Rude Boy Subculture, Critical Pedagogy, and the Collaborative Construction of an Analytic and Evocative Autoethnography

J. Patrick Williams¹ and Muhammad Kamal Jauhari bin Zaini²

Abstract
This article theorizes and performs an analytic and evocative autoethnography about participation in the Rude Boy subculture in Singapore in the 2000s. Relying on critical pedagogy and a performative conception of subcultural theory, we analyze the second author’s past self as a Rude Boy through a collaborative narrative that emerged out of a university course–based research project on youth subcultures. Our narrative, which includes the reproduction of field notes, reflective journals, interviews, and dialogue between the authors, is intended to simultaneously question the assumed dichotomy between analytic and evocative autoethnographic forms and to highlight the potential for a critical pedagogy that brings teachers and students together to create new understandings of the self. The article also highlights the personal and pedagogical outcomes of dealing academically with a subcultural past and extends a dialogic approach to studying subcultural participation and experience.

¹Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
²National University of Singapore, Singapore

Corresponding Author:
J. Patrick Williams, Division of Sociology, Nanyang Technological University, 14 Nanyang Dr., HSS-05-41, Singapore, 637332, Singapore.
Email: patrick.williams@ntu.edu.sg
Keywords
autoethnography, critical pedagogy, performance, Rude Boy, Singapore, subculture, symbolic interaction, youth

Introduction

A student in an undergraduate course on youth subcultures writes the following as he attempts to make sense of his own prior participation in the Rude Boy subculture:

I know what it means to choose the path different from the “others”; the subcultural path. I was never that popular kid in school. The circle of friends that I had called themselves the “non-MTV” kids, the ones who were definitely different; the non-mainstream. We were often branded as “troublemakers” by teachers and students alike. But we held our heads up high, wearing the label as a badge of honor of sorts simply because we wanted to be seen as different.

How could (or should) a teacher reading autoethnographic work interpret this? Thinking more specifically of the debate in the special issue of *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, August 2006, 35 (4), on analytic autoethnography, to what extent might such writing be “analytic” (Anderson 2006) on the one hand, versus “evocative” (Ellis 1997) on the other. These terms have been used not merely as descriptions of types of ethnography but normative statements about what autoethnography can or should be (Charmaz 2006).

The boundaries of traditional ethnographic practice have been disrupted not only within symbolic interactionism, the perspective that frames our writing, but within many other disciplines across the social sciences, education, and beyond. These disruptions have occurred both at the level of *doing* ethnography—i.e., as a process of studying culture and meaning—as well as at the level of *writing* ethnography—i.e., what ethnographers produce from their research. Many of these disruptions were rallied under the banner of, first, postmodernism, and, subsequently, evocative or emotional autoethnography (Ellis 1997), terms intended to foreground the importance of the subjective, emotional experiences of authors. Autoethnographers retroactively and selectively write about experiences and often deal with epiphanies—“remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; see also Denzin 1989a). Alongside a focus on the significance of personal experience, there has emerged an interest in producing aesthetic and evocative texts that rely as much or more on literary conventions of scholarly production as on social
scientific ones (Ellis and Ellingson 2000). Breaking away from autoethnographers who make explicit analytic links between lived biography and larger social processes (e.g., Ronai 1995), some proponents of the evocative approach have given up any obvious reference to social context, turning instead to what some see as a “self-indulgent [form of writing that] is sometimes more akin to therapy than social science” (Walford 2004, 412) and which focuses exclusively on the subjectivity of the author(s) to the extent that it borders on narcissism. In response to the latter, Anderson (2006) sought to reclaim a realist- or critical-realist-oriented version of autoethnography. In this formulation, autoethnography would have five features based upon researchers being “complete” insiders, analytically reflexive, visible in the research, and committed to an analytic agenda, as well as engaging other informants. These features are taken to represent key aspects of methodological rigor through which the validity of autoethnographic writing may be judged within social science.

Back to the excerpt from a student essay. I (the first author) did not choose it randomly; it was written by Jauhari, the second author, as part of an assignment in my course on youth subcultural studies. By my measure, Jauhari was doing analytic work according to Anderson’s criteria for autoethnography. The excerpt above, for example, illustrated his insider status and reflexivity vis-à-vis cultural difference, as well as an analytical interest in identity with an emphasis on insider-outsider dichotomies. Yet his writing also evoked emotions in me as I read it. I was transported back to my own past, which included subcultural participation. I remembered my own feelings of difference, of being labeled by adults, and both the good and bad times that resulted from them. I was also emotionally affected as a teacher, not least because my own ideas about pedagogy clashed with how I saw his teachers having acted toward him. I came to feel connected to Jauhari because of what and how he wrote. I saw his writing as an example of “interpretive interactionism . . . the attempt to make the world of problematic lived experience of ordinary people directly available to the reader” (Denzin 1989b, 7), while also dealing with the connections between such personal troubles and larger social structures within which they occur (Mills 1959). I also believed that it was my own story-telling in class that, at least partially, led to Jauhari’s willingness to share his own story as part of the process of writing subculture. Thus, I felt implicated within Jauhari’s presentation of self.

