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With Action Comes Reflection

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This paper is an autoethnography highlighting the reflections of a White, female, graduate student as she begins her protest journey to struggle for justice within a southern city facing an epidemic of police brutality. In this reflection, she contemplates and negotiates her ally identity while serving as a scholar-activist in a historic city for social justice. The autoethnography spans a college semester of activism, involving a march, weekly protests, and a storytelling event centered on police brutality. Communication scholarship undergirds this narrative that reveals entering activism is a rewarding journey to justice, and also to self-discovery.

Keywords: communication, social justice, police brutality, storytelling

A place doesn't mean anything until you know its people. Camaraderie is the seed where the roots grow, allowing their spindly legs and arms to burrow into various directions, become stable, and become home. The more seeds, the more trees, and you have a forest - a verdant community. Without the shared root system, water, and space, a forest cannot thrive. It takes many trees to become a forest, just as it takes many people to make a community.

A former professor of mine would tell us that trees can communicate with each other. It's how they know when another needs help, like when a tree is dehydrated and requires excess water from another. We, as a community, communicate too. Sometimes it isn't as sophisticated as a forest of trees, and sometimes it isn't so empathetic, but try as we might. Like invasive pests seeking a home in a forest has disastrous impacts on the health of its ecosystem, so do distrust, hate, and ignorance in our human community. It is easy to assume, having this shared connection, in a single space and time, that it would be hard to not love your neighbor. Whether it's a neighboring

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tree or a person, knowing one another makes it harder to hate than to love. This is a story of how I developed a social justice orientation through loving my community.

I live in Greensboro, North Carolina. Within the city, I am just an individual, with my existence and voice acting as a minute piece of its history marked for and against social justice, for and against love. The more I knew about my community's history and its people, the more I wanted to invest in the love it has to offer and assist in ridding the hate that infested its roots. One could go to a variety of historical moments that reveal this conflicting nature of love and hate in Greensboro, but I will start with February 1, 1960.

Four brave young Black men, students of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NC A&T), sat at a lunch counter after purchasing small goods from Woolworths (Chafe, 1980). A simple act, set within a segregated southern United States, eventually ignited a call for equality. These four men demanded equal service to that of their White counterparts. Left unserved, they remained. The following day, flanked by their peers, they protested for equal food service. Just like that, four young activists began the sit-in movement, sprawling 54 cities in nine states (Chafe, 1980). This is Greensboro. This is its people.

Yet it was not always a beacon for justice. More than anything, it deflected this call with the status quo. Change was snuffed out and smuggled from those on the front lines. This was evident in 1969 when bright student activist, Claude Barnes, was written in as student body president at Dudley High School, a predominantly Black high school in Greensboro (Jovanovic, 2021). Barnes was known for standing his moral ground, making administrators uneasy about his appointment. Therefore, they dismissed the vote. In response to the dismissal, 400 NC A&T students protested by walking to Dudley to instate Barnes as student body president. Following this demonstration, NC A&T students continued their own protests about racial injustice on campus. The Greensboro Chamber of Commerce and the city's police department forced themselves into the demonstration, which resulted in the mayor calling in the National Guard. Gunshots were fired out by the military, killing Willie Grimes, an NC A&T sophomore, whose legacy is now known for being the longest unsolved murder in Greensboro (Jovanovic, 2021).

On November 3, 1979, Greensboro witnessed bloodshed during protest action. The Communist Workers Party (CWP) organized an anti-Klan rally in an attempt to recruit more textile union workers for their cause. The protest's slogan "death to the Klan" rang through the streets as the local social movement found the KKK's beliefs diametrically opposed to their own (Jovanovic, 2012). A caravan of nine vehicles, with a combined 37 KKK and Nazi Party members, slowly neared the group of 40 to 50 protestors. The caravan, full of weapons, hurled racial slurs. In response, the protestors insulted the vehicles' inhabitants and used their sign sticks and feet to hit

