

“From Margin to Center”¹: Processes and Relationships to Participation One Woman’s Ethnographic Journey Mirrored through Community Research

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Abstract

In the closing two years of my doctoral degree that spanned ten years of my life, I was asked by a mentor to write a personal essay on my academic experiences at the university. That essay follows and is printed here not without the accompanying editing that marshaled its own questioning, self-reflection and analysis that comes with distance, wisdom, and the editor of a juried journal.

I was concerned to give a revisionist accounting now, another five or six years after the writing of the essay, to explain what my perspective was then as a disaffected African- American ABD (all but dissertation), given my changed thinking now, of what matters and what does not; and how my responses would have changed, lessened, or wizened over time. After all, my heightened sensitivity as an emotionally vulnerable and young so-called minority Black female, coming from a politically-charged HBCU (historically-Black college or university) to enter a predominantly white and politically conservative environment brings with it a whole dimension of challenges, the least of which is how to fit in, how not to be invisible, how to be successful and how to gain access to be successful in the midst of myriad real and perceived walls and obstacles.

Keywords: Womanist/Feminist ethnographic Writing, Life History, Personal Essay

Access, capacity and empowerment are important tenets central to my identity as a person, a woman, and the magnitude that comes from being one of color. Throughout a long academic career as a student, particularly at the graduate level, and because I enrolled in fields rarely represented by women, least of all, those of color; I have been often relegated to the margins of scholarship and excluded from academic pursuits. I have rarely received access to assistantships on department projects. Despite a 4.0 Master’s degree record in Agriculture and Economic Development, I was perceived as sub-par or of lower capacity than my majority and male counterparts. Upon a recruitment meeting with a preeminent scholar of African development, a white male, one with whom I wished to work, I was asked, “What did I have to offer African development?” Consider the magnitude of this question, coming from a white male, to me, a female of African descent, from the Black Caribbean, having studied, traveled, lived and worked on the

¹ From bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, (South End Press, 2000).

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Continent. Perhaps I had not lived as long as this individual, but what arrogance permits such a question?

Why the accepted presumption or premise that one has to be able to state what one's contribution is going to be at an initial introduction, in a field of study or at a place of learning becomes the crux of the matter at this revisit. This paper then is a presentation of a form or former of self, resting on a belief in learning, developing competences and having a willingness to contribute where appropriate, whereby one's capacity is strengthened as a result of one's academic background and reflected in future possibilities.

My one salvation to success through what I call the wilderness of my PhD process was my own power; certainly not any power given me by any other, degree, status or accomplishment; but the power inherent of knowing who I am and whose I am, regarding both the divine and my heritage. It is from this heritage that my power emerged: from holding on to my inheritance, and not handing anything over to another. In the academy, a prominent myth is that your life is in your advisor's hand; well, that story was never part of my reality. This one perspective or philosophy may have been both the reason for and my salvation from my experiences.

The heritage I speak of is really that of a culture³, national as well as familial. My family, we are Trinidadian—purportedly, the most proud of all the Caribbean Sea Basin. Trinidad and Tobago is a legacy, a culture and country context of strivers and accomplished thinkers. My family history is far more impressive than my national identity. I come from a maternal family of educators and professionals across fields. My father is an entrepreneur having businesses in the United States and Trinidad for over thirty years. Its important to tell you my father reached only the eighth grade of formal education. He is the first intellectual I ever met, and the best kind: one self-taught.

My father has been the biggest source of my inspiration in all spheres of my life. To see all he has done with so little inspires nothing but awe and admiration. With that history, how can I make excuses out of my difficulties, they are far meager than those of others who have gone before me. My paternal grandmother, Ruth Huggins, forms the other enabling dynamic of my life. The old Negro adage of "somebody prayed for me" is a personal story and reality. In my own personal folklore, I believe either my father or my grandmother prayed and placed an everlasting covering over me that has brought about success in all things, and particularly when those all around me would do anything and everything to see me fail. Thus far I have not; suspecting, I never will- the anointing persists. I owe this assurance and insurance to a marriage between these two aspects of power: the familial and the divine.

