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Black Scholarship: Autoethnographies and Epistemic (in)Justice

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Introduction

As a Black female scholar I am socially situated within a traditionally marginalized group of knowers, who must also contend with the effects

of the intersecting dimensions of gender, race, and an “African” identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). However, rather than deter me, I believe my socially powerless identity (Fricker, 2010) has inspired my participation in the struggle for epistemic justice with other Black (female) scholars (e.g. Nkomo, 1992) with the goal to advance Black scholarship (Muzanenhamo, & Chowdhury, 2021). By Black scholarship, I denote epistemological approaches grounded in the social realities of Black (and Brown) individuals and communities, that are adopted by non-White bodies such as myself (Muzanenhamo, & Chowdhury, 2021).

I regard my participation in the collective effort to center Black scholarship particularly within Management and Organization Studies (MOS), as a response to the discipline’s tradition of primarily privileging white male bodies as the legitimate scientific knowledge producers (Fricker, 2010; Nkomo, 1992). This inclination, categorized by Miranda Fricker as epistemic injustice, involves wrong and harmful traditions and practices of excluding and disenfranchising Black female scholars like myself and women in general, among other marginalized individuals (Fricker, 2010).

Epistemic injustice historically promotes the misrepresentation and marginalization of Black social realities within MOS. Effectively, this results in the exclusion of our Black social realities from informing policies, projects and initiatives that impact upon our physical, psychological and social wellbeing. Thus, to redress epistemic injustice and its negative effects as Black (and Brown) scholars, we attempt to ‘tell our stories’ and immerse readers in our social realities to inspire action towards social justice. Emancipatory storytelling (e.g., hooks, 2000) evolves as poetry, autobiographies (Angelou, 2013; Davis, 2022) and autoethnographies (e.g., Bell, & Nkomo, 1999; Muzanenhamo, & Chowdhury, 2022).

Hope lays at the heart of Black scholarship (King, 1968). I see hope as the anticipation of a socially just World that, according to Ernst Bloch, is ‘not-yet become’ but enroute to materialization through collective effort (Ernst Bloch, cited in Brown, 2003; Moir, 2018). However, while hope inspires Black scholarship, my phenomenological experience has introduced me to an immense fear that is encapsulated in the process of writing first-hand

scholarly accounts addressing subjection to social injustice (*our truth*). *Telling our truth to people* and *speaking our truth to power* demands courage (Collins, 2013) and entails a paradox of fear and freedom.

I subsequently illustrate the above stated point by reflecting on my collaborative autoethnography concerning how I suffered a racially aggravated domestic assault, and was temporarily 'homeless' at the height of a teaching term and the Covid-19 pandemic (Muzanenhamo, & Chowdhury, 2022). I proceed by addressing the paradox of fear and freedom against the backdrop of hope in the sections that I have identified below as: *The first time – floodgates opened; Trembling like a reed – The revise and resubmit process, and; the Acceptance – What a dreadful world*. I then conclude this chapter on a hopeful note.

The first time – floodgates opened

When I sat down for the first time to write about how I had been physically assaulted by a white female housemate that I had invited into my rented home (see Muzanenhamo, & Chowdhury, 2022), I felt immensely relieved. Such relief embodied freedom and it was (temporarily) liberating. I was in control over, and (self-)empowered to tell *my truth in my own words at my own time and pace*. This permitted the release of an indescribable anger and pain that had been trapped within me, and had trapped me within a dark mental space for months.

Consequently, I wrote a lot and did so endlessly for days. Notwithstanding, not every word and emotion could be accommodated into the space of a journal article. Hence, the process of *telling my truth* taught me that such *truths* need structure and linkage to the broader community of actors beyond the self. Relevancy to wider community allows *our truths*, as victims of social injustice, to potentially create positive change. It was therefore imperative for my collaborator and I to exercise a degree of judgement over scientific significance, and potentially offer a novel theoretical contribution beyond self-emancipation.

Trembling like a reed – The revise and resubmit process

After submitting the manuscript, I tried to forget about the submission as a way to reduce anxiety and carry on. However, deep inside I feared that *my truth* might be rejected by the scholarly community that I hoped would *listen* to me, *believe* me, and to which I sought to *belong*. I feared epistemic injustice, and that *my truth* might be ‘objectively’ less convincing and compelling to journal reviewers. Therefore, to prepare myself mentally for potential rejection, I read literature on how victims of some of the most brutal physical violence might cope with such dehumanization, particularly when the justice system chooses not to believe *the individual’s truth*.

