

Colloquy

THE MARGIN SPEAKS: On the Radical Possibilities of Embodied Knowledge as Decolonial Pedagogy

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As a space in which the situated practices of teaching and learning are performed, the classroom must be where the work of decolonizing anthropology (Harrison 1991) begins. Such a contention takes the classroom as an important site of anthropological knowledge production where scholars must perform the pedagogical work necessary to reimagine anthropology as a more just discipline. Often inherent in the call to radically reimagine anthropology is the assumption that the scholarship and pedagogy to radically reframe the discipline will emerge from anthropology departments at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)—and in particular, from the discipline’s select highly regarded graduate programs. In this regard, PWIs have been taken to be the authority, the voice of the discipline, and the gatekeepers at home—the site to which anthropologists retreat from the supposed margin to produce knowledge. In a similar vein, the predominantly white students who attend PWIs have traditionally been taken to be the standard, and moreover, the future of the discipline.

John Jay College is not in the mold of a PWI. As a public, urban, and senior college within the City University of New York (CUNY), John Jay College predominantly serves minority students—47 percent Hispanic, 18 percent white,

17 percent Black, 15 percent Asian, and 3 percent other, as well as a significant number of veterans (450 enrolled) and first-generation students (45 percent of students enrolled). The college is a federally recognized Minority Serving Institution (MSI) and Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). While these demographic figures are helpful in statistically describing the composition of John Jay College's student population, they do not fully capture the realities of my lower-income students, who come from families with a median household earning of \$41,900 (Aisch et al. 2017). Many of these students live at the intersection of racism and poverty and work each day to juggle school, long commutes, parenthood, and jobs that are necessary for them to contribute significantly to the economic survival of their households. John Jay College is attended by students who have learned how to survive at the margins of society, as well as at the academic margins.

Still, though my students are multiply peripheralized, they belong to a radical tradition of higher education in the United States: CUNY has long been a pioneer in the development of democratic and open pedagogy (Fabricant and Brier 2016). The pedagogical strategies of past CUNY teacher-activists—notably, Black feminist poets and writers such as Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and June Jordan who taught at the university in the 1960s and 1970s—offer an example of radical teaching and learning. In this Black feminist model, teaching and learning was always positioned as a situated intellectual project, that is, as embodied, interactive, and practice-based (Lave and Wenger 1991). Furthermore, theirs was an example of teaching committed to “disrupting disciplinary boundaries, identifying knowledge bases outside of the university that flourished inside poor multi-ethnic neighborhoods, and creating a partisan liberatory relationship to collective studies” (Lavan and Tomás Reed 2017, 8). In this spirit, these teacher-scholar-activists unapologetically centered minority students and their everyday embodied experiences and forcefully positioned the MSI classroom as a place of radical intellectual possibilities.

In this essay, I argue for an active looking to the MSI classroom and the minority scholars intellectually forged in this critical geography. I center auto-ethnography and photovoice as emancipatory embodied teaching and learning strategies that ask minority students to think about their own lived experiences as knowledge and their own communities as sites of theory-making. In this way, this essay offers a model to disturb scientific imperialism and decolonize the classroom.

WHO D'YA THINK YOU ARE?

In my upper-division course titled “Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Anthropological Perspective,” students use auto-ethnographic writing assignments to distill the performance of these categories in their own personal lives. Auto-ethnography is a methodological approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) (Chang 2008). This experiential and reflexive practice, as Tami Spry (2009) notes, has the power to reveal the understory of hegemonic systems. The process of working on auto-ethnographic essays challenges my students to take on the dual role of subject/ethnographer and embrace an intentionally embodied methodological praxis. Quite importantly, auto-ethnography provides my students with the opportunity to take their own bodies as constitutive of evidence, analysis, and knowledge.

In an auto-ethnographic essay on race (Mamudoska 2020),¹ one of my students, a young Romani woman, describes her racial negotiations in the wake of immigrating from Macedonia to the United States. She writes, “My racial identity has always been a confusing topic not only for me but for those around me as well.” She brings the reader into her family’s complex racial and ethnic history, explaining that in Macedonia, her family’s tan skin and low economic status had marked their bodies as Romani—that European minority ethnic group stereotyped as “Gypsies” and pathologized (in both Macedonia and Hollywood popular culture) as biologically predisposed to stealing, poverty, and fortune-telling. Yet if in Macedonia her family stood out as distinctively ethnic and “other,” in the United States, their phenotypic trait of olive skin enabled them to “blend into the major white population as well as the Hispanic population” (Mamudoska 2020).