the cars. Suddenly, a shot was fired into the protesting crowd. More came. Some of the protesters hid; others grabbed their guns and shot back. The caravan drove away, with the massacre leaving five protesters dead. Ten others were injured, including a local newsperson, a Klansman, and eight protesters (Jovanovic, 2012). Police were not on the scene and nowhere in earshot to hear the protesters' cries. Later, it was unearthed that undercover police officers participated in the action, with one Klansman acting as a paid informant providing details about the protest. A federal agent from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms gathered information about the protest at organizing meetings. Only 12 of the nearly 40 KKK and Nazi Party members were arrested for their actions (Jovanovic, 2012). It is through learning this history and meeting those actively involved in today's soon-to-be history that I learned about my values.

Now it is 2022. I hold a master's degree. Two years earlier, prior to returning to the halls of academia, I had no idea where the upcoming year would take me. 2020 was primed for perfection, with all the major holidays perfectly aligned on weekends—just right for us to spend needed time with friends and family. Yet, it turned volatile. A pandemic spread across the globe as other countries watched racial unrest take place at home in the United States. As more and more people of color were murdered before our television and phone screens, it became evident this was another pandemic spreading. Ahmaud Arbery. Georgia. Breonna Taylor. Kentucky. George Floyd. Minnesota. Protests arose across every state and 74 countries across the world. This mass protest of police brutality in favor of the Black Lives Matter movement, spanning 15-26 million people, became the largest social movement in United States history (Jovanovic, 2021). I never directly protested during this time, somewhat afraid for my well-being, although I later learned that 93 percent of all protests were peaceful (Jovanovic, 2021). I was swept up in the news. However, I still took action in my own way, sending money to support arrested protesters in Minnesota, writing an email to the mayor of Greensboro, and sharing sources and photos of beautiful artwork about the movement lining the city's downtown businesses. What made 2020 harder was knowing our city had our very own George Floyd. His name was Marcus Deon Smith.

On September 8, 2018, during the North Carolina Folk Festival, Marcus, a 38-year-old Black homeless man, walked up to members of the city's police department, asking for a ride to the hospital (McDowell, 2021). Marcus was agitated but not violent toward the officers. Bodycam footage revealed Officer Robert Duncan threw Marcus on the ground in downtown Greensboro. A group of officers piled on top of Marcus, rolling him over onto his stomach and stretching out his arms and legs. Marcus cried in fear and pain. Officer Duncan handcuffed Marcus's hands behind his back and pulled his ankles, bending his knees beyond a 90-degree angle. A RIPP hobble device was used to clasp his wrists to his ankles, suspending his knees and shoulders

off the ground. After fighting to breathe for nearly a minute, Marcus became unresponsive and died. The medical examiner declared Marcus's death a homicide (Democracy Greensboro, 2021). Three years, five months, and 24 days. This is how long it took for any form of justice to be handed to the Smith family after Marcus was murdered. In early February 2022, the family's lawsuit was settled for \$2.57 million. The money is intended for his parents and children (McDowell, 2022).

Embedded within this history, I came to the realization I needed to take part in the movement. This exigence led me to something new - direct action. In other words, I finally wanted to physically put my body on the line through marches and protests.

A Definition

Before I go any further, let me put this essay and its methodology into perspective. Empiricism is the understanding, as Art Bochner (2013) states, where "method trumps meaning" (p. 51). Empirical research, critical in its existence, is not always a reasonable method for scholars who view communication studies as more fluid than static. From an interpretive standpoint, communication is the flow of ever-changing relations, making it crucial also to hold space for research that expresses this instability of the topic studied. In the 1970s, autoethnography was introduced to the social sciences as a method and methodology distanced far from exactness, to seek a blip of understanding in the chaos of lived experience (Bochner, 2013). It is a balance of objectivism and subjectivism that muddies our lived interactions.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). Phrased another way, H.L. Goodall, Jr. (2013) refers to the art of autoethnography as using the power of eloquent storytelling to allow others to interpret an author's revealed truth. From this interpretation, autoethnographers understand their social worlds as an amalgamation of stories told (Goodall, 2013). The unspecificity of autoethnography's definition allows for an expansive range of creative pursuits to fall under this methodology, including storytelling, performance, art, dance, and more (Pelias, 2013). Whatever the method, for me, an eloquent summation of autoethnography's purpose is when Pelias said, "I seek to reveal the human in humanity, to show how one human life might or might not find resonance with others" (p. 387). At its core, the purpose of autoethnography is for the author's truth to, hopefully, resonate in at least some small way with the reader's understanding of life.