As my father was my first image of an intellectual, so my Aunt and Godmother, Marjorie Baptiste, was the first picture of a womanist/feminist. She is one of three

³ The culture I refer to in the essay is one of the Carib Indian, Coca-Payol and African strain of identity and experience within Trinidad & Tobago. Trinidad & Tobago, the twin-island nation state is a country as is most other Caribbean islands, one that advances a predominant ethnicity and cultural identity that some would argue is not inclusive enough of all its groups, and as such, is more Creole, Christian, African and secular. However, the culture I refer to in my mind is one of many. In fact, my referral to this specific cultural frame was not to encourage or relate to any ethnic tensions, but merely to herald its success and buoyancy for those whose it is by identification and living.

women in my family who never married. She is a woman who has amassed wealth and achievement on her own, without the title and name of any other than her father. I observe most women's zeal to take on the name of a mate or a husband, and I have always been perplexed, wondering, was not your father's name enough to honor. I am and have always been so proud of my family name, even from childhood as I recall. I vowed I would always remain a Huggins. These are the roots to my successes: my family history and the source of my honor.

Despite the processes of cumulative causation regarding my successes, however, I have to admit a certain portion of my power also came from my own personal journey that delivered me to my doctoral pursuits. A journey filled with accomplishments that consisted of surviving life challenges of separation, contention, death and solitude. It was also a journey enjoyed through privileges and rewards of family, blessings, and the reinforcement of inherited victories.

Of course, other skills and resourcefulness allowed me to persevere through the various stages of the doctoral program that has been eight years, full time, consecutive and running, albeit closing. Truly, it has not been just me, but Grace endowed within. This story is my introduction to the dissertation; this is my personal story of how I came to identify personally, internally, with my research topic and a researchable problem. This is a story of how, I, a woman of color and identity⁴ struggled, strived and forged success in the academy – moving from the margins to the center; a center from which I address you in these days.

This introduction is a narrative of the similarities, perhaps, of my thoughts and processes of participation and the primacy of relationships as the mediating factor from which success is crafted, whether for an individual graduate student seeking inclusion and validity through scholarship, or for a citizen, a neighborhood resident in urban regions, fighting against apathy and invisibility. This is a telling of the same story, but different plays and dichotomies of finding internal hope and salvation, of my moving from the margin to center of the academy, and prescribing in this dissertation how the invisible urban minorities: the poor of all ethnicities, solve and prescribe their own realities, not from the margins, but from the center of their own authority.

⁴ A woman of identity is a woman who is beyond categories of sexuality, world, role and functions. "A woman of identity" is a woman imbued with a chart of her history; she has an inkling if nothing else of a great destiny and even greater possibility. Such a woman of identity walks and makes decisions, living as she does from her own inner resources and of those lives of other women and people who came before her, who light her path and make her ways. A woman of identity is one who is not easily swayed, corrupted, beguiled, or destroyed by the vagaries of living.

Women of identity in today's world comprise the recently installed President of Chile, Senora Bachelet who upon taking the presidential oath gave homage to her father for his life given and taken in the struggle for the nation. A woman of identity is the new Prime Minister of Jamaica Portia Simpson Miller whose detractors call her common because her dialect and behavior bespeak an experience of a specific people of a particular history; holding on as she does to her personal belief systems (religion) apart from traditional government protocol and political correctness.

A woman of identity is Vandana Shiva of India who is empowered to go against all-powerful multinational corporations (MNCs) to tell the world and inform her country folk of how these MNCs are destroying their lives and livelihoods. These are women of identity, all women of a particular ethnicity, cultural identity, in some cases shared and in others, different, but all, deeply rooted in a strong sense of self that is held as a shield and never in negation to any other."

Beyond the stories of the student of color in the academy and urban residents, demoralized, intertwined with these issues is the different ways of knowing beyond the common, the traditional, the mainstream and the majority sanctioned. In the process of legitimating one's own way of knowing and doing, is the crafting, finding, outlining and framing, as well as the advancing and living of one's own scholarship as the essence of one's being – the very meaning of authenticity. This narrative is the finding of my way out of the difficulty to walk, stalled, in the trying to find my voice within the traditional form. This academy was not prescribed for people like me, I have been reminded many times, within these eight to nine years. Independent thinkers with in-collapsible principles, passionate about the frames of thought that prescribes certain existences for others, are not part of the larger agenda. My voice on this research comes out of creating a form of scholarship that is innately accurate to my sensibilities. The language may be my own and not that of the establishment. As I have decided what is scholarship for me, I will give you the same honor and liberty through your own reading of this story.

