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Blackademic Negotiations When the Ivory Tower Isn't Enough: Finding Pathways to Activism as an Emerging Black Scholar

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This reflexive essay chronicles the last two years of the author's PhD program and the negotiations of an emerging black female critical scholar in response to the growing tensions between academic obligations and growing racial unrest. Guiding questions of, "what are you going to do? And what are you willing to pay?" were used to think through what it meant to dedicate oneself to critical social justice work and apply that dedication to everyday practices despite perceived limitations.

Keywords: Emerging Black Scholars | Community Narratives | Critical Scholar | Lived Experiences

This is the second night in a row where I haven't slept. Needless to say, the recent events have shaken something in me and I have been grappling a lot lately with what it all means; what is my responsibility as a Black woman who considers herself an advocate for children of Color? How do I channel my rage?

*Things are moving very quickly, I feel awakened but I'm just very scared as to what going down this path would mean for me in terms of my safety, my sanity and academic obligations. I want to dream big and DO BIG. But it scares the living ***** out of me... (Seraphin, personal communication, December 5, 2014)*

These were the opening lines of an email sent to my advisor and mentor on December 5, 2014 at 5:40 in the morning. The non-indictment of Officer Darren Wilson for the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, coupled with the non-indictment of Daniel Pantaleo for the choking death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, had plunged the university into a week-long peaceful demonstration and sparked intense dialogue about racism, the policing of Black and Brown bodies, and the #blacklivesmatter movement.

I was in my third year as a PhD candidate in Curriculum and Instruction and was struggling to write my comprehensive exams. The pressure was on that semester to pass and move on to the final stages of my studies: proposing my dissertation, writing it, and finally *graduating*.

But I was...stuck.

While holed up in my graduate student office for hours at a time, I simply could not will my brain into focusing on putting words on the blank page. The cursor just blinked incessantly in the same annoying spot, broadcasting my lack of progress.

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Prior to sending the Friday morning distress signal to my advisor, I spent the week lying down at die-in demonstrations across campus, journaling my thoughts and feelings like my life depended on it, and speaking to close friends on conference calls, trying to figure out if the grand jury rulings had impacted them at their respective universities. I silently wept in my car for Eric Garner, as though he were my own family, the day his murderer walked away.

Despite the looming pressure to complete my exams, I could feel myself dealing with what I would later understand to be an academic existential crisis. Prior to this moment, I had proudly — defiantly— taken on the identity of a critical scholar-activist committed to doing the work of “dismantling the system.” However, the growing #blacklivesmatter movement and unrelenting hashtags documenting the loss of Black American life, pressed theory into reality and demanded, “So, critical scholar-activist, what are you to *do* about it?”

This question weighed on me. At that point in my doctoral training, I had studied enough theories to understand that social justice work came at a cost. There was no way around it. Power is rarely relinquished voluntarily and disrupting systemic oppression comes with consequences, which required the follow-up question of “what are you willing to pay?”

This reflexive essay chronicles the last two years of my PhD program and the negotiations I made as an emerging Black female critical scholar in response to tensions between academic obligations and growing racial unrest. Guiding questions of, “what are you going to do? And what are you willing to pay?” were used to think through what it meant to dedicate oneself to critical social justice work and apply that dedication to everyday practices despite perceived limitations.¹

Turning Affect into Motivation

I've learned that Black lives terrify, threaten, and are publicly consumed for the purposes of entertainment, scorn, ridicule, disdain, rage, fear, self-heroism, and relevancy.

But really, what good is learning obscure academic theories when Black and Brown children are literally dying in the streets?

(Seraphin, personal communication, December 8, 2014)

I found myself turning to personal writing to process and express my grief, despair, rage, confusion, hurt and disappointment. Writing and performing helped me to assess the impact of the national Discourses² of state-sanctioned violence against Black and Brown bodies. This processing was necessary and helped soothe the emotional rawness that halted my academic progress.

¹ These guiding questions are part of Dr. Jeanine M. Staples’s social justice-oriented framework for dismantling white supremacy patriarchy in the classroom. Dr. Staples employed these questions when assisting teacher candidates to develop nuanced teaching philosophies and pedagogies.

² Capital 'D' Discourse is a sociocultural perspective of literacy, and refers to "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life that integrates words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (Gee, 2001, p. 5260).

