

PUTTING PRIVILEGE INTO PRACTICE THROUGH "INTERSECTIONAL REFLEXIVITY:" RUMINATIONS, INTERVENTIONS, AND POSSIBILITIES

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Engaging in intersectional reflexivity requires one to acknowledge one's intersecting identities, both marginalized and privileged, and then employ self-reflexivity, which moves one beyond self-reflection to the often uncomfortable level of self-implication. This complex process may move critically minded people, both scholars and citizens, beyond individualized politics and expand our accountability from self, to others and self, creating possibilities for coalitional activism targeted toward broad-based social change. Further, privileged scholars should advocate for coalition building in cautious and reflexive ways that complement rather than appropriate the intellectual labor of scholars of color, who have long called for more intersectionality and critical self-reflexivity within the academy.

Academically and personally, my goal is to connect theory and activism in ways that will have positive, material effects for marginalized people, and ultimately lead to social change. But, my academic and activist identities are in tension with each other. The academy tells me to focus my attention on developing an "academic identity." My heart wants me to take action, with my body to make some change, and not just write about it. I enjoy my place in the academy but I also have strong accountabilities to the groups I represent in my work, and count myself a part of.

As I have become more active in presenting at conferences, and on my recent quest to find a tenure track job, I have been reminded of the ways in which critical research within the academy is still, at best, marginalized and, at worst, looked upon with suspicion and ire.

But, as Conquergood (1995) reminds me: "The choice is no longer between pure and applied research. Instead, we must choose between research that is 'engaged' or 'complicit'" (p. 85).

Intersectional Reflexivity: Coalitional Activism

My queer identity and my queer politics permeate all of my identities, as does being an activist and an ally. We must reflexively engage in a rigorous understanding of intersectionality if we want to begin to explore the complexity

of our identities and create possibilities for coalitional activism and social change. By engaging in intersectional reflexivity, I learn that my marginalized queer identity does not exist separately from my privileged White male identities. I also learn that creating possibilities for alliance means prioritizing broad-based social issues that contribute to the oppression of many groups, rather than cherry-picking issues that only affect me. Rowe's (2005) conceptualization of the "politics of relation" calls on us to move from individual to coalitional notions of the self, which are "radically inclined toward others, toward the communities to which we belong, with whom we long to be, and to whom we feel accountable" (pp. 16-18). This means critically minded people, both scholars and citizens, must move beyond an individualized location, expanding our accountability from self, to others and self.

My queer political agenda is not just about calling out and critiquing heteronormativity. My queer political and social accountabilities also involve fighting racism and sexism; fighting for a more just economic system; protesting development and promoting environmental sustainability; and standing in solidarity with those in the disability rights movement, who resist the medical model of disability and mental illness that rationalizes and legitimates them being treated as less than human, incarcerated, and/or forcefully medicated against their will.

At the theoretical and conceptual level, this type of coalitional activism, and blurring of boundaries between academic and personal, is not new. This blurring and bleeding is something that feminists, especially feminists of color, and queer scholars, especially queer scholars of color, have long known and written about (Alcoff, 1991-1992; Alexander, 2006; Anzaldúa, 1999; Collins, 2000; Johnson, 2006). However, as Hendrix (2005) notes, White scholars have not been as critically and reflexively present in the discussion of identity politics and power, perhaps because White scholars are not often "in surroundings that place them in the role of 'minority' or in circumstances that required exploring their Whiteness when conducting research with White participants" (p. 330). Perhaps "our" Whiteness blinds "us." Perhaps, our layers of privilege insulate us, and protect us from the more pressing and immediate material needs that come with triple, or more, layers of marginalization. Those immediate needs are what often drive people toward activist work, because writing, reading, and theorizing take a back seat to threats of physical violence, hungry kids, or the negative health effects of environmental racism.

Critical scholars of color have been yelling at us to wake up and see things in a more complicated way, while many of us have continued on, lulled, or perhaps sedated, by a sense of critical superiority. After all, are we not the most critical and progressive in our social circles? Do we not deserve a pat on the back for being so critical and progressive? No! There's a lot more work to be done. Many people do not have the privilege of rest, reward, or reassurance.

Many people are sick and tired of being sick and tired, yet they continue. So, I cannot, as a critical scholar, thinker, and activist, be sick and tired of occasionally stepping out of my privileged identities to get my "hands dirty" because I can always retreat to the safety of my privilege when I want to, or "when the shit hits the fan."

I am learning from the work others have done, others who have different racial, ethnic, national, and ability identities than I do - work that I was not exposed to during the first 17

years of my education. And I am cautious and reflexive about picking up and joining their conversation, and not dismissing the academic labor of people of color and scholars marked as "other" as exaggerated, lacking rigor, or atheroetical, which are all critiques that, mostly White, "experts" in Academia have used to marginalize critical, embodied scholarship (Calafell & Moreman, 2009; Collins, 2000, p. 253; Hendrix, 2005). Calafell and Moreman (2009) offer provocative critiques of the academic publication process and highlight the potential and problematics inherent within critical scholarship that engages the personal voice, especially in relation to the tendency for Whiteness to remain unmarked and uncritiqued as it operates behind a façade of "objectivity" (pp. 126-129).

