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REFLECTING, SEEING, LEARNING:
USING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY TO CRITICALLY INTERROGATE RACISM, CLASSISM,
AND SELFHOOD

by

Stephanie Nook

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ABSTRACT
REFLECTING, SEEING, LEARNING: USING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY TO CRITICALLY
INTERROGATE RACISM, CLASSISM, AND SELFHOOD

by

Stephanie Nook

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014
Under the Supervision of Professor Donna Pasternak

The purpose of this self-study was to engage in autoethnography that focused on the interactions of the auto (self) and the ethno (culture) components of this qualitative method of study. In an effort to be more culturally aware of my selfhood within the classroom, I sought to “story” pivotal moments in my personal history where class, race and privilege intersected. I aimed to interrogate these intersections and their role in shaping and informing my identity, while also harvesting new knowledge and understanding through the very act of retelling. I argue that the act of autoethnography was influential in dismantling unproductive visions of myself as an educator, while at the same time propelling me productively through Helms’ (1990) White identity model. As a preservice educator, I share my own work with autoethnography, which is honest and personal, in the hopes that other preservice educators might engage in such self-reflection.

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Part I – Storying the “I”

On October 14, 2011 I checked into the emergency room at a hospital in a small southern town in Georgia. It was my twenty-sixth birthday.

I told the intake nurses that I did not feel comfortable being alone in my own home. That I was having severe anxiety and depression. That the Xanax my doctor had prescribed was no longer working. They gave me a gown, a wristlet and packed away all my belongings into a plastic bag. My husband would be at work for the next eleven hours. My family and friends were all over 900 miles away, and my own self, well, that seemed even further out of reach.

I can remember just a month before I checked myself in, waking in the middle of the night to a panic attack. I can remember feeling the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet turning moist in the thick southern night. I can remember feeling a heat rising inside me, flushing my cheeks, making my heart race. I can remember the shakes, the way my husband looked at me when I woke him, the way he rested his hands on my shoulders and the way I could not stop the trembling, like every muscle was contracting. And I can remember when I looked in the bathroom mirror that night how I did not know where I was. Or more importantly, *who* I was. I did not recognize myself. What I saw was someone who looked an awful lot like me and yet did not resemble any sense of self I thought I had. And I can still remember that moment to this day, where the truth and reality of that moment were superimposed on some memory I had of myself as *someone*. It is hard to put into

words how it feels to really *see* oneself, not simply as a reflection, an assumption, a confirmation, or an expectation, but as something wholly unfamiliar and yet every bit as real, if not more so.

What had I expected myself to be in the fall of 2011? Successful? Published? A writer? Fulfilled? Fearless? I had spent seven years of my life since graduating high school creating this vision. I had received a bachelors in creative writing. I had received awards. I had been accepted into an MFA program in creative writing. I had left the program. I had moved, given up everything and everyone to write. But in between all that self-creation, life happened. *Things* happened. A real self began to take root and grow and finger its way into the foundation of everything I had thought I had wanted and would be.

And so, on my twenty-sixth birthday I checked myself into the hospital. Because when I looked in the mirror, I did not see myself or *that* self, and that scared the shit out of me. It is in these moments of my history, of my own narrative that I find myself still wading through as I write my own autoethnography.

Carolyn Ellis (2009) has spent much of her career exploring and writing ethnography, and particularly ethnography that centers on the “I.” Autoethnography is a qualitative method of study that situates the researcher at the heart of the research. Often highly personal, autoethnography focuses on the collection of data and analysis couched in social contexts (Hayler, 2011; Pennington & Brock, 2012).

According to Holt (2003) “Autoethnography is a genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the cultural, placing the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997)” (para. 2). Reed-Danahay (cited in Holt, 2003) notes that autoethnographers often vary in their focus on the different parts of autoethnography. Where one researcher might hone in on *graphy* (i.e., the research), another researcher might emphasize *ethnos* (i.e. culture), and yet another might focus on *auto* (i.e., the self). For the purposes of my autoethnography I chose to focus on aspects of the self and culture and how these two interact and inform one another. I drew most heavily on memory for data and analysis and while Chang (2007) believes that memory can be both beneficial and detrimental for autoethnographers, Ellis, (2009) argues that it is the *process* of storying ourselves that is essential rather than the validity of the actual memory. Through this process, the researcher relearns, reinterprets and brings to light how our pasts continue to inform our futures. (Hayler, 2011; Le Fevre, 2011; Robillard, 2003).