Let Me Explain

Considering my status as a White, cisgender female, of middle-class socioeconomic status, I questioned what I could add to communication activism literature. Surely there are veteran activists, living each day in a

persistent struggle that offers more expansive and blunt exposés of what it takes to work for justice. What do I have to contribute?

I am privileged by most standards, but so were many others who I grew up with and engaged with daily. Many I sat next to in college were also of this status. It was through sitting in these classrooms, particularly as an undergrad, meeting people in the community through service-learning projects that I was awakened. Before, I never experienced radical points of view, and if I did, I did not care to consider them valuable. I was my parents' daughter—I did what I was told. By most standards, I am also an average human. I was ignorant, and sometimes I still am today. However, in my simplicity, I went full throttle, forcing my mind and body to take the leap. I not only listened but absorbed others' experiences surrounding me. Through autoethnography, I knew I could give someone a glimpse into my thinking during this transformation in a digestible manner. I can use reflexivity and make connections to research. This was helpful for me to parse through the thoughts loitering my mind. More importantly, however, I hope that it offers an inkling of inspiration to others of a similar social status so they know they can do the same. You can do the same.

The Work Begins

My first protest action began in September 2021, after the nightly protests of 2020 fizzled out and prior to the Marcus Smith settlement. I took to the streets with my classmate Alex to participate in a march. The demonstration was significant because it marked three years since Marcus died at the hands of the Greensboro Police Department. Additionally, the protest happened during the same annual event in which the murder took place—the North Carolina Folk Festival.

We show up early to the event. Sitting on stairs, away from other marchers writing BLM in chalk, we begin talking to others. Small talk escalates to making connections. As a previous college student and one that performed community research, I would tend to know someone who knew of someone. This was new territory for me. Growing up, I was always the person who knew no one and tried to keep it that way. These conversations showed I had a stake here, demonstrating I held a place in this community. As part of the community, I knew I needed to make my voice heard. It is commonly believed that the ivory tower is “a



Figure 1 Mourning Boy.
Photo by Jessica Clifford

metaphor of disconnection that views scholars and students (as) detached from the world in pursuit of knowledge” (Jones, 2020, p. 30). Yet, in my case, it had only brought me closer to community members. As Levinas (1979) argued

The relation with the Other, discourse, is not only the putting in question of my freedom, the appeal coming from the other to call me to responsibility, is not only the speech by which I divest myself of the possession that encircles me by setting forth an objective and common world, but is also sermon, exhortation, the prophetic word. (p. 213)

Through Levinas’ words, and those of other scholar-activists, I began to feel the duty to take part in my community because the success of our humanity rested on the need to ally with those who called for help. I must do what I can, even if the bare minimum is staying informed about what is happening to those around me. Disconnection with my community has only bred individualism in me; through relationships, I feel like I—we are—thriving.

Those present for the march are gathered to listen to organizers speak a few words before leaving for a silent procession. Clad in all black, our crowd, diverse in race, gender, and age, listen attentively. We are instructed, if we are interested, to take their supplies of faux flowers and cardboard cut-out graves with the names of people of color who died at the hands of the police. Alex and I walk up to grab a headstone and flowers. Looking at the names, I wonder who I should take. Marcus Deon Smith and George Floyd are left, waiting for someone to hold their headstones proudly and earnestly. The importance of the names—Marcus Deon Smith and George Floyd—is not wasted on me. We are here for Marcus; we are here for his namesake, for his justice. Marcus is our local George Floyd. The latter tragically became a national sensation, yet the death sparked a renewed outrage and thrust for justice. It is closeness in proximity to the death of Marcus Deon Smith and the historical significance of George Floyd that make me feel unworthy of holding their names. After weighing these thoughts, I quickly select the headstone for Philando Castille, a 32-year-old Black man who was fatally shot at a traffic stop in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. I didn’t realize this would be the first of other decisions I consciously made that night, including whether Alex and I should stand at the back of the line of marchers or in the middle. We chose the middle of the pack.

