Eating Fire While Walking on Broken Glass: An Auto-Ethnography of One Adult Educator's Tenure Process

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Eating Fire While Walking on Broken Glass: An Auto-Ethnography of One Adult Educator's Tenure Process

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Abstract: This autoethnography documents the journey of one female academic of color through her tenure process. It offers recommendations for new faculty of color.

Keywords: critical race theory, autoethnography

Introduction

This autoethnography explores tensions and contradictions embedded in the tenure journey of one female adult education faculty member of color. Re-mapping her tenure process, she situates her experiences within a larger framework of race and gender within higher education in order to explore the landscapes and landmines that face faculty of color within the academy. The study unpacks barriers (seen and unseen) that can undermine all newer faculty, but especially faculty of color. Faculty of color bear heavier burdens, because of the weight of histories of structural racism and legacies/manifestations of those histories (Lazos, 2013). Through documenting her experiences, the hope is to contribute to a larger dialogue centered around race and racism in academia that could be of utility to younger scholars of color. The questions guiding this research were:

- In what ways can the academy offer more meaningful supports to new scholars of color?
- How can academic culture, specifically the tenure process, be more inclusive 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

One newly tenured practitioner of color (Indian, Tibetan, British) critically reflects on her process of succeeding the gauntlet to make it through tenure, exploring implications for other new scholars of color. This study is not intended to portray all experiences of people of color as monolithic but to contribute to a fluid conversation aimed at opening up spaces within the academy while at the same time recognizing that the academy is as Kelley (2016) states, a cog in the neoliberal order, with endowments built on misery, class privilege disguised in multicultural garb, gentrifying practices, and commitments to war and security.

Theoretical Framework

The academy, situated in a history of white male privilege has continued to be a space where brown and black faculty face numerous microaggressions every day (Dyson, 2016). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 79% of current full time faculty in universities are white. The study also states this trend is unlikely to change. Much has been written (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Sheared, 2001) about ways in which different standards exist for racialized and non-racialized faculty and also ways in which racialized faculty have had their credibility questioned. This narrative also highlights a reality within the neoliberalized academy that is driven by budgets, timetables, and other market interests (Wells & Ramdeholl, 2015). For practitioners of color, this culture has proven daunting, hostile, toxic, and mostly
inaccessible. (Johnson – Bailey, 2000). From students accusing faculty of color to "sounding" angry, to being mistaken for a secretary (because you don't look like the professor), to being questioned by security when leaving campus with a computer (Johnson-Bailey, 2012) to other white faculty members referring to them as "exotic," the list of psychic assaults is virtually endless.

This speaks explicitly to Critical Race Theory which 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 that the insidious nature of racism can only be addressed when people of color share their experiences through counter-narratives (Peterson, 2008). CRT is critical in this study because, while not explicit, issues of racism emerged repeatedly in my experiences in academia. Critical Theory is also relevant, highlighting ways in which capitalism pushes society into dehumanizing ways of living and being that perpetuate legacies of economic/racial/gender oppressions (Brookfield, 2005). Space for people to re-write/re-negotiate their narratives is almost impossible because as the academy has become increasingly commodified, students are viewed as clients to be satisfied and appeased at all costs. (Gill, 2014).

Research Design

Ellis and Bochner (2000) point out the ways in which 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. Though I was skeptical of focusing solely on/inadvertently fetishizing the personal (and diminishing the importance of the collective) this method allowed me to move fluidly from personal to cultural analysis and back again.

Coles (1989) reminds us that stories are all we carry with us in our lives and we owe it to each other to honor and learn from them. Using several years of 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 several other practitioner scholars of color. Their realities reflected mine almost identically.

Findings

My Journey

I began working in my current institution (a public university in NYC) in 2009 in a tenure track position. Almost from the very beginning, I felt like an outsider. Before joining the academy, I was a community based adult literacy practitioner most of my working life where naming/speaking truth to power and working in solidarity with others were the foundations that shaped my everyday reality. I quickly became aware that academia was very different. One of the first things I noticed was how few faculty of color worked at the institution. Though I found interactions with students very fulfilling, I found the culture embedded in the Center in which I worked disheartening. Even though the curricula/philosophy was built on fostering a more democratic culture for/with students, there was almost no space for faculty to enact that in any meaningful way. Endless meetings ensued only to have decisions reached by faculty collectively
scrapped and instead what was implemented was what the Dean at the time had decided. Understandably, it had a silencing effect on all faculty. In my current center, there is very little space to include faculty of color's voices/perspectives in discussions. In the last six years, all 6 of the faculty in my Center who did not receive tenure have been people of color. Though racialized discussions aren’t addressed in any explicit way in my Center, it could be argued that expressions like, "he/she just doesn't fit in" might be a veiled way of alluding to race. There is also certain false color blindness which serves to preserve dominant interests.

