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Main Article:

Opening My Voice, Claiming My Space: Theorizing the Possibilities of Postcolonial Approaches to Autoethnography

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Abstract

This essay examines the ways in which postcoloniality and autoethnography can be integrated to create a space of scholarly inquiry that disrupts the colonialist enterprise prevalent in the academy. By utilizing González's four ethics of postcolonial ethnography, this essay presents an ethics for postcolonial autoethnography as a mode to build a body of scholarly research that disrupts scientific imperialism.

Keywords: autoethnography; postcolonial studies; communication studies; women of color; feminist methods

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1. Introduction

The process of autoethnography disrupts the traditional academic voice, but carries with it various pitfalls. It is possible for autoethnography to slide into autobiography, memoir, and at worst, narcissism (de la Garza, 2004; González, 2003; Minh-ha, 1989). While the first two serve a purpose and when done well can be enjoyable to read, they are not autoethnography and they can inadvertently derail the autoethnographic enterprise by reinforcing the idea that the stories of autoethnographers are “mere stories” without theoretical academic value.

Autoethnography calls to me because it allows me to make sense of the world I have lived in. Autoethnography also gives voice to my life in a way that never seems to be articulated in the academic writings in which I have searched for myself. That said, I question if my story is worth telling. I have been impeccably trained to consider the absence of my voice as the most legitimate form of knowledge. Yet, my own experience, my true self continues to interrupt me, pushing me to consider the falsity of my own beliefs. This conundrum is exacerbated by the continual need to disrupt my knowledge of diversity from my brown body while acknowledging the embodied reality of my own experience (Pathak, 2008).

Is there a place in autoethnography for those of us for whom the intellectual/academic voice is our natural voice while assuring that we are not denied that very same intellectual validity because we use our own experience as the location of analysis? Utilizing González's (2003) essay presenting an ethics for *postcolonial* ethnography as a foundation, I am seeking a way to ground autoethnography in a postcolonial space that allows me to be who I am, both an intellectual and a person of color.

Additionally, in utilizing autoethnography to further the social justice agenda, we face a conundrum: we both disrupt the academic imperialism of absent, omnipotent, white, male voices as scholarship but also force identity onto the body by saying that "this" story has to be told by "this" person, inadvertently reinforcing the illegitimacy of the academic/intellectual voice of the scholar of color (Shugart, 2003). As an autoethnographer, my story is unique because it is mine; it is a lived experience, and also because I have the academic training to examine it critically.

This essay attempts to address the inherent contradictions of engaging in autoethnography as research practice by focusing on the ways in which we can ground autoethnography in the postcolonial enterprise and ways in which to strengthen the legitimacy of autoethnography without reinforcing the oppressive politics of diversity as merely of the body.

The essay will present a brief history of autoethnography and its roots amongst voices of color, a brief overview of the postcolonial enterprise in communication studies, an articulation of the false binary positioning knowledge of race/gender/class/sexuality/nationality as merely on the body or only in terms of intellectual training, and, finally, offer a way in which autoethnographers can ground their work in postcoloniality.

2. Two Beginnings

2.1. A Beginning: Claiming the Inherent Synergy of the Intellectual and Experiential

I was having a conversation with a white male colleague about the latest group of advisees we had been assigned. One of my newest advisees was a young African American male from an inner city who had been raised by a single mom. My colleague

looked at me and said, “Of course you have way more in common with that student than I do.”

I am a South Asian female raised in a two-parent, immigrant family that is firmly ensconced in the middle class, suburban US. I stood stoic, not sure how to answer my colleague or even if his comment called for a response. He truly believed that our dark skin color (mine and the student’s) connected us in some way, making me able to inherently engage with that student and his life and his needs. My colleague couldn’t/didn’t see that the experiences of a young African American male from an inner city were vastly different from my experiences, indeed perhaps even foreign. For my colleague, our skin color fixed us into the same reality.