Ellis (2009) writes:

To story ourselves does not mean to describe the way it “really” happened; instead it means to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 257). It means to “see and rediscover the past, not as a succession of a events but as a series of scenes, invention, emotions, images, and stories” rewritten by the author within the conditions set by the author. In turn, as the story is being produced, it affects the author’s re-

experience of what happened (Denzin, 2008a, p. 118; see also Ulmer, 1989).

The story and the “I” in the story come into being in the telling (Jackson & Mazzei, in press). (p. 16)

Considering this, it is not expected that autoethnography will be wholly true to *fact*, if there is such a thing, but rather an interpretation of the events, stories, and histories that have produced a sense of self. In essence, while the storyteller – the narrator – might be unreliable, it is not the content but the *act* that frames the learning and reflecting. As such, the night I just reflected on might be told in a very different vein and from a very different perspective if relayed by my husband.

I am a pre-service educator, though I have worked in the field of education prior to returning to school for my post-baccalaureate license and Masters. I am white, middle-class and female. I hope to be teaching English and language arts in my own classroom within the next year, and while my experiences and my path toward teacher certification are certainly wholly my own, the categories that I place myself within – racially and socio-economically – are not unlike much of the current and future teaching force of today’s society. Race, within my autoethnography is a “power-infused category of social difference” (Ball & Lardner, 2005, p. 25). Race can be both at once a disadvantage or a privilege, depending on the gradation and is indicative of both position and hierarchy (Dalton, 2008). In order to fully appreciate and critically interrogate privilege – an unearned advantageous or favored state due

to my presence within a dominate group (Lapour & Heppner, 2009; Wildman & Davis, 2008) – I also have to be witness to my complicity in racist and prejudicial thoughts, actions, and inactions.

These same privileges have to be identified and recognized within the confines of class, an equally important facet of my autoethnography. Class, according to Lawler (2005) is, “... conceptualized as a dynamic process which is the site of political struggle, rather than as a set of static and empty positions waiting to be filled by indicators such as employment and housing” (p. 430). In other words, rather than class being a defined as where one falls within an income bracket, class within the context of my autoethnography is a multi-layered categorization that includes education attainment, cultural views, values and biases (hooks, 1994), all of which do indeed act as indicators for placement once again – not unlike race – within a social hierarchy.

According to Tim Wise (2012), white Americans will cease to be the majority in the United States by no later than 2050. And so, while 90% (Bushman & Haas, 2006; Bell, 2008) of the nation’s teaching staff is monochromatically comprised, this is not reflective of the demographic make-up of contemporary classrooms. Right now, there are over 400 languages being spoken in public schools across the country (Bushman & Haas, 2006), and on top of that, more students than before are living in poverty or have parents lacking secure employment (Kids Count Data Book, 2012). Similar statistics can be seen in the urban, Midwestern district in which I

currently student teach. The district I currently teach in is constructed of 55.8% African American students, 24.1% Hispanic students, 13.0% White students, 5.7% Asian students, and 0.08% Native American students. Of this student population, 79.7% are defined as low-income students, meaning these students qualify for free or reduced lunch (MPS District Fact Sheet, 2013). While this district is not representative of all school districts, it does bear a resemblance to other large, urban districts, which make up a goodly portion of the country's public school system.

Within this context, research has shown that current teachers exhibit passive racist attitudes and presumptions and often corroborate with systemic racism (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998 & 2000; Young, 2011; Hardie & Tyson, 2012) and that this mentality and assumptive thinking can begin in pre-service education programs (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Garmon, 2004; Marx, 2006). The question then begs to be asked – of both pre-service and veteran teachers – how do we, educators, overcome this thinking?

