

# **From Grassroots Adult Literacy to Navigating Academia: An Autoethnography**

Madevi Ramdeholl, Empire State College CUNY, USA

***Abstract:*** *This study chronicled the first year of a grassroots adult literacy practitioner into the world of academia. This scholar practitioner reflects on her transition into this culture and the implications for other new scholars of color.*

## **Introduction**

Many view universities as one of the country's most valuable resources and academic culture as a level playing field, a place where one is judged primarily by her ideas and contributions. (Tatum, 1999; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). However, the culture within many higher education institutions have long been commodified and instrumentalized, driven by budgets, timetables, and other market interests (Faust, 2009). For practitioners of color, this culture has proven uninvitational, anti-democratic, and Eurocentric. (Johnson – Bailey & Cervero, 2008). One new scholar practitioner of color critically reflects on her transition into this culture and the implications for other new scholars of color.

### Research Questions Guiding this Study

- In what ways can the academy offer more support to new scholars of color?
- How can academic culture be more inclusive and democratic of new scholars' of color voices and interests?
- What role can autoethnography play in being a source of support for new scholars of color in the academy?

## **Purpose**

Coming from the explicitly political world of grassroots literacy education, one which was rooted in collective, social change and activism, I was somewhat taken aback that even non-traditional programs in higher education seemed to be built upon entrenched cornerstones of individualism and competition. Engaging in a critical reflection of my own experiences in this context, I could look back on where I came from while simultaneously envisioning my future. According to Ellis & Bochner (2000) Autoethnography is "...research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political context." Only autoethnography offered me a way to focus on my own narrative while simultaneously being able to interpret and situate it in political and socio-cultural contexts.

One purpose of this study was to chronicle my own journey as a new scholar practitioner of color negotiating and navigating academic culture (in a university in New York City). This study was conceived as a way to contribute to a larger collective dialogue with other new practitioner scholars of color joining academia. The goal is in no way to attempt to portray all experiences of people of color as monolithic and static but to contribute to a sustainable conversation aimed at opening up and transforming spaces within the academy, aimed at creating more functioning, democratic processes and structures (Brookfield, 2005; Heaney, 2000).

## **Theoretical Framework**

One contradiction to egalitarian, democratic processes and structures lies in academia's deeply entrenched culture which privileges Eurocentric and individualistic interests. This inevitably is at odds with worldviews rooted in collectivity and polyrhythmic ways of thinking and being in the world. (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). This speaks explicitly to Critical Race Theory/Critical Theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) acknowledges racism as being a toxic condition in the social fabric of our society, challenging concepts such as color blindness and neutrality (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Bell (1992) points out that racial inequalities are only addressed to the extent that white interests are also served. CRT acknowledges and honors that the insidious nature of racism can only be addressed when people of color share their experiences thus providing counter-narratives to disrupt the status quo (Peterson, Personal Communication. July 12, 2008). CRT is critical in this study because while not explicit, the issue of race emerged repeatedly in my experiences in academia. These subtle forms of racism or micro-aggressions, when experienced on a daily basis, eventually resulted in psychic wounds (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Critical Theory also impacts this narrative, highlighting ways in which capitalism pushes members of society into dehumanizing ways of living and being that perpetuate legacies of economic/racial/gender oppressions (Allman, 2001; Brookfield, 2005). Luttrell (1997) points out that in the dominant culture there is no space to address social inequities and structures of domination. Freire (1970) states in order to transform society, space must be made for people to re-write and re-negotiate their narratives. This is almost impossible because as the academy has become increasingly commodified, it has ceased to remain a home to a polyphony of voices; a producer of knowledge and of doubt. (Faust, 2009). Instead it is driven by market interests and profit.

## **Research Design**

Ellis & Bochner (2000) point out that autoethnographies honor the researcher's own experience as a topic of investigation in its own right, providing ,as a methodology, a space and form for readers to think with a story instead of about it; to feel the moral dilemmas and actively join in the decision points. Ellis (2004) says in this form, one can work and write in the spaces between subjectivity and objectivity, passion and intellect, autobiography and culture, primarily to understand a life lived in a cultural context. Behar (2001) speaks poignantly to the importance of vulnerability in autoethnography. This method allowed me to move fluidly from personal to cultural analysis and back again.