The hardest part of this conversation was that I was caught between the fact that I knew my skin color did connect me with the student, but not in the ways my colleague believed. Though a part of me wanted to snap sarcastically, “Actually, given that you’re a man, you might have more in common with the student than I do,” I knew that my lived experience and my academic training and my intellectual passion did connect me to the student. But, I struggled with the vast chasm between the reality of why I was connected to the student and the reasons that my colleague and ultimately my superiors believed I could best serve that student. I was connected to that student not only as another person of color in the US, but more so because of my training in culture and communication and in race and gender, and because of my own work on social justice and inclusive education. For my colleagues and superiors, their understanding of my connection was a racist response of lumping all people of color into one homogenous group.

I knew that I would never get credit for the work I did with this student. My work with students of color and/or other at-risk students, my work on issues of race and gender, my scholarship was/is ultimately seen as nothing more than an obvious extension of my dark body. Indeed, even as I write this essay, in my head, I hear the voices of a former colleague and dean commenting that autoethnography is merely “me-search.” How is it that the work I do, which stems from rigorous academic training and sparks a deep passion in me can be relegated to such a small, snarky word? And, am I just perpetuating that ugly perception by writing the essays I write? I do believe that my lived experiences shape, inform, and disrupt theories about race and gender and in utilizing myself as text I engage in a meaningful, rigorous analysis. But my ingrained training and the chorus of traditional, white, male, bourgeoisie voices around me also make me ask: Is that mere narcissism? Am I escaping the mandates of scholarship by writing about myself?

Johnson and Bhatt (2003) explicate the ways in which, for scholars of color, intellectual commitments are often relegated to the body. Their work on issues of race is seen at best as “non-empirical” anecdotes and/or at worst, “a political soapbox.” This is also often true for women who engage in scholarship about women and LGBT scholars who engage in scholarship about LGBT issues (Yoshino, 2006). This is a product of the false binary belief that knowledge is either of the body (experiential/anecdotal) or of the mind (intellectual/abstracted theoretical), and the false belief that knowledge can and should be apolitical. We are unable to consider the ways in which it is possible to have both

embodied and intellectual knowledge in equitable and meaningful ways. And we are taught to see the political positioning of colonial, bourgeoisie, white male scholarship as apolitical (Pathak Bhatt, 2008).

This false binary is a result of the scientific imperialism that has penetrated the social sciences such that absence of the scholar's voice assures its legitimacy. Despite not naming the voice, a majority of the dominant, "mainstream" scholarship in the social sciences is driven by specific political agendas that are often completely denied through a positivist discourse of validity (Nielsen, 1990; Reinhartz, 1992; Smith, 2008; Sprague, 2005). This becomes a crisis for scholars of color who are told that engaging in research about race (or women engaging in research about women, GLBT scholars engaging in research about sexuality) is ultimately not "real" research, yet at the same time they are called upon as "experts" in these issues because of course their embodied experience is "valued." It is a double bind that forces the scholar of color to be both hyper-racialized (gendered, sexualized) and completely erased at the same time. Nor can they engage in scholarship about (their) identity without it/their motives being questioned.

Autoethnographic scholars and others have attempted to disrupt this scientific imperialism by arguing for the value of the knowledge of the body--the narrative of self (Bochner, 2001; Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004; González, 2000). These attempts have served a vital purpose in disrupting the arbitrary superiority of variable analytics, however, they do not quite address the false binary of knowledge as either intellectual or embodied. While arguing for the value of interpretivist methodology, the use and value of narrative and singular stories serves to disrupt the idea that aggregated data has more value and better serves the intellectual enterprise, it does not necessarily address the false binary that knowledge of the body/lived experience is antithetical to and separate from intellectual knowledge.

In many ways, the argument that embodied knowledge is not intellectual knowledge is a deeply colonialist position, derailing native, embodied knowledge as mere "lore" (Grosz, 1993, p. 187). This knowledge is relegated to the realm of the exotic, fantastic world of the indigenous and their myths. And, implicit in that derailment is the reinforcement of the western, white, male knowledge as scientific, universal, and true. The articulation of knowledge as rational, neutral, and empirical originated with the Cartesian move to separate subject from object and to measure reality in mechanistic ways (Husserl, 1970; Kramer, 1992). Several feminist and postcolonial scholars have since then expanded on this argument, detailing the ways in which contemporary articulations of knowledge reinforce dominant male, colonialist ideology despite not naming these defining characteristics of knowledge (Nielsen, 1990; Sprague, 2005).