Over the last year, as I have moved closer toward my goal of teaching English in a secondary, urban school, I have asked myself this very question time and time again. While there is certainly no single answer, engaging in autoethnography has provided a rough roadmap for such self-reflection and constructive change. However, engaging in such self-analysis does not absolve or rid me of racist thoughts or presumptive thinking based on socio-economic class. Beyond this,

research has indicated that autobiographical forms of self-study, such as autoethnography, rely on recognition and connection on the part of the reader (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). While autoethnography hones in on the “I” of the study, the researcher reveals these truths in hopes of forging bridges with a readership who can envision themselves within a similar narrative, which, considering my racial and socio-economic identification with the majority of future and current teachers, is highly possible. Furthermore, there is evidence that authentic recognition and reformulation of previously held prejudicial views is best accomplished in a collaborative setting (Hu & Smith, 2011; Le Fevre, 2011; Marx, 2006; Souto-Manning, 2011; Swartz, 2003). My hope then is that while this autoethnography was conducted through a single lens – mine – its production here will serve to spur and foster conversations about self-reflection and analysis of one’s cultural self for pre-service and veteran teachers alike.

In his essay, “Literacy, Identity, Imagination, Flight,” Keith Gilyard (2000) writes, “It’s useful at times to complicate notions of identity, but primary identities operate powerfully in the world and have to be productively engaged” (p. 270). This notion of a primary identity is what I seek to discover through autoethnography. This foundational identity imbues meaning into the decisions I make and have made as a teacher, and is ultimately at the heart of my very decision to become a teacher. It is this unearthed identity that I hope, as Gilyard notes, to “productively engage,” within the classroom.

Part II – An Emerging Self

The last thing my husband and I ever heard from his seventeen-year-old nephew was a text message thanking the two of us for a book we had given him over Christmas. That was in February 2010. On April 1st my husband and I would announce to our closest friends and family that we were getting married in three months at the end of June. In May, my husband's nephew would pass away. He would leave in his wake two unborn baby girls. And while making the funeral arrangements, his mother would tell us how much he had loved the book we had sent him. How he had carried it with him. How he had shown off the inscription my husband had written. How he said no one had ever given him a book as a present before.

My husband's nephew was of Mexican descent, as is my husband's eldest niece. Four of his other nephews are of Cuban descent. His half-brother's father was East Indian. The newest addition to this mix – our great niece – is African American, East Indian, European American, and Mexican. I say all this with a sense of pride. With my marriage, came a diversity within my extended family that I had never known. And yet, I am cautious with this pride. I do not yet know how I wear it fully. I do not know if it is an unconditional pride, or one stemming from an apologetic mindset. I do not yet know whether when I tell the students I work with about my extended family, it is simply to tell them about myself, or to create some credibility

on my part, to show that I identify with “the other”? I am still interrogating the intent behind this telling.

Beyond the varied ethnicities of my husband’s niece and nephews is the fact that all of them come from a mixture of working class and lower socio-economic class backgrounds. As they are all products of divorce, they are also products of different environments and fall into different socio-economic stratifications.

My husband’s nephew’s death was a turning point for me – though I would not see it as such until looking back, it began a process of self-doubt, questioning, and reinvisioning that would culminate with my ER visit on my twenty-sixth birthday.

That being said, in all honesty, I barely knew my husband’s nephew. Over the three years that my husband and I were dating, I met his nephew no more than three times before he passed away. I knew of him mostly through story, through tellings of childhood tales by my husband. He had grown up with my husband – as much a nephew as a pseudo little brother. Somehow, he had become nearly a ghost during the years I should have known him. He juggled back and forth between his father’s and his mother’s home, sometimes living in different states, sometimes rejecting his father, particularly during a paternity dispute. It would seem that while I knew of much of the context that surrounded his life and the people that made it up, I hardly knew him in any authentic way.

Even so, I managed to find him a book that he would like. A book that I thought would speak to him, or engage him, or that he might find himself within. I urged my husband to send it to him. We did. He loved it. I felt reaffirmed. Did it matter that Junot Diaz wrote the book, in the voice of a urban teenage boy hailing from the Dominican Republic? Certainly. I had read it and had thought how much our nephew would like it – an urban, Hispanic, teenage boy. But this book did not save his life. This book did not keep him from over-dosing and passing out in a guest bedroom, choking on his own vomit. My husband’s nephew slipped through the cracks, as I assumed many urban youth of color do. He slipped through the cracks even when it came to his family and me. And even that terminology – “slipped through the cracks” – what does it mean? That he disappeared, that at one time he had not been on the precipice of invisibility? But who was he invisible to? Certainly not everyone. To me? Who was I to determine any of this?