The student’s writing brims with the frustration of trying to claim her Romani identity while often having to succumb to others’ limited interpretations of her racialized and ethnic body. She describes one such interaction. Once, when she informed a customer at her place of work that she was Macedonian, he responded, “But you’re” His sentence ended with a pregnant pause. He proceeded to rub his cheek signifying the color of the student’s skin. The student put the man’s silence into words. “In his mind, I couldn’t be Macedonian.” Indeed, in this customer’s mind, to be Macedonian was to be light-skinned, and the student’s skin color betrayed any claim to a Macedonian national identity. Even though she was now resident in the United States, the racial and ethnic politics of Macedonia would not be left behind. One hears the irritation and unease in the student’s voice when she writes, “I laughed obnoxiously and proceeded to explain to him that I was Roma.”

For her, her olive-skinned Romani body had a legitimate claim to the Macedonian imagined community. For the customer, these two things were not congruent. In what follows, the student describes capitulating to her own exasperation, as well as to the stereotypes that she guessed were comfortably lodged in the customer's mind. She writes, "I then degraded myself to explain that I was Gypsy." The reader is forced to bear witness to the student's self-imposed shame and to the tragedy of the moment in which she identifies with a word she finds offensive.

Auto-ethnographic praxis provided this student with both the permission to and means by which to sit with problematic stereotypes of race and ethnicity that had been effectively mapped onto her body. In addition, it was through her auto-ethnography that this student managed to come to and articulate her most honest of truths. In this regard, one only need look to the explicit and unvarnished title of her auto-ethnography: "*Mi Sijum Romani* (I am Romani)."

In the outline for her undated course, "Race and the Urban Situation," taught at John Jay College, Lorde dedicates one module of the discussion on the effects of racism on Black Americans to "the internalized stereotype." On the outline she asks her students, "who d'ya think you are?" This simple question emphasizes the importance of "I" and asks students to understand their learning as "a process of individuation which can build deep self-knowledge" (Lorde 2017, 3). It is a question I have seen many of my students struggle with. Many have been hesitant to embrace the ways in which their own working-class and ethnic experiences can allow for a remapping of anthropological knowledge in the classroom. Still, I ask this question of my students, not in the name of mere individualism, but, as Lorde did, in the name of liberation. It is this same question that my Romani student wrestled with in her essay. In exploring the shifting landscape of her racial and ethnic identity, the student's racial experiences illuminate anthropological theorizations about the myth of race. Yet she also forces the reader to consider the ways in which race, in its lived implications, is very much real. Her words stand as a reminder that the United States' black/white racial paradigm is neither complex nor sophisticated enough to convincingly grapple with the question "who d'ya think you are?" Auto-ethnography allowed this student to do precisely what Lorde (2017, 16) asked of her own John Jay students decades earlier—to "define themselves in ways that will be of use in the world [and] . . . to identify with their own multiple selves, and in doing so, establish an activist practice deeply seated in self-knowledge." The declaration "*Mi Sijum Romani* (I am Romani)" must thus be read as an act of self-affirmation, an embrace of a U.S.-specific notion of ethnic identification

and pride, and ultimately, as a defiant rejection of Romani misrecognition in favor of recognition of the “I.”

COUNTERVISUAL LENSES

My course “Urban Anthropology” has also provided a space for my students and me to productively explore embodied and decolonial pedagogy in the MSI classroom. In this course, students are expected to conscientiously move through New York City as urban ethnographers and use their camera phones to capture images that bear witness to their own unique readings of the urban landscape. Taken as a tool of ethnographic fieldwork, the camera phone has expanded what it means to do contemporary ethnography. Sarah Pink and Larissa Hjorth (2012) have argued that it is the banality of the camera phone that allows for new types of co-present visuality and sociality. However, as they note, the camera phone’s banality should not only be understood as related to the images that it produces, but also in terms of its use. That is, the camera phone itself must be read as “an embedded part of the ordinary—the routine, habitual and often-tacit practices in which we engage as we move through, sense and perceive environments” (Pink and Hjorth 2012, 147).

Undergirding my impulse to structure this course around urban photography is a commitment to having my urban ethnographer students practice the embodied multi-modal methodology of photovoice (Wang and Burris 1997). As a methodology that centers community, photovoice places the camera in the hands of those historically excluded from and harmed by audiovisual modalities (Shankar 2016). In calling for a critical re-engagement with photovoice, Arjun Shankar has argued for a consideration of the ways in which this methodology can produce countervisual and counter-hegemonic knowledge. He suggests that scholars must not simply take student visuals as documentation, but rather as evidence of students’ abilities to agentively construct their own embodied realities. In my classroom, the experiential exercise of using photovoice has forced my working-class students to pay attention to, represent, and agentively confront the everyday bodies, practices, infrastructures, and aesthetics of life in New York City as they track back and forth between John Jay’s campus in midtown Manhattan and their homes located in less affluent parts of the city.

