

Writing Another as Other: A Retro-Intro-Extrospection

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Autoethnographies such as Ajil and Blount-Hill's (2020) "Writing the Other as Other", which demonstrate the disempowerment suffered by *the othered* at the hands of colonial systems are valuable contributions to the decolonial literature. Still, as *the othered* gain in status, privilege, and power, narrative provides a worthy method of analysing *the othered as powerful*.

Autoethnography refers to a collection of methods through which researchers "study their life stories to reveal sociological phenomena at work within their own lived experiences" (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 90). In our recent work in this journal, Ahmed Ajil and I use it as a tool to "bring into full view treasures from the inner sanctum of [our] minds, that [our] secrets and [our] pain may enrich an otherwise whitewashed and incomplete historical record" (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 90).ⁱ My exposure to autoethnography was through the lens of critical race theory, which advocates the method as a means to address "the oft-made criticism that criminal justice researchers share few characteristics of the populations they study" (Blount-Hill & St. John, 2017a).ⁱⁱ Set against the national retrospection of my home country on issues of race-class subjugation (see Soss & Weaver, 2017), I have engaged in further introspection on this point. Increasingly, one may say that I too share "few characteristics of the populations" I study, at least on the social justice metrics I tend to study. The distinction between my everyday experience and theirs widens with each advance in status and privilege granted by the very system I often challenge.ⁱⁱⁱ As scholars like myself come of age in an era of exponentially greater opportunity for personal and professional achievement, success within systems of subordination brings new implications for how we conduct the work of decolonization and racial equity theory and praxis.^{iv} In this respect, Ajil and my work is only the beginning.^v

Critical autoethnography, particularly about race and by academics of colour, has been written mostly from the stance of a disempowered and

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marginalized other (exempli gratia Crichlow, 2017; Pizarro, 2017). Of course, scholars' marginalization has always been experienced from a privileged position relative to the typical member of their othered ingroup (Barrow & Rouse, 2006). Nevertheless, disparities in professional achievement and outcomes have historically left these individuals disproportionately trapped at the lower levels of professional hierarchies (Menges & Exum, 1983). Still, the professoriate is diversifying, albeit slowly (e.g., see Finkelstein, Conly, & Schuster, 2016; Flaherty, 2019). As othered identities and critical epistemological perspectives penetrate deeper into scholarly and institutional authority structures, their lives will inevitably be lived in positions of relative power and privilege.^{vi} Subtle systems of oppression will no doubt still be acutely felt by the othered, but we shall also find ourselves struggling more often with being part of – or even having some authority over – those very same systems. In the spirit of autoethnography, allow me to illustrate using my own biography.^{vii}

Just three years ago, I wrote of my early years as a doctoral student in the United States (Blount-Hill & St. John, 2017a). Combining my experience with Victor St. John's, we asserted a feeling of *cultural incongruence*. In other words, our Black cultures had instilled values so different from those most prized by academe that the coming together of the two, in our experience, "cause[d] stress, strain or all-out clash" (Blount-Hill & St. John, 2017b; see also de la Tierra, 2015). Yet, by the time I revisited this topic roughly three years later, I did so as a trusted and informal advisor to my programme on issues of professional development and of race, as an involved recruiter of candidates of colour, and as a member of the doctoral Diversity Committee, a scholar who has published, written grants, and conducted research with professors from the very programme I had felt so completely disconnected from such a short time before. I recently completed my doctoral studies, seemingly having found a way to resolve the incongruence that previously dominated my academic experience.

The life I lead is at this time far more privileged than those portrayed in my studies and writings on Black American perceptions of justice officials (Blount-Hill, 2020), the burden of criminal stigma (Evans & Blount-Hill, 2020), or housed in correctional facilities (St. John & Blount-Hill, 2019). Of course, Ajil and I explicitly noted both "the subjective nature of our truths" and "the inability of our voices to speak for others" (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 91). Though my life is now atypical of most American Blacks (of most Americans, in fact), this does not diminish the importance of my voice

regarding issues important to them. My upbringing, background and intimate relationships still allow me a closer understanding of the groups and collectives targeted by debates on American crime and justice than most scholars. And past and current (though different) personal experiences of othering enhance the likelihood I will “more naturally discern the symbolic violence of ‘being talked about’ in both emotional and cognitive terms” (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 101). I can still draw meaningful perspective and empathy from my lived past and more privileged – but still othered – present. Doing so can lead to valuable insights and insightful restraints in how I conduct and present research on third parties.^{viii}

