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Writing for Equity Inside and Out: Emerging Scholars of Color Doing Ethnography with a Marginalized Population

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Abstract

Graduate students and research scholars are required to demonstrate active scholarly engagement in conversations relevant to their fields. Publishing is the primary barometer of success at research-intensive universities; however, not all publications are counted equal. The gate-keeping functions of a discipline's top tier journals naturalize rational, jargon-laden, and definitive ideas of what scholarship should be. Living theory and praxis compel an academic scholar to reach into the community. How may emerging scholars make a difference in an underserved community through research? How does one maintain an active, community-engaged qualitative research trajectory and publish, publish, publish? Universities relegate service as the least important criterion for advancement despite the importance of furthering social justice projects, which benefit institutions of higher learning and local communities. Graduate students and scholars of color, however, are questioning the institutional practices and views of merit surrounding community-based research praxis that challenges and redefines institutional structures.

Keywords

Higher education, race, graduate education, ethnography

Neoliberalism as a policy (Giroux, 2010; Polychroniou, 2013) for examining scholarship in higher education has the potential to neglect, marginalize, reduce, or misinterpret the meaning and tradition inherent in critical qualitative inquiry. This is particularly true of research conducted by graduate students and new scholars of color working with historically marginalized groups such as racial and ethnic minorities and nonnative English speakers. How does one remain true to co-participants in an ethnographic study and produce tenure-worthy articles?

This article rises from numerous conversations I have had with graduate students and junior scholars of color for more than a decade. Students expressed concerns about academic and financial support against graduate school debt and career potential; hostility among White and privileged non-White students in their cohorts; and an uneasy sense of whitewashing the self to recondition the "bright, articulate student" into a more homogenized, sanitized intellectual of color (Bonnilla-Silva, 2006; West, 1987). A recent conversation with a doctoral student who decided to abandon ambitions to earn a PhD reignited my own embroiled and silent rage (Rodriguez & Boahene, 2012) over the battle to define myself (Austin, 1989, Lorde, 1984, Moraga, 1983) and *my* work (Moffitt, Harris, & Forbes, 2012; Welch & Pollard, 2006) . . . my scholarly, [auto]ethnographic (Alexander, 2009; Denzin, 1997, 2012; Muncey, 2010), community-engaged research in underserved communities (Calleson, Jordan, & Seifer, 2005; Stanton, 2008; Willox, Harper, Edge, "My Word": Storytelling Digital Media Lab, & Rigolet Inuit Community Government, 2013).

To be sure, I am also remembering and writing of the conversations I had with potential graduate school applicants who were either met with lukewarm support to apply or made to feel that their research interests were not intellectual enough. I once again juxtapose my own remembrances of so-called well-meaning advice to not set myself up for failure by enrolling in two master's level methods courses at once.

A first year graduate student of color—not my advisee nor a student in my college—sat in my office describing the ways in which he has struggled to argue for a critical qualitative dissertation project. The advisor, according to the

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student, did not discourage the student from "doing a few interviews" but said that an ethnographic study would take too long to complete. In addition, "doing a bunch of interviews" might not result in any richer data than building a theory in response to the problem. Listening to the student articulate his frustrations reminded me of a conversation I had when I was at a similar point in my graduate schooling. My conversation was with a friend who earned an MD and worked in private practice.

My Story:

"I'm going to volunteer to teach people in the area how to use computers," I told a friend.

"For free?" He said.

"Yes," I replied.

"Why?" He asked.

"I like doing stuff like this. I like helping people. This is my way of doing it."

"But you're not going to get anything out of it . . . and you have school. You can't even get extra credit or something. They can't pay you anything?"

"No. I asked if I could use it as my research site. They said I could, but originally I wanted to do it just to help. I've made it a habit to do volunteer work of some sort when I can."

"Oh, but you can use it for your dissertation. Well that's something."

"Not everything has to amount to working out for me you know. We help each other in lots of ways. You just wouldn't understand. You don't volunteer for anything!"

"Yes I do. When my clients don't pay, and I don't send them to collection—I've basically volunteered my time."