In this article, we wish to extend the conversation about the overlaps and cleavages between the analytic and evocative traditions in autoethnography. We believe that it was possible, even desirable, to be analytic and evocative at the same time and therefore argue that a key contribution in this article lies in how it fills the gap made between scholars’ expectations between what
analytic and evocative forms of autoethnography should look like. Equally important is our desire to discuss the process through which two scholars may cocreate an autoethnographic account of one person’s experiences. As teacher and student who shared something from our respective youths, we wanted to write about the collaborative experiences that shaped Jauhari’s project and to perform it as an alternate way of speaking to other scholars about ethnographic findings. Yet our collaboration differed from what we saw in the literature. We had created a performance after having read much of Denzin’s (2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2007a) work on performance autoethnography and performance pedagogy, but Denzin’s work was different in two ways. First, his autoethnographic performances are single-authored and, second, he reappropriates and recontextualizes others’ voices into his own work and according to his own design. Similarly, we found differences when looking at collaborative autoethnographic writing such as Ellis and Bochner’s (2006), in which Ellis takes the first-person position while her partner is placed as a third person in her story, even as he spoke his lines and was assigned authorship. A second goal of this article is thus to explore and extend the collaborative nature of autoethnographic accounting in a way that does justice to the multiple voices that create it (see Charmaz and Mitchell 1996).

The result of our collaborative effort might be called a “mixed-genre narrative” (Denzin 2002, 2007b) that weaves together recollections (Rath 2012), conventional social-scientific writing, and a dialogue between the authors to function as a type of “writing story” (Richardson 1995). At its core is a dialogic performance narrative through which “teacher” and “student” interact to collaboratively analyze Jauhari’s subcultural self. Because of status and ethnic/cultural differences between the authors, issues of authority inadvertently arose and had to be dealt with. One of our concerns revolved around how Patrick could participate in Jauhari’s project on subcultural experience. Both of us also supported an educational model that went beyond traditional teacher and learner roles as well as the expectations for the production of objectively valid “findings.” Because of these issues of reflexive positioning and critical pedagogy, we first decided to create a performance, which took place in November 2012 at a youth cultures conference in Australia. There, with a single image of a group of Malay-Singaporean Rude Boys floating on the wall behind us, we performed a dialogic narrative that was later expanded and couched within the context of analytic and evocative autoethnography to become this article.

The outcome of our engagement was a shared meaning-making process wherein the distinction between who said what became less important than the story that is finally being told (Paulus, Woodside, and Ziegler 2010). The dialogue became a shared autoethnographic account, “our story” (Bruce
2010). “Focus[ing] on the authors’ experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011), we have mixed conventional socioscientific framing of methodological and pedagogical issues with stories and analysis of past subcultural experiences to provide a “layered account” (Ronai 1995) of doing selfhood and autoethnography collaboratively. We see this process as crucial in unpacking the relationship between being analytical and being evocative, as well as in opening up new forms of collaborative autoethnography and performance texts.

Setting the Scene

Field notes, old memories, notes taken in class or while reading, discussions in and out of the classroom between teacher and student, and reflexive moments in the minds of the authors: these are the resources from which we construct our collaborative, performative autoethnography about reinterpreting subcultural experiences within the institution of education. In this section, each author takes a turn describing and dealing with issues that were relevant to his participation in this project. For Patrick, these issues included teaching a course in a way that maximized student engagement and opportunities to develop analytic skills, mitigating the disconnect between the teacher’s goals and students’ expectations, as well as whether and how to turn Jauhari’s reflexivity and presentation of self, as evident in his coursework, into a meaningful learning experience. For Jauhari, relevant issues included sociologically reconciling his subcultural past, which was fraught with painful memories and unresolved issues as a scholar-in-training, learning academically to comprehend youth subcultures in a country where the literature is rather scant, and to critically analyze issues of stereotypes pertaining to Malay male youths that are prevalent in the Singaporean education system, and in Singapore more generally.

Relevant Issues for Patrick

This was the first time I was to teach my undergraduate course on youth cultures and subcultures in Singapore. The course was oriented toward Polsky’s idea of “viewing society as a problem for the [subculturalist] rather than the other way round” (Polsky, cited in Williams 2011, p. 4) and was driven primarily by a semester-long project in which students were responsible for individually collecting and analyzing information about a youth cultural or subcultural phenomenon of their choice. Throughout the semester, students interacted with a body of subcultural studies literature and completed weekly analyses that corresponded to the theories and concepts being covered in
class (see Williams 2008). This required that they do three things: first, collect or make data having to do with the subculture they were studying; second, tie those data to theories or concepts from the course materials for that week (such as hegemony, labeling, style, resistance, homology, identity, media, or stratification); and third, write up a weekly essay that others in the class could access and comment on. By the end of the semester, each student would have a portfolio consisting of a minimum of eight analytic essays related to a single subculture. Having taught the course several times in the United States, I had come to expect a fair mix of students who had subcultural experiences or proclivities to guide their engagement in this course. But Singapore and its educational system is quite different from what can be found in North America or Europe.

Singapore is well known for its authoritarian policies, many of which affect the everyday lives of young people. Students are raised within a system that historically has placed a premium on performance on standardized testing (Cheah 1998). In their discourse-analytic study of everyday talk, Anderson and Weninger (2012) show how Singaporean students are preoccupied with individual accomplishment, viewing learning as an individual cognitive achievement with an end product, even in learning contexts where performance is not being measured by teachers. Students' achievements are implicitly understood as being for the State rather than for themselves. Educational policies and practices also promote young people's acceptance of the idea that the State and family come before the individual (Ng 2008; Weninger and Kho 2014; Zhao 2005); thus, individuality and nonconformity become insufferable breaches of civic responsibility. Strict codes on appearance and demeanor further control personal expression in primary and secondary schools, and there are few channels in which youths can self-express outside of commodity consumption (Chua 2003). The educational system supports and defends an emphasis on uncritical acceptance of rules. In 2013, a group of five female secondary school students had their heads shaved at a Children's Cancer Foundation's “Hair for Hope” charity event. When three of them returned to school without wearing wigs, they were suspended by the female principal, who feared the potential of a bald head's subcultural symbolism. “The school's rules do not allow ‘punk, unfeminine or sloppy hairstyles.’ Said principal Marion Tan: ‘It's very clear in our mission: it's about their turnout as a young lady”’ (Chua 2013). Only a concerted public backlash and the eventual intervention by Singapore's Education Minister restored the students’ place in the classroom.