Nevertheless, there is still much to consider. Critical or decolonizing autoethnographies are most often written from the perspective of the othered and marginalized as a challenge to a suppressive system (e.g., Chawla & Atay, 2018). They proffer as implications of their work mainly extrospective and/or outward-facing responses for these systems and their dominant actors to take up. Othered autoethnographers have also turned their inquiry inward, engaging with issues such as the decolonization of the mind (e.g., Toyosaki, 2018). However, while offering others potential coping and action strategies from a common position of marginalization, their engagement with “the system” is still mainly to challenge it. We conceptualize the epistemological colonization process as our regretful internalization of a milieu outside ourselves, for which the solution lies primarily in ferreting out that external influence. We seek cathartic processes through which we regain our rightful agency and can be our true empowered selves. Having found our own healing, we may then turn our attention to liberating still more of the colonized other and fighting this colonizing system. Yet, for many, that fight will mostly take place during a gruelling climb up the ranks of one or another colonial hierarchy, each step bringing more pressure to concede evermore of the fight.

Ajil and I did admit to “the privilege that comes with success” (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 98). We were self-critical regarding bias or hegemony in our own thinking as abuses of our knowledge-making power, even if unintentional. We stated our internal struggles with privilege derived from an oft oppressive system:

Success made us vulnerable to tokenisation and therefore complicit in justifying a system that maintains its alienating



essence.... At the core, a predominant theme in our reflections was the struggle to maintain a professional pursuit inside a system we are critical of but must excel in to reform it and advance our emancipatory aspirations. In a knowledge production industry that is complicit in the epistemic and political oppression of others, otherness comes with feelings of guilt and anxiety: guilty for benefitting in various ways from the system and anxious not to become too complicit in it. Guilt also because of a contradiction in our narratives around emancipatory struggle and the objective privilege of a comfortable lifestyle as a result of our professional pursuits. Managing this conflict requires a considerable amount of cognitive and emotional effort (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 98, 99).

Moreover, we highlighted the implications of our power given our status as othered and our commitment to the decolonial project:

... Researchers who have a first-hand understanding of the symbolic violence of othering and a certain grasp for how hegemonic discourse can support and cement systems and dynamics of oppression, tend to approach research more carefully, humbly, and with a concern for the delicate handling of the power of knowledge.... Whether for their own group(s) or other othered, researchers with an “othered lens” can put their unique positionality and sensitivity – if well-worked and reflected upon – at the service of their fieldwork to produce knowledge that carefully considers the symbolic and discursive violence that may come with ‘talking about others’, but also the tangible social and political ramifications of their findings (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 100, 101).

Herein lies our first grappling with decolonization from the position of power. We highlight first and foremost use of a power shared by all knowledge-makers – the power to bring voice and recognition justice to the unheard (Mathiesen, 2015) through more thoughtful, more comprehensive, and more careful and compassionate research. Inasmuch as one conducts, publishes, or presents research, one must recognize that activity has power. Much attention has been paid to methods of decolonial research and pedagogy, though more often in the language of good practice than explicit examination

and critique of the power implied by those techniques and holding it to account. The fire of our critical gaze must not only focus on points in our lives when our power is devalued, diminished or denied, but must also be turned to hold our own selves to exacting scrutiny in the exercise of what power we have. Just as hegemonic and colonial systems of education and knowledge production hold power so does our research and teaching. That power can be emancipatory (e.g., de la Tierra, 2015), but it may be misused or neglected. While joining critical theorists in documenting othered scholars' subordination and constraint, future decolonial autoethnographies might chart important paths forward if part of their inquiry is examined from the position of the othered yet powerful.