Being an ally to any movement requires making decisions. Alex and I are grappling with how to best show our support without amplifying our White privilege, and instead, showing quiet reverence. I think back to historical marches, such as the suffrage movement, where people of color were told to march in the back as White women took the lead. I think about this now. According to DeTurk (2011), self-described allies make a commitment to perform this identity; however, having social power enables, constrains, and complicates their rhetorical opportunities. Like every

social experience, allyship consists of dialectics. DeTurk states, “the ally’s paradox is the dual drive for unity and pluralism and the simultaneous recognition of difference and commonality” (p. 582). These tensions appear in different contexts, forcing the ally to determine the best option at the moment. After reflecting on our decision to walk in the middle of the crowd of protesters, I now realize its symbolism. For some communication scholars, the most trivial-seeming rhetorical decisions, stir up a multitude of ways to perceive the action. Although I think we were rushed to decide, we also knew that the middle of the pack meant solidarity - we were in the thick of things.

We march in silence, as the organizers planned for us. I feel more watched now than I have ever in my life. White skin is the shade of invisibility - it is my superhero trait called security. I am never watched, or at least not for the amount of melanin in my skin. I sneak through crowds like a ghost, carrying the baggage of harm caused by non-existent superiority. This baggage is positive and negative in that I do not experience racism; instead, I benefit from hundreds of years of it. But I feel guilt from others’ hatred, woven into the everyday life of those who only have a difference in shade, not even a color, to their skin, because I benefit from this system. I subvert that positive meets negative baggage when I protest. I say, look at me. Look at how I force you to see me when it only takes walking out the door for Black and Brown men and women to turn heads. I’m with them. I’m on their side.

Our route takes us to the place where Marcus’s body was pressed to the ground trying to breathe. To get there, our mass severs a crowd of folk festival goers. It is a moving of the tides with our bodies, as onlookers question our intent, finally understanding, and still goggling. A ball is stuck to the inside of my throat. We stop, with a crowd on either side of us, as organizers call out the names of the 18 people on the cardboard gravestones using a megaphone. People are thanking us. We nod in response. Others take photos and videos of our silent procession. It strikes me, that there is something beautifully vulnerable to displaying your beliefs in public. Leaning into that feeling, I stand taller, more erect than usual. I know I am surrounded by a group of people who deeply feel the same, namely, that the Greensboro Police



Figure 2 Onlookers.
Photo by Jessica Clifford

Department, and other police departments, consistently dehumanize and murder people of color, with their weapon of choice being hate.

I try to keep my thoughts in check while wondering what others are thinking. My Whiteness, my privilege, is showing. I can don all black, but I can take the outfit off, unlike my counterparts. The lack of melanin protects me like a shield. I wonder if that helps others of color march along with me. Whiteness functions “as an invisible and ubiquitous social force. It often remains unexamined yet influences the frameworks of everyday life” (Nuru & Arendt, 2019, p. 85). Am I using my social force for good, or does it appear my participation is a performance? Are those walking beside me thinking this too?

Unfortunately, I suffer from White fragility at times. When I feel offended by something I do not choose, I think about it in the reverse. People of color also do not choose this life, or that is, a society where they must fight to matter and exist. In this way, there is no privilege within me, but I am encased in it. According to Nuru and Arendt (2019), privilege is both a location of structural advantage, a standpoint from which other White people and I look at ourselves and society, and cultural practices that are unnamed and unmarked because they are mainstream. Tearing down what was ingrained in my upbringing, in my Whiteness, and in my White surroundings is not easy, but I cannot blame anyone but myself if I do not change my reasoning. I have done it, and I continuously do it. I rethink how I communicate and act and wonder how I can portray my beliefs with authenticity. Similar to Sanford (2020), I view the act of heightening one’s social justice consciousness as comparable to the aphorism of taking “one step back for every two steps forward” (p. 10). It is a journey that requires interrogation of one’s personal history, which “involves embracing the good and the bad and recognizing what caused the behaviors. It means coming to terms with the intersections of oppression and privilege and the simultaneous experience of being both the oppressed and the oppressor” (Sanford, 2020, p. 4).