A Brief Herstory of my experiences would focus on my skills and resourcefulness as the salvation of my academic career, but that would be woefully insufficient. It has not been me, but God, the divine, the benevolent universe, a power larger than myself that has kept me, protected me, shielded me, advanced me, and provided for me. I saw the working-out and manifestations of the assertion 'that what (wo) man means for evil, God makes for Good'. Several times, I tried to leave the academy. It took me three or more years to own the reality of my unhappiness, denial and masked sorrow. I was so smart I made the minimum grades by doing nothing to little. Those three or four years were a process of coming to terms with the possibility, choice and acceptance to leave. Even before my peace of leaving, however, each time I attempted to leave, grace appeared.

Realizing my dissertation topic would not come from the usual processes of collaborative department or assistantship projects, I wrote a proposal for predissertation funding. The Dean of the College funded the project. In the summer of 1994, I returned to the country where I once lived as an expatriate, Zimbabwe. I went to reestablish old connections made as a development consultant. I considered for research issues in natural resource management, use and policy. I also thought it possible to research the country's resettlement program through the Land Tenure Commission. My final option for dissertation research included the evaluation of development communes and collective I implemented and assisted throughout my earlier stay. None of these options materialized. Perhaps due to my swift departure even before a month's stay, I had planned on two. My Mother was fighting the last illness of her chronic battle with lupus. It was the last time I saw Zimbabwe, a sentiment seeming irrelevant here, if not for how much that country has changed since 1994. My Mother passed away another month later, eight years and ten months after my Brother. Despite my stories of consistent success in the war of PhD survival, there were battles lost. This attempt to save my ag-econ academic career through a Zimbabwe research project failed.

The constant change of advisors, though disconcerting in appearance was another grace. The source of such upheaval is the lack of relationship, friendship, or mentorship. I look back in horror, amusement and irony at the academic form of my acceptance to do the PhD. At the bottom of the form where should have stated my advisor's name—it was blank. I see now, in hindsight and clear vision that was the hallmark of what was to come.

This lack of relationship with advisors only ended a few months ago, when I last changed advisors. I had to do it that time because as I kept working on my research concept as a way to combat the lack of any faculty involvement, my regular submissions to him was not met with the feedback I asked for and sought, but with an admonition of who of the committee sanctioned me to move forward with my ideas. I was sadly dismayed as I thought who would take me as an advisee, again; but recognized I would never progress without that necessary change. As horrible as it looks and as unpleasant as it is, the one thing that saved me throughout the years here was my willingness to change and move forward from what was not working. I never let myself be stuck. I never believed I could not change or make changes. My persistence in looking for what works is immeasurable.

The person who became my advisor was the professor of the proposal writing class I registered for to produce my proposal. It was a class I waived out of upon entering the department, but registered for, again, looking for the way to success, to finding solutions to situation. It is the first time I enjoy a positive, supportive and reinforcing relationship with an advisor. One who respects and uses my writing and research in his work. He is a faculty member of color.