**Tenure**

For those outside and inside academia, tenure and promotion are mysterious processes, arbitrary and deeply politicized. Many who have navigated this process speak about how psychically drained they have felt during and after it was all over. In the institution where I work, in order to receive tenure, the five requirements by which all faculty must succeed are: university service, mastery of subject matter, scholarship, teaching effectiveness, and continuing growth. These categories are all subjective to the extent that they're interpreted differently by different deans and different standards end up applying to different faculty. For example, one dean might place heavy emphasis on student evaluations, considering anything less than 4 out of 5 problematic. To another dean, this is a non-issue. Though literature (Lazos, 2012) has warned against the very limited nature of student evaluations, this is the way teaching effectiveness is mainly assessed in the institution in which I work. Literature discusses ways student evaluations are potentially retaliatory and offer an inaccurate snapshot of one's practice. Faculty of color also tend to get lower scores than non-racialized faculty for a variety of complex reasons (Lazos, 2012). Universities can use these as a tool to discipline or punish.

In my own case, I had exceeded the categories needed for tenure and promotion but some of my student evaluations fell shy of 4. Many of my colleagues felt my portfolio was strong (lots of publications, service, etc.) and I soldiered on, naively convinced that justice would prevail.

Soon after I began my position, I was asked to be part of a team developing a new graduate degree and then to coordinate that program. I didn't realize at the time that by junior faculty being promoted, some senior faculty members were becoming increasingly threatened. I was teaching four courses at that time in addition to coordinating. This is significant responsibility for any new faculty. It is fairly unusual for a junior faculty member to be teaching so much, coordinating, developing courses, staffing a new program, responding to program queries from prospective students, etc. Without realizing it, I was being set up to fail. I brought it up repeatedly with my Chair but while she was sympathetic, no extra supports or resources were given. I was up until after midnight most evenings responding to student work. The program was completely undeveloped at the time. I shouldn't have been surprised at the unnecessarily vicious comments directed at me by certain senior faculty but I was.

I would hear repeated murmurs from certain senior faculty that one needed to be part of the institution for at least 10 years in order to understand how it really worked. The subtext was I didn't. One senior faculty member even said to me that she would coordinate the program for 10 years and keep the seat warm for me. After 10 years she felt I would be ready. On another occasion, after once asking a senior faculty member to complete a simple program related task, I instead got an email with 15 questions. I ended up completing the task myself. It was a classic case of bullying a vulnerable faculty member who wasn't protected by tenure.

I continued working with no support in place. The former dean who appointed me left and the current dean (who had never been a faculty member) didn't recommend me for tenure. Her reasons were idiosyncratic and arbitrary (like the focus of my scholarship being too narrow).
This went against the faculty vote. One aspect of this process is that, in my institution, the candidate up for review leaves the room while others discuss her/his work after having read the candidate’s file. It could either be a lovefest or a verbal slaying. I had witnessed both. After various people speak, each faculty member votes. The candidate returns to the room not having any knowledge of what was said. In many cases, many faculty only meet at annual meetings yet they vote on colleagues whose work they hardly know.

In my situation, as reported to me by colleagues, during my absence a senior faculty spoke for 15 minutes giving reasons why I shouldn't receive tenure. One of the reasons was that this was a teaching university and I should have had fewer publications. Despite her fifteen minute speech, the majority of faculty voted in my favor. As I walked back into the room, no-one would meet my eye but a few friends patted me on the shoulder. Everyone looked drained. I was bone weary and disconnected from my body. I spent much of the weekend trying to regain a sense of feeling centered. I couldn't help but think that one simple way this process could be slightly more humane would be if the candidate were allowed to have the last word on her case (or address any questions from the group) after returning to the room at the end of faculty discussion. I wrote a response to the dean’s recommendation. Other faculty wrote letters. This all then went to the Academic Personnel Committee (APC), a college wide committee, who voted in my favor. I also contacted the union who was very supportive but unable to do much. Ultimately, the provost and president overturned the dean's recommendation and I received tenure last June but was denied promotion. The process had taken its toll. I felt depleted. For months after this, I felt emptied out, and exhausted. However, the support of my allies was invaluable throughout this process. I would stress that finding allies in this process is necessary. I also sought the support of faculty of color in other institutions (since I was the only faculty of color in the program I was teaching in). These conversations allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my reality. Many other faculty of color I spoke with were engaged in some variation of the same script I was.

