and Critique of “The Ethnogs”

By: Ethnogs¹, FemNogs², Rip Tupp³

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The Ethnogs, the Femnogs, and Rip Tupp. (aka Trujillo, N.; Krizek, R.; Poulos, C.; Drew, S.; Mills, M.; & Ellingson, L.) (2011). Performing Mythic Identity: An Analysis and Critique of "The Ethnogs." *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17(7): 664-674.

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Abstract:

This article describes and critically examines the process of creating and performing alternative identities associated with a mythic band called “The Ethnogs.” Specifically, the authors tell individual narratives regarding their performances as rock stars, groupies, roadies, and security, and reveal the value of and the personal and institutional risks associated with these performances. The authors conclude by describing a line of scholarship represented by their project that they call “automythography,” the excavation of cultural myths through the critical reading of narrative accounts about a particular period or set of events.

Keywords: performance | autoethnography | automythography | play | Ethnogs | FemNogs

Article:

Despite this project’s oddities and flaws, it suggests a new kind of ethnographic study made possible by online social media.

Young, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2009

The project discussed in this article might have begun as a playful accident in 2007, but it evolved into an interesting experiment with virtual, performative, (auto)ethnographic, and (auto)mythographic elements. In this article we describe the project and critically examine the process of creating and performing alternative identities associated with a mythic band.

Creating The Ethnogs

We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be. (Vonnegut, 1961) In February of 2007, three middle-aged ethnographers attended a communication conference in Seattle. Nick Trujillo and Bob Krizek had played guitar for few months, while Bud

Goodall had played for several years. Given our friendship, musical interests, and a shared desire to venture outside of the conference hotel, we made time to go to the Experience Music Project near the Space Needle in downtown Seattle.

Once inside we wandered around the various exhibits of this rock n' roll museum, reliving memories of our youths through the glass-encased classic guitars played by Jimi Hendrix, a Seattle native, and other rock icons. When we passed an area called "On Stage," where customers could pretend to play a song at a concert and receive a DVD and poster of their performance, we looked at each other and said, "What the hell."

While we stood in line for our chance at artificial stardom, a clerk with a clipboard approached and asked for the name of our band.

"The Ethnogs,"³ one of us blurted out. Little did we know that we had begun to socially construct our mythic identities and a very unconventional research project.

We paid the fee; took our positions on stage armed with guitar, organ, and drums; and rocked the imaginary joint with "Wild Thing."

After the gig, we picked up our DVD and poster. With "The Ethnogs" emblazoned across the top, the image looked like the genuine artifact—a photo taken at a real concert. It made us laugh.

On the cab ride back to the hotel, we talked about "This is Spinal Tap," the mockumentary about the ups and mostly downs of a fictional metal band. Being academics, we tried to name a book about a fake band and, when we could not, we naturally decided to write one. Our concept for the project was interactive: Anyone could create an identity for him or herself in the history of the band as a roadie, groupie, manager, producer, musician, and/or fan. If you said you were a roadie from our concert in Detroit in '72, then so be it. All you had to do was tell your story, and the book would be a collection of those stories.

We shared our idea with colleagues at the hotel, some of whom found it amusing and/or interesting and agreed to participate while others looked at us with something other than interest or amusement. Following the conference we were still excited about creating and sharing our band identities. Given the name of our mythic—we liked this term better than "fake"—band; we thought our characters should have a connection to ethnography. Nick created "Gory Bateson," the disturbed but harmless nephew of his namesake, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972). Bob invented "Dougal Macrorie," a good-natured third-generation Scot from Indiana whose aunt worked for sociologist William Whyte at the University of Chicago. Bud became an orphan from the Bronx, named "Dick Diver" after a character in an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, who might have been the illegitimate offspring of two well-known anthropologists.

After an initial flurry of emails in which we cocreated our identities and the history and discography of the band, the project waned. Each of us returned to other "more serious" research. And sometimes what seems like a good idea at a conference should stay at that conference.

That summer, however, Nick brought his character to life, at least virtually, after he traveled to Paris and a friend videotaped him singing “Light My Fire” at Jim Morrison’s grave in Pare Lechaise Cemetery. He posted the video on YouTube as Gory Bateson and proceeded to make other videos, such as “Take Me to the River” while standing in a river and “Hound Dog” with his dogs. He posted several original songs and created the “Gory Bateson Channel” on YouTube.

In November of that year, Nick, Bob, and Bud brought The Ethnogs to life materially in an inaugural performance at the National Communication Association’s Ethnography Division Preconference. We performed an original song about ethnography, titled “It’s a Way of Life,” introducing it as “the anthem” for our division. A group of feminist scholars wore tie-dyed Ethnogs shirts and enacted their identities as members of “The Nogheads,” the band’s groupie fan club.

Since that performance, dubbed the first stop on The Ethnogs Reunion Tour, Nick and Bob have continued to perform at academic conferences and to develop their characters. We have posted over 75 videos on YouTube and many other sites with well over 200,000 hits, and the project has generated attention in several publications and blogs. Other colleagues have developed and performed their characters at conferences and on blogs and online fan sites. In the remainder of this article, we narrate our stories of creating and performing these identities, but now we contextualize those stories with a brief review of relevant literature on performance and identity.