"Volunteering is more than action, it's also a state of mind," I say.

This exchange troubled me for months. Did I do the right thing; "exploiting" as some may say the participants for academic/professional gain? The participants were not paid, but neither was I; while I was at home writing my dissertation, they were at home with a computer. So, I don't feel that I exploited them, nor did the digital literacy program under which I worked exploit me.

What about the relationships; was I true to the participants as well as myself? There were so many stories to tell. Some were jotted down immediately after, others were quickly scribbled in the parking lot before driving home, and a few are engraved in my mind. I will never forget some of the kind and giving exchanges—tangible and philosophical—between a digital literacy participant, named Melissa, and me. She is a true friend. It is because of our friendship that there were stories, mostly told outside of the CNI environment that I will not tell. I worry about the consequences. While writing an interpretive, self-reflexive text makes the participant observer/researcher vulnerable, it also (without full permission), makes the participant vulnerable.

The same friend who asked why I would want to do volunteer work asked why I was struggling with telling certain stories.

"Because she's my friend," I said.

"But you don't make friends with your subjects," he said.

"But she's not a subject," I shouted. "She's my friend."

I would later learn that what I was arguing for; positioning myself with, was an ethic of reciprocity (Frey, 2009).

Graduate students of color enter the increasingly neoliberal educational environment carrying an 18th-century steamer trunk full of racist, gendered, bigoted comments and documents representing individual and institutional discrimination. These battle scars are buried under brightly, tightly woven cloth that binds them/us to family and community left behind to pursue an intellectual life. As students prepare to enter a new space, they lay atop the cloth, notes of encouragement from hopeful mentors and promises of a bright future from university administrators.

Oh yes, despite my thinking that I was special, as Serena Easton (2012) describes, I too carried a trunk to graduate school. What have I learned since committing to a life in the academe 17 years ago? First, the load is heavy—weighed by historical oppression, social class disparities, and a knowing that is starkly different and, by some, vastly dismissed on arriving at the "Welcome" mat that leads to the ivory tower. I was fortunate to have found a space for my work and a place to nurture my scholarly interests as a PhD student working with Norman Denzin at the University of Illinois. I have also sought out and found a community of critical qualitative researchers and allies—intellectuals and administrators—at my current institution and in the broader intellectual community who do more than pay lip service to the notion of social justice. Yet, despite my community, I struggle. Graduate students of color struggle; and though not explicitly discussed in this article, I recognize that new and emerging LGBTQ and scholars with disabilities struggle against the –isms (Lorde, 1984) that relate us if for no other reason than rejecting the "mythical norm" (p. 116). I will refer to graduate students, recent PhD graduates, and pretenure professors described above as emerging scholars through the remainder of this article.

My focus is not only on the ability to do the kind of work they/I/we aspire to do in underserved communities but also on their/my/our ability to do so through research and publishing while seeking and obtaining higher-level academic and administrative positions (Stanley, 2006). There are four interrelated factors that contribute to the potential stunted growth of critical qualitative ethnographic research among

emerging scholars of color. First, emerging scholars of color who enter the ivory tower seeking theoretical and methodological instruction, career guidance and a like-minded intellectual community may encounter an overwhelming amount of pseudo support. mentoring. . Second, when expressing an interest in an emerging research area or with a marginalized population, the scholars themselves are [further] marginalized. While critical qualitative inquiry is becoming more widely accepted across disciplines, and new ways of writing are being published in journals highly regarded for such work, when conducted and written by emerging scholars of color—particularly if the work happens in an underserved area—the research work is reduced to community service and the publications are regarded as lower tier. Finally, critical qualitative inquiry when conducted by and for historically marginalized groups are misinterpreted as nonscholarly research that lacks rigor and is unpublishable in top-tier journals, thus threatening career opportunities that range from full-time employment to tenure and promotion.

Higher Education Neglecting the Outsider Inside

Giroux (in Polychroniou, 2013) argues that higher education may be one of the few public spheres left where knowledge, values, and learning offer a glimpse of the promise of education for nurturing public values, critical hope, and a substantive democracy. Yet, Harris and González accurately point out, "the university remains profoundly inhospitable to the experiences and point of view of those formerly excluded" (2012, p. 7).

