

Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education

Volume 18

Issue 1 *Breaking the Silence: Telling Our Stories
as an Act of Resistance*

Article 8

September 2019

Seeing It for Wearing It: Autoethnography as Black Feminist Methodology

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Recommended Citation

Brown-Vincent, L. D. (2019). Seeing It for Wearing It: Autoethnography as Black Feminist Methodology. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 18 (1). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.18.1.08>

Seeing It for Wearing It

Autoethnography as Black Feminist Methodology

Layla D. Brown-Vincent

We [Black Feminist Anthropologists] are rarely cited, although our ideas (and our experiences) may be appropriated and used without permission. [...] For the most part, despite the rise of innovative approaches and styles of ethnography, as well as a flood of critiques about the racist and colonialist history of anthropology, minority scholars (Black, Native American, Latino/a, gay, and others, including some women) still struggle for credibility in the discipline; we battle a rising tide as our attempts to speak as situated anthropologists are viewed with “objective” suspicion or dismissed as “essentialist.”

—Irma McClaurin

Why Black Feminist Anthropology

In 2009, on a late November Monday, I walked into the second-to-last meeting of my first-year theories seminar in Cultural Anthropology at a top-10 institution in the southeastern United States. I was the only Black woman to have been extended and accepted admittance into this particular doctoral program in several cohorts, so needless to say, I was the one Black woman in the classroom. On this day, I was made painfully aware of the ways Black scholars, specifically, Black women scholars continue to struggle for credibility in the discipline. After nearly three full months of reading Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Malinowski, Freud, Evans-Prichard, Geertz, Boaz, and a seemingly never-ending barrage of dead white men who made a name for themselves studying the colonized peoples of the world, I was excited that we had finally arrived at the first person of color and third woman on

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the syllabus, Zora Neale Hurston. We had been assigned excerpts from Hurston's *Mules & Men*, an (auto)ethnographic account of Black folktales collected in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida and other locales in the Black American South. It is also worth noting, of all the assigned readings, Hurston's was the only work on the entire syllabus for which the page numbers were not specified, but I didn't think much of it at the time. I arrived in class prepared to discuss Black southern dialects, tall tales and the role of myths in Black epistemological cosmologies or, at the very least, what it meant to be doing fieldwork among a people to which and whom one belongs.

We began the class discussing Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, Clifford Geertz's reading of Benedict's work in *Works and Lives*, and Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*. As it was clear that we were shifting our discussion to Hurston's work, the professor says to us, "Zora Neale Hurston's work is experiencing a revival and I feel like it's important to put her on the syllabus but I don't really know what to do with her work so, talk amongst yourselves." Though I was not necessarily surprised by this professor's lack of willingness to critically engage Hurston's work, I was baffled at how to respond to her indifferent dismissal at that moment. I had read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a high school student but I had never engaged Hurston as an Anthropologist prior to my graduate studies. I later learned that Hurston once taught at my alma mater, North Carolina Central University, an HBCU across the once literal and now proverbial railroad tracks, from Duke University. This professor's lack of regard or recognition for Hurston's contribution to the field of Anthropology and her documentation of Southern Black Epistemologies is a salient example of the phenomena described by Irma McClaurin in the opening epigraph. Despite Hurston's groundbreaking work in "native anthropology" and her contributions to experimental ethnography, she remains largely uncited and understudied in the broader discipline of Anthropology. This early interaction with this racist anthropologist during my graduate studies began my obsession with Hurston work, my ambivalence toward the field of Anthropology, and my fascination with autoethnography as a method of critical inquiry and scholarly writing.

The primary method of inquiry which distinguishes "anthropology" from other scholarly disciplines in the American academy is "ethnography." Historically, that anthropological/ethnographic inquiry has been concerned with the colonized, dispossessed (non-Euro-American) other. We (students of Anthropology) are taught that ethnographic inquiry requires a peculiar simultaneity of distancing from and drawing closer to a given researcher's subjects/object of study. Zora Neale Hurston is rarely given credit for her early theorizing of ethnographic methodology in which she deploys the spy-glass as a metaphor to offer insight into her decision to record the African-American folklore of her Southern childhood and the subsequent difficulty she encountered in attempting to do so. In the very text my anthropology professor proclaimed she did not know how to engage, Hurston offers a theory of

methodology that is profoundly Black Feminist in its attention to the ways in which theory must be grounded in our lived experience:

From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. *I couldn't see it for wearing it.* It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that. (Hurston, 1990)

She goes on to explain that she went back there because it was home, it was safe, and folks there wouldn't been too impressed by her newly acquired education. Most of all however, she returned to Eatonville because she believed and knew it to be full of rich ethnographic data that she believed to be worthy of documentation and study. Hurston's familiarity with the subject matter and the producers of said subject matter, made the prospect of recording the tales of her youth not only seem possible but worthy of documentation as well as critical inquiry because she did not hold the racial biases many of her classmates and teachers held about southern Blacks. Her closeness however, required a kind of distancing which can stir a certain discomfort in people who are typically stigmatized, othered and otherwise devalued in their respective societies.