We finish our march on Church Street. At our destination, tiny battery-lit candles that emanate a warm glow are handed out to the marchers. The names of those that passed are called out one



Figure 3 I'm with Breonna Taylor.

Photo by Jessica Clifford

last time. Each marcher with a tombstone lays it on the ground as their person's name is read aloud. Organizers tape the flimsy signage down, hoping they will stay for a little time before they are removed, most likely by the police department. The candles and imitation flowers are laid near our makeshift sidewalk graveyard. While car horns honk in support, so does an annoyed single male driver scream "fuck you" at our gathering of bereavement. A protester flings an insult back, all while the event continues. Then, another protester sits in the street, preventing traffic from passing. A lone SUV waits for her to move. I could not unthink it: what if something happens? How would I react if anything escalates from these incidents?

Alex told me afterward that police officers on bikes kept lightly hitting their wheels into the protester's side, attempting to move her from the street. Was my fear of participating in a demonstration valid? I don't want it to be, but it's hard not to think expletives may escalate in the name of hate. While my fears never came true, it makes me wonder where I draw my line for justice. McCann (2020), discussing the borders of the academy and activism, states, "sacrifice is a precondition of progress, and typically the privileged are least willing to sacrifice" (p. 17). My fears drove me to ask: what will I sacrifice for justice? It is not an easy question, and I think I am still grappling with it, even when I want the answer to be simple. I want the answer to be anything; I would do anything.

Mondays for Marcus

After the march, I knew I wanted to do more to show my support. I heard of Mondays for Marcus before, but I never attended one. This weekly protest began after Marcus's murder when Hester Petty, a member of the community, felt obliged to protest the city and the police department demanding they formally apologize to the Smith family and settle their lawsuit. It became a tradition and others joined her. Every Monday at noon, scheduled around a common hour for a lunch break, community members gathered on the sidewalk in front of the Greensboro municipal building. Conveniently, the city building faced the Greensboro Police Department whose officers could see the group of protestors holding signs and waving flags as they drove their patrol vehicles back to their office. However, the placement of these protests was not only convenient; it was symbolic. While a meeting location may feel superficial, it is an integral part of the strategy involved in activism. Like other decisions made by organizers, the location of a protest is a rhetorical appeal forcing others to see the cause as an exigency (Artz, 2020). Like community members and other students, I used my flexible schedule to attend four protests in the fall of 2021.

The first time I joined the protesters I was alone. Like any student of communication walking into a new setting, my observant side awakens so I can read the actors and the scene. I walk up to a group of older White men and women holding handmade signs and I awkwardly announce, "Hi, I'm

here to join your protest.” In response, I receive squinting eyes caused by hidden smiles beneath masks. “Great, grab a sign from the bag!” I walk over to a large plastic bag filled with 10-15 signs, with a variety of demands written in red and blue markers. I thumb through signs reading “honk for justice” and “stop police violence.” I find one that I resonate with more than the others. With my sign, I join the line of protestors. Some of the faces are familiar, including one involved with the Grove Farmers Market, a community market, with vendors predominantly consisting of local people of color. In addition, I met a few protesters while observing the weekly Community Tables hosted by the Beloved Community Center, a grassroots organization based on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. While I know some activists in Greensboro, I always manage to meet more at events. I introduce myself to a few, and others did the same. We share our reasons for participating. A group of young Black men and women gather, some with signs, and another interviewing people for a school newspaper. I am happy to see White and Black people pursuing justice alongside each other as I saw with the march. However, 20 minutes later, the young group disperses, after one of the protest organizers collects their emails. They walk off to do whatever else their day called for them to do. This was the only time I witnessed support on interracial lines during these protests.

