

Survival in/at the Intersections: A Preface for Three Papers on the Matter of Things

International Review of Qualitative
Research
00(0) 1–7

© 2020 International Institute for
Qualitative Inquiry

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1940844720943512

journals.sagepub.com/home/irq



Bryant Keith Alexander¹, PhD 

Abstract

These papers were independently submitted to the Ethnography Division and the Disability Issues Caucus for the National Communication Association 2019 Annual Convention. The panel was entitled: “Survival in/at the Intersections: Contributed Papers on Race, Sexuality and Disability.” The substantive content of the papers in general bleed the disciplinary borders between self and community located in particular and shifting cultural contexts. These three essays take into consideration the ways in which place and space, positions and positionalities, as well as populations and politics always impact our shifting sense of self; and how desire and distain are held in tense relations. Each essay sustains and promotes an activism of the self—through auto/ethnographic means that consistently promote critical qualitative scholarship in/as/for social justice, to change culture and to sustain community, especially as a response to how others construct us (as them).

Keywords

auto/ethnography, race, culture, pedagogy, queer space

I had the pleasure of responding to a series of papers independently submitted to the Ethnography Division and the Disability Issues Caucus for the National Communication Association 2019 Annual Convention. The panel was entitled: “Survival in/at the Intersections: Contributed Papers on Race, Sexuality and Disability.” While these contributed papers were not submitted as a collective whole

¹Loyola Marymount University

Corresponding Author:

Bryant Keith Alexander, Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045, USA.

Email: bryantkeithalexander@lmu.edu

but curated on a panel, the substantive content of the papers in general and the three particular papers presented here, along with a variation of my response to them—bleed the disciplinary borders between self and community located in particular and shifting cultural contexts. These papers each engage in a tensive struggle to articulate and negotiate identities at the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and abilities.¹ All of which is a relative to the social constructions of our being and becoming. As well as notions of being and belonging in the third spaces of the classroom, academia, and the gay the bar.

These three essays take into consideration the ways in which place and space, positions and positionalities, as well as populations and politics always impact our shifting sense of self, and how desire and distain are held in tensive relations. Each essay sustains and promotes an activism of the self—through auto/ethnographic means that consistently promote critical qualitative scholarship in/as/for social justice, to change culture and to sustain community, especially as a response to how others construct us (as them). Assessments made relative to the materiality of our bodies (the matter of things made manifest in human social encounter)—like the presumption of our sexualities; the predeterminations of race, regionality, and reason; the social constructions of beauty and attractiveness; and the predeterminations of competence and qualification based on a range of dis-positions, such as:

Who we are,
 What we are,
 What our accented tongues sound like, and
 Where we are from.

In different ways, each of the essays ask: What are the limits of comfort?

In so-called safe places,
 In so-called home places,
 In so-called communities,
 In so-called classrooms,
 In places called academia, and
 In places called America.
 In places called “the homeland”—on whatever distant shore you must cross to return to be accepted, and sometimes, not.

The products and productions of these essays serve as scholarship that work at the intersections of information, formation, and the transformation of self and society.

Scholarship as social activism;

Scholarship as community building and sustaining self.

Scholarship that feeds our souls, and so many like us—the sometimes despised, disposed, dispossessed, dis-engendered OTHER, longing to be seen as both particular and plural.

Each project speaks to issues of invisibility and hyper-visibility in places and spaces with an investment in the materiality of bodies, and the psychology of being—bodies in space, bodies out of place, bodies that read as foreign or international, bodies that read as normal (whatever that is), bodies read as queer, and to be Black and queer. And bodies that blend in a sea of difference AND INDIFFERENCE in which the investment in difference is different; but the social economy of difference in/as an investment to “diversity”—makes such bodies marketable commodities in a cultural confluence of tense relations.