Feminist scholars/activists have long contended "the personal is political." Autoethnography, rooted in the feminist theorization of the personal as political, is, as a disciplinary practice, largely a product of the "reflexive turn" in Anthropology that occurred in the 1970s, despite Hurston's critical deployment of autoethnography decades earlier (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Behar, 1993). In the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Stacy Holman Jones offers the following definition:

... auto-ethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Auto-ethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be. And in the process, it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living. (Jones, 2013)

Black Feminist scholars and activists from the late 1970s through the early 1990s charted impressive intellectual territory in calling attention to the multiple ways in which structures of inequality permeate every aspect of oppressed people's lives (Hurston, 1942; Combahee River Collective, 1974; Lorde, 1984; Crenshaw, 1991). Irma McLaurin argues for Black Feminist Anthropologists specifically, "telling our stories," "bearing witness," and "testifying," otherwise referred to here as autoeth-

nography, is “an innovative strategy of knowledge production” through which “Black Feminist Anthropologists may theorize and textualize our situated positions and elevate our subjugated discourses to levels recognized by both margins and centers of the discipline” (McLaurin, 2001). Johnnetta B. Cole argues that in order to BE a Black feminist anthropologist one’s inquiry about the human condition must include “an analysis that is informed by a sense of the importance of ‘race’ and of gender.” Beyond the intellectual work, Cole further argues that a Black feminist anthropologists’ work must DO something, it must “participate in some way in the active struggle against racism, sexism and all other systems of inequality.” (Heyward-Rotimi, 1998).

With respect to my own work, my parents’ tales of activism are not unlike the southern fables of Brer Rabbit for Hurston. They are the thing with which I am intimately familiar, the tales that shaped my being in the world, the experiences stirring my curiosity about possible parallels in my own lifetime, the stories that led me to Venezuela and allowed me to see the familiar in the supposedly strange and ultimately forced me to return home to the US South to conclude my doctoral research. In many ways, it was not until I went off to graduate school, that I could more clearly see who it was for wearing it, that I could begin to interrogate the stories I was reared with and observe them as they were operationalized throughout the African Diaspora and it was Black Feminist Anthropology, more specifically autoethnography that helped to me to begin to explore that which I always already intuited.

Always Already Existing Struggles for Black Liberation

As an undergraduate in the mid-late 2000s, I began to hear rumblings of a socialist revolution taking place in Venezuela. In our earliest conversations about what was occurring in Venezuela, I remember witnessing my father’s excitement as he instructed me to keep my eyes on Venezuela. “One day,” he warned, “I might find myself wanting and/or needing to get out of the United States.” He always made it very clear that he believed travel and exposure tend to nourish the imagination and expose us to new possibilities. It was this encouragement to travel for the sake of learning and political exposure that drove me to the discipline of Anthropology, a field that would allow me to travel with the financial support of the university and continue to encounter peoples of the African Diaspora. Through my studies of Spanish Language and Afro-Latino cultures as an undergraduate, I began encountering Afro-Venezuelans attesting to the importance of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution in college classrooms, local Black-owned bookstores and even entire conferences dedicated to understanding the revolution from Afro-Venezuelan perspectives.

When I began my graduate studies the political landscape of the world looked different. Intrigued by what I understood to be a socialist revolution committed to improving the material and socio-cultural conditions of Black/African descended peoples, unfolding in my lifetime, I set out to study the role of Afro-Venezuelans in the Bolivarian Revolution. Because Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez were comrades

and Cuba supported Venezuela's revolution I was also curious if Venezuela had learned from the racial mistakes Cuba made as it birthed its communist revolution. I was interested in Venezuela because of the way my parents often praised the role of Cuba in both African and African Diasporic liberation struggles when I was a child. My parents are members of the All African People's Revolutionary Party and as such imbued me with the values of Pan-Africanism from birth, defined by Dr. Osageyfo Kwame Nkrumah in *Class Struggle in Africa*, as total liberation and unification of Africa under an All-African socialist government." (Nkrumah, 1970).¹ As a child, I was intrigued by the stories my parents and their friends would tell about their political work with South Africans, The American Indian Movement, Palestinians, etc. The breadth of knowledge and sophistication they seemed to possess when they spoke of international and domestic communities of African peoples struggling for liberation was overwhelming as a child but would later come to drive all of my scholarly inquiries.

Not long after I completed coursework and began to conduct fieldwork, my interlocutors in Venezuela would often ask me about what kind of political work I was engaged in at home. I admit to being very intimidated by these questions at first because I was not directly tied to any specific organization at that point. By the summer of 2013 that all began to change, and my attention was drawn back to my place of birth, the United States of America, largely as a result of the chiding of my Venezuelan comrades. I am forever grateful for those reminders that the political life of the U.S. impacted the political life of Venezuela and that I could not be of real service to Afro-Venezuelans or the Bolivarian Revolution more broadly if I was not engaged in the struggle on my home turf. This particular example is illustrative of the ways Black Feminist Anthropology and/or Autoethnography necessitates action on the part of the researcher.

Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution had been unfolding for more than a decade when a generation of Black and Brown youth in the United States had the thin veil of American democracy ripped from our eyes following the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. Jolted into action through the desire to believe the (in)justice system could work in our favor, at least once, Black and Brown youth all over the country took to the streets to demand the arrest of Trayvon Martin's murderer. Only through public outcry, was George Zimmerman arrested, charged and tried. A new generation was convinced of our ability to affect change. Zimmerman's subsequent acquittal was met with mixed emotions. Some were angry enough to keep pressing on and others were resigned, once again to the truth of a country that *neverlovedus*.² Events reached a tipping point in 2014 when Black and Brown youth across the United States watched live, as Mike Brown's 18-year-old body lay face down in a streaming pool of blood just steps from his home in Ferguson, MO. Through the echoes of a mourning mother and a seething community, the giant of youthful, righteous, Black and Brown indignation awakened and the need for this comparative research project was undeniable.

I began asking myself, what did it mean that mass social movements were flourishing in both the United States and Venezuela? How significant was the fact that both countries were experiencing these upheavals under the leadership of their first respective, self-identified, “Black/Afro Presidents?” Why, in Venezuela, were Afro-Venezuelans taking to the streets to protect their budding national political project while Black and Brown youth in streets of the United States were there precisely and defiantly in response to ballooning state violence and repression? Could this be proof that socialism better served the material and cultural needs of Black and Brown peoples? And, perhaps most fundamentally, how did these Black/Afro peoples (particularly women and youth) become politicized and radicalized to the point of action? These questions swirled in my head for years as I struggled to find the connections, articulate the necessity of studying Black social movements in Venezuela and the US at the same time and rejecting the traditional anthropological trend to deem myself an expert on a particular country.

At various points in my graduate studies I was quizzically asked why I was taking on such an enormous task of doing comparative research. Every time I was asked the question I was baffled because I didn’t quite know how to articulate why I deemed comparison necessary. Why couldn’t I be a good colonial anthropologist and just go study “the strange” foreign people? I realized that it was because my interest in Venezuela was not as an outsider, a voyeur but was a product of my own possessive investment in liberation as a woman, a Black/African diasporic person, as the product of a working-class family, as a member of a globally dispossessed people. The research wasn’t purely intellectual, it was in part a utilitarian search for liberatory alternatives for myself and my people. What I now understand is that the liberal individualism of the American academy rendered my intellectual preoccupations illegible to many of my so-called colleagues and professors because of their “freedom” to be nominally invested in their subjects of inquiry. Even now, after having completed my dissertation, I am still hesitant to claim expertise about Venezuela as a country. My work is the product over just over a year of research in a particular urban area of Venezuela, among a particular subset of Venezuelans who self-identified as “Afro.” To claim, or even the desire to claim any level of expertise over a people whose identities, politics, and ways of being are constantly in flux is a product of the hubris of the colonial institutionality of Euro-American Ivory towers that I vehemently reject. I understand Black feminist autoethnography as Black women’s attempt to return to a belief in the power of our productivity informed by a rigorous inquiry into our lived always already intersectional struggles for liberation.

Finding the Research in Fieldwork

I was first introduced to the histories and cultures of Afrodescended peoples in Latin America by Dr. Marco Polo Hernandez Cuevas, an Afro-Mexican professor of Spanish language and literature at North Carolina Central University. Dr. Hernandez

was my college advisor and a constant advocate. He didn't just *introduce* me to (Afro)Venezuela, he encouraged me to learn more about Venezuela in a moment when its shifting politics were allowing the struggles of Afro-Venezuelans both domestically and abroad to become increasingly more visible. The struggle for visibility is so central to the lived experiences of Afrodescended peoples across Latin America that the word visible has been made into a verb, *visibilizar*, meaning "to make visible" or perhaps more pertinently, "to recognize." This understanding of the act of making ones lived experience visible is essential to the lexicon of the struggle for self-determination and consciousness-raising among Spanish Speaking African descendants and Black women alike. To encounter, document, and analyze the stories of Black Women and Afro-Venezuelan peoples is an active attempt to make visible that which has been intentionally obscured by white supremacist patriarchal structures and institutions.