Coles (1989) reminds us stories are all each of us carries with us in our lives and we owe it to each other to honor and learn from them. Blaise (1993) suggests that people's stories make us into world travelers. We learn (if sometimes only temporarily) to live in each other's countries, speak each other's language, negotiate each other's streets, and turn our keys in each other's locks. Using a year of daily field notes, and later constructing analysis, I was interested in conveying the meanings attached to the experience, of communicating the movement in, out, and around the experience. I also had regular conversations with two other new practitioner scholars of color. Their realities matched mine almost identically.

## Findings

*I am sitting in my office at the college in New York City, where I was recently hired. I will not mention the name specifically because I do not believe my findings are specific to this university. (When compared with my other two colleagues' experiences, our realities were almost identical). Though I have only been here three weeks, I feel somewhat unmoored. From the moment, I got here staff and other faculty have been friendly but I can sense there is tension. People speak in half sentences, let pieces of information drop; wink at me instead of completing sentences, sentences often end up hanging half finished. It feels uncomfortable as someone who is desperately attempting to read her new world to feel like I am standing too close to the painting to truly see or understand it. In the adult literacy landscape (where I came from), I understood the familiar, though often precarious terrain.*

I look back through my journal kept over the course of this past year and think of the process of critically reflecting on and synopsisizing incidents throughout the year. As a new faculty member, learning my institutional context was critical. How well have I fit in? Are my contributions being acknowledged and valued? To what extent can I contribute to meaningful change in this context?

### *Entrenched Culture of Individualism within Academia*

Though I often hear wishes for a different paradigm, self interest rules. "After we get tenure," is a sentiment that is regularly expressed by untenured faculty members. Somehow, there is a belief among many that their fates will change radically after granted tenure. My colleagues, the other full time faculty are all up for tenure next year. They seem nervous and apprehensive. I am amazed (and frightened) that people's futures could hinge on such a process (that I'm likely to participate in it someday). As a relative outsider, I witness first hand how power laden, top down, and opaque this process is, with no room for dissent. It is a process that has truly been commodified where your qualities are packaged and evaluated in ways that many have told me they found dehumanizing. Faculty members have said to me, the tenure process is the antithesis of democracy. It is also invariably impacted by issues of power and positionality. In what ways are the least protected/most vulnerable voices (untenured and adjunct faculty) inadvertently silenced because of this process? How can critique of processes and structures be possible or supported in such a climate? Are there insidious ramifications when vulnerable voices speak up?)

While the actors in this script may all be more or less well intentioned, the meta-narrative is rooted in anti-democratic tenets of individualism and competition. The tenure process (which fetishizes and privileges a set of prescriptive guidelines) is how one's future in higher education is determined. The process is fraught with potential landmines (have I served on the "right" committees? Do the people who will be making decisions about my future know my accomplishments?)

### *Race impacts the Narrative of Academia*

As the only full time faculty member of color in the center where I teach, I can see that issues of race are rarely addressed or explored in thoughtful ways. On my first day of work, I was asked by two different people in the college where I was hired, "what I was because I had an interesting look and spoke English so well." Exoticizing certain groups is one way of "othering." In my classes, students almost always think I'm a fellow student. Later they apologize, saying I

don't look like a professor. Collective historical memory impacts our constructed realities in ways we may not be conscious of. What do professors look like anyway? What is this image based on?

In addition, most, if not all, of the support staff are women of color. There is a simmering resentment among many of these staff members towards faculty. Non-faculty members wonder aloud why it is possible for faculty to conduct some of their work off-site when non-faculty schedules are more restricted. Faculty's response is usually to point out the complicated range of their responsibilities, ranging from developing curricula, to researching and writing articles, to conducting research, to mentoring, all of which can usually be conducted off-site. I have heard this explanation later repeated sarcastically and in disbelieving tones among non-faculty. Finding ways to bridge this divide is essential in order for seeds of community to be sown.

### *Navigating Landmines*

When administrative staff, in positions of power (most of whom are white) assure faculty (especially untenured and adjunct faculty) they can share their perspectives freely, with no fear of ramifications, it's later a shock to faculty to often be reprimanded for expressing the very sentiments they were encouraged to do. (This has occurred repeatedly within the last year). Dissent and a sustained willingness to critique structures and processes are critical to building a truly democratic culture. If this isn't encouraged and supported by those who are most protected in academia, then those who are more vulnerable can feel silenced. Whose interests and agendas are protected and ultimately prevail by this dynamic? Those in positions of power within the academy must be especially attentive to ways voices are being silenced (albeit, inadvertently). Are there insidious consequences to those who offer critique? Democracy is in the details, in the everyday struggle to foster and sustain a more equitable and inclusive culture where space is made for those whose voices are most marginalized to be heard. However, in a culture that rewards individual accomplishments and where power and positionality are potent, this is a great challenge.

