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Our Identities as Academic Writers: An Autoethnographic Approach Toward Linguistic Solidarity

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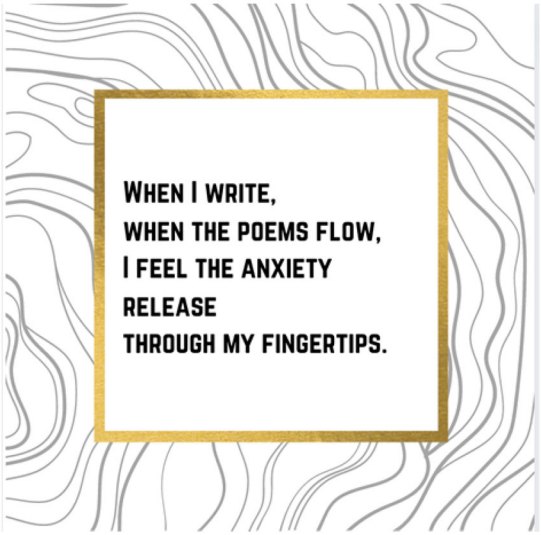
In this article, we reflect on our identities as English educators of color and how they have influenced our journey to becoming academic writers. Through reconciliation with our collective experiences of linguistic violence, we share how the experiences have impacted the ways we show up as secondary and higher education English educators in our classrooms. We authentically represent our sense-making in our autoethnographic journeys to demonstrate how we understand ourselves as academic writers, through music, poetry, and images. As a result, each section begins with song lyrics and images in this article that we believe speak to our academic writing journeys. With introductory narratives about who we were as English students, we then reflect on linguistic solidarity within our experiences as scholars of color. Lastly, we uplift culturally and linguistically relevant approaches to English Language Arts instruction to honor students' multilingualism and multicultural identities and humanize their academic writing journeys.

Introduction

Fire, Cries, Shouting, War … Let's make a change, It's a revolution

– David



When we encounter students who say "I'm not an English person" or "I'm not a writer," we as educators often wonder what kind of linguistic violence was enacted on students who have only seen and felt themselves as antithetical to what success looks like in their minds. Written and oral language can be a violent act and has the power to alter one's reality because it can render students into marginalized or invisible positions; however, language also has the potential power to resist such violence (Ponzio, 2018).

Schools reflect established decisions of how an academically successful student should look, sound, and feel and, as a result, are never neutral (Giroux, 1985). Similarly, schools mirror the way our society sorts students into various roles, where some must fill the lowest rung with particular justifications for their positions (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

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When particular students do not match these invisible rules, these students may feel inadvertently labeled as a "failure" or not suited for what the school or teacher defines as academic success. If we accept Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development theory, which is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86), then we must also accept that when a student "fails to write academically," it is not an individual failure but a failure of the school system to provide the necessary support—culturally and linguistically—for the student to meet writing objectives and goals.

We intertwine images, lyrics, and poetry with our stories as a way of critically reflecting on our identities as academic writers, educators, and scholars since these are mediums that we all share as languages with which we engage.

As educators, we need to re-examine the invisible and existing narratives of what it means to be academically literate and successful. Oftentimes, when students think of academic writing, they think of a five-paragraph academic essay and look at us confused when we make the case that narrative writing is a form of academic writing. We agree with scholars who have argued that in order to reexamine what it means to be academically successful, we must reimagine ways to speak and write to push against the boundaries to which students and scholars of color have been relegated by society (Nieto, 2010). How can we, as educators, cultivate spaces and beliefs within students so that we can, in the lyrics by David, "make a change" and create a revolution? In a similar manner, how can we inspire our students to see themselves as potential artists and changemakers, ease their anxieties, and let their genius flow to the world?

In this article, we begin by stating our reasons for using an autoethnographic method as a means of academic writing. We intertwine images, lyrics, and poetry with our stories as a way of critically reflecting on our identities as academic writers, educators, and scholars since these are mediums that we all share as languages with which we engage. Finally, we engage in a critical discussion of how by using narratives as a form of academic writing, we can extend the beginning implications of taking part in linguistic solidarity and, ultimately, what it can mean for scholars and students.

Autoethnographic Writing: The Power in Shared Narratives

> Random thoughts of you
> transform my mind's mundane conversations
> into interesting chatter
>
> – Yolanda

Autoethnography provides us the opportunity to share our narratives authentically in several ways by analyzing personal experiences to understand cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2010). Essentially, the aim of autoethnography is to recreate the researcher's experience in a reflexive and reliable way that can be as close to the phenomenon of academic writing as possible, while noting that in the past, ELA instruction has positioned language by communities of color through a deficit lens (Lee et al., 2021).