At the funeral arrangements I kept wondering why no one had ever given him a book before. I thought because I had made that gesture, because I had offered him a glimpse into what I held dear and valuable, I had forged some connection with him. This feeling of connectedness that I felt very wholly to be my own – even in its nascent formation – would fester and grow with his passing. It would, as I mentioned, begin a snowballing of internalized reassessment that would forge within me a desire to work in the educational field, most particularly with students

often described with vague nomenclature such as: “at-risk,” “disadvantaged,” or “under-privileged.”

...

During the spring of 2013 as I began working on this autoethnography, I read Sherry Marx’s (2006) book, *Revealing the Invisible: Confronting Passive Racism in Teacher Education*, based on Marx’s semester long study where she explores the emerging racial identity of nine, white, female pre-service educators as they participate in tutoring second language acquisition students – a requirement within Marx’s particular teacher education program. During this study she found that many of the tutors created visions of themselves and their students. She writes:

While volunteer experiences are certainly meant to be rewarding to the volunteer, tutors described in this section placed too much emphasis on their own good intentions and benevolence. In doing so, they constructed highly idealistic visions of themselves as role models, teachers, helpers, and even saviors. Simultaneously, they constructed highly deficient visions of the people they sought to help. (72)

I wish I could say that this is *not* how I envisioned myself when I volunteered for nonprofit organizations or worked as a literacy tutor for AmeriCorps, but that would be a lie. In fact, I continually saw reflections of myself within the interviews with these tutors and the ways they saw themselves. As I story my own experiences, it has become clear how much and how often I have created “versions” of myself. Be it

a reclusive author (who never wrote), a doting aunt (who hardly knew her deceased nephew), or a future educator saving the “at-risk” youth of today (while not yet paying attention to my own prejudices and racism).

The tutors in Marx’s (2006) study began to reflect on their preconceived notions about race and identity and as they did so Marx, outlined the stages of Helms’ (1990) model for white racial identity. According to Helms, white individuals progress through six stages as they confront their own whiteness and racism. The first stage – contact – involves an obliviousness to racism both on a personal and institutional level. This stage of Helms’ model unfortunately comprised the majority of my childhood and adulthood before returning to school for my teaching license. While I would like to think of myself as someone who had rebelled against racial injustices and other inequalities, that would be a false representation. I might have been *slightly* aware of them, but I was not actively combating them on either a personal or institutional level. According to Helms, white individuals at this stage might actually categorize themselves as “color-blind,” or as Ball & Lardner (2005) put it, “The essential ingredient in white skin privilege ... is the option a white person possesses to avoid contending with race” (p. 25). Being white allowed me to not have to think about skin color or privilege or even critically interrogate a nasty habit I had for making racially charged jokes begot from a history of jokes by family members and friends in the same vein. I cannot tell you how many times my father told me that his grandmother used a highly pejorative term for Brazil nuts with a

knowing wink, or how often my friends and I made stereotypical jokes about all different ethnicities – including those that had become an outgrowth of my own family tree.

And why had I thought these jokes were okay? Because I thought I had a free pass? I had black friends. I had lived with a black person. I had gone to inner-city schools. I liked *The Chappelle Show*. I listened to Mos Def. I married a guy with a Wu-Tang tattoo, whose friends and family were quite diverse. Did this make it okay? Or maybe I thought I had a free pass because when I was just twenty-one I had taken the Implicit Association Test developed by a Harvard professor – who I had seen featured on *Oprah* – and it told me I had a “slight preference for African Americans over European Americans.” Therefore, these jokes, these generalizations, they were all in good fun. Right? I was allowed to make derogatory and racist jokes because I never *really* meant it. Jokes that, if I’m being wholly truthful, I would never think to utter in the presence of anyone who did not look like me. Why? Because they might offend. They might hurt or harm. And maybe they wouldn’t have, but they *might* and while I’d like to think that my friends, colleagues, nieces and nephews would know the *intent* behind these jokes, would know that it was lighthearted and not malicious, that is ignorance on my part. That is obliviousness. That is “possessing the ability to not content with race.” That is failing to see the *impact*.