And so I should not have been surprised when students in the course, with the exception of Jauhari, reported having no participatory youth subcultural experiences. Likewise, students engaged in third-person, objective,
report-style writing, even when discussing subcultures to which they expressed a sincere, if often voyeuristic, interest. I struggled to find ways in which to connect with students on topics of alternative youth culture, relying often on telling stories related to my own experiences, but finding they rarely had stories about themselves to share in return. As the course progressed, it became clear that Jauhari’s work was qualitatively different; he was the only student who explicitly identified with a subcultural past and his writing took on a first-person perspective. As we progressed through the course, I provided regular feedback to students and specifically encouraged Jauhari to continue bringing personal experiences into his writing. After the end of the semester, when grades had been posted, I asked Jauhari via email whether he would be interested in working together to further analyze his essays for a paper on Rude Boys in Singapore. After a few months of collaborative work, we decided to forgo a traditional study on Rude Boys and to focus instead on Jauhari’s recounting of his Rude Boy past. As we progressed, I became uncomfortable treating his past as an “object” of analysis and we decided to produce a more reflexive and dialogic text that highlighted the process of (re)constructing the subcultural self and that gave each of us an explicit voice (Berry and Clair 2011). At this stage, the project became a collaborative, performative autoethnography.

Relevant issues for Jauhari

Traditional scholarship pins the emergence of the Rude Boy subculture to the political and economic uncertainties that characterized Jamaica and the United Kingdom in the 1960s and to the rise in popularity of the ska music genre in both countries. The emergence of Rude Boy was intricately tied to the lives of poor Jamaican youths who migrated to urban towns and/or to the United Kingdom in search of employment opportunities. Dislocated and marginalized from the formal economy, these youths straddled the line “between the licit and illicit economy to make ends meet” (Heathcott 2003, p. 193). While some of them did engage in criminal enterprises such as drug-peddling, gambling, and prostitution, much of what came to be commonly known as Rude Boy, however, had to do with noncriminal, but nevertheless subcultural, practices surrounding the production and consumption of ska music. Indeed, it was through music and associated styles that Jamaican Rude Boys came into sustained contact with white, working-class British youths, which became key in the emergence of white British youth subcultures such as Mod and later Punk (Hebdige 1979). Likewise, Jones (1988) discussed how both black and white working-class, inner-city youths “adopted the Rude Boy idiom as a tool of protest amidst a climate of disintegration and decline in the
fortunes of working-class families” (cited in Heathcott 2003, p. 197). Rude Boy was thus, from the beginning, a subculture rooted in colonialism and race/ethnicity.

In the former colony of Singapore, we Malay “Rudies” (a slang version of Rude Boys) stood on the corners of tourist hotspots sporting pork pie hats and listening to 2Tone British ska music. To a cultural studies–trained scholar, the appearance of Rude Boy style in Southeast Asia would likely be explained as the subculture’s simultaneous “diffusion and defusion” into a new, albeit still class-based, recycling of working-class youth cultural style (Clarke 1976). But as a Malay Singaporean Rude Boy, such ideas stood in stark contrast to my own subcultural experiences. In fact, the academic claim of subcultural style “recycling” would have been offensive to us since it was as good as saying that we were mere copycats. I didn’t see myself as a copycat but rather as just another Rudie doing his thing:

You know, the rude boys are back [and] they’re ruder than ever. (Gilroy 2003, p. 4).

We were Rude Boys, we were different from other kids. We did not seek to copy others, but to be our own. Indeed, we were our own.

I for one felt a gap between my subcultural experiences and the existing literature on the Rude Boy subculture, which has put pivotal importance on class, thereby linking subculture to political-economy (Hall and Jefferson 1976). My Rudie compatriots and I were faced neither with dire economic circumstances as was the case with Jamaican Rudies, nor conflicting racial ideologies as with white British Rudies. With the exception of a few drop-outs, we were full-time students in formal educational institutions. Just kids trying to make our way in life. The Rude subcultural life in Singapore was as much about a shared collective identity and having fun as it was about developing “solutions” to the problems of dealing with a dominating educational system. Our subcultural lives had relatively little to do with class-based marginalization as such; it was more about racial and ethnic-based classifications, and most importantly about our desire for individuality in a culture that is notably conservative in terms of how young people are raised and taught (Englehart 2000; Mauzy and Milne 2002).

Patrick’s emphasis on the significance of studying lived experiences throughout the course—moving away from the armchair theorizing that unfortunately makes up much of the existing literature on Rude Boys—led me to critically think about and reflect on my subcultural experiences. I recognized that taking Patrick’s subcultures course was improving my understanding of subcultural participation by reflecting on my insider’s perspective.
Reading the course materials throughout the semester was refreshing given how little we as students are able to deal critically with such topics. Indeed, studies on youth subcultures in Singapore are few and far between. For literature on youth more broadly, studies are typically framed in terms of behavioral and pathological issues (e.g., Kee et al. 2003; Yiu 2009; Chu et al. 2012) on the one hand, and research on consumption, style, and identity on the other (e.g., Chua 2003 on Ah Bengs; Mattar 2003 on hip-hop consumption through the Internet; Williams and Ho [forthcoming] on K-pop fan identity). Because schooling becomes a primary institution in which young people’s identities are shaped, studies often deal with youths in the formal educational system and focus on low academic achievement or other forms of (quasi-)criminal and deviant tendencies. This was no surprise to me; as will be shown in the dialogue below, being a subculturalist in formal educational settings, I was treated as a pathology of sorts. My frequent brushes with the Discipline Master culminated in a series of “professional preventive and intervention” techniques used to find out what was wrong with me. “It’s for your own good,” the teachers used to say.