Black men and women, outsiders inside the academe, are predisposed to microagressions (Pierce, 1970, 1974; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007). These subtle, biting, verbal and nonverbal racially charged phrases—whether intentional or unintentional—demean and may serve to establish a power dynamic. While microagressions are traditionally race-based (Pierce, 1974), racial and ethnic minorities, nonnative [fill in language] speakers, the LGBTQ community, and people with disabilities are counted as targets (Sue, 2010).

While Sue et. al. (2007) articulates three forms of microaggressions—(1) microassault, (2) microinsult, and (3) microinvalidation, I will focus on microinvalidations, which "directly attack or deny the experiential realties of socially devalued groups" (p. 10). Emerging scholars of color indicate that microinvalidations do the most harm because they don't feel supported by their mostly White cohort, professors, and at times advisors, as well other students of color. A student said his friend, a Latino graduate candidate in a different department, told him that he would never find someone to chair his committee if he wanted to do a "full-on" ethnographic project. "I'm supposed to get in and get out; not be a part of the resistance." The student went on to say that staying longer than the projected number of years would create tremendous debt that was not part of the long-term plan. Rodgriguz (2006) expresses her frustration with other female scholars of color who deny their existence of rage as "colonization [that] is killing our spirits" (p. 453). One student explained, "I don't want to just talk about a problem. I don't want to 'conceptualize' racism and oppression, I want to get in there and be a part of the solution; if nothing else, at least fight alongside them." Yet, both students were discouraged from pursuing their research projects by White mentors who had no experience in the communities in which the students wanted to work and by peers of color who indicated that they were making their lives "harder" by not doing the right kind of research work.

When a Black student who requested a research assistantship to gain more ethnographic experience was "awarded" a teaching position, which required her to teach two writing-intensive courses, she met with a funding coordinator. The coordinator congratulated her for getting a position that would allow the undergraduates to experience "some diversity" during their time at the university. After commiserating with a White female student in her cohort who confessed to not wanting to work in a "dangerous" neighborhood, the student approached the funding coordinator about swapping assignments the following year. This time, the administrator commended the student for wanting to "give back" but, according to the student, "I could improve my writing skills through grading papers . . . I don't even know how I'm supposed to take that. Grading undergrad papers will somehow improve my writing?" She concluded by explaining that she did not grow up in a poor neighborhood and was offended by the administrator's assumption that she had—as evidenced by the giving-back comment.

In each of the cases I describe, the student abandoned his or her original goals in an effort to continue the graduate student journey. They each expressed an interest in getting through their respective doctoral programs and "just finishing" as quickly as possible to avoid additional debt. These students are getting a lesson in the time-is-money ideology (Giroux, 2010) espoused in a neoliberal institution of higher learning. Neoliberalism promotes profit-making even as higher education supports diversity and democracy. How does an institution reconcile market-driven, corporate policies with a commitment to academic freedom and creative practices? Emerging scholars are learning what Tessa Muncey (2010) observed when initially doing autoethnographic research in the social sciences. "Unfortunately, in our highly competitive society we tend to measure our success in terms of money earned or successful careers," which is measured in the academe through tenure and promotion. "We dismiss the many talents that we have, those that don't achieve the ends, as hobbies or time-wasting activities" (p. 56).

Doing Battle Against Marginalization

Testifying in seminars or meetings, arguing the merits of conducting an autoethnographic research project, and arguing why critical sociocultural work needs to be done inside the academe and not as a side project (William-White, 2011) are a few of the ways I have seen emerging scholars of color go to battle. Is social justice, diversity, and multiculturalism, as Linda S. Greene (1991) argues, a "slogan or epithet" (p. 1174)? Perspectives, papers, and manuscripts are viewed as "moving" and "interesting" but without the words of the Western canon, which privileges White men, the work is not scholarly. Yet, one must be careful to use the canon as instructed by others who will one day be counted in the Western canon; mean what they say and don't get it twisted. Yet, Cynthia Dillard, Chinwe Okpalaoka, and Karla Manning (2013) reminded me that there are experiences—ways of seeing and doing—that "theory cannot explain."