I suggest to one of the veteran protesters that we need to get this message out; we need the presence of youth and people of color. They wholeheartedly agree and said so did the Black students present earlier at the protest. We brainstorm solutions to include more than our White, mostly retired compatriots in Greensboro. I know a call to action is necessary. At the time, I was enrolled in a social change graduate course and announced the ongoing protest was seeking more bodies. Others began to join, such as Alex. However, this still left us with



Figure 4 Activist Community
Photo by Jessica Clifford



Figure 5 Chalking
Photo by Jessica Clifford

an all-White group of protesters. This was our mission's limitation.

According to Parker (2020), "social justice collectives must recognize limitations and opportunities from all angles of vision - under or beyond 'the heel' of a particular set of circumstances" (p. 79, italics in original text). For instance, although the protests were scheduled during a typical lunch break for some people, it could have become a struggle for those who didn't work a 9-5 office job. Part-time and gig workers may have struggled to attend protests during this time of day. For students, this was prime time for classes, which afforded little wiggle room for interested activists to participate. Parker also suggests we listen for the silences, meaning "listening for those instances of uneasy relations" (p. 78). Stepping outside of my Whiteness, as best I could, I realized it might not be easy for a person of color to attend a protest if they do not see others with a similar shade of melanin to their skin. Inviting people of color to join the protest reinforces our Whiteness as we assume others will come when asked. As allies, we must meet our BIPOC counterparts where they are. To do this, we must announce that we are eager to come to their table, not only for them to come to ours.

It's a privilege to assume this is the best protocol, however. Not every community of Black and Brown people is the same; not all communities will suggest the same response and actions from White activists. To assume they would is to again stereotype their response. Instead, we must radically listen to their individual needs. All of this complicates White activism. It forced and forces me to parse through decisions more cautiously. This decision to invite people to a protest originates from a place of genuine care. It might be commonly considered the right decision. It appears to come from a place of love. Yet, a simple invitation communicates intention differently to a group of people who continue to face the obligation to protest in their daily actions and publicly in the streets. Reflecting on this reality allowed me to see my place as an ally. This opportunity to conduct the protest work was my way to step up as one. Allyship is not one-size-fits-all for every occasion. The act should look and be different depending upon what is called for in the situation, particularly what is called for by those who want (not need) the assistance of the more privileged.

Unlike the energetic and boisterous protest photos one might see on a TV news station or on social media sites, Mondays for Marcus is calming and inviting. Protestors are holding signs and flags and chalking the sidewalk leading to the overbearingly tall municipal building. An urgency for change is drawn, like always, and written in the oppositional shades of pastels and charcoal for passersby to read. As someone who worries protest will turn violent, a misconception exacerbated typically by conservative news outlets, I witnessed the antithesis of this at the Mondays for Marcus demonstrations. Instead, protesting can build community and common goals. Violence is limited to a few protests.

The welcoming nature of us participating makes it easy to walk by, start a conversation, and feel the urge to pick up a sign. At one of the demonstrations, Alex offers a person loitering nearby, who appears curious about the gathering, a chance to pick up a protest sign. After rummaging through the bag we direct him to, he proudly and quietly holds a sign. Later, I see him add his name to the Mondays for Marcus emailing list. Gaining more supporters is energizing; however, I notice the lifeblood of the protests are the car horns ringing out from vehicles, and the subsequent wave of the driver and possibly their passenger. It is in these moments, when the sudden sound of a horn goes off, that our mission is validated. While some cannot leave work or hold prior commitments on Mondays at noon, the sound of a horn, rather obnoxious in other scenarios, offers a token of support, a moment of solidarity.