Thus, to say that "lore" has value in some ways reinforces its position vis-à-vis western knowledge. Of course, lore and stories of the native do have value. I, however, posit that what must be addressed is not whether these stories have value; rather it is the disruption of the idea that these stories are not legitimate knowledge. To know is not merely an abstract, omnipotent intellectualized process. To know is to engage an experience fully with one's mind, body, and heart. Knowledge then is a vaster, more multi-dimensional

realm than we often recognize. And, this then allows us to consider how it is possible for a person to have intellectual *and* experiential knowledge. And at the same time, it is important to not place experience and knowledge on a false binary. To relegate one's knowledge to experience further perpetuates the second class citizenry of these scholars and their work (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Mohanty, 1982; Stone-Mediatore, 2000)

2.2. Another Beginning: Claiming Voice as Intellectual Space Through Postcoloniality

As a scholar, I have been trained across various epistemologies and methodologies. I am comfortable with a variety of traditions, yet it is autoethnography that continues to call to me. This is in some ways surprising, because I am also most comfortable with a "traditional" academic voice. I have been a communication scholar since my undergraduate years and find that I have a passion for the intellectual. Though I also love reading fiction, biography, and memoir, I never thought of myself as an author of novels. I did, however, see myself as a professor. Even as a child, my family tells me, I loved giving a good lecture. And yet, all my life, I have struggled between my love for fiction and the novel and my academic training, which taught me non-fiction--the scholarly essay was the truer, more legitimate voice. I hid my passion for novels and read them on the sly, as though the time I took to read fiction or biography or memoir was wasted time. Yet, those books sustained me and I found myself using the theories from my classes to make sense of, interpret, critique, and analyze the lives of the characters in my books.

So, it should come as no surprise that I was giddy when I discovered autoethnography. It was in so many ways an answer to my confusion. Finally, there was a way to take the excitement, vitality, honesty, and transcendence of my forbidden books and make that a part of my academic self (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004). And it was through my reading of autoethnography that I realized that fiction had been the only place I had been able to find voices like mine and where my experiences were mirrored. I realized that those stories I loved reading made me feel like I was not some oddity; those stories showed me how the lives of individual people connected with the world. I wanted to write like that. I wanted to make the intellectual come alive for others and myself in the ways that my forbidden books were alive for me (González, 2000).

However, as with everything, autoethnography was not an easy world to move into. At times, I read it and felt immeasurably let down. Though it read well, my intellectual self was left unsatisfied, untouched. Where were the "Aha!" moments where the transcendence of my books seamlessly synchronized with the heuristic power of the theories I so loved? I knew it could happen, but it seemed fleeting. It felt that the more I read, the more I was reading beautiful narratives that weren't much more than that. And, while that was dissatisfying, my true concern was the fear blooming in me. I couldn't write like that. It wasn't my voice. Was this also going to be another place that wasn't quite for me? Was I stuck hiding parts of myself? Was there a way that I could write in my voice and would it fit in this space that was so inviting and meaningful to me? Given all that I was reading about autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 1995), there was a space for me. And I was able to finally find

it. In reading the work of postcolonialist scholars such as Raka Shome, Radha Hegde, Sheena Malhotra, Sarah Amira de la Garza, and others, I found a name for my voice through postcolonial scholarship. I realized that blending the postcolonial with the autoethnographic was the space that mirrored me, my voice, and my passions. And I also knew that this blend already existed. I had heard it when I read the works of writers such as bell hooks, Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. B. DuBois, Salman Rushdie, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Arundhati Roy. I knew that those voices offered me a foundation on which to dream, to write, to open my voice.