As a sociology student, I came to feel that there was an ethnic undertone that rooted discourse about Malays’ academic underachievement and delinquent tendencies and that I had been taught to see myself as part of the “Malay problem,” a theory of cultural deficiency used by Singapore’s elites to blame the Malay community for its failure to live up to mainstream (Chinese) cultural standards. Stimpfl (1997) has argued that because Singapore is a Sinocentric culture, Malay students engage in “non-cooperative” behavior such as being late to class and not conforming to schools’ dress regulations as a way of “fitting in” with minority peers while distinguishing themselves from the Chinese. To be academically successful or follow the rules too fastidiously meant risking being seen as a Chinese wannabe and then ousted by peers. This was more salient among the male Malay students, particularly those in the lower-ability stream (Stimpfl 1997; Baharom 2012).

I agree with Stimpfl’s argument and its implications. From the inside, this has much to do with identity and social belonging, which was exactly what I felt as a Rude Boy. Yet, in an education system that narrowly defines academic achievement and demands “proper” demeanor and behavior at all times, teachers would usually construe us Rudies as a form of defiance that required “intervention.” This further reinforced the stereotypical notion of Malays (especially males) as being lazy, academically underachieving, and generally problematic from the teachers’ side, and strengthened our commitment to doing things our way.

Negative stereotypes become particularly pronounced for male Malay subculturalists. Writing on the heavy metal music scene in Singapore in the
1970s–1990s, Liew and Fu noted how young Malay males became prime victims/suspects of the discourses reacting to imported Western culture.

Their emphasis on music, which included singing and loitering around public housing estates served to further reinforce pre-existing [ethnic] notions of Malay youth as “lazy” and incapable of academic excellence and discipline. Drug-related moral panics in the 1970s and 1980s also tended to stereotype male Malay youths as having a propensity to consume drugs, which was commonly believed to be related to their interest in metal music and the hedonism of a rock and roll lifestyle. (2006, 103)

Much of my own experiences resonated with these ethnic stereotypes of the Malay male, which at first glance may appear somewhat similar to the working-class lads’ resistant culture discussed by Willis (1977). Yet it was specifically the clash of class cultures that was central in Willis’ analysis, and here is where my own experience diverged. Willis described a seemingly monolithic “parent culture” that taught the lads to be suspicious and disdainful of schooling. I may come from what scholars would classify as a “working-class family” (living in a one-room rental apartment with a single-mother who struggled to make ends meet by working as a cleaner), but my mother profoundly held the belief that the only way for us to get out of our circumstances was through education, which I understood as getting good grades in school. In fact, the parents of most of my peers supported the teachers. I remember regularly sitting down with friends to compare the “ass-whooping” we each got when our parents decided to tag-team with the teachers, dishing out additional punishments at home when we complained of being punished unfairly in school. As such, it wasn’t so much some implicit working-class assumption that we “would probably not get ‘good jobs’” (McLaren and Scatamburlo-D’Annibale 2004:42) that made us defy the teachers, but rather the collective desire to express individuality; if there was any group-consciousness here, it was based on our ethnicity rather than class.

Unlike my teachers, I saw no dissonance between being subcultural and getting good grades . . . or at least trying to. As a Rude Boy in the higher-ability stream in school, I inhabited a sort of liminal space, which made me, in the eyes of the teachers (then) and myself (later), even more troubling (see also Rizvi 2004). I think teachers believed that I could be “saved” if they just tried hard enough. As for my own view of things, reading about Rude Boys academically for the first time, I quickly found myself asking, “was I ever really a Rude Boy, given the extent to which my own experiences departed from the scholarly accounts of the Rude Boy subculture?” Looking back now, I wonder, was I just an oddball who was trying to look tough by putting on a subcultural mask? How can I reconcile these juxtaposing experiences?
“On Being a Rude Boy in the Classroom”: A Dialogic Narrative on the Subcultural Self

Jauhari: When I first entered Patrick’s class, I knew right away that I would re-tell the tale of my subcultural past through the portfolio entries that were part of the coursework requirements of the course. But this was more than just coursework; in re-telling my subcultural past, I would be (re)creating a subcultural experience through a fresh lens. Piecing together the different parts, the line between the past and present was blurred—I was re-living my subcultural past, so to speak. Yet, this experience was something new, something different. It all started to make sense: the mockery from the teachers, the psychiatric evaluations, the nights my Rude compatriots and I spent chatting away on how fucked up adults are.

Patrick: I have felt a need to increasingly mix two pedagogical approaches in the course. The first is rather traditional—I want students to learn to read social theory, method, and research and to assess its strengths and weaknesses, its epistemological and ontological assumptions . . . in short, to learn the value of reading and writing sociology. Second, I want students to become critically literate. I want them to recognize that social science writing is not Truth; it is perspecti ve. I do not want them to memorize what theorist wrote about what concept or subculture in which book. I want them to walk out of a classroom filled with new ideas that can come from interacting with theory and research. I want them to recognize that many concepts and theories often contradict one another and that that is okay. Perhaps most importantly, I want to maximize the students’ ability to choose what to study and what to write about, based on what they consider important. My desires here align with the critical pedagogy of scholars such as Myles Horton, especially insomuch as I espouse the significance of education for personhood. In my teaching, I focus on nurturing actors able and willing to confront the world out there. My critical pedagogy derives in large part from Horton’s belief that “curiosity is very important . . . and . . . too much of education . . . is either designed to kill curiosity or it works out that way anyway” (Horton and Freire 1990, 191). In my course, I leverage students’ curiosity to promote their active engagement with culture and difference without demanding that students develop a critical stance in their work. The point should not be solely on what I assign in the course, but also on the process of creating and making sense of data through the processes of reading and writing.