Holding a sign on a Monday, amidst a busy schedule of teaching, paper writing, and reading for graduate school classes is what an ally is supposed to do. Activism is a voluntary job, where those called to action prioritize it within their schedule. Although activism is inherently a privileged act, in which those participating have the time and energy to stand on a curb, it still requires effort. However, it did not always feel genuine as I observed my surroundings while making connections to the literature I read and writing papers. When reviewing my field notes on the protests, I thought to myself: Are my actions as a scholar-activist a means to an end? Whether it is a published article or a final class paper, are these tangible products of intellectualism out of altruism or selfishness? These thoughts, while critical, tarnishes my work because it harbors in my mind, eating away at its validity, and having me question my morality. I always knew I wanted to do research that made a difference. While most research improves our understanding of life, it does not always move the needle towards justice. According to Jones (2020), non-engaged scholars are those who produce scholarship for their peers' eyes only: subsequently, their results are not widely shared in public discourse. This creates a paradox, where disciplines within the humanities are separate from humans (Jones, 2020). My research is the antithesis of this paradox, yet it also feels strained.

My work as an ally, as a scholar-activist, holds limitations, and part of those constraints come from fabricated structures of knowing. I understand as Elers et al. (2021) state, "we cannot completely remove our academic



Figure 6 Settle the Suit.
Photo by Jessica Clifford

privilege, which is built within a neoliberal structure that works to legitimize knowledge of modernity and colonialism that often assumed baseline for human knowing” (p. 36). One avenue for a scholar to progress in academia is publishing an article in a journal. However, journals are typically exclusionary to the public because they lack accessibility. These not-so-grandiose thoughts about justice that scholars hold only go so far when there is a barrier between the university and everything else. This divide causes me concern about the importance of my writing. While yes, I believe writing one’s truths is a form of activism, it only goes so far to me. I am reaffirmed by scholars that my work is important, but it feels artificial when my autoethnography’s audience may not have money to attend the classes where I struck my epiphanies.

I know where my conflicting thoughts about scholar-activism arise, however. Activism as a term offers a range of connotations, not all of which are positive (Jones, 2020). I also asked myself: I wonder, is my understanding of activism—a combination of mainstream and educational connotations—swaying the way I come to think about my work? My mind is not an island; therefore, I cannot completely detach my studies from the dominant culture’s dislike for the “‘A’ word” (Pason, 2020, p. 3). Yet, I keep trying to learn. I always want to improve. One step forward in my personal education was attending a story-building campaign with graduate classmates.

Feeling Their Stories

Sirens blare louder and louder until they begin to decrescendo as space wedged between us and the patrol vehicle. I am sitting in a semicircle of peers, community members, and the family of the storytellers, listening to activist Reverend Nelson Johnson’s urgent voice calling for us to pull the roots of injustice out of our city. The police sirens are symbolic background noise to the storytelling event. Everyone attentively listens to the opening remarks before what I presume to be a heavy evening filled with tears, sullen faces, and stern demands occur. This event in late October involves residents of Greensboro retelling stories of their interactions with law enforcement that led to abuse of power. I find each story unique and personal, yet all share a similar theme - dehumanization. While unlike the action I experienced before, this event still serves as a protest. The audience becomes their co-participants. We are allies, leaving room for the victims or survivors (or however they prefer to be called) to speak. The storytellers call out for someone, anyone, to listen, understand, and empathize. We answer that call.

According to Hyde (2012), to live an ethical life, we must be open to answering the call to conscience. Answering a call to conscience is welcoming an “existential interruption” to our everyday lives, where we live in our protected views and understandings (Hyde, 2012, p. 45). Interruptions come in the form of learning others’ truths. As humans, this is an integral part of our being. Hyde states, “human existence is fundamentally a process of disclosure, an event of openness” (p. 47). That October evening was an act

to answer the call of those who needed us to listen, to learn. These times of learning are a protest against the stock stories perpetrated by media outlets, and sometimes families and friends, and offer inspiration and motivation to continue our activist work (Bell, 2019).