Performing (and Playing) Identity

I seek a performance rhetoric that turns notes from the field into texts that are performed. (Denzin, 2003, p. x)

Many scholars argue that performance is constitutive of identity. Pioneers such as Burke (1957/1962), Goffman (1959/1967), Geertz (1973/1980), and Turner (1974/1986) developed dramaturgical or dramatisitic perspectives embracing the idea that human interaction is a symbolic process with important expressive as well as instrumental functions. As Goffman put it, every performance is a “presentation of self.” Feminist and critical theorists have added that performance is a cultural and political process, enacted in a world of power relations, which can problematize social categories such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation (see Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1991). As Butler wrote about gender, “There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender. . . . [I]dentity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p. 25).

Studies of identity performance abound, especially in the ethnographic literature. For example, scholars have studied cultural performances of female adolescence (Hamera, 2005), ethnic identity (Holling & Marie Calafell, 2007; Pineda, 2009), masculinity (Payne, 2009), tourism (Wood, 2005), and many other topics. Other scholars have taken more autoethnographic stances to examine the cultural and political implications of their own bodies (Spry, 2006), their own families (Jones, 2005), and their own forbidden desires (Pelias, 2006).

Two more specific areas in performance studies have also informed our project: performances of music and of online identities. Scholarship on the performance of music includes

Jones' (2010) analysis of Billie Holiday's collapse of identity, DeChaine's (2002) ethnography on how the poetics of music shape identity, and Radford et al.'s (2002) reflection on the importance of playing music in their academic and personal lives. Studies of online identities include Agger's (2004) examination of the alter egos created for online games, Boellstorff's (2008) research in *Second Life* through his avatar "Tom Bukowski," and Bates' (2009) exploration of the mutability of virtual identities in multiplayer role-playing games.

In sum, the literature on performance and identity has influenced our project and shaped our performances (and our analyses of our performances) of our alternative identities. We embrace the theatricality of performance and acknowledge the force of cultural conventions and power relations. We reflect autoethnographically on our experiences in performing our alternative identities, and we examine the development of our identities through our live and online musical performances.

We now narrate our stories of performing and playing *The Ethnogs*.

Performing (and Playing) The Ethnogs

Gory's Story

A dinosaur rocker of dubious talent, Gory Bateson has fallen on hard times since his heyday some forty years ago. . . . (Offman, *National Post*, 2009)

One breezy day in October of 2003 while my wife Leah and I walked our golden retriever Ebbet and Wheaten terrier Hawkeye, she said she had abdominal cramps.

"It's just a bladder infection or intestinal problem," she insisted.

The cramps turned out to be cancer. Stage IV ovarian cancer. The initial diagnosis was that Leah might have months to live.

She died 14 months later, the day before my 49th birthday.

When her diagnosis was so bleak, I suggested to Leah, also a professor of communication, that we take a leave and travel to places we had never been. She refused, preferring to keep her job to teach students how to live with a terminal illness and die with dignity. A few months before she died we decided to share our experiences in a book to help others, a manuscript I completed and published a few years after her death (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 2008).

One year and one day after Leah's death, I turned 50. Except for my 21st when I could legally drink or my 13th when I became a "teenager," birthdays never fazed me. But 50 felt very different. My 20-year marriage had ended in the worst possible way, I was single again, and I was 50. Five-oh!

Leah was 6 years older than me and died at age 55, and so I realized there was no guarantee that I would even make it to 55. I thought very seriously about what I wanted to do with the rest of

my life. I still enjoyed teaching and writing and decided to keep my day job as a professor. But I vowed to develop more hobbies, and first among them was learning to play guitar and sing. I had taken guitar lessons when I was a teenager but gave up after a few months because I was too shy to perform in front of others.

I also promised not to take myself as seriously as I had in the past and to have more fun. I decided to take more chances in life as well and to go on those trips that Leah and I had never taken.

Although my chronic shyness did not disappear after Leah's death, I believed that watching her die was the worst event I would ever experience in my life. I thought, What's the worst thing that could happen if I performed at a singalong? Singing a flat note or hitting the wrong chord?

I began learning guitar and, after a couple months, I started playing and singing at parties with families and friends. I even brought my guitar to an academic conference for the first time and jammed with friends in Seattle.

Our plan for The Ethnogs was to write a book about our mythic band. We did not initially intend to perform as our characters and actually play "concerts." I inadvertently brought Gory Bateson to life when I traveled to France one summer and had the nerve to sing a song at Jim Morrison's grave. The day was sunny and cool, so I wore sunglasses and a leather jacket, unaware that this attire would become Gory's signature costume a la Johnny Cash and Roy Orbison.

When I returned to the States, a colleague who teaches digital media suggested posting the video on YouTube. He edited it and I spontaneously added the voiceover: "This is Gory Bateson at Jim Morrison's grave." To my amazement, within a couple of weeks the video had attracted several hundred hits. I was amused by the novelty of seeing myself on YouTube, and I decided to make and to post other videos.

Although it was not my conscious intent, making these videos gave me much-needed breaks from the emotional work of finishing the book about Leah's death. I would complete another gut-wrenching section and then make a silly Gory Bateson video.