******

While part of the course required that students read up on the so-called origins of whatever youth cultural phenomenon they were studying, we found it necessary to leave behind the “official” history of Rude Boy and get into the
lived experiences of it, particularly in terms of place and ethnicity. That does not mean the traditional social-scientific characterization above is unimportant; Jauhari and his compatriots appropriated Rude Boy as a subcultural lifestyle because of such characterizations, which were available in a variety of popular media. The significance of the colonial Jamaican male, transposed to Southeast Asia, was familiar and attractive. In a country where overt political resistance has been outlawed and repeatedly crushed, its perpetrators displayed to the populace, and where youths are constantly exhorted to follow the Confucianist/Asiatic “tradition” of respect for authority, a culture of resistance through style was all the more appealing.

Writing together about what we saw as most important, we felt the need to move away from the “spectacular” aspects of subcultures (e.g., style) to meaning-laden, personal introspection. This need brought with it a desire to express the validity of subcultural experience without being weighed down with history. Thus, we came to autoethnography and performance as a way to highlight subculture as lived, negotiated, and embodied rather than as a static, supra-individual abstraction.

*****

Jauhari: In a recent conversation I had with my sister over dinner, I took the opportunity to discuss the topic of youth and adolescent behaviors since she is a teacher at a local secondary school. While my intention was to discuss adolescent behaviors in general, I was surprised at how quickly the conversation turned into a discussion of “problematic” students. Commenting on a group of students who she deemed were “kids involved in the Goth and Black Metal nonsense,” the discussion inevitably meandered to my own experiences as a “problem” youth. I remember being frequently singled-out by my teachers for being “disruptive” and “inattentive” during lessons. In their eyes, I was a deviant because my outwardly disposition—the way I wore my school uniform and the way I spoke—did not manifest what was deemed appropriate student behavior.

Patrick: Cohen (1972) brings up a very similar point when he says that deviance is neither intrinsic in an act nor a quality in a person. He also says that we should question the labels that powerful individuals in society use to frame certain people and behaviors as problematic. Becker (1963) calls these powerful individuals “moral entrepreneurs” and teachers are certainly one type. They not only decide what is acceptable in the classroom, they often become the frontline enforcers of those norms. But they don’t act alone. As Cohen points out, there are many different kinds of “socially accredited experts” to support the teacher.
Williams and Jauhari

Jauhari: My sister made a comment that captures this process perfectly. She said,

Sister: Remember the time when you had to attend counseling sessions?
Me: Yeah. Almost every other day.
Sister: Well, it’s the same for the students [who are involved in the Goth and Black Metal ‘nonsense’]. But you were more extreme! I remember Mama telling me that the Principal referred you to a psychiatrist for evaluation because your studies were okay but your behavior was not.

I remember the psychiatrist asked me to bring my CD collection to one meeting, saying we could listen and talk about the music. But she just confiscated it all on the grounds that ska music was “dangerous.” I vividly recall her shock upon seeing the title of the first track, Gangsters, by The Specials. In retrospect, I realize that the psychiatrist assumed that ska was “dangerous” since she thought that it was not the usual MTV top-20 music that teenagers listened to. She took the song title at face value, assuming that Gangsters was a valorization of criminal behavior. I highly suspect that she never actually listened to the song.

Patrick: For me it was my father and not a psychiatrist, but the story is similar. I used his truck one night to drive to the grocery store and accidentally left a Suicidal Tendencies cassette in the tape deck. I’ll always remember his reaction the next morning because it seemed so over-the-top to me.

Father: Patrick, do you want to kill yourself?
Me: No dad. Can I have my cassette back?
Father: Then why do you listen to music about people wanting to kill themselves? The first song is called Suicide’s an Alternative!

The whole title was actually Suicide’s an Alternative/You’ll be Sorry, but I knew I wouldn’t win a debate over such “minor” details. Besides, at that point he showed me that he had already pulled all the tape out of the cassette. It hurts to lack the power to properly defend your own interpretation of the music you love. In both our stories, the adults’ actions and the assumptions that underlie them highlight the meaning-making process that shapes definitions of deviance and the reactions that follow. This is one reason I try to make connections with students who have been through similar circumstances. Connecting events in my own biography—events that were instrumental in leading me to be critically reflexive about the taken-for-grantedness...
of reality and morality—to events you have experienced is part of a “reflexive teaching” (Warren 2011) that I hope improves both our understandings of what appear to be generic social processes of enculturation.

Jauhari: Paradoxically, the experience that I had with the psychiatrist further strengthened my resolve to be more deeply involved in the Rude Boy subculture—I wore the deviant label as a badge of honor to assert my subcultural-ness vis-à-vis the mainstream MTV students. I see now that I wasn’t alone in all this. In fact, the subcultures literature shows how similar things happen all over the world. Ironically, in the course of their moral crusade to “save” me from what they perceived was a harmful path, I ended up feeling “abnormal”—the very opposite effect from what the psychiatric treatments were intended to achieve in the first place. All this departed greatly from my own understanding of the Rude Boy subculture. I simply wanted to be different from the rest of the students. While outsiders equate being “different” with being “abnormal” or “deviant,” to be different as an insider is more about experiencing life outside of the labels imposed by the mainstream. For me, Rude Boy was an authentic, lived experience, not a label.

Patrick: What do you mean by “authentic”?