Looking at this through a critical lens, we can question if ELA instruction has become more equitable and diverse toward communities of color. Coming from minority backgrounds, we can say for sure that there has been a deficiency in culturally and linguistically supportive ELA instruction in our own education and, as scholars of English education have noted, there has been a prevalence of violence in ELA instruction for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students (Baker-Bell, 2020; Johnson, 2021). However, at the same time, there has also been the presence of creativity in the written language of students of color that educators should accept and appreciate—creativity through poems, music, photography, dialogue, letters, and other forms of expression. As we resist the effects of linguistic violence in ELA instruction, we also push the boundaries of academic writing and how it can be seen among the masses.

Autoethnographic writing creates the opportunity for those who may or may not define themselves as academic writers to interact dialogically with their narratives and further self-discovery by comparing similarities and differences. For researchers, Miller (2020) stated that such writing reveals the vulnerability of not only what they know but also what they do not know. Autoethnography also

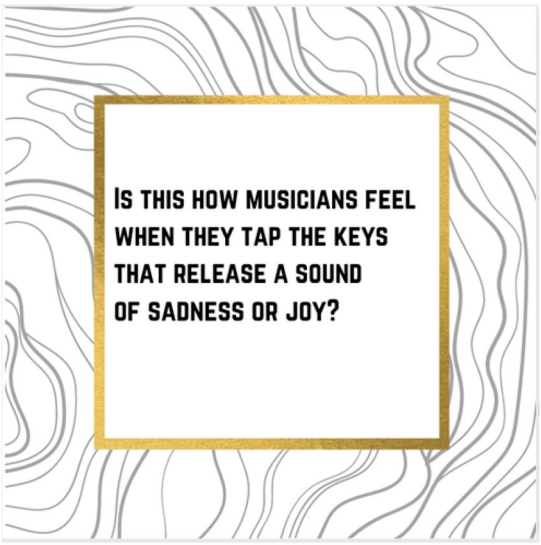
lends itself to being more reader-friendly by removing barriers of traditional and conventional academic writing to narrative writing that is more personal. Through the method of autoethnography, our unique voices with "reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness—is honored" (Chang, 2008, p. 52). We, the authors, recognize that we are inevitably tied to one another not only as a community of academic writers, but also as educators, researchers, and students. In our narratives, we adhere to the sentiments of language researchers and examine how experiences of racialization are produced, linguistically and socially, among groups to which we belong and do not belong (Alim & Reyes, 2011).

To deny sharing our own journeys toward the process of becoming our academic writer identities means ignoring the multiple worlds in which we exist and further dehumanizing our positions as we navigate various spaces of power, Whiteness, and the narrative of standards in writing production. We hope that through our dialogically autoethnographic approach, readers will be able to see themselves reflected in our experiences. Just as Yolanda writes, her interactions with another human being illuminate the power of human connection; we hope that our written narratives can also resonate deeply with our readers for interesting chatter. Furthermore, we hope this resonance can encourage educators to reflect more deeply on their own teaching and learning experiences in their respective classrooms. We also hope it will allow us to build on a shared understanding of what it means to be academic writers while expanding the boundaries "to include others of difference" (Chang, 2008, p. 29). Greene (2000) referred to such a space as an expanding and open community through the ongoing dialogue of shared unique perspectives. Furthermore, by speaking about our journeys, the process we have started continues with each other to humanize our experiences in the classroom and firm our commitment to racial, linguistic, and social justice in our communities (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017). In the next section, Diana, David, and Yolanda reminisce and share their journeys toward becoming academic writers through their ELA classroom experiences. Diana is a second-generation Shanghainese Asian American woman, who is the first in her family to finish middle school and advance to postsecondary education. David is a first-generation Haitian American, who is the second in his family to finish high school and advance to postsecondary education. Yolanda is African American Caribbean, and the first in her family to earn a Ph.D. Where in their educational experiences did they encounter melodies of sadness and joy?

On Becoming Academic Writers

our voices, songs to be heard and sung

– Diana



Our Secondary English Education Classroom Learning Experiences

Bamboo People

Diana: I do not remember much about my honors ninth-grade English class specifically, but I carry with me pieces of painful memories and the subsequent emotions of how I felt through my four years of high school.

I remember feeling constantly defeated, a weight unable to be lifted, but only intensified as I stepped into the classroom. I wanted to shrink myself away as much as possible. I remember telling my friends that in class, I could roll a loaded die and receive a C or a D on any given essay. I also remember my mom telling me that the English teacher called home and said my extremely poor performances single-handedly lowered the class average.