In Helms’ second stage – disintegration – white individuals’ obliviousness is replaced with a burgeoning sense of guilt or shame over their unearned racial

privileges. As I began retelling the stories of my childhood and education, I found myself clinging and reverting back to this stage. I was beginning to see how insidious racism and privilege had been in my upbringing and this was unsettling. On a certain level, it felt good wallowing in this internalized loathing, as if it were justified, sanctioned, deserved. I would like to think that this autoethnography has propelled me beyond this stage, and it has, however, this guilt, this shame, it still hides at times in shadows of my emerging identity though I know it now to be unproductive in every fashion of the word.

Helms' third stage – reintegration – is categorized by fear or feeling the need to be accepted into one's own racial group. She notes that while some individuals might experience this stage, others do not. Pseudo-independent is the fourth stage in which white individuals begin critical self-examination. Individuals in this stage might begin seeking out information and questioning their previously held belief systems. Individuals in this stage begin to see their white privilege in new ways, but still act (or do not act) in ways that may perpetuate institutional forms of racism and privilege. This particular stage is the context in which I would like to believe my autoethnography began, but as mentioned I often saw myself oscillating between this stage of inquiry and reformulating and Helms' second stage of guilt and shame. I interviewed my parents within this stage in order to create a context of the world I grew up in as it was informed by race and class, and I began to reflect on my first encounters with race and class – stories I would retell multiple times. I would retell

stories about my next-door neighbor, a trash-to-treasure type, and her topsy-turvy doll. This doll is a bewildering creation, half white and half black, it is soldered at the hipbone, at the age of six, I can remember sitting on her front porch, flicking the skirt back and forth, hiding one half while playing with the other, because I was enthralled. I had never seen a black doll before.

I would retell stories about my first memory of being a snobbish brat, brandishing my socio-economic standing before friends at a fifth grade graduation ceremony, telling them about the pearls I was wearing, how much they cost, how the dress I was sporting was bought in France. I would story my time at a magnet school, plopped down in the center of a high-minority, high-poverty neighborhood, and how it culled its students from affluent townships and villages outside the city limits. I would relay my time there and how it took me until nearly twenty years to really see the reality of my acceptance into the program and how it had very little to do with ability, but everything to do with advantages and privileges, such as attending a private Montessori preschool, or well-employed parents with the means to afford testing and camp out in a gymnasium to secure me a slot at this coveted school. It would take me twenty years to see this truism and see it played out in other contexts and studies that I sought out during my autoethnography (Brantlinger, 2003; Lapour & Heppner, 2009; Payne-Bourcy & Chandler-Olcott, 2003; Reay, 2006). Within this particular stage, these stories were important for me to reflect on, remember, retell, and relearn. For instance, I was able to see more

clearly how being white had allowed me to file away the memory of the topsy-turvy doll for decades, because it hardly stood out in my memory. It was not charged with any antagonistic emotions. In fact, it did not even come back to me when I came across the very same doll at a flea market in Charleston, South Carolina three year ago. While there was something unnervingly familiar about the doll, the memory stayed buried until almost six months ago when it remerged, forcing itself upon me.

Helms' last two stages – immersion/emersion and autonomy – examine first white individuals' discomfort with their whiteness, and then ultimately their proactive nature in redefining and reformulating their racial identity, while seeking out opportunities to engage in antiracist alliances. Helms is quick to note that individuals who do arrive at the sixth and final stage are well aware that understanding racial identity is a constant, on-going process that requires one to be open to new views and attitudes. It would be premature on my part to say that I have achieved stage six. It would be safer to say that I am in the *process* of working toward the last stage, and that while my autoethnography has been a propellant, there is still much that needs to be done, still much that needs to be interrogated, and still many truths that need to be addressed within myself.

Part III – The Recursive Nature of Narrative

In the summer of 2010 after my wedding, after our nephew's death, after making the decision to move down south, I worked with the a prestigious literary foundation in Washington, DC to run a summer internship program for designated "at-risk" DC high school students. These six black students, with the occasional seventh, were all from the Anacostia neighborhood of DC, a part of the city that many do not venture to and has been described as third world esque. This was the pilot session of this program, and it ran throughout the entire summer meeting once a week for six hours. During these weeks, students were expected to read three books from three different genres, complete study-guides for future students, and participate in creative writing workshops. Students also had the opportunity to meet the authors of the books they read. I reflected on this particular program many times throughout my application process for my Masters degree and post-baccalaureate licensure. It had been for me an experience that I believed greatly inspired my desire to return to teaching.