Jauhari: Back then, I certainly felt that I was authentic. I was different. I was a Rude Boy through and through. Never mind what the teachers said, they were a bunch of hypocrites anyway. One week during the course I was invited by a former fellow Rude Boy to a jamming session with a local ska band. I took the opportunity to take some field notes during the session and the late-night supper we had afterwards. What struck me as peculiar was the fact that throughout the jamming session, the lead vocalist Sam [a pseudonym] kept insisting that the band was not just a ska band, but an indie band as well. When asked what he meant by indie, Sam simply replied, “not mainstream.” Our subsequent discussion revealed the importance of having one’s identity and actions seen as independent from mainstream society. When I pressed him on how the band was indie, he said:

Sam: We create our own songs. We play originals, you know. (He laughs.) I mean [being] original is what ska is all about right? The more original, the more Rude. Oh wait, you are no longer original. (We both break out in laughter.)

Patrick: It reminds me of something that I’ve heard said within the straight-edge subculture: “If you’re not now, you never were.” What that means is that claiming to be straightedge is a lifelong commitment. If at any point you
Williams and Jauhari

break the “rules” of the subculture or quit identifying as a member, then your authenticity is erased from the collective memory. You become labeled as somebody who was always just a poseur rather than as ever having been a “real” participant. This is how the boundary between insider and outsider is maintained. In your case, by saying that “real” Rude Boys are indie, Sam proves his own authenticity by calling yours into question.

Jauhari: From the inside then, his definition serves his own identity claims. He, along with many others, measure their indie Rude-ness through its originality. As Sam mentioned, “the more original, the more rude.” However, given that ska music itself is a product of transnational cultural flows, is Sam’s claim of originality really original? As Rude Boys, we were often scoffed at by teachers who insisted that we “stop acting like Jamaicans.” We were made to feel as if we were copycats when, in actuality, we were seeking our own authenticity apart from the mainstream, MTV kids. Sam’s comment on why I am “no longer original” certainly got me thinking about my own subcultural identity. In hindsight, I realize that we Rude Boys see our subcultural identity as something tied up tightly with being Malay, being male, being young, and being disenchanted with the establishment, especially the education system. “Fuck school” was certainly a phrase that was repeated over and over again. Me becoming a university student and a graduate is counter-intuitive to what Sam perceives as an “authentic” Rude Boy. To him, I have not only lost my “originality,” I have even lost my ethnicity. In hindsight, I think Sam felt a rift between us; he felt that the group solidarity we once used to feel together, going against the established norms, being ourselves as Rude Boys, had been lost. I am a bird of a different feather altogether because I no longer exude that ethnicized masculinity that is integral to being a real (Malay) Rude Boy.

Patrick: Authenticity is a topic I’ve been interested in for some time now. Part of the reason goes back to my own adolescence and struggles to be accepted by some of my peers, who felt that my family’s middle-class status precluded me from being a “real” punk. There are at least two approaches to authenticity in sociology: the realist tradition in which social phenomena are treated as “really real” and the social constructionist tradition in which social phenomena are understood to be negotiated, collaborative accomplishments. In the former tradition, objects and processes are authentic or not, while in the latter tradition authenticity is something that must be agreed upon. If you look up authenticity in a dictionary, you will find realist definitions such as in accordance with fact; real or actual; rooted in creativity and self-expression.

******
My research on authenticity has taken a decidedly constructionist approach (e.g., Hochstetler, Copes, and Williams 2010; Lewin and Williams 2009; Vannini and Williams 2009; Williams 2013; Williams and Copes 2005) and I emphasize as much in my teaching. In the subcultures course we spent a week on identity and authenticity. At some point I held an ad hoc debate on whether authenticity was a natural or social phenomenon. I asked to students to choose a side and ended up literally with the class splitting in halves. The arguments put forth by each group were impressive. Some argued for “doing away” with the concept, while others disagreed. Ironically, both sides ended up agreeing that authenticity is a social construct, with some taking a stronger interpretation of W. I. Thomas’s dictum that what people define as real become real in their consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928, p. 572).

*******

Jauhari: The course materials and our debate in class that week really helped me formulate a critical understanding of authenticity. I have always wondered what it felt like to be a “real” Rude Boy—the ones living in 1960s and 70s in the U.K. I remember the times when I was mocked by my secondary school teachers for “acting Jamaican.” Asians should behave as Asians, they would constantly remind us. More specifically, we were told that “real” Malays don’t behave the way we did; we were too “Western” for our own good. While I did not know what it meant back then, it certainly took a toll on me—I frequently questioned the authenticity of my own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Why couldn’t I be a Rude Boy and Malay at the same time? But a Malay Rude Boy, it seems, was too far-fetched a notion for the teachers to comprehend.

*******

I can’t really recall whether or when I “grew out” of the Rude Boy subculture, although Sam seems sure that I have . . . that’s why I am “no longer original.” Despite no longer donning the Rude Boy “uniform,” I know I am a Rude Boy at heart. The subcultural blood has always, and will always be in me. In fact, the adolescent years I spent being torn between conforming and resisting, the years of transition from childhood to adulthood in a political economy that emphasizes the importance of education to “continue Singapore’s competitive economic edge” (to borrow a phrase that my teacher frequently used), have definitely shaped and sharpened my critical view of the world. In that way, Rude Boy is an indelible part of who I am.

*******
Patrick: So part of why you are seen as “no longer original” is because you no longer play by subcultural rules. That is ironic, but not surprising. A lot of subculturalists pride themselves on being critical. Not buying into mainstream, hegemonic culture. But the subculture itself fills in the gaps left by the group’s rejection of certain bits of the mainstream culture. Subcultures come to have their own hegemony.

Jauhari: Yes, believing in the totality of the subculture is the problem. One of my Rude Boy compatriots once said to me, “You walk, breathe, eat, shit, sleep ska. Ska is life. To be Rude is to be ska.” The problem with that mentality is that it becomes just as closed as what Rude Boys are supposed to be resisting.