The personal writing was also a useful tool in assessing what my commitments were as a critical scholar-activist. Part of how I conceptualized myself as a critical researcher was being able to locate myself in broader social and historical Discourses, and analyze how my own practices as an educator, researcher, activist, etc., worked to uphold or dismantle white supremacy ableist patriarchy. Through writing, I came to place myself as dissatisfied; my overall participation at that point hovered between terror and inaction. While terror was a legitimate emotive response, inaction did not honor its significance, but only heightened the sense that all was lost.

I wanted to fight the feelings of hopelessness, so I sought out mentors whom I considered scholar-activists. Interestingly, there was no clear consensus; each person offered a different perspective as to how they chose to fulfill professional and ideological obligations. Advice ranged from blocking out all noise and finishing the degree, to “learning the system so you can infiltrate it” and “not letting your afro show just yet.”

However, what was mostly disappointing was that most of their advice situated action in the near future, after graduation and obtaining a faculty position. They highlighted the precarious position graduate students walked as emerging scholars. Our main objective was to obtain academic and professional training, and secure an advance degree. Activities that strayed from those objectives could be costly and jeopardize our success, particularly as female graduate students of Color. Nevertheless, it was difficult tempering my outrage, the sense of urgency, and the growing demands for structural change in this moment in history. I wanted my “afro” on *full* display.

What are you going to *do*?

What are you willing to *pay*?

Would I be potentially killing my career (and years’ worth of expensive, grueling graduate schooling) before it even starts by stirring up trouble? Would potential departments see me more as a liability, a nuisance, rather than a valuable member of their academic community because all I want to do is interrogate an institution’s commitment to inclusion? Am I even strong enough to take on and commit to this type of work when I have comps and a dissertation to worry about?

The only thing I was certain of was that I had to do something to reconcile the tensions of occupying an ivory tower during this moment in American history.

Finding Space in Stories

The first thing I decided to do was gather my closest friends and colleagues whose scholarship focused on issues of equity and social justice to sit down and think through our role in furthering campus conversations on race. I shared a vision of organizing a town hall-style forum where campus stakeholders and local law enforcement agencies sat together with the university’s student body and broader community to contextualize national Discourse spurred by the #blacklivesmatter movement in relation to our community. We would not only assess our relationship to law enforcement and the communities of Color, but also lay down infrastructure that ensured bridges between multiple groups, and documented a plan to move our community forward.

The only problem with that vision was that the university had beat us to the punch. A town hall meeting with top level administrators, chiefs of police from multiple townships, students, faculty, staff, and local community members had been executed at the end of the semester. The town hall was a powerful moment. Audience members, mostly students of Color, took the time to share their frustrations and experience with police brutality; it was an intense outpouring and hundreds were there to bear witness.

However, after it was all said and done, after the town hall had ran its course, there was little obligation to support action beyond listening in the moment. What became clear was that the university was not in short supply of symbolic support. While dialoguing is indeed a crucial first step, from my perspective, it was being treated as though it were the only step that mattered.

Our next idea as a coalition was to generate a report documenting issues, such as lack of representation in the student body and in faculty, and commenting on issues of funding for programs and initiatives that served the minoritized student populations on campus. However, upon review of government databases, student and faculty demographics on our campus remained relatively unchanged for almost 20 years; none of the figures we could possibly present would be new information. There were whole offices on campus charged with understanding these statistics. We wouldn't be sharing numbers they didn't already know. So, what *else* could we do?

After these two ideas fizzled, so did the attendance of the coalition meetings. Our numbers went from about ten graduate and undergraduate students to two, and we struggled to figure out what we could do that was outside the box of symbolic gestures of support. After multiple meetings, my colleague, a Latinx international PhD candidate from Colombia, and I conceded that we did not know how these larger conversations made sense in our rural, insular, college town. What were people of Color actually experiencing here in our community? This question would anchor our work for next two years.

There was a noticeable gap in public knowledge and community memory about the lived experiences of various minoritized groups on campus and overall community. People of Color represent a very small percentage in our college town, but their presence is undeniable and their experiences are hardly centered in normalized town discourses.