The body is at the center of these critical qualitative research projects. We do not separate our multiple raced, ethnic, sexed-gendered selves when we enter the ethnographic field, nor do we forget ourselves when we write. Norman Denzin said the following in relation to sports, but the same may apply to research and writing more broadly: "An embodied project that matters must locate the body within a radically contextual politics. It must focus on the active, agentic flesh-and-blood human body" (p. 298). Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) articulates the multicultural slogan-epithet dichotomy by arguing that "imputing race or sex to the creative act has long been a means by which the literary establishment cheapens and discredits the achievement of non-mainstream women writers" (p. 6). Therefore, with each brushing aside of their/my/our experiences, rage follows. No such separating of the self is required for "others" who are on the inside looking out. Again, the social justice, multicultural bind at work.The rage (Anzaldúa, 1987; hooks, 1990, 1995; Rodriguez & Boahene, 2012; William-White, 2011) that ensues from having to educate, articulate, and erase is daunting. A woman of color on the tenure track, who refused to abandon ethnographic research and interpretive writing for more widely accepted and more quickly written conceptual articles, faces the possibility of not getting tenure. Scholars of color on the tenure track, particularly women, are often denied tenure (Harris & González, 2012) after having been instructed to publish work outside of their areas to meet the requirements of seemingly ever-moving targets called tenure and promotion. Or as one emerging scholar called it, "the carrot that kills your soul." As an exercise in neoliberalism, and marginality based on topic/scholar, count the number of citations from non-university presses and interdisciplinary journals in this article alone. Ask yourself, does your institution, college, and/or department count or give equal "weight" toward tenure for books published by non-university presses or articles printed in interdisciplinary, new, or international journals published in non-Western countries; does your university encourages or discourages coauthorship; what about works published online or for the larger public community?

Being Reduced to/Rejuvenated in Silence

The decision to fight no more and drop out of the graduate program came for one student when the professor whose research was most closely related indicated that an autoethnographic project was not possible. According to the student, the professor claimed to have not read any good autoethnographic work and could not support such a dissertation. I wondered: did whatever the professor read make him or her uncomfortable (Alexander, 2009; William-White, 2011); did it show more than tell (Denzin, 1997); was the writing fragmented (Moreira, 2008)? All of these attributes are common in interpretive, performative writing. I wanted to ask the professor, as Denzin (2011) did when confronted with a similar situation, "How can you evaluate something you don't understand?"

I understood this Black male student's exhaustion, and a first-generation Mexican American student's despair as they each, at different institutions and at different times in my career, describe the physical and emotional stresses that they had endured while pursuing an intellectual life in the academy. The aspiring autoethnographer dropped out and the other student has remained ABD—all but dissertation—for nearly than a decade. Other emerging scholars have dropped out of sight and emerged with a resilience only comparable with cast iron.

Yet, a long-fought battle leaves its marks (Stanley, 2006, Smith 2004). Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011) describe the physical, psychological, and emotional toll that battle fatigue has for scholars of color. They outline how the stresses can cause physical pain, anxiety disorders, and depression. For some, moving through a doctoral program or earning tenure means becoming a "co-conspirator" to the 21st-century academic colonization (Rodriguez & Boahene, 2012, p. 453). For others it means instituting the STFU, or shut the f**k up rule, as espoused on a Tenure Track thread on the Chronicle of Higher Education Forum (Chronicle.com, 2007; Werner Herzog's Bear, 2012). The general premise behind the rule is that a tenure-track faculty member should shut the f**k up instead of bringing indiscretions to light or potentially angering a member of the retention, promotion, and tenure (RPT) committee. In other words, avoid conflict at all cost until after tenure. Some emerging scholars of color may choose to take action either at their current institutions or by moving on and hoping for change if not fighting a better, potentially fairer fight elsewhere.