In these reflections, I also paid special attention to that occasional seventh student who would show, a cousin of one of our pre-selected students, who essentially had nowhere else to go on during the record-breaking heat wave of those summer days. I paid attention to her because she hadn't been determined "gifted" by teachers and the director, like the other students invited to participate, and yet she wielded language in a way that astounded and continually surprised me. She wrote

about losing her friend to a drive-by shooting earlier in the year. She wrote about her brother, who was in jail. She wrote about heartache and cheating and abortions. And at the time, in doing so, she fulfilled in me a desire to see and try to know “the other.” She gave fodder to my presumptions and my implicit classism and racism. She fueled within me a desire to save because her talent surprised, because I saw potential that I believed no one else had, because I felt we had failed her by looking past her during the selection process even though she had not even been a part of it.

I found myself likening this young girl to my husband’s nephew. I found myself beginning to see him within her and all the ways I had failed him. I even began to see him within all of them, reincarnated before my eyes, because they were all students of color, all students of lower socio-economic class, and thus, at that time in my life, I was seeing them all as the same, despite not being so.

I entered that summer program with what Marx (2006) calls “deficit” thinking. I marginalized and othered my students, and as I listened to them, I continued to view them as the exotic, with their hardships and turmoil. I had created a hierarchy before even really knowing these students that placed me – and other white teachers – at the very top and these students at the very bottom. Without me – I thought – the occasional seventh student of ours would have never been acknowledged, her talent gone unrecognized. Without me, my husband’s nephew would have never received a book that I would later have the terminology to explain

as “culturally relevant” (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Boyd, Ariail, Williams, Jocson, Tinker Sachs, McNeal, Fecho, Fisher, Healy, Meyer, Morrell, 2006). This mentality and structure of power informed pedagogical choices and mistakes I made throughout this program and other teaching experiences.

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks (1994) writes of a rhetorical situation in which a white female English professor teaches a novel by Toni Morrison, but then fails to discuss race or ethnicity within the unit, thus displaying what she terms “tokenism” (p. 39). Much to my dismay, in reevaluating, I promoted such “tokenism” in the summer reading and writing workshop I ran with this nonprofit. Not only did I fear discussing race, and so it was never discussed, but I also pushed for the inclusion of texts written only by black writers because I *assumed* that my black students would not want to read anything else. Not only did I pigeonhole my students and their interests, but I also failed to address, critique and interrogate these pedagogical choices with my students and myself. While I had – in memory – thought of myself as a cultural relevant and responsive educator, I was – in actuality – a woefully misdirected educator, bringing with me presumptions and biases based on the skin color and socio-economic class stratification of the students.

I would carry these presumptions and biases with me into my time working as a literacy tutor for AmeriCorps. As I tell this story, I begin to see that even the choice of working for AmeriCorps reveals my privilege and my deficit mindset. Here

I was entering a school, openly choosing to work for pennies, so that I could “help” or “empower” those who were less fortunate than me. This is not to say that this wasn’t important work or that it didn’t have value. Rather, it is to say that I continued working with students of color and of lower socio-economic class as I had in Washington, DC because years later I still had not come to terms with the fact that my desire to work within urban communities was fueled by a desire to be a savior. I would often come home from work and tell my husband that I wanted to take my tutees home with me, that I wanted to just pluck them right out their environments and lives because I had decided that whatever my life had to offer was significantly better than theirs, and time and time again, my husband would remind me that my students did not want my sympathy. They did not want to be saved. They did not want another mother. They wanted to be taught.

They wanted to be taught in the same way my seventh grade students would during my field placement in the fall of 2013.