Bodies like Anjuliet G. Woodruffe, in her essay “Surviving From the Margins: A Conversation About Identity With James Baldwin,” who speaks through a Black feminist autoethnography with and from the marginalized spaces of women of color—at the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression. Where she both theorizes and textualizes the Black female experience through the articulation of lived experience. She asks: “*When did I start to register as someone who is different? Which of my cultural markers betrayed me?*” As she crossed from place to space, from Trinidad to the United States. Like Madison (1999), Anjuliet engages an epistolary of performing theory through an embodied correspondence to James Baldwin. Like Madison wrote to her theoretical fathers Karl Marx, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, and Frantz Fanon --Anjuliet also “performatively expresses specific theoretical ruminations on class, language, and race. This writing is [also] a performance, while it is or is not necessarily for the ‘stage.’ The performance seeks a felt-sensing meeting between theory, writing, and performing.” The performer, Anjuliet, in this case, like Madison “claims an uneasy possession of performance as a means of both” a critical subjectivity and articulated freedom—as she processes theory through experience, and maybe experience through theory with James Baldwin (107).

Bodies like Tao Zhang, in her essay “Your English Is Accented!” *Surviving with Otherness While Approaching Positive Becoming*” Tao, like Anjuliet, who, like me, and who—like so many other professors of color or queer professors—comes to painfully *face to face with our own alterity* in the classroom, coming to understand how difference works in/as pedagogical resistance (Simon, 1995). Or how the sense of difference is resisted in the classroom particularly in predominately White universities. In which the confluence between diversity initiatives, rural and cloistered student identities, curriculum like Intercultural/Interracial Communication, and the histories of racism and ethnocentrism to which such curriculum is supposed to be antidote—creates a turbulent alchemy for personal challenge at the nexus of teaching, learning, and schooling, and who gets schooled.

In Tao's paper, I am reminded that in the Southern Illinois area of her doctoral program, as was my own, there is a little town called Cairo, IL—where the Ohio and Mississippi rivers cross. At first blush, the notion of a confluence is a romantic thought, a kind co-mingling coitus. But a confluence, like a middle passage, is a turbulent crossing in which the two rivers carrying their own chattel are challenged to maintain their own purpose and pathways in resistance to each other. What happens, as is evident in an observation tower located on the site to witness, is the turbulent contact of the two rivers:

Each river vying for control of its destiny,

Each river holding ground of its character and charisms,

Each river refusing to compromise, creating a rapid of encounter;

The rapids are a tensive negotiation, not against but in relation to each.

In the end—each river moves forward—but not without carrying some of the water from the other; not without carrying some of the silt, sand, sentiment, sent or stench of the other.

Each river losing a sense of its presumed purity in that space; in that practiced place of encounter called the confluence.

The classroom, especially as Yao approaches it—is a cultural confluence, a juncture of forces—teachers/students/curriculum—all in their particularity and purpose. The question: How do we, teachers of color, and particularly international graduate teaching associates, navigate the rough waters in which they/we are challenged on multiple levels in which the materiality of their bodies and their articulation of voice are met with resistance, sometimes before the teaching begins? Tao offers perspectives based in Critical Pedagogy and Critical Communication Pedagogy in which the recognition and negotiation of whiteness become strategies of engagement. Learning to move from what she describes as *negative becoming*—through their eyes to *positive becoming*. The strategy of survival is a resistance against their marginalization of her, and her claiming the authority of her positionality as teacher.

In response to Tao, and in relation to my own experiences that inform so much of my scholarship—sometimes I just want to say, “Fuck whiteness!” Whiteness takes up so much time for teachers and scholars-of-color. What happens if we flip the script of oppression to ensure that, short of transforming them, meaning students in the predominately White classroom—we reestablish methods of informing them, using the nature of their racism and their biased behaviors as the very source materials of courses in Intercultural/Interracial Communication. To Tao I ask, “How does your particularity as an international graduate teaching associate (or person of color) become part and parcel of the embodied methodological praxis of a powerful pedagogy?” A pedagogy that forces them to see how each of them, though they seem to collectivize their

identities as White and through a performance of whiteness, are also marked and marginalized by negatively encoded differences in different ways. This as they also perpetuate a false collective ethnocentrism on you. I ask Tao, “How can the confluence of the classroom (that happens in the classroom) serve as a productive interruption in pathways of teachers and students?” To which each (teacher/student/ and maybe curriculum as a fluidity of engagement) will be forever changed by the residual effects of being there?

Call it learning.