3. Employing a Postcolonial Frame in Communication Studies and Research Methods

Postcolonial studies is not a mere study of colonialist histories, nor is it merely a response to colonialist study. Indeed, the post- in postcolonial can be articulated as:

Both the material effects of colonization and the huge diversity of everyday and sometimes hidden responses to it throughout the world . . . represent[ing] the continuing process of imperial suppression and exchanges throughout this diverse range of societies, in their institutions and their discursive practices. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995, p. 3)

Given the diverse scope of postcolonial studies, it is important to also specifically ground one's own disciplinary position within such a large intellectual frame (Shome, 1996). Shome and Hedge (2002) do just this in their germinal essay. This essay serves as my point of entry in examining the ways in which postcolonial studies informs my own positionality as a communication scholar.

Specifically, in addressing my work as an autoethnographer, Shome and Hegde provide a clear articulation of how one's work must reach beyond a simple storytelling. Indeed, they mandate that telling the story of colonialism is not postcolonial scholarship. There must be a clear move toward critique and material engagement of the colonialist question:

Its commitment and its critical goals, first and foremost, are interventionist and highly political. In its best work, it theorizes not just colonial conditions but *why* those conditions are what they are, and how they can be undone and redone (although more work is needed on this latter aspect). This is important to keep in mind for it emphasizes that not every study of colonialism would necessarily qualify as a postcolonial study. Merely describing or chronicling the facts of colonialism, without taking an emancipatory political stance, and without offering interventionist theoretical perspectives through which to examine the violent actions and erasures of colonialism, does not make a study postcolonial in its critical impulse. (Shome & Hedge, 2002, p. 250)

This speaks particularly to the ways in which one can engage autoethnography in powerfully political ways. This is not to say there is no value in telling the story. Rather,

I offer ways that open autoethnography up to even more diverse intellectual engagements. By engaging a postcolonial frame to the autoethnographic enterprise, we create a space that allows for one to engage both *the* story and *its* story. Based on González's (2003) four ethics for engaging in postcolonial ethnography, I apply these ethics to autoethnography and explore the ways in which by taking a postcolonialist position, the scholar of color can utilize autoethnography to disrupt the false binaries that drive her away from the work that impassions her while holding true to the mandates of "rigor" that pervade the academy and its evaluative bodies.

4. The Four Ethics

González (2003) explains that it is not easy to write from a postcolonialist positionality. Given our training, we often inadvertently reproduce the colonialist voice. González explicates:

Colonialism, as I have framed it, along with religious-political imperialism, results in a form of silencing in scholarly writing. This silencing is insidious in that along with the obvious explicit censorship of texts and writings, it helps create the illusion of a free exchange of ideas. (p. 80)

Thus, scholars of color who write critically about race are caught in a conundrum in that there is seemingly an open space into which they can write, but they can feel that something is amiss. There is an invitation to speak into that space, but when they do speak, it is often dismissed or they are punished for what they say. Postcoloniality provides a space that not only invites exchange of ideas, it allows one to name the ontology, axiology, and methodology that shape one's voice (see Conquergood, 1985, 1991; Shome, 1996 for a full treatise on this argument).

Now, this is much easier said than done. Of course, one must fight to not be re-entrenched into the colonialist voice. But, more importantly, the postcolonialist space is much more than an explanation of the colonialist voice. It must show that one has stepped out of the domination of colonialist thought (González, 2003). The postcolonialist scholar articulates ideas that both explain colonialism and disrupt the very nature of colonialism. Indeed, as González (2003) explains:

A post-colonial ethnography, therefore, is not merely an act of defiance, but one of great courage, in that unlike *pre-colonial* awareness, there is now a sense of coexisting within social systems that may or may not still be fully or partially in the creative grasp of the colonial fist. (p. 81).

One must exist within these systems without being determined by them. To this end, González offers four ethics for postcolonial ethnography. She explicates each ethic while reminding the reader to recognize that these ethics coexist and inform each other. Utilizing her ethics, I present the ways in which they connect with and can serve to shape autoethnography.

4.1. Accountability

“The ethic of accountability is not just the telling of the ethnographic tale. It is the telling of our story, of how we came to know the ethnographic tale. What is the story of the story?” (González, 2003, pp. 83-84). This ethic mandates a deeper, meta-analytical frame for the telling of the story. Particularly in autoethnography, this ethic pushes the autoethnographer to keep dancing between the space of subject and object, storyteller and protagonist, researcher and researched. This ethic specifically responds to those who declaim that autoethnographic research is merely “me-search,” by calling for a synchronicity between method and methodology. In the telling of the story, the scholar is given a space in which to both disrupt scientific imperialism and engage an active intellectual voice that does not presume to silence her.