I was constantly confused with the required texts that I read in class—maybe I had issues with reading comprehension because I did not read certain types of books enough. For creative writing assignments that I also did poorly on, I thought maybe I didn't understand or have enough creative writing skills to write in the way the teacher wanted. My personal narratives weaved creatively were invalidated. At that point, I had already half-given up. I wasn't an academic writer, nor could I write creatively in an academic way.

Coming from a family of two immigrant parents who did not complete their middle school education due to the Cultural Revolution, I had no one to read over my essays or discuss ideas in the text with me (Xie & Ye, 2020; Zhang, 2020). My parents were also confused why, if I spoke English at school, I was not doing well in English class. At that time, I had no answer. Yet, keenly aware of my struggle in ninth-grade English class, my parents continuously encouraged me to work on all areas of English to improve.

My intense desire to be as far removed from my high school learning environment as much as possible due to the traumatic experiences of ninth-grade ELA resulted in turning toward my local community college as a space where I could develop my writing. In tenth grade, I took creative writing classes and English (not realizing at that time, the class was equivalent to the first semester of college English). I continued to take prep classes through the years in various places that my parents found for me and what money they could scrounge up, ranging from essay writing to vocabulary building.

My parents and I shared the same goal for me: mastering all forms of English. They often used themselves as examples of what could happen when English is not mastered: "Don't end up like us." At the same time, they reminded me that we were "bamboo people," able to be cut down yet to grow easily again.

Windows and Mirrors

Diana: Never would I have imagined that I could tell my ninth-grade ELA self that I would end up as a ninth-grade ELA teacher.

As a current ninth-grade ELA teacher, I center on not only building my students' confidence in writing but also creating space where they can see the texts that they read become their windows and mirrors even when writing (Sims Bishop, 1990). To cultivate their identities as academic writers, it is important for students to recognize that their writing can allow them to tackle their world as windows to explore, imagine, and write about and be aware that their writing can reflect who they are and have the power for others to resonate with them.

"For *The Joy Luck Club* unit, we are going to do a rumination paper. We are going to ruminate or think deeply on an aspect of this text like how a cow chews through a lot of grass, digesting all the great nutrients." I paused to see if students were so far following this metaphor. "We are going to do our very first analytical paper of the year! HOW EXCITING, RIGHT? Any questions so far?"

One student raised her hand. "So … are we cows?"

"NO!"

Students laughed.

I explained the rumination paper as a combination of narrative and analytical writing, both of which I acknowledge as academic writing and both of which can contribute to their deeper understanding of the overall text. When submitting final papers, we came away with shared stories not only of *The Joy Luck Club* but also of ourselves. Students could also resubmit their papers if they wanted a better grade because I wanted them to know there is always space and time in my classroom for the development of their identities and abilities to write well.

Most importantly, by placing narrative writing with analytical writing (the more traditional academic writing form), students can write their narratives as academic writing. Consequently, when my 34 students do so, the academic writer, who I had always sought to be, stares back in 34 different ways.

A Moment of Transparency

David: To be honest and transparent to you all, I have never been the best writer and even an academic writer at that. Even as I write this, I still struggle with severe writer's block. Having all these thoughts in my head and then organizing them on paper can be such a painful task for me.

Coming from immigrant parents from Haiti, the first language that I spoke was actually French. Over time, I learned how to speak, listen, read, and write English. There are times when I speak, people say I have a bit of an accent. Sometimes in my head, I translate between these two languages. Knowing this, I realize it takes me a bit more time to process my thoughts, especially when it comes to writing.

Going back to my first semester of graduate school at CUNY Queens College for my English Education program, I remember that there were times I would have trouble writing responses to course readings. It would take me hours to write just one page and then even days to write two pages. But as I grew as a student, I have found more confidence in the language that I write. Writing in the voice that I use has made it easier for me to get words onto the page. I feel like when I write like this, my own authentic self can shine

through these words. Now I am in the second year of my doctoral program at Teachers College. It has been a tough year so far, but I am continuously learning that writing is a skill that takes time to fine-tune and cultivate.

Working Through Writing

David: Writing about the experiences I've had with my students has helped me step into the world of academic writing. I realize that I actually enjoy writing about these real-life experiences as opposed to doing literature reviews, theoretical framing, and overall epistemological writing. I am not saying there is anything wrong with that type of writing; in fact, it is needed. But I prefer writing about the stories of others and me.