Patrick: There is a classic article in the sociology of deviance in which Becker (1966) argues that we must choose sides when studying and/or teaching matters of structural inequality. Certainly the willingness to choose sides is part of critical pedagogy as well as of performance theory (Giroux 2007; Denzin 2003c). To take my course means that students should not just view self-identifying subculturalists as deviant or outlandish or crazy, nor as heroes or underdogs. I push them to question deep-seated assumptions and myths that support their opinions and beliefs and to take some responsibility for trying to understand society as the problem for the subculturalist rather than the other way around (McLaren and Kincheloe 2007; Polsky 2005).

But we can go further still. Critical pedagogy can’t rest with taking the side of the subculturalist or with merely criticizing a system that alienates or marginalizes young people. Within the subcultures course I try to provide a healthy dose of skepticism and even criticism about what subculturalists do. I think critical pedagogy calls on students to take account of their own studies of youth cultures and reflect on how their work may create or support social inequalities as much as it gives them insight into those inequalities (see also Ellsworth 1989).

Jauhari: I found the need to think about this when analyzing my Rude Boy past in terms of gender. For example, my interactions with other Rudies were definitely based on gender norms and stereotypes. The bulk of our group identity was anchored in the idea of Rude Boys first and Rude Girls second. I remember vividly how it was the girls who were the “official” booze shoppers. Hanging out in the wee hours of the morning around the City Hall area, alcohol was part and parcel of group life. Since nearly all of us were under legal age, it was the girls’ task to buy alcohol for the group at the nearest 24-hour convenience store.

Reflecting back, I realize that the gendered interactions were embedded in multi-layered and contradictory meanings. At face value, it was only
“natural” that the girls did the shopping; I remember my best friend saying that it was “good training” for them on top of their Home Economics class in school. In one instance, I was chastised for offering to accompany one of the girls to buy alcohol. One of the guys suggested that I should “wear a skirt and panty hose” the following week, much to the delight of the group.

Patrick: Even in so-called “critical spaces” like academia there can be stigma attached to men who associate too closely with “women’s work.” Think of feminism and the looks men get when they claim to be feminists. So when you look at youth, culture, and the importance of establishing gender and sexual identities, it’s not surprising that you would feel chastened for not conforming to what your friends expected. Men who don’t adhere to masculine codes trade away some of their male privilege. That’s a difficult bargain for any man but especially for young men.

Jauhari: Yea, there was a deeper layer to the gendered division of labor as well. Only later did I come to see how relegating the task of buying alcohol to the girls was pragmatic. We all assumed the store clerks would go easy on the girls should they be caught attempting to buy alcohol under age. But here’s the contradiction: despite all our efforts to be masculine, we ironically shirked a task that would otherwise show our masculine bravado. I remember seeing male Skinheads and Punks who hung out in the same vicinity proudly exiting the convenience stores, beers tightly clenched in their fists, wearing proud smiles on their faces as if to say “look, I did it.”

Discussion and Conclusion

In “Writing Stories: Co-Authoring ‘The Sea Monster’, a Writing-Story,” Richardson illuminates fundamental issues in research and writing in the social sciences:

How we theorize about lived experience and how we experience lived experience are at odds. . . . We experience our lives as personal, emotionally meaningful, narratively knowable and tellable. . . . [Yet] as qualitative researchers . . . we cannot . . . write from inside the heads of anyone but ourselves without losing credibility as ethnographers. We can only write “accounts” . . . [even while knowing] from our own lived experience that life as subjectively experienced is the key to understanding the cultural and the sociological. (1995, 194–95)

The rub between analytic and evocative forms of autoethnography continues to focus in part on how ethnographers “account” for themselves within the
social sciences. Advocates of either tradition remain “suspicious of authors’ voices outside of prescribed forms” (Charmaz and Mitchell 1996, 286). This suspicion was no more apparent than in reviewers’ comments on an earlier draft of this article. One reviewer wrote that she/he was emotionally moved by some of the content of the paper and felt that, overall, our manuscript “relies more on the evocative than the analytic.” Another reviewer claimed the opposite: “While much of it might pass muster as ‘analytic,’ not enough of it comes across as sufficiently ‘evocative.’” While supportive, each reviewer felt that more could be done to bring the article around either toward analysis or evocation. Thus, we find ourselves in the gap between trying to account for our own lived experiences while resisting the call to give up either the evocative performance or the analytic focus (see also Wall 2008). As such, another key contribution of this article (beyond bridging the gap between the analytic and the evocative) is in exemplifying some of the possibilities and limitations of collaborative autoethnography and performance.

To be sure, we have sought to express the cultural and sociological significance of learning to reinterpret subcultural experiences within the context of critical pedagogy as well. The teaching–learning nexus is more than a space where static bits of knowledge are passed down or around, or where students are trained to conduct scientific research and to report their findings in accordance with socioscientific norms. It was in the classroom initially, and then for months later as we crafted our performance narrative and discussed various issues related to the project, that our own subcultural affiliations were reenacted and performed as we brought together pedagogy, method, and subjectivity. For Jauhari, the portfolio project was more than just coursework; it embodied critical pedagogy qua performative social science inquiry. To borrow from Denzin, our

commitment to critical pedagogy [has been] an empowering dialogical experience. . . . In [this experience], students [and teachers] take risks and speak from the heart, using their own experiences as tools for forging critical . . . consciousness. . . . Pedagogically and ideologically, the performative becomes an act of doing, a dialogical way of being in the world, a way of grounding performances in the concrete situations of the present. (2007a, 138)

It was through this collaborative autoethnography that Jauhari was able to reconcile juxtaposed subcultural experiences from his youth; indeed, it was emancipatory for him to relive these experiences with Patrick. For Patrick, it demanded a methodological shift into the fields of autoethnography and performativity studies that consequently has broadened his understandings both of what may count as relevant knowledge in social science scholarship
and how the performative act of teaching becomes consequential in a multitude of ways (Liew 2013).