Within our small, isolated college town, power lied in sustaining the widely-held narrative that our community was sort of immune to the harsh realities of urban city life. Gun violence, police shootings in particular, was not a reality for many residents or students, making it easy for us to remain on the periphery of these hard conversations. There was a pride in being associated as a “happy” town in which safety, tranquility, and quality of life were as good as you could get.

However, the racial slurs and threats of violence by anonymous members aimed at peaceful protesters during the peaceful student protests indicated that efforts towards living up to our “happy” moniker, and becoming a sincerely inclusive, diverse, respectful and sensitive community did not permeate the collective community consciousness.

While some at the center may have had an idea that lived experiences could potentially be different for the “Other,” many were content to live under the town's the protective narrative:

“It's safe here.”

“This is a great place to raise a family.”

“We don’t have to talk about/deal with/confront/acknowledge *those* types of problems here.”

Their resistance is not usually overtly hostile. But I could feel it in my professional work with educators in the public school systems, whenever issues such as racial microaggressions and curricular whitewashing were avoided, brushed off, or actively subdued. The experiences of myself and remaining colleague, invalidated those tacit claims of being happy, and we knew we weren’t alone.

We shifted our energies to finding those stories. We recorded our first session in March 2015, and 12 and half hours of recorded sessions later, our search for lived experiences would develop into a full-blown narratives project. Sharing stories is not exactly revolutionary. There are multiple community organizations, such as StoryCorps, and The Moth, dedicated to creating spaces for people to share their narratives. But what was compelling was watching how silenced trauma and microaggressions, actually brought people together. When asked, “What brought you here to this community?” and “What’s it like to live here?” participants would describe rather mundane day to day interactions, and voice that nothing “outrageous” ever happened to them, “but then...there was that one time...” Because the narratives were shared in a group dynamic, listeners would sometimes comment with, “that happened to you too?” or “I know exactly what you mean.” Storytelling became an act of re-remembering macro and microaggressions that had been normalized and forgotten so that the participant experiencing the aggression could function.

Because there wasn’t a promise of remedying a gargantuan societal malady such as racism and police violence in one sitting, participants were open to sharing the mundane, the casual slights. This then progressed into sharing the more overt, painful interactions. There was silence, tears, and the sense of a growing community consciousness. Of course, not all the narratives were bad, there were many participants who spoke to how the community provided safety, opportunity, and the freedom to explore one’s identity. When the voices of marginalized residents and students were centered in conversation, the story of our community became more nuanced and complex, and actually reinforced the idea that our community was made great by its people.

Being a part of this project emboldened my actions in other contexts. As an instructor of secondary English methods courses, I was no longer on the fence about using a critical perspective to frame media literacy and language arts instruction. In my class, we applied critical frameworks to understand how Discourses and intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and power were present all through different media representations. I questioned notions of what “good writing” meant and the ways in which this qualifier mostly spoke to the acceptance of dominant forms of communication as the standard-bearer, and how these standards alienated and de-legitimized others. We tried our best as a unit to ‘go there’ and use relevant issues in media and politics to anchor our discussions around literacy and literacy instruction, thinking through how media texts could bring relevancy to twenty-first century students and encourage multiple perspectives to inform learners’ meaning-making. Simply put, being active gave me gumption.

I could also see a shift in the ways I interacted with the high school students I’ve mentored for the past 3 years. In the past, their stories were always centered during our meeting times after school. However, those stories remained protected within the group,

and it was difficult for me to connect them to the club's broader mission to educate its student population on the harmfulness of discrimination, and the promotion of unity and inclusion. My work with the narratives project pushed me to connect the high school student organization with community organizers who gave students a platform to publish their insights in the local paper as well as keynote a community forum on race attended by over 150 members of the community and district administration.

The Cost of It All

Fortunately, the narrative project, my work with pre-service teachers, and high school students did not put my safety at risk. However, the question of what did I *pay* in order to do the work is an important one. First and foremost, time was the most expensive. Admittedly, it took an additional year to complete my benchmark exams and propose the dissertation. My time was divided between crafting intricate papers demonstrating my understanding of the field, planning, grading, teaching, recruiting participants for the narrative project, and coordinating interview sessions. As money became an issue, my colleague and I would then have to spend time drafting grant proposals and seeking out funding from various community organizers and university groups to keep the project afloat. This required constant networking with different groups of people, understanding their organizations and objectives, and being able to make new connections. As a graduate student, the pace to complete my degree requirements slowed down as my energies became more split.