In the fall of my junior year in college Dr. Cuevas told me the Modern Foreign Languages department would be hosting Afro-Venezuelan scholar/activist Jesus "Chucho" Garcia as well as Geronimo Sanchez-Gonzalez, one of the top administrators at what was then referred to as the University Institute of Barlovento, Venezuela's only Historically/Predominantly Black Serving Post-Secondary Institution, which has since been renamed in honor of Afro-Venezuelan socialist guerrilla, Argelia Laya. The talk covered a range of topics, however, the one that stuck out to me most was the discussion of "*pedagogía cimarron.*" *Cimarrones* (maroons) are formerly enslaved Africans who escaped their captivity and went on to form community with other formerly enslaved Africans. In some cases, those enslaved Africans also formed alliances with local indigenous populations, a practice more common in Latin America, though not unheard of in the continental United States. In its most basic sense, "pedagogy" is the art, method and/or practice of teaching. A maroon pedagogy can and should be understood as a weapon of history, a method of bearing witness to modes of resistance, struggle, freedom and dignity passed down from enslaved ancestors to present communities of African descended peoples fighting for liberation.

I was privileged to have been afforded a full academic scholarship for my undergraduate studies at North Carolina Central University, an Historically Black University in the heart of Durham, NC, adjacent to the Hayti Heritage Community commonly referred to as the Black Wall Street.³ Despite being notoriously under-resourced and staffed by overworked faculty, I had the good fortune of being meticulously nurtured and encouraged by NCCU's overworked and underpaid faculty and staff. So much so that, with no personal intentions of pursuing a graduate degree upon entering college, my Eagle community laid a path to the PhD that I would only later recognize. My scholarship afforded me the opportunity to travel domestically and study abroad several times. In the latter part of the summer of 2006, I participated in the University of North Carolina (UNC) in Washington Program, which allowed me to live in Washington D.C. for a few months while

taking classes and interning with the National Alliance of Black School Educators. In the earlier part of that summer, I spent about six weeks in southern Mexico and the following winter break in Guinea, Conakry. Following those trips, I spent the spring semester of 2007 studying abroad in the Dominican Republic.

I embarked on these journeys primarily with the intention of improving my Spanish language skills, however, having never traveled abroad I was equally motivated by a desire to see more of the world and my father's encouragement to learn by doing. I grew up surrounded by communities of several different nationalities, but I had no idea what their home countries were like. My first trip abroad to Southern Mexico was typical and without incident, or so I thought until I began to decompress. I had a series of experiences that would only be elucidated as I continued my studies of Spanish language and as my interest in Spanish speaking African diasporic communities grew. On several occasions while in Cuernavaca, I was asked by random strangers if they could touch my skin and/or if I was from Jamaica or Cuba. Most of these inquiries felt benign enough until I spent a semester in the Dominican Republic (DR). In the DR, I experienced a visceral form of racist bigotry I had never previously encountered, despite being born and raised in the US, a country plagued by a history of racial trauma and paranoia. I was regularly solicited as a prostitute on my daily walk to school; my Professor Blas Jimenez, an internationally recognized poet, was referred to as "*negrito*" (a term he found racially offensive despite being aware of the claim by many Spanish speakers that it is a term of endearment English speakers are too racially paranoid to appreciate); and I was often assumed to be Haitian and subsequently accused of lying about such when I denied any known ancestral connection to the country. While enrolled at PUCMM in Santo Domingo, two classes, one on Dominican Culture and another on African Heritage in the Dominican Republic, helped me begin to interpret my racial encounters in the DR. They exposed me to the peculiar history of the island of Hispaniola and the centuries-long tense relations between the two nations inhabiting the island. When I left the DR, I was so angered and likely traumatized by my experiences that I couldn't speak well of the country for years. I did however desire to continue my study of the Spanish language as well as the histories and cultures of Afro-Latin peoples.

As a child, Howard University offered a kind of cultural and intellectual refuge for my family and their political community. It was a relatively safe and consistent meeting space for my parents and their fellow Pan-Africanist comrades. My family religiously planned and attended African Liberation Days in Malcolm X Park (Meridian Hill), with most of the smaller political meetings and discussions being held on the campus of Howard University. The very first African Liberation Day (ALD), then referred to as Africa Freedom Day, took place in Accra, Ghana in 1958 after Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, called for the yearly commemoration of the progress toward African Liberation, and to symbolize the determination of the people of Africa to free themselves from foreign domination

and exploitation. The very next year, Malcolm X addressed an Africa Freedom Day rally in Harlem, NY. The first properly named African Liberation Day to occur on US soil did not take place until 1972. In 1976, my father stopped at nothing to attend his first African Liberation Day, hosted by the A-APRP. He was so determined in fact that, when his car broke down on the drive from North Carolina to DC, he ironically, hitched a ride on the back of a watermelon truck the rest of the way. In the past forty-two years my father may have missed one or two African Liberation Day celebrations and as a result, ALD is a more commemorated “holiday” in my family than Christmas, why Howard University will also be situated at the center of my political consciousness, and a significant reason why I remain committed to the legacy and mission of HBCUs.