I began my field placement on the Wednesday after Labor Day in 2013. The school I worked at was predominately students of color – 67% Hispanic, 14% black, 14% white, 3% Asian 2% American Indian – with 90% of the population qualifying for free or reduced lunch (www.greatschools.org). I worked under the tutelage of a conservative, white, male teacher who had been working in the public school system for over twenty-five years. This teacher, while dedicating himself to this urban

school district, spouted off disparaging comments about the very students he taught such as: you can take the kid out of the ghetto, but not the ghetto out of the kid, more often than I would like to admit, and I remained silent more often than I would like to admit. Silence is, in and of itself, its own kind of passive racism, one in which I too often hid within. In her essay, "Breaking the Silence," Beverly Tatum (2008) states:

What do we fear? Isolation from friends and family, ostracism for speaking of things that generate discomfort, rejection by those who may be offended by what we have to say, the loss of privilege or status for speaking in support of those who have been marginalized by society, physical harm caused by the irrational wrath of those who disagree with your stance? (p. 148)

I came upon this essay when I began my autoethnography an entire semester before my field placement, and yet, there I was, six months later, continuing to participate and corroborate with institutional racism and classism, while purporting that I was in the process of productively and actively trying to engage in antiracist and anticlassist work. How far had I really come then? How much was I fooling myself?

These same questions plagued me at the end of my semester at this particular school when I handed out a teacher evaluation for my students. On the evaluation I included questions such as:

1. How would you describe my lessons?
2. How would you describe how I treat you as a student and person?

3. Please use one word to describe me as a person.

4. Please use one word to describe how you think I see *you* as a person.

Here I was, fishing from my students for some self-affirmation that I had treated them with respect and kindness. As I sorted through the answers, I saw that yes, for the most part my students thought I was kind to them. Yes, they thought I was fun and hardworking. But why did that matter? Would I have asked these questions if I had worked in a classroom of all white students? Would it have mattered to me how I treated them or how they *perceived* how I treated them? Would it have mattered how they thought I saw them? The most damning question came when I asked: How would you describe my lessons? More than anything my lessons were described as being fun and not too hard, for which my husband challenged me. Had I pushed them? Had I given them a rigorous curriculum? Had I really taught them? Or had I coddled them, holding their hands, wanting them to “realize” their potential, because once again, I had placed myself within a role in which I held the power and they did not.

It can be disheartening to think of how many times I have fallen into this role-play, creating false visions of myself, and unnerving to think that I continue to propagate such mentalities within myself while wanting to teach in an urban school. Am I then running the risk of doing more harm than good? I turn to Lee Anne Bell (2010) in these moments, who reminds those of us engaging in narrative that we – the storytellers – must, “... stay vigilant for new manifestations of racism and other

forms of injustice, and for concealed and resistance stories we have not yet considered” (p. 76). The reflective process is not so much about being “fixed” of my racism and classicism as it is about continuing to be “vigilant,” continuing to interrogate myself, continuing to see narrative and autoethnography as a cyclical process. It is about “storying” myself as Ellis (2009) says, about considering the truth of my experiences and learning from them. It is about understanding the roles I have played and the ways I have lied to myself about my privilege and my actions. I must continue to productively move forward in spite of making mistakes and ultimately taking steps backwards. Beverly Tatum (1997) describe the cycle of racism with the following metaphor – which is fitting for socio-economic discrimination as well:

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at the speed

faster than the conveyor belt – unless they are actively antiracist – they will find themselves carried along with the others. (p. 29)

I have been on this conveyor belt for most of my life. I have stood still. I have turned around, but I have not always been walking fast enough in the opposite direction, not even as I began embarking on this autoethnography. At times, it simply felt like I was walking backwards, like the person who felt she had had some profound impact on her husband's nephew is the very same person today. But that isn't true. Not wholly, at least. Yes, there are still parts of me that have carried through the years, there always will be. I cannot deny biases that I might bring into the classroom, histories that have shaped me, the choices I have already made, but there are parts of me that have begun to metamorphose, and this is the purpose of autoethnography, to begin to see the parts that have "self-actualized," (hooks, 1994). Perhaps when I look in the mirror today I have the potential and the capacity to finally see a holistic selfhood emerging, not one under the guise of a savior, not one burdened with guilt and unaware of privilege, not one acting as a gatekeeper of power, but as a teacher who is willing to be vulnerable and honest before her students. As bell hooks (1994) states, we – educators – cannot expect risk-taking and vulnerability from our students if we do not first model it for them. I am finally leaning fully into this statement both with myself and my students. I am sharing with them my vulnerabilities, my foibles, and my mistakes. I am not shying from

contact zones about race and class and my misconceptions and mistakes. I am attempting to walk forward on that conveyor belt toward a holistic self.

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