There is no space or place that is completely free of the neglected, marginalized, reductive behaviors and

microagressions I describe; yet, I find myself in a good place surrounded by a small but committed support system that spans my office to across the globe. Yet, I am unable and unwilling to sit on the sidelines while others struggle. My mother always said that my mouth would get me into trouble. Her efforts to make me a quiet, conforming Black Southern Belle never worked. I did, however, learn how to recharge while spending time in my room for having spoken out. Silence, then, becomes a place to reflect and regain what was lost during the battle (Rodriguez, 2006); a time to [re]define myself for myself (Lorde, 1984, pp. 45) in an effort to re-gain and re-center what was taken and/or marginalized. I am and will always remain committed to doing critical qualitative research work that speaks to and of—from the margins and center—minorities in underserved communities. This essay is my effort to step away from my new media/digital divides focus, lift my head from the computer screen, and leave my desk to support other emerging scholars struggling to do important intellectual work. Taking some kind of action is especially important now that neoliberalism has taken hold in institutions that should support education as a public good and provide space for critical cultural development in all its forms. There are ways that these commitments may remain intact while I and others like me strive to achieve our professional goals.

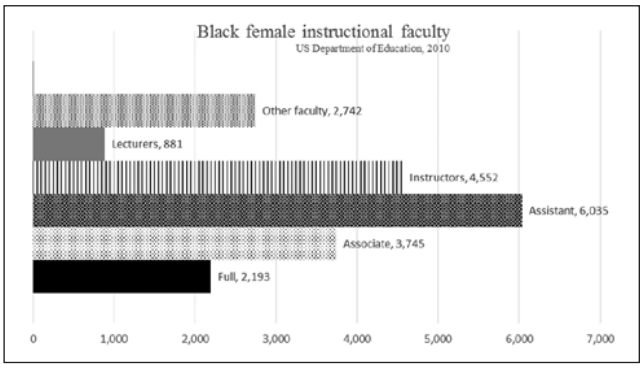

Figure 1. Black female instructional faculty by rank.

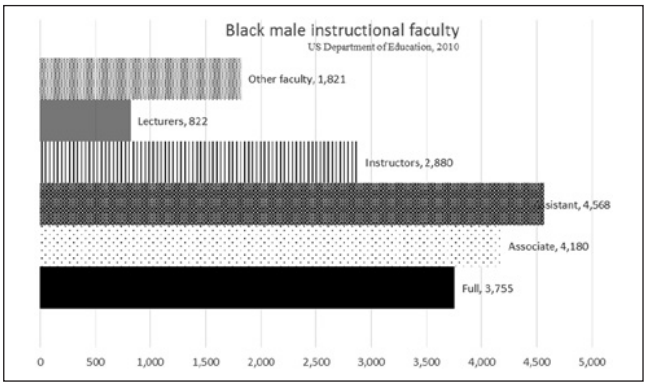

Figure 2. Black male instructional faculty by rank.

The Coup: You've Got It Twisted/Misinterpreted

Institutional claims for diversity and multiculturalism have steadily increased over the past 20 years, which gives the perception that the doors of the ivory tower have swung open for racial and ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups. Certainly, some administrators and tenured faculty are at odds with higher education's turn to neoliberalism and all that centering the academe around a market-driven platform holds. But what are emerging scholars who have left home and put faith in the American dream and hope that the debts they pay monetarily, physically, emotionally, familially, and spiritually to do? The runaway train has left the station.

Emerging scholars of color need to support one another in addition to making connections with White scholars—men and women—who do more than nod in agreement at the notion of social justice, arm-chair champion the efforts of community-based research, and recognize and respect various ways of knowing and writing. Tolerance is not enough. Having attended international and national conferences in the fields of communication and sociology, as well as interdisciplinary meetings with emphases in qualitative research, new media technologies, and education, I continue to be astounded by the small number of people of color who attend. This is true even of conferences hosted in countries outside the United States. The number gets even smaller when accounting for students versus faculty and tenure-track versus tenured.