It is within my stories and others that we understand our humanity. It is within stories told we understand the language of the Other. For one older woman—a mother—tears dot her cheeks as she grows the courage to retell her story. Organizers give her tissues to dab her face, as audience members call out, “we are here for you.” She experienced mishandling from the police after she and her son parked in the driveway of her friend’s house. This person, who she believed her friend, called law enforcement, claiming she and her son were peering into his house. When the police arrived, she was in her car, not near the entrance to the house. Police yanked the door open, she says. Without listening to her concerns, since she uses a wheelchair to move around, they pulled her from the car, dragging her body across gravel. Her son, beside himself, watched, unable to help his mother in pain. During one of the few intermittent pauses to ease her sadness, she gives her son, who is present at the storytelling event, the reins to tell the remainder of the story. This is the weight of telling one’s story.

However, with every story, comes an inherent dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. I lived this during the event. The audience members fall into the background. In this crowded room, listening to the storytellers, I feel them speaking solely to me. This feeling is a calling; it is an itch telling me to keep going, keep listening. Although you are at the beginning of your journey, the arriving is the most important part. For me, stories, with roots that latch and grow around my heart, make it a seamless transition to lose track of the reality I’m in because the words, characters, and plot are transcendent. Amidst the individual experience of learning the truth from hearing a vulnerable public story, a community, wholeness, and interconnection are also born. I believe we were each experiencing this feeling together that night. After hearing these impactful stories, I knew the feeling of separateness and togetherness is the concoction that breeds growth. They are a symbiotic relationship.

The older woman’s words are a protest. It is not the kind with signs and cheering, but it serves as an act of resistance. Like the mother’s story, I hope my story has the depth for change. I hope it brings feelings of newfound resistance. I hope it’s engaging and energizing. All I can do is hope because stories like the ones I heard that night are the truths we must hear, and maybe mine is too in some way. Within her story, I feel the words dismantle the trope that law enforcement is always there to serve its community in a positive and infallible manner. According to Bell (2019), resistance stories are concealed stories, those that live on the margins of the mainstream, that are collected and accumulated by people and groups to challenge racial inequity. That night, her story was one of many recorded at the event, co-sponsored to support storytelling movement-building. By telling these stories,

Bell states, we build a foundation for new stories, subsequently inspiring social justice work. While there are large efforts, such as Black Lives Matter and the Dreamers, emblematic of our struggle for change, it is within our communities where we understand inequality manifests in the depths of our homes, our roots. It breeds and mutates. Our collective stories suffocate the persistence of injustice.

Although, I am not a vulnerable person in public or willingly allow people to see tears cascading down my face, my eyes begin to water. I feel the strength of an ally, forcing myself to stay seated, uncomfortably saddened by the stories. It is in this discomfort I continue to learn and expand my sense of empathy. This is my story of the self, the story that explains my values and defines my identity (Ganz, 2011). My story of entering activism, nestled between the stories of those who surrounded me at the story-building event, is the story of us that reveals values of justice and love for our community. These values are our collective identity. This identity extends to our story of now, our struggle for justice for those who suffered and were dehumanized and disrespected at the hands of law enforcement. It is within the story of now that we find hope (Ganz, 2011). Sometimes it is not easy to locate this hope, but it is easier when we feel it together.

“The Story is Still Going”

Typing these final words for this autoethnography, I come to the realization that this story is not over; instead, it is just beginning for me. For others, born into skin several shades darker than my own, I know their fight originated before their birth. It was a fight within the blood of their ancestors who fought tirelessly pushing, begging, and clawing toward the crumbs of equality the hegemony is willing to drop on its own accord. Injustice morphs and mutates; it destroys everything in its path. It's an invasive species in our community, as it is for many other communities, where we are at risk of an altered habitat. I do my part to extinguish the infestation, like others I've met and grown to care for and show care for in my community. However, it won't just take me. It won't just take us. This history of justice and injustice, love and hate within Greensboro is ongoing, and I am just a blip in its timeline. Conclusions aren't easy for every story, and the same for this one when so much is still happening. Yet, I think I know one way of ending things. As one young Black woman living in Greensboro, eloquently stated to a crowd that October night, “the story is still going.” The story is being written outside of me, all around me, but it is inside me too. Without knowing and loving my neighbors, I would have never stepped up, ready to fight.

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