There is a complex, pervasive, Eurocentric culture deeply embedded in academia. This linear, hierarchical way of thinking and functioning can restrict access to democratic openings and efforts. Insular, individualistic cultures that reward competition can stifle and even destroy enthusiasm, morale, and creativity of new scholar practitioners, especially those whose worldview are rooted in collectivity and polyrhythmic ways of knowing (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

### **Implications**

Johnson-Bailey & Cervero (1998) say that the ways in which race and gender affect daily interactions are very powerful, in part because this is where the political and personal get illustrated. The underlying problem in this is power. To address these insidious dynamics, it is important to put structures in place that support consciousness raising. In addition there needs to be measures of accountability, starting at the top. Processes must be transparent and inclusive of all voices, not just the perspectives that reflect dominant points of view. Deeply entrenched individualistic paradigms need to be subverted. Projects that encourage people to work together in teams might be one way to approach this. In addition, finding ways to bridge academic and community knowledge ought to be a priority in subverting individualistic frameworks. Bridging this divide can open up potentially powerful spaces for more collective efforts, rooted in concrete

change. Too often, academia is far removed from everyday struggles, which can foster the perception of the academy being elitist, outdated, and irrelevant. New scholars, in partnership with experienced faculty, can lead this effort, but they need to be supported by administration from the top. Instead of being a neutral educational site, higher education culture is a replication of existing dominant power relations in society, complete with privileges conferred along lines of gender, race, class, and other status markers. (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998). Counter-narratives by new scholars in the academy have the power to contribute to a larger collective conversation. This dialogue can support a shift in power dynamics and open spaces for more democratic spaces and possibilities within academia. I invite other new practitioners joining higher education to share their stories like I have mine.

To the extent that higher education should embrace the long view and nurture critical perspectives; to be society's critic and conscience, involved in larger collective conversations rooted in social transformation, then extensive measures must be implemented in order to shift the culture, making it more invitational to new scholars of color. Embracing new ways of knowing and being can support academia in becoming bridges to other communities, to accessing different, important conversations rooted in change, offering a deep, broad vision of a world that is absent from the myopic present (Faust, 2009).

## References

- Allman, P. (2001). *Revolutionary social transformation*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Bell, D. (1992) *Faces at the bottom of the well: the permanence of racism*. New York, Basic Books
- Blaise, C. (1993). *I had a father: A postmodern autobiography*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Behar, R. (1997). *The vulnerable observer*. New York: Beacon Press.
- Coles, R. (1989). *The call of stories: Teaching and the moral imagination*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin
- Ellis, C. (2004). The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography. Walnut Creek: CA: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A.P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 733 – 768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Faust, D. G. Crossroads – the university's crisis of purpose. NY Times. September 6, 2009. [www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/books/review/Faust-t.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/books/review/Faust-t.html)
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Seabury Press.
- Heaney, T. (2000). "Adult education and society." In Wilson, A.I., and Hayes, E.R. *Handbook of adult and continuing education*. (pp.559-570). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass..
- Johnson\_Bailey & Alfred, M. (2006). Transformative teaching and the practices of Black women adult educators. In E. W. Taylor (Ed.), *Fostering transformative learning in the classroom: Challenges and innovations* (pp. 49 – 58). New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 109. San Francisco, Jossey- Bass.
- Johnson\_Bailey, J. (2001). *Sistahs in college: Making a way out of no way*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Press.

- Johnson-Bailey, J., & Cervero, R., (1998). *Power dynamics in teaching and learning practices: An examination of two adult education classrooms*. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 17(6), 3899-99.
- Johnson-Bailey, J., & Cervero, R.M. (2008). *Different worlds & divergent paths: Academic careers defined by race and gender*. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78 (2), 311-332.
- Ladson-Billings (1994). *The dream-keepers: Successful teachers of African-American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Luttrell, W. (1997). *School- smart and mother- wise*. New York: Routledge.
- Peterson, E. (personal communication, July 12, 2008).
- Solorzano, D. & Yosso, T. (2002) 'Critical race methodology: counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research,' *Qualitative Inquiry* 8(1), 23-44.
- Tatum, B. (1999). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York: Basic Books.