Quite unexpectedly, I have enjoyed performing as Gory Bateson, on YouTube videos as well as live at parties, conventions, and at open mic nights in Los Angeles and Sacramento, and these performances have helped me to become less shy. Gory has evolved into a very playful vehicle through which I can enact a persona quite different than my professional one. Gory is "quadrapolar," not very smart, and speaks with a Southern accent. When I put on his leather jacket and sunglasses, I don't care if I look or act foolish, because I am playing a foolish character. And I am truly having fun doing it.

Most people who know me realize that Gory is a playful, harmless creation. Others, however, are concerned for my well-being and/or insulted by Gory's antics. My sister believes I'm having a mid-life crisis. A few musician friends think The Ethnogs are an affront to "real musicians." Some colleagues were initially offended by Gory's YouTube videos, especially the one in which he sings Clapton's "Wonderful Tonight" to the backside of a prostitute in the Red Light District

of Amsterdam. (Predictably, that video has the most hits.) A small group of these colleagues remained unconvinced by my email to the department that “Gory is a caricature, a parody, and as such, he really serves as a critique of sexism.”

No matter what others think of Gory, this project has been one of the most interesting projects in my career. It has become a virtual participant observation study of an Internet alter ego’s mythic quest to get one million hits on the Internet. It has awakened my very real passion for music and motivated me to take classes in songwriting, production, and music publishing. And I did something I would never have considered possible: I hired producers, musicians, and background singers and professionally recorded a CD of original songs. And now Gory Bateson’s “Is That Viral Enuf 4 U?” can be downloaded on I-Tunes.

Perhaps most importantly, performing as Gory Bateson helped me to move on from the most tragic event in my life. Quite profoundly, The Ethnogs project has reminded me of the power of performance to help us deal with death and enhance our lives.

Dougie Mac—the Gift of an Alter Ego

Dougal is a version of the Scottish first name “Dughall” (pronounced Doo ghul): Literally translated it means “black stranger.” . . . People who know him well call him Dougie or Dougie Mac. (*The History of The Ethnogs*, <http://ethnogs.jottit.com/>)

The back story of my alter ego, Dougie Mac, is a complex mixture of invented fiction (what I call “mythic facts”), verifiable facts, biographical “seepage,” and historical truths. Some aspects of this identity, his name for one, are pure invention. I have never known a single person with the name Dougal prior to the time we imagined The Ethnogs. I thought the name made him sound mysterious, at least more interesting than “Bob.”

These mythic facts of Dougie’s life serve to separate the ego from the alter ego and make it easy to distinguish between the two of us. Dougie has had experiences that I have not had, and he displays talents that I don’t possess.

He often would sneak over to Maxwell Street to listen to the blues and early rock n’ roll played by the Negro men on the street. He picked up a stolen Fender bass guitar on Maxwell Street when he was 12, back in 1958, but also played bagpipes and the fife at the Scottish Rite Armory back in Gary. (He was the one who suggested to Eric Burden that he use bagpipes on “Sky Pilot”; *The History of The Ethnogs*, <http://ethnogs.jottit.com/>)

I have never played the bagpipes, though I love the sound of them. I am not a versatile musician; I often have trouble following a strum pattern. Dougie is more of a risk taker than I am. I never have stolen anything beyond a handful of candy (from Molly’s Candy Store) or an extra light switch cover (from Home Depot). And the nonmythic truth is that I grew up in the all-White suburb of Oak Park where the only “Negro” man I knew shined shoes at Carl’s Barbershop.

There are, however, some aspects of my biography that I share with (or gifted to) Dougie. We are contemporaries in time and place—we both came of age in the Chicago area back in the 1960s.

Here's a picture of me playing bass along with John "Madman" Mattinock on drums in my band, The Coalition. The picture was taken on October 15, 1964, at a performance at the old Arie Crown Theater in Chicago. We were one of the warm-up bands for the Stones. "The Ethnogs Blog" authored by Dougie Mac (<http://theethnogs.blogspot.com/>)

And yet even the biographical elements with which I have infused Dougie have their fictional components. As such our biographies intersect but never mirror each other for long. I played bass in a band named "The Coalition" back then, but, of course, we never played with the Stones. I wish. But the Stones did play at that theater on that date—an historical truth. I thought these biographical overlaps and historical truths suggested plausibility.

Outside the world of his back story, I share other aspects of my identity with Dougie and his performances. We're both second fiddles of sort, feeling more comfortable as "wingmen" instead of squadron leaders. Although he's more of a risk taker than I am, compared to others we are both methodical, some might say to an irritating degree. Dougie is as meticulous about writing a song as I am about writing an article. We both are a bit too cynical, and for both of us the 1970s are simply a decade of lost memories. We each have a hard time remembering specifics associated with who, what, and where but often act like we don't.

What I have gifted to Dougie in the name of interest, credibility, and plausibility, however, has been predictable if not strategic. What my alter ego has gifted to me has been neither.

My mother and sister died within 10 days of each other back in 2003. My mother's death on June 1st followed her 6-year battle with dementia, while my sister's death on June 10th followed a 30-second heart attack. I may not like to admit this, but, following their deaths, a deep sadness framed much of my personal and professional life. Perhaps this sadness was justifiable or at least understandable, but in retrospect I never wanted it to become the focus of my life or my work. I fell victim to the seduction of sadness, not only carrying it around with me (an unconscious choice) like an overpacked suitcase but also electing to inscribe that sadness ethnographically. I dedicated 4 years to writing about what I called "really sad shit."