One particularly compelling photograph from my “Urban Anthropology” cohort of students is titled *The City as Utopia: Poverty through the Lens of a Secret Admirer* (Figure 1).² The image, captured by a young Afro-Dominicana, draws the viewer in with the striking clouds that populate the top third of the frame and



Figure 1. The City as Utopia: Poverty Through the Lens of a Secret Admirer.
Photo courtesy of [Amber Gonzalez](#).

comfortably rest above a set of brown New York City apartment buildings. In her meditation on the photo, the student writes, “On first glance, one may notice the mesmerizing sky with clouds only seen in picturesque paintings or the aged six-floor buildings.” The buildings are, in fact, not distinguishable nor are they distinguished. The worn newspaper stands in the immediate foreground of the image advertising the *Metro*, *AM*, and *Impacto Latino* publications more immediately draw one’s eye. One imagines passersby grabbing them during brisk morning commutes and ignoring the buildings in the background. Still, the student brings the viewer back to those buildings. They are “compacted with individuals accompanied by unknown stories,” she writes. Yet the student knows these people and their stories. Their home is her home—New York City’s Fifteenth Congressional District, located in the Bronx. The student informs the viewer that according to the 2010 census, this is the poorest district in the United States. The student

further contextualizes her embodied relationship with this geography, writing, “I have walked these sidewalks and borne witness to the impact of poverty on those I call my neighbors, local business owners, and friends.” She goes on, “They say NYC is the best.” And then, this Fifteenth-District resident leaves the viewer with a final word, a question to meditate on as they rest uneasily with the implications of what the student has captured with her lens—“Yet, how can it be that the best city in the world disregards its poor?”

In her 1969 essay, “Realizing the Dream of a Black University,” Toni Cade Bambara asks: “What happens to the student who cannot or will not operate in the schizophrenic way a ‘good’ student has been trained to, with real life on one hand and academic life on the other?” (Bambara 2017 [1969], 17). In taking her question as a charge, I ask my students to resist the schizophrenia of the utilitarian university. Rather, I ask them to acknowledge the experiences forged in their communities as central to their learning in the formal classroom and to regard their communities as authentic intellectual spaces. When they use their cameras to embrace such a philosophy, my students manage to tap into the counter-hegemonic possibilities of photovoice to construct new realities. It was by embodying such a praxis that my student from the Fifteenth Congressional District could acknowledge the realities of life in this community. However, her lens does not settle on pathologizing this place and its inhabitants. Rather, her photo and writing command the viewer to destabilize and reframe their foreign gaze. She reminds the viewer that even in the face of poverty, this place and these residents are to be admired. There is utopia to be found here, as her title reminds us. Her final question to her viewer subtly criticizes those who control New York City’s resources, those who market the city as “the best,” and those who are more likely to focus their economic gaze on brilliant skyscrapers in Manhattan than on faded housing in the Bronx. In so doing, the student reveals to the viewer the true counter-hegemonic power of her lens, deftly turning it around to rest on those with whom the burden of change rests.

ALIVE AT THE MARGINS

Each time they practice auto-ethnography and photovoice, my students actively (re)write anthropology from the MSI classroom. This work is not predicated on displacing the margins nor on trying to remake my students in the image and likeness of the privileged few who exist at the center, with the hope that through some form of scholarly transubstantiation they will be made whole. Instead, this pedagogical work is grounded in a recognition of the wholeness of the students

who thrive intellectually at the margins. It is steeped in a celebration of the inherent emancipatory and decolonial possibilities that come alive at the margins. It subscribes to the unquestionable truth that the margin can and must be allowed to speak.

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I argue for an engagement with students' embodied knowledge as a means by which to rethink what it means to "do anthropology" as well as produce knowledge. I center auto-ethnography and photovoice as emancipatory teaching strategies that ask students to think about their own lived experiences as knowledge, their own communities as sites of theory making, and their own voices as the authority. This essay takes seriously the classroom at the academic margins as integral to the renewed calls to decolonize anthropology. [embodied knowledge; auto-ethnography; photovoice; decolonial pedagogy]

NOTES

1. This student's essay was published in the Spring 2020 newsletter (*News from the Ninth Floor*) of John Jay College's Department of Anthropology.
2. This student's photography and reflection were published in the Fall 2020 newsletter (*News from the Ninth Floor*) of John Jay College's Department of Anthropology.

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