So, it was no surprise that as a college student, with a little change in my pocket and my own car, that I made my way to Howard University as often as possible. In April of 2008, I curiously attended a symposium at Howard University titled “What’s Up with Venezuela? Participatory Democracy or Democracy as Usual.” Despite Chuchó’s visit to NCCU a few years prior, I hadn’t kept up with Venezuela, so I was unfamiliar with what was happening there. I remember wondering who and what motivated such a specific conference at the time. I arrived and found myself in rooms of Spanish Speaking Black folks attempting to explain the myriad ways Venezuela offered a hopeful, and increasingly viable alternative to neoliberal economic governance through wealth redistribution programs and 21st-century socialism. The conference, convened by the Venezuela Solidarity Network, hosted over 200 solidarity activists from across the US, interested in studying and understanding the revolutionary changes sweeping Venezuela. I remember being awed by the number of darker skinned Spanish speaking people discussing radical change in their home country. I also remember being excited and a little intimidated by the level of nuanced sophistication apparent in the way they discussed the progress and pitfalls of the Bolivarian Revolution. One of the featured panelists at the conference was a representative from the Network of Afro-Venezuelans, Jorge Guerrero, who, at the time, also served as Venezuela’s Consul General in New Orleans, Louisiana. Jorge offered a panel presentation on the growing communal council programs as an alternative to neo-liberalism.

That people were suggesting Venezuela was somehow threatening to the US because of the alternatives it modeled was something I had only ever really thought about in relation to the Cuban Revolution up to that point. I associated hopeful alternatives with the Civil Rights, Black Power and African liberation struggles across the continent working in conjunction with the Cuban Revolution. I primarily believed such alliances to be a relic of an era I was not born to witness. Finally, I remember people defending the Venezuelan revolution while simultaneously critiquing it, declaring it their responsibility to ensure the revolution served them, that it was not Chávez’s job alone. This symposium essentially solidified my interest in Venezuela. The choice of the symposium organizers to highlight Afro-Venezuelan voices and

to host the symposium at the nation's premier HBCU signaled the importance of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution, in particular Afro-Venezuelan's support for said revolution and the subsequent impact on the African Diasporic community. My father was and is fond of reciting the following quote from Kwame Nkrumah's 1957 speech in recognition of Ghana's Independence from the British, "We have won the battle and again rededicate ourselves... Our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa." (Nkrumah, 1957) I think Nkrumah's direct meaning here is clear, but I also take the inverse of this statement to be true, anywhere there is a struggle being waged for Black/African liberation, Africans, whether continental or diasporic should support said struggle. This proclamation is why I found it necessary to conduct research in two places when I was in grad school and refused the label of expertise. I do not intend to become an expert on a given country. My desire is to conduct research in the service of Black/African liberation, and as such I will follow the fight in whatever country it presents itself so long as I have the linguistic capabilities to do so.

Fumbling Through Methods

During the summer months preceding my final year of doctoral studies, nearly ten years after our initial encounter, Chucho and I found ourselves together again on the Campus of North Carolina Central University. A few weeks prior to our reconnection, I was sitting in the basement of Lilly Library at Duke University with my husband Joshua when I received a Facebook message, from Chucho. He wanted to inform me of his new post as Consul General of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in New Orleans, Louisiana. In the ten years or so since we'd met, he evolved from being best known as a highly published scholar/activist, to serving as a Venezuelan ambassador to Angola, Mali and Burkina Faso and on to his present position as Consul General in New Orleans, Louisiana. Those accolades alone say much about his dynamic capacities. Chucho further inquired about how I was doing and how my research proceeding since we last spoke. When I informed him that I had moved into the final stages of completing my dissertation he asked me to remind him what it was about.

At that I was still struggling to distill the content/argument of the dissertation but came up with something to the effect of a comparative project about radical black organizing in the US and Venezuela. After telling him a little about my desire to write more about the process of becoming radical for Black/African descended peoples, he said he would love to read my work and assist me in any way he could. He instructed me to call him, immediately, so that we could discuss the subject in more depth. I immediately began to panic. My respect for his work and achievements, and my qualms regarding my ability to complete the task I had begun sent me into avoidance mode. Somehow, I forgot I had previously given him my number, so when I did not immediately call him, he called me. I did not

answer the call because of my anxiety about speaking Spanish on the phone. He called a second time, which I still did not answer and then proceeded to message me on Facebook again. Because Facebook allows your network to see when you are active online, I couldn't pretend I didn't see his message. I responded, saying I was in the library and had bad reception, which was not a total lie, I was in the library but my reception was perfectly fine. I told him I would call him back later when I had a better signal, which of course I never did.

About a month later I received an e-mail from Baiyina Muhammad my mentor, advisor, and sista-friend at my alma matter NCCU, about a program taking place at the end of August titled "Jazz & Words: A Much Needed Conversation." She went on to explain that the program was to be a discussion of a new book entitled *The Afro-Mexican Ancestors and the Nation They Constructed*, written by none other than my former advisor Dr. Marco Polo Hernandez Cuevas. When my partner and I walked into the Alphonso Elder Student Union at NCCU I spotted Chucho immediately. He was standing, wearing a knit dread cap in the colors of the Rastafarian flag with the ends of his graying cornrows exposed at the back, a black shirt, jeans and sandals—not all that different from the way he looked when I first encountered him almost a decade earlier. I explained to Josh that Chucho was kind of a political celebrity among Afro-Latinos, particularly among Afro-Venezuelans and that he had offered to help with my dissertation but that I had been avoiding him out of insecurity about my Spanish.