Forging alliances and building bridges across landscapes of marginality and liminality is risky, as is critical and embodied research aimed at social justice. Conquergood (1991) reminds me that bodily physical, and emotional risks may come with engaged research, and Behar (1996) says research that does not break your heart, is not worth doing. Does suffering make research better? How do we deal with the pain associated with research? In reality, we engage in these risks everyday, in what we have arbitrarily bracketed off as our "personal lives," through our interpersonal relationships, which involve risk, emotion, pain, accountability, and an ethic of care. And I struggle to resist this bracketing off, because I am the field.

Alexander (2006) encourages me to not let my performance as researcher overshadow the desire that motivates my research. I did not choose or ask for overlapping academic and personal identities. I became a scholar in order to understand my identities. As an organic intellectual, my research has always been driven by a personal and political longing to better understand my world and myself. Further, being a critically engaged academic and community member is not a choice; it is a mandate that has been passed to me by my academic and community mentors.

I am the field. And, in my story, I know there is agency to resist those who may try to make me feel powerless, deficient,

pathologized, sinful, or unworthy, because I hear Corey (1998) whispering in my ear: "Each queer has a little story, but in the spirit of postmodernism, a little difference becomes a lot of discourse" (p. 250). Part of telling my story means first being reflexive in regards to my intersecting identities, and to acknowledge the disadvantages and privileges that come with them. Not reflection, not just light going back and forth all neatly contained within the laws of physics, but light hitting surfaces and refracting in new directions. Reflexivity is the ceaseless process of reflection and refraction. Self-reflection might scratch the surface, but self-reflexivity cuts to the bone. It implicates you. Reflexivity is uncomfortable because it forces you to acknowledge that you are complicit in the perpetuation of oppression. The fact that I can go most places and be safe is a direct result of my White privilege, my male privilege, my ability privilege, and other social circumstances that I did not earn and that I have no control over. Reflexivity has got to hurt. Reflexivity is laborious. But, while it may be laborious for me to "go out of my way" to intervene in how I perform privilege, I must also recognize that it is a privilege to not have my performance always already marked as marginal.

If people read me as a White, heterosexual, upper-middle class, Christian, vanilla, secure person unsuspectingly standing before them, and I do not go out of my way to intervene in that reading, then I am complicit in the perpetuation of the status quo. I want to say to them:

"You don't see a boy who grew up as a poor child, living in a trailer on the side of a mountain in the rural Appalachian region of North Carolina. You don't see a boy who was called 'faggot' more times than he could count during most of his adolescent and teenage years. You don't see a 12-year-old boy praying to Jesus during the alter call at his church, 'Please make me not be gay. Please Jesus, come into my heart and make me not be gay!' You don't see a man who later renounced Christianity after all those years of being psychically abused by his Southern Baptist upbringing. You don't see a boy who was called 'n***** lover,' and verbally and

physically assaulted by the rednecks on his bus because he associated with the Black kids, who got off the bus earlier on the route. You don't see a man who later identifies as an anti-racist, committed to recognizing and dismantling White privilege."

All Aboard the Critical Scholar Rhizomatic Underground Railroad!

I have received a "call to action" by critical scholars to reveal subjugated knowledges. Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) wakes me up at night, and, channeling Foucault (1980), tells me that differential knowledges are "incapable of unanimity," and gain their force through "the harshness with which [they are] opposed by everything surrounding [them]" (p. 311), and I am inspired by his comparison of epistemology to rhizomes. Our critical ideas can burrow and tunnel, much like ginger roots and strawberry vines, escaping open surveillance and resisting the social and academic conformity imposed on the open landscape above. However, I feel that our academically radical rhizomes rarely survive their tunneling through the pesticide-laced ground of the academy. So, this predicates my call to action, to get off the poisoned land and onto fertile ground.

I am trying to find a balance between work that stays confined within the intellectually hegemonic walls of the academy and work that makes a difference and touches people outside those walls in an accessible and meaningful way. I try to do this through intersubjective research methods that connect me with people in my communities, and through critical pedagogy that hopefully plants seeds of critical thinking within my students. These actions illuminate and contribute to rich patches of rhizomes in the community which I can touch, draw nourishment from, and reciprocate nurture. Who knows how a message we share, or a realization we help co-construct, as educators, practitioners, and citizens, may travel down those tangled vines, and how many people it may reach?

So, this is the call I bring to you: acknowledge your privilege, be self-reflexive, and jump into the messiness. Put your body in spaces where you are at risk, because doing

so may create a safe space for someone else. There are vast connections of rhizomes that are only sporadically visible, because most of them are underground, hidden, and subjugated. Perhaps this could be the "underground railroad" through which we, as activist-scholars, can safely transport our "radical" and critical ways of thinking to community to begin a transformation, to begin a revolution!

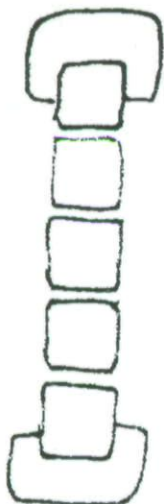
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