**Recommendations**

- Newer faculty (and of color) need to be supported when given significant additional responsibilities (like organizing entire conferences or coordinating entirely new programs). When junior faculty are being set up to fail, they need to be able to leave that situation without repercussions.
- When powerful senior faculty in an institution privilege certain teaching/learning philosophies above others, newer faculty can be penalized covertly or unconsciously for valuing other ways of knowing/paradigms. This tramples on academic freedom.
- Using teaching evaluations as a weapon instead of taking into account multiple sources in order to assess teaching effectiveness (testimonials from students, research with students, etc.) when one has been burdened with unrealistic additional responsibilities is unfair and unethical...especially when similar scores by other faculty up for review are not necessarily scrutinized in the same way...
- Make tenure requirements explicit and clear. Ex. listing a specific number of publications instead of vague open ended language which creates confusion and opportunity for personal biases/vendettas to play out against candidates up for tenure.
- Senior faculty have a responsibility to mentor newer faculty (and faculty of color) as they are more unprotected from the toxicity of academia. As skewed as the rules are, it's important for untenured faculty to follow processes in place by their institution. Only when those seem to be fruitless, should one attempt to seek justice outside of those
• When faculty of color choose to write about race, poverty, and other institutionalized inequities they can get dismissed as being "angry people of color" or that their scholarship is too narrow. This was the case in my situation when my field of adult education/adult literacy education was referred to as too narrow (even though it was what I was hired by the university to teach). When one has significant publications in this area that also gets diminished or marginalized as “not serious scholarship.”

• Counseling services and other appropriate supports need to be in place for students. This is especially true if the student body is mainly comprised of poor/working class students who are precariously situated on a number of fronts. This inevitably takes a psychological toll. To do anything else is to perpetuate larger structural inequities students navigate each day of their lives and set faculty up to fail.

• There are numerous institutionalized barriers that work against faculty of color within the academy. Because universities still have de facto preferences for white males and females, it is important for everyone to address the privilege and entitlement that is prevalent within the academy. Faculty members continue to perceive women of color through their own biased lenses.

• Covert, overt, and unconscious racism among colleagues remains an enormous issue. Good intentions are not sufficient to guarantee that equal opportunity will insure equal treatment. One example is that different expectations are often placed on faculty of color. In my own case, my teaching/advising was significantly higher than other faculty in the department. This was in addition to coordinating a new, undeveloped program. This can negatively impact other tenure requirements for which they are penalized. There is a price for being silent on issues of inequity and for not being silent on those very same issues.

• Collective historical memory impacts our constructed realities in ways which we are mostly unaware. What have professors historically looked like? What are those images based on?

Implications
Self care/communities of support are essential if faculty (and those of color) are to survive the tenure process (as is developing networks of allies). In addition to self care, allies, people of color networks, and practitioner networks can all be necessary lifelines during this process. Tenure and promotion policies must be as transparent as possible with uniformity across the institution. Respecting the significance of research/teaching contributions by members of underrepresented groups is critical. To the extent that higher education can be one of society’s critics and conscience, then extensive measures must be implemented in order to shift the culture, making it less toxic to newer scholars of color. Given the deeply racist structures that faculty of color continue to encounter within academia, it is critical that the academy put more supports in place to create more fairness/equity around tenure. It is also important for newer faculty to come together and struggle collectively outside of institutional constraints to think about developing new ways of building a more egalitarian discourse that subverts hierarchical, competitive ways of being rooted in traditional academia. When faculty members of color are hired and then left to flounder, there needs to be language and visibility around these landmines. For myself and other activists who have found themselves in academia, our commitment was continue to find ways to bridge the divide between the academy and communities and to work with marginalized communities to co-create a critical body of work that would honor knowledges, voices, and perspectives that have been historically marginalized. This remains my
commitment. Embracing new ways of knowing/being can support academia in learning how to better serve the communities in which they exist (and to honor knowledges that have been silenced or stolen), to access different, important conversations rooted in change and that offer a different, more equitable vision of the world. At present, this vision is largely absent.

References
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