Recently, however, I have remodeled my house, and, as part of the process, I have been trying to eliminate the unwanted baggage. In doing so I uncovered a stash of photos. I looked at pictures of me as child. I had that worry-free smile that most children display. In fact I looked at pictures of me from throughout my life and most of them (okay not the ones from the 2 years following my divorce) revealed a spirit of joy.

Dougie Mac has rekindled that spirit of joy and has given me permission to play. Play was something I had forgotten how to do in both my academic and personal lives. Without play, there was only sporadic enjoyment. Without enjoyment, my life became a series of routines and events endured but not engaged. My alter ego has allowed me to revel in the world of mythic facts and to put behind me a portion of the hard reality surrounding the deaths of my mother and sister.

Dougie has reignited in me a realization of what it means to live in a moment with joy. He has reminded me of a time when I “drank original Coke” (from the song “A Time for Kings,” written by Dougal Macrorie of The Ethnogs).

Making Up Dottie

By the beginning of 1967, I was living on and off with a couple of women’s lib sisters in Seattle, and we were loving The Ethnogs (literally and figuratively) whenever and wherever they played. We were doing a women’s lib newspaper and helping out at a cooperative coffee house and doing daycare at a commune and sit-ins and rallies every weekend, but we never missed the band’s gigs. (Excerpted from Dottie’s fansite at www.hu.mtu.edu/~pjsotiri/f-nogs/f-nogs/Dotties_Blog/Dotties_Blog.html)

I’m Dottie, the fanatical fan, the Noghead groupie, founder of the FemNogs, the band’s feminist fan group. Dottie lives both online through the FemNog fansite and in her mindlessly frenetic appearances at Ethnog performances. In both places, Dottie is given over to a groupie’s obsession with the band. At the same time, she is an avowed feminist and claims a university education in feminist ethnography.

Dottie emerges in impromptu performances; I make her up as I go along. And making her up is what Dottie is really about. I make no claims to either groupie authenticity or parody. The Ethnogs and the FemNogs “really” exist affectively and imaginatively as much as in their material appearances; they embody virtual lives that won’t abide by the lines that separate fact and fiction, virtual and real, bodies and minds, and, for me, feminism and sexism.

Becoming Dottie. The 2007 NCA Ethnography Preconference in Chicago was quite a serious academic endeavor—8 hours of scholarly presentations and discussions. At the close, The Ethnogs made their “Reunion Tour” appearance and so did Dottie, shrieking and jumping around with the other FemNogs. Later, a performance studies friend told me that he was dismayed that a group of feminists would enact such stereotypically sexualized, subordinated, and exploitable roles. Why would a feminist like me enact a nit-wit groupie like Dottie with no obvious critique or parody?

My friend has since reconsidered his reaction, but I felt so concerned at the time that I created a back story to salvage Dottie as a backyard feminist ethnographer and I transformed the “Nogheads” into the “FemNogs.” I also created a fan website that features Ethnog and FemNog stories, Ethnog videos, and a “Paraphenalia” page devoted to the stuff Dottie really gives away at band appearances (t-shirts, videos, bracelets, and posters). The highlight is Dottie’s blog, all about the latest exploits of The Ethnogs and Gory Bateson, the band’s lead singer. The site hangs off my .edu website, and I wonder sometimes whether I should pay for server space elsewhere.

The trouble is, Dottie is a potential professional liability, and despite my feminist back story and scholarly explanations, I’ve come to the conclusion that being Dottie can’t be reconciled with my professional identity as a feminist scholar. The back story I created was a counternarrative reclaiming Dottie as an agentic feminist. But Dottie doesn’t need feminist reclaiming or

redemption. Dottie is a groupie *obsessed* with the band, *passionate* about being a fan, given over to the *jouissance* of the performative experience. She is not me; I am not her. There is no blurring of (my)self and (my) other; there are only affective encounters, sometimes hyperbolic, sometimes staid, always engaging the energies and desires that connect groupies, scholars, feminists, and rock stars.

Doing “real” research. In 2009, Jeffrey Young (2009), a *Chronicle of Higher Education* reporter, interviewed me about the Ethnogs project for a story he was writing. Although we spoke for a good 45 minutes about the ethical implications of making up what we purported to be autoethnographically studying, the only quote he chose to use in the story was, “My role is to mindlessly scream, which I think I do very well.”

A week or so after the article was published, I was onstage at the graduation ceremony hooding one of my PhD students. As I shook the hand of our university president, he looked me in the eye and said, “Read your quote in the *Chronicle*.”

“Great,” I said.

For the *Chronicle* reporter, The Ethnogs pose an ethical research issue—if you’re making it up, how can you claim to be studying social life? That The Ethnogs are not *really* a band and that we’re all improvising identities that channel a cultural *mythos* seem to mean that The Ethnogs and the FemNogs are not a form of social life but something else—the experience of participating in this experience is not, well, a *real* experience. And studying ourselves making up this band is not *real* research.