4.2. Context

“The ethic of context is about the ability to describe the environment within which one’s tale is told. What were the political, social, environmental, physical and emotional surroundings of one’s told story?” (González, 2003, p. 84). This ethic provides specific guidance for engaging one’s accountability by offering the autoethnographer direction for laying the stage of her story. And, it also allows for naming the systems that shape, constrict, disrupt, inform both the story and the storyteller in autoethnography. Additionally, it helps the autoethnographer resist the insular narcissism that narrows the story to merely herself, her experiences, and her thoughts. It reminds the autoethnographer that her story is important precisely because it is about how her story lives in the larger world (e.g., Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Chang, 2008; Visweswaran, 1994).

4.3. Truthfulness

The third ethic exemplifies a sort of radical openness to “see not only what is in one’s social and environmental context, to see not only what one has actually done or said, but also to see that which is on the surface not visible” (González, 2003, p. 84). By calling for this radical openness, González disrupts the scientific imperialist demand that knowledge must be measurable by variable analytics in a fixed, material world. It allows for the telling of a reality that is often rendered invisible to those who benefit from the colonialist frame (Mohanty, 2003). Finally, this ethic serves to undergird the completeness of one’s accountability and context. Truthfulness pushes the autoethnographer to continuously return to an accountability that highlights the ways in which insidious, unnamed systems of power shape her story.

4.4. Community

“The ethic of community implies that once we step forward with an ethnographic tale, we can no longer feign separation from those with whom we have shared the story” (González, 2003, p. 85). I posit that this ethic will derail the narcissistic tendencies of autoethnography. This ethic demands that one’s story cannot be told alone. For the autoethnographer, it demands that the story be told not only of a person who is an

example of the world, but of a person who exists within a larger world--someone who is part and parcel of a larger story (hooks, 1994; Visweswaran, 1994).

These four ethics offer a frame in which the autoethnographer can engage her story in its fullest, most diverse, contradictory, paradoxical, real way without becoming lost and silenced by the colonialist discourse that so strongly shapes the academy.

5. Conclusion

I am glad I didn't respond to my colleague about my connection to the young African-American male advisee. It turns out I did have a connection with him and while my institution did not ever really understand my work, I know the ways in which it mattered. I was able to exist and remain committed to my intellectual ethic despite the colonialist discourse that pervades my world.

And, I am glad that I was trained in the variety of intellectual traditions in which I was trained. This training allowed me to understand the depth of the colonialist enterprise in the academy, not only in a historical context, but also in a lived context. My training made me a stronger postcolonial scholar because it gave me the foundation of truly knowing the colonialist enterprise.

And by engaging in such scholarship, I create "legitimate" sources for autoethnographers to cite as they work to articulate the legitimacy of their voices. Such scholarship offers vital implications for future research. I do not presuppose to offer prescriptive skills; rather, I offer a variety of possibilities for autoethnographic scholars.

As autoethnographers, it is imperative that we continue to produce both examples of rigorous autoethnography and methodological articulations of the value of autoethnography. By doing so we accomplish two things: we create a body of literature that serves as a foundation for future scholarship and we disrupt the colonial mindset that method exists a priori, without need to articulate its roots, its assumptions, and its origins (Feyerabend, 1993).

Additionally, postcolonial autoethnography opens the door for more rigorous, critical positivistic scholarship. In naming the methodological underpinnings of a particular method, we provide a structure and process through which to articulate the methodological underpinnings of other methods. This then disrupts the presumptive privilege held by positivistic scholarship. It is not the goal of postcolonial scholarship to get rid of positivistic scholarship; only to allow it to hold its space so that other methods may hold their spaces, allowing for a rich, diverse, complex matrix of scholarship.

And, my journey continues. I am sure that I will continue to write in ways that spark my intellectual, fiction-loving, traditionally trained, diasporic, postcolonial, multifaceted self.

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