Like critical pedagogy, autoethnography emphasizes reflexivity and the questioning of seated assumptions about objectivity and truth (Atkinson 2006; Warren 2011). In the process of writing about his subcultural past, issues that had been naturalized within the myths of meritocracy, gendered and ethnic underachievement, and “social problems”—emerged for Jauhari. As a Malay Singaporean who graduated from university with top honors during the writing of this article, Jauhari briefly became a poster boy of “minority success” in a country where “the Malay problem” continues to produce objective effects (see Rahim [1998] for a discussion on political and educational marginalization of Malays in Singapore). Two excerpts from news articles represent this.

Another youth who overcame his difficult beginnings to do well is Jauhari, who smoked and played truant as a young student but turned over a new leaf. He recently graduated from NTU with a first class honours degree and received the Lee Kuan Yew Gold Medal. (Hussain 2012)

Jauhari smoked and played truant, and was often caned. But he turned over a new leaf, worked hard, and made it to NTU, said [Singapore’s Prime Minister] Mr. Lee. (Goh 2012)

Laced with essentialist rhetoric on ethnicity and deviance, the political and media attention that Jauhari received upon graduation represented, for the status quo, closure to his transition from a troubled subcultural teenager to a productive adult-citizen. Framing him as once being a deviant, young Malay male, media coverage centered the responsibility for Jauhari’s past to his own poor choices or rebellious behaviors rather than interrogating the dominant culture and political economy that results in relatively few Malay males graduating from university. Further, these dominant narratives silenced/erased claims of his subcultural past. Despite referring to it repeatedly in interviews, the media message—very much controlled by the ruling elite in Singapore (George 2008)—excluded any reference to an alternative youth culture that saw him through to become the man he is today.

This project has thus been partly therapeutic insofar as it provided Jauhari with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the injustices he felt during his active years as a Rude Boy. With Patrick as his interactional partner, the writing process transformed into moments that were as subjectively empowering as they were pedagogically instructive—disrupting and critiquing hegemonic cultural practices and discourses (Giroux and Giroux 2006). Yet, the
process of writing the self, whether therapeutic or empowering, need not preclude an emphasis on analysis. In a very practical way, it was Jauhari’s analytic writing in the subcultures course that facilitated this (re)writing of his Rude Boy self.

Through this collaborative autoethnography, we have suggested a way of understanding youth (sub)cultural experience that brings together the personal and the social, as well as the analytic and the evocative. Methodologically, we have sought to highlight how autoethnography may be written by imagining the power of evocative story-telling while keeping an analytic focus. Autoethnography can allow scholars to investigate social phenomena that have personal significance by re-imagining and then analyzing mundane and epiphanic moments.

The collaborative nature of this article also raises questions about traditional ethnographic methods employed in subcultural research and about writing forms that depart from prevailing social scientific norms (Miller-Day 2003; Lico and Luttrell 2011). Like Ottenberg (1990), we have used personal recollections in our writing because we “remember many things [and we are] certain that they are correct and not fantasy” (p. 144). The voices of the many whose lives are embedded in the very cultures that we try to understand are not lost just because we center ourselves in the story. Rather, weaving these recollections together constitutes a “collaborative reflexivity” that generates “theoretical insight into the role and significance of material practice in identity work” (Cherry, Ellis, and DeSoucey 2011, p. 233). In short, our collaborative autoethnography is intended to reach far beyond ourselves.

In his final portfolio entry for the course, Jauhari wrote:

Through the project I became more able to make sense of my subcultural past—wherein making sense goes beyond the mere process of comprehending a past reality and validating it using the academic toolkit. Writing on culture and its interpretation, Geertz (1973) noted how ethnographic accounts are “themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot [because by] definition, only a ‘native’ makes first order ones: it’s his [sic] culture.” (p. 15, emphasis in original)

Geertz further argued that a “good interpretation of anything . . . takes us to the heart of that of which it is the interpretation” (1973, 18). The dialogical process that our autoethnographic narrative embodies illustrates this. We are subcultural “natives” so to speak and our subcultural experiences are, in this sense, first-order interpretations. While the coursework required Jauhari to analyze data and report second- and third-order interpretations of the (sub)
culture in the form of social-scientific writing, deeply personal issues of social identity, authenticity, ethnicity, and gender also surfaced as he interacted with the youth subcultures literature for the first time. Rather than take up a third-person standpoint vis-à-vis the Rude Boy subculture, he reflexively returned to his subcultural past and, together with Patrick provided a layered account of it. After all, subcultures are as much about the personal lives of individuals as they are about the webs of social networks, value- and belief-orientations, and practices that result from the sustained interaction among people.

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.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. The Rude Boy subculture originated in Jamaica in the 1960s but became more well known as its style and music, particularly ska, spread through the Jamaican diaspora into the United Kingdom. Rude Boy is described in more detail later in the paper.

References


**Author Biographies**

**J. Patrick Williams** is associate professor of sociology at Nanyang Technological University. He has many research publications on the experiences of individuals who self-identify as subcultural and is particular interested in the social construction of subcultural authenticity. He has edited and authored several books, including *Authenticity is Self, Culture and Society* (Ashgate 2009) and *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts* (Polity Press, 2011).

**Muhammad Kamal Jauhari bin Zaini** is currently a Masters student in the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. His research interests are in culture, gender, political sociology, and social inequalities.