But it is real. The personal and professional ambivalences; the mindless screaming; the energies of desire, imagination, music, and digital flow; and especially the academic risks, are very real. The performances are real experiences and the band, Dottie, the FemNogs, and all of the band’s followers “really” exist affectively and imaginatively despite/in their appearances in the material world. As Butler (1988) put it, “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.” (p. 527). The virtual presence of The Ethnogs, online in websites and YouTube videos, is densely fluid, a flow of fiction and the virtually real. It comes down to this: If you are studying an affective, imaginative experience of shared desire and collective energies, then you need to immerse yourself in the fantasy. Because that is what’s real.

Chasing the Pleasure: A Feminist Reflects on the Thrill of The Ethnogs

The 2007 Reunion Tour has inspired me to get out my beads, my tie-dye t-shirts, and my souvenir Ethnogs guitar picks. I’m ready to hit the road again. . . . (From “Darla’s Story,” on Dottie’s fansite, www.hu.mtu.edu/~pjsotiri/f-nogs/f-nogs/Dotties_Blog/Dotties_Blog.html)

I have long thought of myself as an ethnographer, but only for the past couple of years has that identity expanded to include a playful past as a rock groupie. Becoming part of the narrative of

The Ethnogs has afforded me a type of pleasurable learning I did not expect to encounter within the academy. The band's anthem immortalized Art Bochner's pronouncement that "Ethnography is a Way of Life," shaping my own academic journey by gifting me with a career theme song. Writing about The Ethnogs and the life of my alter ego Darla, one of the band's women's liberationist groupies, affords me the opportunity to write myself into belonging with people who were friends and colleagues long before I joined the scene, linking the past and future of ethnography in a surreal present that I coconstruct.

Everything I invent becomes part of The Ethnogs mythography, granting me agency to insert myself into a narrative larger than myself. The pleasure of collaborative invention entices me to a performance that embraces the delightful contradiction of fawning over (male) rock stars *and* enacting a righteous Second Wave feminist persona. My performance exudes irony and social critique, but just as importantly, it is *fun*.

I enjoy my academic work and find great satisfaction in it, but of my many conference presentations, only The Ethnogs performances make me laugh out loud and hug my copresenters, my voice hoarse from joyful screaming. As I bounce up and down, clapping and shouting as the guys take the stage, my tie-dyed t-shirt emblazoned with the Ethnogs logo, I revel in the performative moment. In that moment, the irony, scholarly insights, and politics located at the intersection of academia, rock music culture, and performance ethnography are all subsumed in the pleasure of invention. I do not delude myself about my training or talents as a performer; I bow to the truly talented performers whom I am privileged to call colleagues and friends. But my (admittedly silly) act works for me—claiming my space on the edge of the stage, my body suffused with energy, my smile beaming at my collaborators. By performing an alter ego in a creative space with vibrant people, I feel a sense of pleasure that enriches all my work and my self.

Likewise, I smile as I write about Darla's escapades with her sister-groupie Dottie, who, the story goes, helped Darla escape a patriarchal family as an emancipated minor for a life of activism with her feminist sisters. As feminist music scholar and critic Daphne Brooks wrote, "I had to write in order to interpolate myself into the scene. More still, I was chasing the pleasure and searching for a way to intensify and elongate the pleasure of the musical encounter" (Brooks, 2008, p. 60).

Chasing the pleasure of performance and performative writing is also instructive. The pedagogy of fun reminds me to be in the moment, to savor the details of our collaborative performances and accounts. As an ethnographer, I always seem to be scanning the scene or scrambling to get down notes as precisely as possible. I rarely allow moments in the field to wash over me as I do during Ethnogs performances, making myself fully present, engaged, and vulnerable to the scene, even though that type of embodied presence in fieldwork and in our representations of qualitative research is precisely what I advocate as a feminist ethnographer. (Ellingson, 2009). Thus, the mythic reality of The Ethnogs continually teaches me to be a better ethnographer by honing the skills of attention, openness, and conscious embodiment, all the while showing me one heck of a good time.

Riffing on Rip: Reflections on My Life Among The Ethnogs

I was wandering around backstage one night in 1969, looking for a place to relieve myself, when some guy yelled, “Hey, you! Help me with this amp!” The next thing I knew I was waking up, sprawled across two seats on a tour bus, trying to remember the night before, and wondering why my back was sore. I have been an off-and-on roadie for several bands ever since, including The Ethnogs, The Grateful Dead, Little Feat, Rat Dog, and, more recently (though I’m not sure how or why) Robert Randolph’s Family Band. Weird. When people ask me why I do this hard labor, I scratch myself and say, “I know. It’s only rock ‘n roll. But I like it. Besides, I’m good at carrying stuff.” (From the Autobiography of Rip Tupp)

My character, Rip the Roadie, has recently morphed into a security officer position. Actually, he is a hybrid. His roadie side is mellow, a bit dazed and confused, and easily distracted. But strong. His security side likes power way too much.

I see this performance as a way to get at some of the complex contours of my own personality—it allows me to reach for what C. G. Jung called the “shadow” or what some might call “the dark side” of my self. I also get to play a little, improvising my way into, across, and through some of the dialectics that live inside me—between my focused and clear side and my dazed and confused side; between the quiet, calm self and the fiery, hair-trigger self; between the follower in me and the leader/enforcer in me; between the “good guys” and the “bad guys” that lurk somewhere in there, and so on. For that matter, it also lets me play out some of the personality “shades” and the communication styles of other people I know—some of whom I like very much, others whom I can barely stand to be around.