As we approached, I was relieved to find him next to a familiar face. Chucho was conversing with Ajamu Dillahunt, a founding member of Black Workers for Justice⁴ and long-time family friend and political comrade. Ajamu and his wife Rukia had been organizing black workers in North Carolina for over twenty years and had a relationship with my family since before I was born. They also had children who were the same age as my two older siblings and they attended high school together. I smiled and was greeted warmly by Ajamu who looked a little relieved to see me. I think he was relieved because he and Chucho were struggling to communicate and he knew that my Spanish was better than his. When Ajamu introduced me, Chucho immediately realized who I was and chided me for never returning his call. I bashfully explained my insecurities about communicating in Spanish over the phone, specifically my discomfort with words often becoming muddled in my ears and that not being able to read the lips and body language of the Spanish speaker seriously inhibits understanding for me. He gave me a knowing laugh, told me he was still interested in my project and said "not to worry because we could always communicate in Spanglish." Fortunately, at this point the program was about to begin so we both took our seats.

The title "Jazz & Words" doesn't reveal much, however, given the prestige of NCCU's Jazz Studies program we assumed we would run into some of Josh's former Jazz instructors and sure enough, Robert Trowers, one of his former trombone instructors opened the event with several "Jazz Standards." The first was "Afro

Blue,” originally written and composed by Afro-Cuban Latin Jazz Percussionist Mongo Santamaria and recorded live on April 20, 1959, at the Sunset Auditorium in Carmel, California. The best-known recording of Afro Blue is featured on John Coltrane’s 1963 album *Afro Blue Impressions*. The song has been recorded and released by no less than thirty different artists including McCoy Tyner, Dianne Reeves and most recently by Robert Gasper and Erykah Badu on Gasper’s album *Black Radio*.

Opening the program with this performance facilitated an introductory discussion about the mutual contributions and collaborations between Blacks in the US, Afro-Latinos and Africans. *Afro Blue*, a love song, pays homage to the rhythmic influences of our African ancestors, those maintained and those forgotten, as the lead vocals allude to that cultural memory with “*Dream of a land my soul is from, I hear a hand stroke on a drum.*” The song is one of the earliest Jazz Standards written with the rhythmic 6/8 time that is often felt in African and African Diasporic music such as Highlife and most Afro-Cuban music. Written in the throes of the Civil Rights Movement and made popular by John Coltrane as the Black Power Movement was budding, celebrating the *cocoa hue* of our skin, along with all the other *shades of delight* offers a Jazzy declaration that Black is Beautiful. *Afro Blue* or African Blue references the rich, deep color of the night that often-provided enslaved Africans cover for their plans of escaping to freedom. The song represents generations of collaborations between musicians of the African Diaspora.

The panel for the program was itself, also structured to represent the diversity of African Diasporic perspectives. In addition to Dr. Cuevas and Chucho Garcia, the panel included Dr. Christina Cabral, the first Afro-Uruguayan woman to receive a PhD, and Ivorian Scholar/Howard Professor Dr. Celement Animan Akassi. The program lasted for about three hours and introduced many interesting conversations about the newly released text by Dr. Cuevas. He shared some of his personal history which, over the course of his entire academic career, drove him to explore the often-observed existence and contributions of Afro-Mexicans. The degree to which Afro-Mexican contributions have been erased from the narrative of Mexican nationhood was so thorough that the book and subsequent discussion were predominantly concerned with documentation. While documenting the historical contributions of Afro-Venezuelans and African descended peoples in the United States continues to be an important political objective, the existence of the first self-declared presidents of African descent in the U.S. and Venezuela have facilitated an opening in national and popular dialogue about race, nation and belonging. The program concluded that evening with an announcement of a follow-up discussion to be hosted the next day.

We returned the following evening to screen a short film by Chucho entitled “Por Aquí Pasó Chávez,” loosely translated to mean “Chávez was here.” The film merged footage from Chávez’s 2006 visit to the capital city of Bamako, Mali with present-day footage of interviews with people who were some of the benefactors of the programs Chávez helped to implement and fund in Mali. The footage of the

trip shows Chávez speaking to the people of Mali declaring “we are one people”. He goes on to proclaim the shared histories of colonization and slavery are what unite Latin Americans and Africans in their present fight against neocolonialism. He closes by asking them to receive the words of solidarity from the Venezuelan people and reaffirms his commitment to working together for liberation and development. The film goes on to cover the 17 Malian students studying in the “Salvador Allende Latin American School of Medicine” and another 12 studying textiles elsewhere. The film shows a Malian community named Venezuela, which is comprised of more than one hundred houses that were built with funds from the Venezuelan government. Finally, the film pans to a mission named in honor of Simón Rodríguez⁵ also constructed with funds from the Venezuelan government, which was serving more than one-thousand students at the time.