Teaching and research are but the most common avenues of decolonial power. We might also seek ways of using our platform to engage in scholar-activism. In 2014, the president of the American Society of Criminology emphasized a "responsibility to advocate for social and legal justice on small and large scales" (Belknap, 2015, p. 1). Such engagements can be powerfully impactful, adding legitimacy to social movements and imbuing them with the language and structure of thought designed to fight the powerful on their home turf, including academia (e.g., de la Tierra, 2019, exploring the phrase "Fuck the Police" as a *parrhesiastic exclamation*). My co-author, Ahmed Ajil, has taken this approach in his own work, using both academic (Ajil, 2020; Ajil et al., 2020) and public scholarship (Jendly & Ajil, 2020) to confront the security state on behalf of those vulnerable to its authority. Our ability to enter spaces of power allows us to engage in radical truth-telling where few others can. There is a skill to these actions and a cost to it. Sharing how these strategies unfold within the narrative of one's personal life can be worthwhile in improving upon previous scholar-activism. Sharing the costs of these strategies for one's personal life can aid in innovating or mitigating coping practices. Autoethnographers have explored as much in their writings.

Still, scholar-activism can be a form of power. As such, if it is 'good' power, what insights might autoethnographic studies provide on how to retain it? If part of our activist power comes from the 'scholar' part of the equation, how do individuals position atop a hierarchy of knowledge production and how do we lend that power to others? How do we maintain the unique power of our voice as knowledge-producers without losing touch with the people and concerns about which we speak? For those prioritizing lived experience over scholarly knowledge, but believing that truth is



subjective, what guidelines should guide the resolution of conflicting community perspectives and accounts? Autoethnographic accounts may be illustrative here, particularly in providing access to scholars' thoughts and feelings as they navigate these issues. In critically examining the power of our activism, we should consider at what point the efficacy of decolonial scholar-activism triggers responsibility for the consequences of that activism. For instance, we in the United States have rightly called for a reallocation of government funding from criminal justice and carceral institutions to programmes and initiatives supporting social goods such as education, healthcare, housing, etcetera. What are the responsibilities of activists making this call as gun violence rises in places like New York City and Chicago, with communities of colour disproportionately the victims?

My work with Ajil benefitted from the diversity of our perspectives, including differing nationalities (Swiss versus American), ethno-racial backgrounds (Arab versus Black), religious upbringings (Muslim versus Christian, leaning secular versus very religious), sexualities (heterosexual versus homosexual), epistemologies (decolonization versus critical race and mainstream social psychological theories), and areas of expertise (politico-ideological violence versus perceptions of justice), *inter alia*. We also differed in our career paths. As he has thrown himself evermore into the role of scholar-activist, I have burrowed deeper and deeper into what might be considered the colonial state. When we first conceived our project, I was already a senior research manager for the New York City's Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice. While my work there was centred on its community-based initiatives, I was an influential policy player working for a central cog in the machinery of the (albeit "liberal") municipal state. By the time Ajil and I had completed our work, I was Director of Research and Data Analytics for the chief prosecutor in Brooklyn, New York. Much of my work there is done in the name of protecting public safety and reducing the footprint of the carceral state (KCDA, 2019), working for more beneficence and less oppression but working as an embodiment of the state. I wrote with Ajil in my position as a marginalized other, but what of my position as a wielder of (colonial) power? History has provided several examples of 'liberal' idealists crumbling under the weight of actual responsibility for others' lives and livelihoods, especially when the risks of big structural changes are presented as the visible pain and disappointment of vulnerable others. Can members of the governing state truly be decolonial and, if so, how might the decolonization project unfurl in their professional narratives?

Positions of power make the salience of being ‘the other’ no less important. As I have documented in this most recent work with Ajil, othering can be thickly felt despite professional achievement and the relative power and privilege it brings. Yet, as the othered advance in status and achievement, we run the risk of *recolonization* instead of decolonization. Recolonization refers to the capture and occupation of colonial realms by the previously subordinated other only to maintain their colonial structures. Recolonization includes maintaining the conduct of old colonial practices, even if by Browner and Blacker bodies in a slightly more compassionate and understanding way, and it can certainly occur in tandem with decolonial words and expressions. Works like Ajil’s and mine demonstrate how illuminating autoethnography can be, especially the collaborative sort, in foregrounding the struggle of the marginalized other from a decolonial lens. What remains for us to develop, though, is a robust autoethnographic literature documenting how decolonialists – especially those who are themselves othered – exercise power in ways that value and empower the othered, eliminate othering processes, and ultimately tear down oppressive colonial systems. More and more of us now have the power not just to demand change but to determine it – running academic journals, leading university departments, heading grant-funding institutions, influencing public opinion, moving the levers of the state. We occupy the disempowering position of the other, but also the position of the privileged and powerful. A vibrant and robust decolonizing autoethnographic tradition must equally examine both these positions.