To share one of my recent experiences, one of them was about a scholar who had trouble coming up with ideas for writing their own personal narrative. To give context, I teach seventh-grade English at a middle school in Jamaica, Queens, New York. The population of students I teach is Black, Hispanic, and Indian. We came back in person the 2021–2022 school year. The unit we were working on was mini-narratives. In this unit, we begin with scholars writing any story, whether it be fictional or non-fictional. In order to work them through this process, I had to model to them how I was able to come up with my own narrative. This process started with brainstorming ideas of what I wanted to write about first. So, I told them about organizing some of these ideas into general categories of things they liked to do or talk about. Some of mine were games, traveling, comedy, and life lessons. From those categories, I voiced to my students which one I can probably speak most on and what resonated with me right then and there. The category that I chose was life lessons because I am at a point in my life where I continuously am learning from the lessons of the past. I then shared the written model of my personal narrative of the one time I stole an item from a corner store in New York City. My students were so invested in my story that they asked so many questions after I finished reading out my model to them. After answering their questions to their satisfaction, we were able to work through this process, which helped them get started on writing their narratives.

Through reflections, I have noticed that the strategy of modeling this writing process has helped my own scholars in their own writing. It gives them a guide or some sort of expectation to reach or even exceed when it comes to their pieces of work. It also provides them with the motivation and confidence needed to put their thoughts into writing.

Programming My English Educator Journey

Yolanda: From the time I was 13 years old, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I started writing short stories and picture books made out of construction paper, held together by one staple, when I was 8 years old. I began writing poetry at 15. In my childish ways, I saw myself as a writer and teacher, but I still entered a high school known for computer science because it was seen as a way for me to choose a career that would allow me to make money to support my family.

Surprisingly, and in contrast to Diana's and David's stories, I experienced more violence in my college English classes than in my secondary ones. I attended a relatively new high school for computer science. I was required to take ELA and other traditional classes, but my course schedule was loaded with classes in computer languages like Cobol, Fortran, and computer design. It was where the country was heading, and the students at my high school wanted to be a part of this social revolution.

As I reflect, I see that my teachers, even those of color, may have taught me through benign neglect. Knowing that the school emphasized computer language, they may have chosen not to emphasize conventional writing methods. Their approach led me to believe that I was a "good" writer in high school, earning high 90s on my report card in English and even being the Editor-in-Chief of my high school yearbook. Growing up in the Bronx during the 1980s, my way of speaking always included popular sayings from Hip Hop. Somehow, I am not quite sure what (maybe internalized racism) led me to understand that the way I spoke would not be accepted in my English classrooms. I worked hard to sound like a "good writer," even though writing and grammar were not explicitly taught to me by my high school ELA teachers. But I thought that my high report card grades and position as a high school yearbook editor meant that I had been a successful

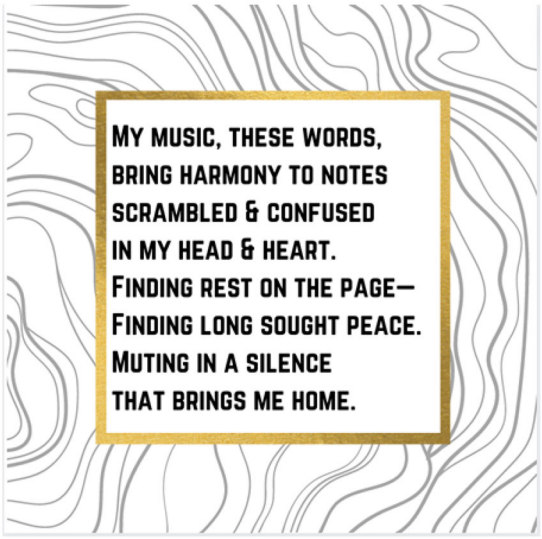
student of "standard" secondary education instruction. Oh boy! Was I wrong!

When I received my first essay, and all subsequent work from my English literature professors during my freshman year of college, there were so many red marks and corrections, I could barely recognize my own writing. This baffled me and led me to make a decision that has forever changed my career trajectory. Following up on my high school career—and the nation's recent declaration that the country was officially traveling along the "information superhighway," I entered Pace University, a college that specializes in computer science. It made sense to me that I enter college with the intent to study computer science. The need for computer processors (that took large rooms to fill) was suddenly revolutionized with the invention of the Apple I and other desktop computers. I was told by my high school teachers that this industry was where the money was and growing up poor in the South Bronx, it was important to choose a path that would lead to "where the money was." After receiving several Cs and Ds on my papers during my first year of college, I decided to change my intended major of computer science to English and transferred to New York University. In my 17-year-old mind, I was going to do the one thing professors at Pace University were telling me I could not do: succeed at academic writing.