In his comments after the film, Chucho made comparisons between the Venezuelan national heroes Simón Bolívar and Hugo Chávez and Malian national heroes Sundiata and Modibo Keita. He noted the many instances over the course of the film when people said repeatedly that Chávez is not dead but that his spirit lives on through the legacy of his work and the continued collaborative support of the Venezuelan government. Additionally, Chucho explained that initiatives like the ones in Mali resulted from his country’s mission to build South-South relations. Under Chávez’s leadership, the program to build South-South relations resulted in the opening or revitalization of 18 embassies across the continent of Africa. Chucho instructed us to be on the lookout for collaborations between the Venezuelan government and the people of Jackson, Mississippi as they were working to continue a project spearheaded by the late Chokwe Lumumba until his untimely passing in 2014.

Though the film was brief, and skeptics may likely read it as propaganda, it highlighted precisely the type of program that initially drew me to Venezuela. Over the course of my undergraduate and graduate career, Venezuela was often covered by American news outlets. Many of those news features demonstrated, perhaps unwittingly, that the Venezuelan government was concerned with the well-being of poor US citizens of color in ways that the US government was not. In August 2005, the United States witnessed one of the worst and costliest man-made natural disasters in its history. When Hurricane Katrina struck the US (making landfall in Mississippi and Louisiana), Venezuela and Cuba were among the first countries to aid, even before the national, state, or local Louisiana governments. The US state department rejected these offers of assistance (Lake, 2005). When, in 2010, Haiti was devastated by a massive earthquake and subsequent tremors, the US State Department once again, attempted to block much-needed aid from Venezuela as well as other foreign aid (Janicke, 2010). Additionally, thanks to Venezuelan owned CITGO Oil’s heating oil subsidy, thousands of American citizens received free and/reduced heating services for several brutal north-eastern winters (Reardon, 2011). The Venezuelan government’s decisions about aiding marginalized and disenfranchised populations in the United States prompted, for me, questions about

how similar demographic populations were impacted by domestic programs in their country. More importantly, however, these attempts on the part of the Venezuelan government made me consider that it was indeed possible for African descended peoples to have a different relationship to an American nation-state, one that actually treated and cared for us as citizens as opposed to a problem that needed to be exterminated.

With this final vignette, I hope to convey the haphazard ways in which researchers who are driven primarily by a deep internal investment may simultaneously always already be aware of the tensions that animate that which they choose to study and painfully unaware of how to go about conducting the study at the same time. Retelling and writing out the ways in which I fumbled through my own ethnographic research is a reminder of how painfully ill-equipped American academics are at helping young ethnographers figure out exactly how to conduct ethnographic field research. I also hope, however, that despite the realities that we sometimes find ourselves stumbling through our research that as long as we are driven by Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole's call that our research DO WORK in the service of eliminating racism, sexism, and classism, that we will always find ethnographic that sheds light on the daily battles Black women and the communities we belong to, wage in the name of our freedom.

Conclusion

I have always had a rather contentious relationship with formal schooling. Though I have mostly been a lover of learning, I have experienced teachers attempts to devalue, invalidate, misread, and/or make invisible the lived experiences of Black/African descended peoples. Just as my first-year theories instructor had no idea what to do with Zora Neale Hurston's work, an earlier teacher had no idea how to make sense of the reality that not all enslaved persons left the plantation immediately following emancipation. When I was about 9-years-old, my third-grade teacher tried to force an a-historical notion of "happy slaves" on my classmates' young impressionable minds. On this particular day we happened to be discussing the conditions of servitude for most enslaved Africans in the United States. I cannot remember the larger context of the conversation but what ensued was something that has remained with me to this day, for better or worse. The teacher began to talk about what happened after the emancipation proclamation was issued, specifically, that some, if not many, enslaved persons chose to remain on the plantations under their former masters' "care" despite being "granted" their freedom. Her explanation for why this occurred was that those enslaved peoples were happy with the condition of their lives in bondage.

As an adult, I could attempt to rationalize her fumbled effort to explain why some folks remained on the plantation after emancipation, as a product of her own ignorance and prejudice. Perhaps she truly could only understand remaining on

the plantation after being freed as a “choice” that formerly enslaved persons made because their “quality of life” was better on the plantation than what they would have to face out in the world on their own. Of course, a more sinister interpretation might attribute her version of events more to what Kwame Ture in his famous Black Power speech delivered at UC Berkeley, referred to as an “insidious subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy,” for the moment however, I will not contemplate her intentions, only the implications of her chosen narrative (Carmichael, 2007). The most egregious assumption she made was in attempting to convince our young minds that, when given the true opportunity to choose freedom, if freedom could actually be attained, almost no person would choose bondage. What she chose not to convey was that the “decision” to remain on the plantation for some was not simply a matter of the desire to be free or remain in bondage but resulted from a fear of the unknown, and in some cases known, dangers of being a black person out in the world with no official ties to white ownership, and further exacerbated by a lack of resources to sustain themselves once “free.”