For example, I explored some of the work by scholars such as Raphael (2013), Resick (1984), and Smith and Skinner (2012) on severely traumatic experiences of rape. To me the revelations presented by the above cited scholars on the denial of justice to the victims were so shocking that they left me feeling even more pessimistic. Indeed, reading such work pushed me further deep into the World of fear and anxiety. To me, and in my context, rejection would have meant that someone somewhere had known about *my truth* but denied me the possibility of telling *it* to the World, and through that, denied me any sense of justice. Rejection not only reflected epistemic injustice, but also, the sentiment that my Black Life *did not Matter*. This is how far my mental journey had evolved at the time.

Fortunately – I use this word granted that academic publishing resembles a gambling game (Gabriel, 2010; Horn, 2015) – my collaborator and I received a ‘revise and resubmit’ (RR) recommendation from the reviewers and editor. When I clicked open the editor’s email for the very first time, I remember trembling like a reed in the river. My heart was pounding as if it was going to explode, as I quickly scanned the editor’s email looking for any wording that questioned, doubted or discredited *my truth*, and thus signaled rejection. There was no such apparent suggestion. I was relieved, and hopeful of a potentially good outcome down the line (that is, an acceptance of the manuscript – *my truth*).

The editor and reviewers' comments were challenging but constructive. Notwithstanding, after successfully revising and submitting the manuscript, the same sense of fear re-colonized my mind. To cope, I tried forgetting about the work once again. Yet still, it was déjà vu as the 'if then' scenarios started replaying in my mind and consuming it. Simultaneously, I hoped that the manuscript would succeed. Fortunately, the research was accepted after a few rounds of reviews. I was briefly relieved.

The acceptance – What a dreadful world

In retrospect, I should have celebrated the accepted manuscript as it was an achievement, and a potential contribution to Black scholarship. But I did not celebrate when I first learned of the outcome. Instead, I felt completely exhausted, drained and somewhat empty inside. I believe this was the by-product of a journey involving an autoethnography by a victim: I somehow struggled with the realization that my academic achievement derived from my experience of a racially aggravated domestic violence. It seemed like a paradox.

At the time, it also struck me that I might not have been sufficiently prepared for the World to know what had happened to me (*my truth*) and I feared exposure. I feared the World's *reaction* to *my truth* (van de Berg, 2021). Indeed, fear was again (and constantly) replacing the freedom, liberation and emancipation that surfaced at the time when the 'floodgate opened', and which would have been fortified by the scholarly acceptance of *my truth*. It took me a few days before I realized how delighted I was that reviewers and editor(s) had listened to *my truth*, *believed my truth*, and decided that *my truth* should be told to the World to expose racism – a mutating virus (Nkomo, 2020) – rather than hide it through silence.

In retrospect, however, I humbly claim a better understanding of why some victims of social injustice *never tell their truth* (speak out) or come forward. I believe I now have a better sense of why some victims may choose to suffer in silence, and continue going to work or living their lives as if 'nothing happened

to them'. To reiterate, van de Berg (2021) teaches us that fear is paralyzing. Ellis (1999) further instructs us that in telling *our truth*, we must also consider those who might be implicated by our stories. Such responsibility – in a World full of social injustice(s) – can trigger and cultivate an immense fear within victims. Yet our voices should be heard, and through that, our voices can expose social injustice(s). I therefore believe that we, Black (female) scholars and our allies, must not lose hope and courage, at least in our collective effort to fight epistemic injustice and advance Black scholarship.

Conclusion

Did I succeed or fail in telling *my truth* to the World? This is a question that may take ages to answer. However, I am knowledgeable that autoethnographies not only allow Black scholars to introduce their Worlds to others, but also, they are potentially therapeutic (Ellis, 1999). When we mobilize autoethnographies as elements of Black scholarship and share *our truths*, we explore collective healing by potentially connecting with similar others (victims) regardless of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity or skin pigmentation. Through such scholarly connections we let other victims “know that they are not alone,” they too can heal and overcome “difficult obstacles” (Gorasia, 2018). While we may have our battles (e.g., fear), we are still able to give other victims “hope... that it is possible” (Gorasia, 2018) to survive and possibly thrive. I have seen myself in other Black female scholars' *truths/stories*, and this has so far helped me to grow courageously, professionally, emotionally, and even spiritually. Therefore, may we, the traditionally marginalized scholars, always dare to speak *our truth* with the hope that we can collectively (with our allies) change the World for better.

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