Call it teaching.

Call it schooling.

As active processes of knowing and re-knowing the self in/as society.

In these papers, I am interested in the bodies like those in Scotti Edward Branton’s study, “Negotiating Organizational Identity: The Communicative Resilience of Smalltown Gay Bars” to keep them alive and viable, so gay folks keep coming. And the shifting terrain of bodies crossing the threshold of spaces once marked gay, but forever experienced as queer spaces for self-exploration for diverse others. In fact, for me, it is Benny LeMaster in the triple autoethnography of Lemaster et al. (2020), also on this panel, but published elsewhere—who actually speaks back to Scotti when:

He writes: “The only thing rarer than a queer bar is a renovated queer bar.”

He writes: “The renovation marks a terrifying reality.”

He writes: “They are competing with hipster bars encroaching and gentrifying our Fucking Spaces with ‘everyone welcome’ signs, which is really just neoliberal code for ‘We will gladly take your queer dollars’.”

But I think that Scotti is getting at something else, not just the national trend of the closing of gay bars, or “the gentrifying our Fucking Spaces” as LeMaster states—but the fading of gay bars in small towns in which their presence marks what Scott and others want to talk about as *queer* third spaces (Oldenburg, 1997);

spaces of a constructed comfort through welcome,

through support,

through the recognition of the self in/as/with others,

places in small towns where we are told “everybody knows your name...” like the old Cheers television series theme song. Or at least if they don’t know your name, they allow you to explore and embody the self that you want to be without threat.

As Scotti tells us in his paper, the efforts of these small-town gay bars are remarkable in creating a sustainable homeplace of possibility for gay folks—but not without its own set of compromises: And here is where I go back to Benny who lovingly ask my own questions.

“When does a gay bar become queer?”

“And when is a queer bar no longer gay in the same way?”

When does the inclusion and accommodation of straight men and women as a space of exploration—poll dancing and poll dance watching as discussed in Scotti’s paper—compromise the safety of gay spaces? Infiltration by an invitation of commerce. When straight men come into the “gay bar” to watch straight women exploring their sexuality in poll dancing—without reprisal or the presumed hetero-male contact, but with a knowing hetero-male gaze that validates their hetero-female desire to be seen. When is the gay space co-opted for heteronormative privilege—again? But despite that query—I am impressed with and recognize the strategies of survival and subversion that Scotti outlines in his paper that gay or queer communities engage to maintain the practiced places of our habitus.

These three essays offer bracing critiques of educational places and social spaces forcing a contemplation of the practices of engagement that makes such spaces habitable, or not. Each essay, written by a doctoral student (at the time of the writing) challenges the reader to contemplate on how we all struggle to survive in our dense particularity and in the plurality of being and becoming—at the intersections and confluences of everyday struggle (living).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID ID

Bryant Keith Alexander  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7382-6696>

Note

1. “*The Hidden and the Hiding: A Situated Understanding of Hidden Disability*” a presentation made on the panel by Nicole C. Eugene (University of Houston Victoria) was not available for this current partial re-iteration of the panel

References

- Lemaster, B., Johnson, A., & Olzman, M. (May 2020). What are you?: Embodying and storying categorical uncertainty in a move to decenter whiteness in intersectional scholarship. In S. Eguchi, S. Abdi, & B. Calafell (Eds.), *De-whitening intersectionality: Race, intercultural communication, and politics*. Lexington Press.
- Madison, D. S. (1999). Performing theory/embodied writing. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19(2), 107–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462939909366254>
- Oldenburg, R. (1997). *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. Marlowe.
- Simon, R. I. (1995). Face to face with alterity: Postmodern Jewish identity and the eros of pedagogy. In J. Gallop (Ed.), *Pedagogy: The question of impersonation* (pp. 90–105). Indiana University Press.

Author Biography

Bryant Keith Alexander, dean, College of Communication and Fine Arts, Loyola Marymount University. He writes and researches in the areas of performance studies, communication studies, race/cultural/gender studies and educational studies. Formally a faculty member in the Department of Communication Studies, Alexander is an affiliate faculty in Educational Leadership and Social Justice, School of Education, Loyola Marymount University.