To be born and raised-up in bondage and to have no clear view of how to establish a free life in a world where black lives were constantly threatened if not accompanied or vouched for by a white person, and to decide to either pursue or accept one’s freedom was a bold decision that for most, promised a life of precarity and uncertainty. Given a thorough knowledge of the history and conditions of bondage in this country, the degree to which an enslaved person’s “happiness” informed their decision to leave or remain on a plantation was likely very limited. These newly emancipated peoples understood that “freedom ain’t free” and they had not to figure out how to pay for their freedom. This was, perhaps, my earliest autonomous understanding of what it meant to use history to “learn lessons” and “define our own essence” (Mawere & Mubaya, 2016).

Now, perhaps this woman truly made these comments from a place of ignorance, and perhaps my first year theories professor really didn’t know how to engage Hurston’s work, and perhaps my dissertation committee really struggled to understand the impetus and the utility of undertaking multi-cited field research, but too often such “ignorance” stems from generations of attempts to, downplay the horrors and atrocities of slavery and subsequently convince the descendants of the victimized that the “peculiar institution” wasn’t quite so bad and therefore our present circumstances of life cannot be linked to the enslavement of our ancestors; disregard the agency and subjectivity of Black/African peoples; individualize that which is communal and systemic. This linguistic sleight of mouth allows the white, wealthy ruling classes to reframe understandings of the past and present in their favor. If history is a weapon, “history” never being simply what happened, but stories of what happened and the lessons learned therein, autoethnography is the body capable of firing that weapon.

Every choice to write and recite a particular history in a given society, to examine our own lived realities, to observe ourselves observing, teaches us what came

to be and in turn, what we understand as possible. History is simply the events of a far-off past, autoethnography allows us to situate ourselves and those to whom we belong in ways that help us understand and shape our presents and our futures. Black Feminist Autoethnography takes those both a step further and forces us not only to situate oppressed peoples, in my case, peoples of African descent in the United States and Venezuela's experiences but to attempt to theorize and operationalize those observations in the service of liberation because we cannot afford to passively ingest the damning histories put before us. We must, and do actively seek out histories that demonstrate the possibility of a better world from which we can decipher the necessary tools to construct our own freedoms. Oppressed peoples must always understand that every tool, if held properly can serve as a weapon. Ultimately, when properly deployed, autoethnography is the Black feminist work of documenting our narratives, the intersectional work of interrogating and examining the global nature of our oppression and our liberatory struggles. The most critical contribution of Black Feminist Autoethnography is that of presenting oppositional knowledge which demonstrates the ways in which our individual preoccupations are linked by histories of struggle, as well as our liberation. Furthermore, the work of Black Feminist Autoethnographers is to document that which we always, already know to be true, that our fates are linked, and the struggle continues.

Notes

¹ He further dictates that this must be the primary objective of all Black Revolutionaries throughout the world. This objective, when achieved, "will bring about the fulfillment of the aspirations of Africans and people of African descent everywhere. It will at the same time advance the triumph of the international socialist revolution, and the onward progress towards world communism, under which, every society is ordered on the principle of – from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

² A 2013 digital activist campaign launched by the Dream Defenders in Florida. Search #neverlovedus for more information.

³ Durham, North Carolina's Hayti Heritage Community is commonly believed to have been named after Haiti, The First Independent Black Republic in the western hemisphere. In 1911 Booker T. Washington visited the Hayti community and commented that he found a "city of negro enterprises" (58). The community was home to the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, Lincoln Hospital and North Carolina College for Negroes, later known as North Carolina Central University. In 1959, only one year after his country gained independence from France, President Ahmed Sekou Touré was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws from NCCU during his tour of the American south.

⁴ BWFJ is an organization of Black workers formed in 1981 out of a struggle led by Black women workers at a K-mart store in Rocky Mount, North Carolina against race and gender discrimination. After organizing a boycott of the local K-mart store and reaching out to workers at other workplaces and communities, Black workers and community activists from 10 counties met at the First Missionary Baptist Church in Fremont, NC in June 1982 to form BWFJ as a statewide organization.

⁵ Rodríguez, known during his exile from Spanish America as Samuel Robinson, was a Venezuelan philosopher, educator, as well as Simón Bolívar's tutor and mentor. *Mission Robinson* is one of the Bolivarian Missions implemented by Hugo Chávez in 2003 is named in his honor. The mission uses volunteers to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic to Venezuelan adults who were illiterate. In addition to its civilian focus it also sends soldiers to, among other places, remote and dangerous locales to reach the most undereducated, neglected, and marginalized adult citizens to give them regular schooling and lessons.

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