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ⁱ In *Writing the Other as Other*, we argued that *otherness* creates in *the othered* a heightened sensitivity to hegemonic/status-quo biases and the impact of research that ignores the voices of those it purports to study -- a



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- so-called “othered lens,” fine-tuned to read coloniality in its various incarnations (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 85). Otherness also produced a sense of “unity in struggle,” which binds individuals across distinct but similarly othered identities, as well as unfortunate feelings of “frustration and helplessness,” “unbelonging and illegitimacy” (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, pp. 96, 100).
- ii Critical race theorists “contend that racism is at the core of American society, a ubiquitous feature of its institutions and laws, and rebuff the notion that systematically imposed racial inequities are things of past” (Blount-Hill & St. John, 2017, p. 115).
 - iii According to Merriam Webster’s (nd) online dictionary, *introspection* is defined as “reflective looking inward”; *extrospection* is “observation of what is outside oneself”; and *retrospection* involves “surveying the past.” On a separate note, Soss and Weaver (2017) explain that “race-class subjugated communities” are those who have had racial and class identities constructed and imposed upon them by dominant actors and institutions, with state support, which interact to create a unique, ubiquitous, and intensely oppressive group existence.
 - iv “Decolonization describes the ‘undoing of colonialism’ by granting former colonies independence and self-governance, largely occurring from the middle of the last century for most colonized countries.... Decolonial ‘thinking and doing’ highlights, questions, resists and fights this matrix of power on political, economic, social and epistemic levels,” including the decolonization of one’s own mind (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 87).
 - v Throughout this writing, I will use the terms “other,” “otherness,” “othered,” and “othering.” For my purposes, *the Other* is defined as a constructed identity projected by one individual or group onto another individual or a group in order to devalue and create conceptual and social distance between the two. *Othering* (i.e. *to other*) is the process of projecting -- and, when in a dominant position, imposing -- that constructed identity onto the other, along with significant interactional and socio-structural consequences that serve to disadvantage that other. Being *othered* is the state and experience of having another other you; *the othered* are those who have been othered. *Otherness*, then, is the state of having been and living with the consequences of being othered.
 - vi Privilege is often defined as a collection of unearned advantages acquired merely through membership in a dominant or favored group (McIntosh, 1988/2004). That it is “unearned” makes it seemingly inappropriate to

apply to individuals like myself who, while not able to claim sole credit for the advantages of professional and economic success, came into their privileged status only through hard work and great effort. Yet, though one may earn an advantage (e.g., a nice house), it is possible that core aspects of that earned advantage are, in fact, unearned human rights (e.g., shelter). Societies have turned a great many of what should be rights basic to human existence into “advantages” that must be acquired (through work or privilege). The ability to enjoy a universal right nevertheless denied to others is a privilege. I have earned the ability to travel the world; I am privileged to travel my neighborhood street without fear of harm. In the United States -- especially as a Black man -- I enjoy safety and security as an unearned advantage that comes with my earned membership in a certain socioeconomic class. Having explained my use of the term privilege, I will briefly note that what I mean by power is the ability to determine the conditions, outcomes, or possibilities within the existence of oneself or another, in whole or in part (admittedly drawing from “traditional” theorists such as French and Raven, 1959).

^{vii} By the way, I am an “an able-bodied, homosexual, straight-presenting, liberal Christian, Black American male” (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 92), “descended from a centuries-old line of African American slaves” (Blount-Hill & St. John, 2017a, p. 116).

^{viii} I would highlight that the premise of Ajil and my writing is that the general experience of being othered provides a lens from which to detect not only the othering of communities to which we belong, but also the othering of identities we do not share. In my work, I have centered racial identity as most cogent to my lived experience as an academic (for me, a “master status”). If those who are othered share a common alienating experience that gives insight to othering universally, one should expect anyone othered due to epistemological stance, gender, stigma, etcetera, would be similarly sensitized from their experience. This is an idea begging for more nuanced development and empirical study; in my view, one worthy of the effort.