For example, though I am only a convenience rule follower myself, I have, for some reason, always wanted to kick someone’s ass for not following the rules. You know, yell a little, throw a little macho around, be THE ENFORCER. Throw a guy who breaks in a line out of the building.

When I was a kid growing up in the 1960s, my friends and I liked to play cops and robbers, or cowboys and Indians, or Green Berets and Viet Cong. I played both roles in each of these pairs. It was fun to be the “bad guy”—you got to do things you weren’t normally allowed to do—true fun. It was also fun to be the “badass”—you know, the Green Beret who kicks ass and takes names. There was a part of me that wanted to be a cop someday. But, of course, it was the 1960s. The cop was “the man”—and, at the time, being “the man” was *not* a good thing.

One day, pretty early in my life, I bought an album. The *Animals*, with the hit song “House of the Rising Sun.” At first, I didn’t understand the lyrics. But the mournful blues tune spoke to something deep inside me . . . a little melancholy edge that later became more prominent. At the time, I lived in two worlds. Maybe you could say I was two people or had two sides to me at least. Part of me was a happy little kid who wanted nothing more than to play baseball, with a big cheesy grin on my face. And then eat a snow cone.

Another part of me—the emerging adolescent—was dark. I *cultivated* angst. I donned a black t-shirt and ripped jeans and shades and grew my hair out. I, like my friends, became obsessed with rock ‘n roll, jazz, the blues—any music that expressed the rebellion, the anger, the angst, or

simply the disaffection we were feeling (or at least *supposed* to be feeling). And then we went to the woods to smoke a joint.

We *all* wanted to be rock stars, though few of us had the gumption to actually try to learn to play a guitar. Everybody wanted to be Hendrix or Clapton or Page or Jeff Beck or Pete Townshend or Carlos Santana or Duane Allman. I was one of the lazy ones. I never actually tried to play a guitar. A little like my baseball career—I wanted to play (and I did) but I didn't really want to *practice* all that much.

As for the music, I went to concerts to hear my “guitar heroes.” I saw some great shows—The Allman Brothers, Led Zeppelin, The Who, The Moody Blues, Traffic, The Dead, Deep Purple, Pink Floyd, The Stones, Dylan—the list goes on. At one of these concerts, I stumbled backstage.
...

Years later, when the opportunity arose to play a part in the reunion of The Ethnogs, I jumped at the chance. Or, rather, like most things in my life, I stumbled into it. Literally, they asked me to help them move some equipment and my character, Rip Tupp, was born. Rip is a minor player, more of an additive than an ingredient. I kind of like that, actually. But I can say this about the experience: It has awakened in me a side that I wasn't fully aware of, but I am really ready to embrace. I *like* to perform, and I love performance and performance studies. This experience has awakened in me a passion I did not know I had and opened up a whole new area of scholarship for me.

I suppose it should come as no surprise that this is true— after all, autoethnography and performance have much in common. Both center on the lived, *embodied* experiences of human life—brimming with emotion, spirit, drive, passion, care, compassion, fear, joy, intuition, and inspiration. These forms of scholarship tap into the deeper wells of human consciousness— where, if we have the audacity to search, we might just locate the power of memory, dream, reflection, emotion, imagination—the wellspring of mythic, archetypal energies that point the way toward truly transcendent experiences (Poulos, 2009).

I also admit that, having put my nose to the grindstone for many years, following my family legacy of a near-obsessive Protestant/Puritan work ethic, I am drawn to anything that lets me *play* a little. I like the idea of *playing* a part. Mostly, I really like the whole spontaneous, imaginative *play* of improvisation that Rip Tupp allows—maybe even *forces*—me to embrace. Or at least stumble into. At the least, for me as a scholar, playing with this role has opened new doors for me in my search. I see my own scholarly identity morphing, much as Rip's has, into some sort of auto-ethno-performo hybrid. I find myself liking what's coming of this.

I look forward to playing some more.

Rock Hard, Hard Rock: Reflections of a Plaster Caster

Some Chicago girls from within the larger consortium of “groupies” (intense followers of rock groups), turned their avocation into an art form. Led by Cynthia, who as a schoolgirl had been instructed by her teacher to fashion a plaster cast of an object that could retain

its shape and returned with one made from the engorged member of a prominent teen idol, the girls christened themselves “The United Plaster Casters of Chicago.” For their field work (backstage, in hotel rooms, or even at airports) they carried calling cards promising “Lifelike Models Of Hampton Wicks” and a suitcased kit consisting of wax, clay, some oatmeal perhaps, and aluminum foil, together with an “algenator,” a receptacle for “dick dipping.” (Whitcomb, 1997)

Some of the most intriguing and unusual material artifacts of rock ‘n’ roll from the late 1960s and early 1970s are the work of plaster caster groupies. The women who engaged in this occupation were on the cutting edge of the sexual revolution, changing the connotative meaning of the word “groupie” to be much sluttier and more powerful. Cynthia P. Caster (referenced in the opening quote) believes she first heard Peter Noone use the term “groupie” negatively, likely because he was miffed that ladies were acting as sexually independent as he and other rock stars, choosing multiple partners just like the boys in the bands—can you say “double standard?” (Harward, 2002).