The U.S. Department of Education statistics (2010a) indicate that 10,417 Black, 8,085 Hispanic, and 952 American Indian/Alaska Native doctoral candidates were conferred in 2009. More interesting, however, were the number of PhDs of color who held positions at institutions of higher learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b). Of the 21,698 Black females counted as instructional faculty at degree-granting institutions, 6, 411 were employed at the rank of assistant professor and only 2, 331 were full professors. By comparison, there were 18,026 Black males listed as instructional faculty with 4,568 at the rank of assistant and 3,755 listed as full. While Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native male faculty outnumbered women, the rates at which men were retained and promoted to associate and full remained proportionately greater than for their female counterparts.

I bring this information and Figures 1 and 2 to the fore to illustrate the concreteness of what I see when I attend conferences, look around the room when I teach seminars, and when I sit on university, college, and departmental committees. Feminists of color do not need statistics to clarify the

disparity, nor is it necessary to use science and theory to explain why more women than men are lecturers, instructors, visiting assistant professors, and perpetual assistant professors on the tenure track. Our work, Our bodies, Our realities are situated in these numbers. Of course, not all women are mothers or take on critical qualitative inquiry, but for those who do the rate at which we move from graduate student to full professor is slow . . . if there is upward movement at all. These statistics do not parse out the kinds of institutions at which these scholars teach. How many are employed by community colleges and how many by research-intensive universities? Who evaluates a tenure and promotion file if the scholars doing related critical qualitative inquiry are not housed in peer institutions?

Ellingson and Quinlan (2012) challenge universities to consider various "products" for hiring, evaluation, tenure, and promotion. Decentralizing knowledge to make texts available to a larger audience is already happening thanks to the Internet, online education, and online social media. Suggesting only textbooks or literature produced by university presses and journal articles provided solely through university libraries ignores one of the functions of higher learning, particularly at state-funded institutions. On product, translational research is a relevant and accessible way to conduct research, and discriminate information ultimately furthers a neoliberal agenda while holding true to the position that higher education serves a public good (McMurtry, 1991).

The University of Utah offers several opportunities for community-engaged scholarship. Ellingson and Quinlan (2012) list University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Ohio University (p. 388) as institutions that not only offer community-based participatory research but also acknowledge participation in the community as a product that counts toward tenure and promotion. There is a significant difference between academics participating as individuals in a local community, academics coopting and institutionalizing a marginalized community for the sake of publishable research, and academics becoming community participants through community-engaged scholarship (Boyer, 1990, 1996). Distinguishing between these three are key when determining whether the work is (1) personal, (2) a neoliberal mode of governance, or (3) social justice lip service. Ernest Boyer (1990) states,

> The scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers and to our cities. . . . But at a deeper level, I have this growing conviction that what's also needed is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation's life . . . The scholarship of engagement also means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other . . . " (pp. 19-20)

Using multiple nodes or crystallization as a product demonstrates the layers of complex and sometimes contradictory ways of articulating the importance of a critical qualitative and interpretive research agenda. This method of evaluation is consistent with the constant churning that already takes place when immersed in a fragmented, performative, political project. Qualitative research, particularly ethnography, is a lengthy process. Crystallization is a way in which scholars may find a productive way to inform peers, senior faculty, and administrators of the value in doing such work over "multiple forms of sense-making" (Ellingson and Quinlan, 2012, p. 390).

A sustained critical qualitative research agenda that decenters theory and centers praxis through underserved communities *is* important research; writing translationally *is* scholarly work. Recognizing and valuing these efforts are also important to future generations inside and outside higher education. Echoing Boyer (1990), "If the nation's colleges and universities cannot help students see beyond themselves and better understand the interdependent nature of our world, each new generation's capacity to live responsibly will be dangerously diminished" (p. 77).

Emerging scholars of color immersed in critical qualitative inquiry and committed to an intellectual life can succeed in a neoliberal institution of higher education with the help of familial, local, and academic communities. We can speak truth to each other and through each other; go to battle with and for each other; and rage and sit in silence with and for each other. I never intended to present a paper or publish an article about emerging scholars of color in higher education. I didn't consider it my "area" of research; and yet, my body/mind/soul/spirit crystallize to compel me to tell these stories, to write, as a Black daughter, sister, and mother in the academe; this is and will always be one of my areas.

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