In the lyrics by Diana, we share our melodies so that we hear each other's songs in our respective ELA educational experiences. We begin to understand how our songs can be interwoven in linguistic solidarity or solidarity through not only using a common language but also the shared experiences brought forth in the languages shared (Martinez, 2017). We also connect linguistic solidarity as part of the concept of thick solidarity from Liu and Shange (2018) who conceptualized thick solidarity as "a kind of solidarity that mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference but rather pushes into the specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of racialized experiences" (p. 190). In our next section, we hope to begin our conversation with thick solidarity with one another to continue our work in solidarity as academic writers and educators.

A Conversation: For Our Educator and Scholar Identities

> We shared gentle moments that reawakened the poetic, finding strength in each other's spaces
>
> – Yolanda



Through our shared stories, linguistic solidarity starts with a foundation of critical love toward one another and seeing each other and our students with the potential to be academic writers, and recognizing all the languages they may speak. We also had to recognize how linguistic violence occurred to us before we began to attempt to undo the pedagogies that were harmful.

Diana: Through our shared stories, linguistic solidarity starts with a foundation of critical love toward one another and seeing each other and our students with the potential to be academic writers, and recognizing all the languages they may speak. We also had to recognize how linguistic violence occurred to us before we began to attempt to undo the pedagogies that were harmful. Some teachers never had that opportunity to reflect and, as a result, perpetuated what they were taught. What do you do when students come in experiencing linguistic violence in your classrooms?

David: In my classroom, I undo linguistic violence by creating a safe space for scholars to be transparent about what levels of writing they may be at. This can occur through one-on-one conferences and also through whole classroom discussions that are facilitated through discussion protocols. I collaborate with students in which they share strategies of academic writing in the classroom such as modeling, using active voice, and outlining. This collaboration is important because it gives them agency to be part of the writing and grading process.

In my classroom, I undo linguistic violence by creating a safe space for scholars to be transparent about what levels of writing they may be at.

Diana: As Yolanda (2022) says, "To do critical self-reflection, it is necessary to acquire and apply language to address the inequities" (p. 21). For my students, it is so important to build confidence in their writing and to emphasize that writing is always a continual process. Those repeated Cs and Ds can be so soul-sucking, so I always welcome revisions to their papers and find ways to incorporate narrative writing as academic writing like in the rumination paper. Writing about themselves allows students to develop their unique voices and see their personal lived experiences as a source of strength.

David: I agree with what you say because when I experienced linguistic violence, I remember that I was not a part of that writing process when I was a student. This is why now as an educator, I intentionally include my students in this work through the creation of poems, narrative writing, argumentative essays, or letters. This also allows my students to break the vicious cycle of linguistic violence that all successful writing has to be an academic essay.

Yolanda: Yes, I agree with all of what you both said. I think I have also learned that these "standards" of academic writing can be very violent to the spirit of a student. They can also stifle learning. Depending on the student, they can also change life trajectories. In listening to us, I believe that self-knowledge is key. In that way, the pressure of these standards can either break a person, set them on a new path, or, in my case, rise to a challenge and in the process rediscover a path that may have been ignored. But that's a heavy burden for students, and young people are in different places regarding how they make peace with this. I also think that, ultimately, self-knowledge leads us to write in a way that is authentic to us.

Diana: Absolutely. We must have students practice narrative writing to begin the process of self-excavation and offer a variety of ways in which they can collaborate and share their stories. I also have a long conversation with my students about the various languages we all speak: home language, English, slang, text speak, coding, and so much more. In some assignments, I have requirements for students to write in a "different language" for them to see that English isn't the only one that should have that power. These methods allow students to speak in the ways they feel most confident when often talking about something that may make them feel the most vulnerable. It also allows students to begin understanding each other's experiences and seeing the commonalities through such linguistic solidarity.

David: Right. It also allows students to recognize each other's strengths. Incorporating all of my identities as a Haitian American, I can *imaginer*, *imajine*, or imagine in the three languages of French, Haitian Creole, and English.

Diana: That's beautiful. Imagine the possibilities or 想象各种可能性 of written languages like Mandarin and only spoken languages like the Shanghai dialect. We hope that we can continue to be academic writers for ourselves and our students, so that we are able to find a sense of home within ourselves and invite others in to share in our experiences and journeys of long-sought peace in the multitude of languages we speak and write.

Peacemaking

When I write,
when the poems flow,
I feel the anxiety release
through my fingertips.

Is this how musicians feel
when they tap the keys
that release a sound
of sadness or joy?

My music, these words,
bring harmony to notes
scrambled & confused
in my head & heart.
Finding rest on the page—
Finding long-sought peace.
Muting in a silence
that brings me home.
(Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, 2021)

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