This is why I decided to assume this artistic role for The Ethnogs. I have always been intrigued (and often ticked off) by different standards for the same behavior when performed by men and by women. I also spent most of the 1960s and 1970s being a “good girl,” so playing this role was a chance to rewind the tape and try something a little different. OK, a LOT different! Parents, see what happens when you don’t let your children go to rock concerts until they are 20 years old?

I’m Darlene Des Barres, third cousin twice removed from the more notorious Pamela, but proud to be a footnote in her “I’m with the Band” book. While my more famous cousin was a groupie for a number of bands, I was a one-band woman—The Ethnogs! They know me as “Miss Darlene” or simply “Darling.” I am their plaster caster. Although I have not achieved the number and variety of plaster penises of the more notorious Cynthia Plaster Caster (aka Cynthia Albritton), she and I hail from the same state, we both do field work, and we are both groupies with artistic aspirations.

My comfort level with this role has varied as we have gone public with our performances, especially when people ask me after our presentations, “What’s a plaster caster?” and I must explain it. This identity was particularly vulnerable to the criticism we received after our performance at the NCA preconference. However, playing such a slutty role (although I am a one-band plaster caster, monogamous as it were) has given me an opportunity to examine gendered aspects of the sexual side of rock ‘n’ roll, or more accurately, roles.

As Patty/Dottie discussed earlier, the “Nogheads” redefined our roles as “FemNogs,” to infuse our group with feminist principles and explicitly address criticism. I also have come to see plaster casters less as being “in service” to the “masculine principle” (Whitcomb, 1997) and more, as Camille Paglia described them, as examples of women taking control (Villines, 2001).

In addition, as I examine my discomfort and sometimes-a-little-guilty amusement revealing and connecting to this character, I realize there is much more to it than a good girl–bad girl dichotomy and the explicitly sexual nature of the role.

I am more than female in this scenario—I am an “older” female (you know, over 50). It’s just not “proper” for “someone like me” to be playing penis games with anyone, not even with a mythical band. Our social system tends to render older women’s everyday sexuality invisible. Oh, it’s fine for aging women to have sex, as long as we don’t see it or talk about it.

Playing the role of Darlene has encouraged me to examine my sexual self, and my sexual future, in my aging female body, and it has broadened the scope of my research on aging in the academy (Mills, 2008). This role has given me visceral experience with social judgment (from others and from myself) related to performing “middle-aged woman.” It has made me more mindful of the connections between work and play and the performance of identity. It has also made me more aware of automatic and habitual ways of thinking that affect how we see ourselves and others (Langer, 1989). And so even though I have never actually made a plaster cast, my performance as a mythic plaster caster gives me a chance to do something I have never experienced, not as an “other” but as “an-other” part of myself.

In short, the novelty of this engagement with the ongoing Ethnog gig has provided a unique opportunity to learn about embodied scholarship, which has been a journey of self-discovery and reflection. Not to mention a brush with rock ‘n’ roll greatness. You might say I have “hard evidence” that The Ethnog and FemNog ethnographic way of life has fostered a novel learning community of creative scholars.

Storying Sara

“While the image of a groupie often has negative sexual connotations for female music fans, it continues to endure, despite the many progressions over the years to dispel gender stereotypes. With the media constantly perpetuating the traditional stereotype, will the groupie stigma ever be shattered?” (Coutts, 2005)

Creating an alternative identity is not something I had ever thought about. But when my path crossed with The Ethnogs in 2007, I considered it. On the one hand, the idea of exploring alternative identities with this group of scholars was exciting. But how would I do this? Who would I be? What would she be like? For me the creation of this alternative identity has been much more of a challenge than I expected.

I thought being a member of the band would be cool, but The Ethnogs had already formed the group and were busily creating the band’s identity and biography. Next, I considered being a groupie. At the time, it seemed like an obvious choice since being a band member did not seem to be an option. But did I really want to be a *stereotype*? Especially a stereotype with blatantly negative associations? While I do not claim to be a feminist scholar, I *am* a feminist. So the thought of constructing an identity that is a certified (or maybe certifiable) “band groupie” caused me more than a bit of angst. For me, the stereotypical groupie is a vacuous, powerless, objectified female, driven to follow her favorite band and to offer sexual favors in exchange for the privilege of hanging out with the guys. Or, she is drugged up, wild, and out of control—requiring forcible removal from the concert venue.

I was also bothered that being a groupie seemed to be my only choice. In our group's discussion of possible identities that we could develop for the project, it was agreed that we could be whatever we wanted. But in the history of rock 'n' roll during the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of performers were men, though there were exceptions like Janis Joplin and Grace Slick. As feminist music scholar Daphne Brooks (2008) pointed out, the world of performance then was mostly closed to women. But I could have created that persona and performed an identity as a female rocker in The Ethnogs. In some ways, my own myopia was worse than being a stereotype.

I was also concerned about what colleagues at my university might think of me. Would this be considered "real" research? How would it be evaluated? How would *I* be evaluated? While being a tenured full professor has its advantages, I still did not want to risk my professional credibility.