While I was definitely more “busy” during the fourth and fifth year of my program, there had been a dramatic shift in my overall spirit as a human being. The terror, outrage, and urgency had not completely dissipated, but they were no longer in control and paralyzing me to the point of inaction. Being able to sit down and connect with so many new people from the community and the university that I wouldn't typically come across while locked up in my office, was therapeutic. During those sessions, there was support and comfort even amongst strangers.

The willingness to actively listen to stories from and of people who come from totally different perspectives was incredibly powerful for me to witness and thus contribute. This participation also had its drawbacks. As the main coordinators of the narrative sessions, my colleague and I were present for many of the stories shared. Listening, empathizing, and sharing with people who had experienced trauma, invisibility, hostility, anger, sometimes left a scar. Hitting stop on the recorder did not end the affective responses that would be drawn out by listening to someone share something difficult. Some stories just stay with you and take days, maybe weeks to reconcile, that yes, that happened here in our town. I believe this was one of the higher costs that I did not account for. If I could have done anything differently, it would have been figuring out anchors that could have kept me spiritually grounded throughout the process, and kept me more attuned to how a particular session had impacted me.

Lessons Learned

In January 2015, Dr. Michael Eric Dyson delivered the 30th Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemoration Speech at our university. While still in the midst of figuring out my

role, I asked him how do Black academics vying for positions in the 'ivory tower' negotiate the feeling that academics just isn't enough.

His response was thought provoking and gave me pause: activism is a division of labor. Just as much as we need people demonstrating and physically disrupting and causing discomfort, we need thoughtful, informed and well-articulated documentation of our struggles. Words, our words, have un-estimated value in provoking minds, challenging status quo and leaving a historical trail of counter-narratives.

(Seraphin, 2016)

Undoubtedly, working on the narratives project for the last year and a half has been enriching and has helped me develop my commitments as a critical scholar activist. The project made the local paper, prompting the associate dean of the university's teaching institute to enlist our work to train faculty and instructors on the impact of in-class microaggressions. We have been able to share the narratives with faculty members, educators, and students across campus, and are we're currently working towards archiving the narratives as oral histories accessible to the public via the university and county's public library catalogue.

Because our college town was not dealing with the manifestation of racism through police shootings, it was easy for our community, myself included, to feel absolved of having to take on the larger problem of white supremacist, ableist ideology and its presence in our everyday lives. I learned to use the movement to start thinking about my social context, its historical legacies with white supremacist, ableist patriarchy and the ways we could contextualize macro discussions into recognizable everyday occurrences.

The narratives helped myself, participants, colleagues, and those in the audience to recognize how white supremacist, ableist patriarchy touched our lives. It was in the overt actions of neighbors screaming, "we hate Asia!" through a young couple's apartment door. It was present in the exchange where a teaching assistant informed an African American student that it was unlikely that students of Color admitted to the university under the guise of Affirmative Action were as qualified as their white counterparts. And in a faculty member's abrupt dismissal of a discussion on race in a graduate level course by cajoling, "there's no pill for ignorance!"

The narratives of Black families who have been a part of the community for at least 3 generations, provided historical context and informed us of how their efforts worked to resist and ameliorate community practices towards people of Color. Their generational knowledge was invaluable, and we hope it continues to influence younger generations within the community.

The narrative project was my entry point into *doing the work*. Though not directly related to my dissertation study, both spoke to my ambitions as a critical scholar-activist. The project sharpened the lens of dissertation and helped me better articulate my overall research agenda. By juxtaposing the two projects, I was able to discern the running themes in what motivated me and the reasons why I wanted to get a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction in the first place. In both endeavors, there was the clear goal of centering silenced or ignored voices of students of Color. In both projects is a commitment to understanding how the white supremacist, ableist patriarchy presents itself in practices specific to that context, with an understanding that intersections of race, gender, class,

sexuality, immigrant status, and ability constantly cause systems to shift and adjust. When I leave, I leave knowing that we were able to capture and archive nuanced discourses from community voices who helped shape our town.

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Author Notes

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