Ultimately I decided to join the FemNogs because I felt a camaraderie with this group of feminist scholars, and their reframing of their groupie fan club as the "FemNogs" mitigated my discomfort by offsetting the stereotype. I also realized that studying an alternative identity was as legitimate as studying any other aspect of personal identity. In addition, I made Sara the younger sister of Dougie. I thought that a sister of a band member legitimized my "groupieness" somehow; at least I felt like less of a stereotype. This compromise quieted my lingering self-doubts and allowed me to embrace my virtual self.

Perhaps most importantly, I decided to have fun with Sara and enjoy the ride. Like the other participants, I thought I needed to have more fun in my life, and the rest of the group seemed to be having a blast. Why was I so anxious about it?

So I storied Sara's character to make her more interesting and a lot less uptight than I am. Though she has always been devoted to her brother Dougie, she was also "slightly slutty" in her younger days and easily distracted by musicians in other bands. In fact, she was a seriously devoted Eagles fan (a remnant of my actual self). While traveling with The Ethnogs, she often disappeared for days at a time to follow The Eagles. She had (and still does, rumor has it), a particular liking for Don Henley. She has even been forcibly removed from more than one concert venue—and then incarcerated.

Like my coauthors, therefore, I am learning to "play" with this character's story. Thanks to The Ethnogs and my FemNog colleagues, we have cocreated a safe space for us to explore alternative stories of identity. Does Sara's story reveal, counter, and/or perpetuate the groupie stereotype? I think the answer to that lies in how I continue to story her life.

Concluding Remarks

Among its goals, the project hopes to examine how the mythology of American music, particularly rock 'n' roll, works and how that intersects with people's other identities and experiences, including, in their case, their academic identities and experiences as teachers and researchers. (from the blog of Ray Schuck, *on tunesmate.com*)

The Ethnogs project has evolved in unintended ways and has led to a number of interesting insights as we have created and performed our alternative identities surrounding this mythic rock band. First, in “playing” our characters associated with The Ethnogs, we all have learned the value of *play* in our personal and professional lives. Gentile (2004) argued that storytelling can be considered a “healing art,” and creating and performing our roles in The Ethnogs did indeed help some of us deal with and move on from various life traumas. In addition, given that all of us are experiencing “middle age” to varying degrees, we are acutely aware that we want to live more in the moment and have more fun. As Huizinga (1955) reminded us, playing is important to humans precisely because it involves a “fun-element” with minimal or no instrumental functions. Whatever else The Ethnogs project might offer, it demonstrates the value of fun and contests “seriousness” as requisite to a “real” academic performance.

Second, each of us has also experienced a certain amount of personal and institutional risk by participating in this project. We each have asked ourselves how promiscuous and/or ridiculous we wish to appear, especially at academic conventions. This project has reminded us that there are risks, especially career risks, to engaging in such play in academe. Unfortunately, despite scholarship on the importance of play and the espoused freedom of expression on college campuses, academia is not a particularly welcoming place to play, especially with your professional identity, mythic or otherwise. We have received criticism from colleagues and have been the subject of some negative press in media stories and blogs. It is no accident that all of us are tenured professors—we would not be doing this project if we were untenured.

Finally, this project suggests a line of scholarship we call “automythography.” As we define it, automythography is the excavation of cultural myths (including beliefs, practices, and stereotypes) through the critical reading of narrative accounts, invented or experienced, of a particular period or about a set of events. We believe that scholars can learn about the myths that drive a certain group or era by creating and telling stories about that group or era. Many researchers understand that the objective truth of a particular story (whether the person lived the events or can detail events “as if” they lived them) may be less important than the underlying moral or myth of the story. In this way, whether or not we are or have ever been rock stars or groupies, our stories about The Ethnogs reveal certain myths (stereotypes, practices, norms, etc.) about rock n’ roll culture.

We find it interesting, for example, that given the opportunity to assume any identity associated with the music scene of the 1960s and 1970s, we all more or less conformed to stereotypes as band members, groupies, and a roadie/security man. Perhaps we took on such roles so that our history and culture of the band would be credible. Or perhaps these available stereotypes and narrative structures facilitated our collective play. Or was it that seemingly superficial characters and storylines drew us into collective fantasies and cultural histories, resonating within and beyond our immediate performances as we recreated and reworked these stereotypes and structures?

This project in itself is a play on academic performance, rock and roll nostalgia, and the embodied pleasures of music and camaraderie and scholarly research. We do not know where it might lead, but we will continue to push the actual (and mythical) boundaries between scholarship and play. And The Ethnogs will continue to play.

We invite you to play with us. All you need to do is tell your story. . .

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. For an altogether different counternarrative, see self-proclaimed “queen of the groupies” Pamela Des Barres’s (2008) redemption of rock band groupies as musical muses in *Let’s Spend the Night Together: Backstage Secrets of Rock Muses and Supergroupies*. Dottie is no muse.
2. The student was Diane Miller who received one of the Ethnography Division’s 2009 Top 4 paper awards for a paper based on her dissertation.

Author Note

The Ethnogs include Nick Trujillo (aka “Gory Bateson”) and Bob Krizek (aka “Dougal Macrorie”), The FemNogs include Patty Sotirin (aka “Dottie”), Laura Ellingson (aka “Darla”), Melanie Bailey Mills (aka “Darlene Des Barres”), and Shirley Drew (aka “Saralaughs Macrorie”), and “Rip Tupp” is Chris Poulos.

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