Fulfilling the graduate student/academy tradition, I have some advisor stories to tell. The worse of these regards my decision to leave the academy in the winter of 1997. In pursuit of my next endeavor, I applied to be an Ag-Econ Scholar on Capitol Hill. I did have a Masters of Science in the field. I was in constant and close communication with the administrators of the fellowship that would have been an inaugural position. Because of her preeminence, when I mentioned my advisor by name as a person I worked with, a letter of recommendation was requested from her despite three other positive letters. I asked for that letter not realizing she was the fourth person I asked to write letters of recommendation from the outset. I had to wait two weeks for her to return to town. I then waited another week or so to get on her schedule. When I walked into her office the letter had yet to be written despite the conveyance of deadlines and immediate requests. I could not see between the lines or the writing on the walls, perhaps because there was the refusal to write on her part. Getting past the hesitant letter, I received a phone call from someone I had never spoken to, a male, who I believe was running the program from his Texas faculty position. He told me and I quote "No one had been chosen and they were postponing the program until next year." I could hear and smell craziness pretty well, even if I cannot spot it. I was stunned. I would have had no problem with my disqualification. To tell me though that there is no one qualified, at all, to fulfill a fellowship post that is nothing beyond a graduated student position, sent flags waving. I then suspected the pool of candidates was extremely small, and smaller still were the finalist, and low and behold, I must have been the favored candidate. Hence, the request for the fourth letter was my thinking. I started investigating about the letter since that is when this train seemed to derail. I got a copy through a favorable relationship with department staff. On first glance, I could not see anything wrong with the letter. I sat perplexed in the office with the staff. Until in mid stream of thought and murmurs, Tuskegee University hit my consciousness. The letter indicated this as the place of my Master's work. True enough, but I thought it suspect and peculiar for a student to have spent four years and a half in a doctoral program yet a letter of recommendation goes back in time to old laurels as a touch point. Even so, the letter did not mention my 4.0 at that institution, so I wondered what could be the usefulness of that piece of information

now. Yes, I have been excluded and denied access and participation in these four years, and so therefore have a meager record to show for my time; but surely, a favorable comment on some little thing I accomplished, you can offer; as I am still here, for instance. I guess not. For Tuskegee University became the floodgate by which I saw everything else. What this prominent and national faculty member was indicating was my ethnicity, if not her false notion of race. She was letting the reader know that I was Black, African-American. I then noticed she said, "Melise is interested in poverty alleviation and welfare reform". She was letting them know that I was not "conservative" as they have it defined; and if not that, then indicating my interests were not theirs. Another statement in the letter read, "Melise has felt the need to search for other paradigms of understanding" or some sort comment, loosely regarding the action that led to my exit. Finally, the letter closed with the statement, "I would give careful consideration to Melise Huggins". I have this letter. I remember the quotes verbatim even after all these years. Crafty is it not? It was the dastardliest thing to do, considering this person was my advisor and someone I liked and thought who liked me. I think she may have. However, her identity was so wrapped up in her field, and in her perception and illusion of ownership, as well as in her power to influence, to give and take away from me and my life, she was not able to recognize, my Master's degree qualified me and gave me the right to pursue such a position. Beyond that, the administrators viewed me qualified to fill it. These are my mere efforts and explanations to understand how anyone would do such a sneaky, duplicitous, deceitful and ugly thing. She merely could have denied me the letter, rather than to write her character so clearly for all to see. For those of you reading this narrative and not able to comprehend the world outside your own experiences, what you have just read is an illustration of racism in action, not just mere prejudice. Racism is this power to deny or retract opportunity conferred on another, from near or far. Her social capital allowed her to impact my life in this way, without anyone raising a question or an opposing thought. I see the world on two realms though, the physical and the divine. I wanted that position, but it was not for me. I do believe anything that is mine, with my name on it, as divinely ordered, no one can take away.

Onto friendly faces, for they did exist here for me in Michigan's white cold, they weaving, as I did, in and out of the PhD wilderness journey. Such friendly-faced people gave support and caring. There are far more than I could mention. I recount MaRobie. She has since retired from Michigan to Florida, and just last Monday returned to see friends, a week's trip on which I was the first stop. This is honor. MaRobie is a 63-year-old feisty engaging woman. When she met me on a street corner, outside a beauty parlor she thought she had known me for ten years. We had never met, at least not in this life. We attended the same church, I learned. When I became a member of the church, she stood up to be my member-guide. She subsequently invited me into her home and her family. She embraced me as a friend and daughter. She is a dynamic woman sharing a common heritage of South Florida by way of the Caribbean. She is the person who has always told me I was not particularly skilled in spotting my enemies. Other friendly faces include The Jangs and The Loverbys. The Jangs also became my family, and interestingly enough emerged after MaRobie and her family left Michigan. The Loverbys I am eternally grateful to as they helped me construct my research over the past summer. Their tireless involvement allowed me to finally complete an operational research project and proposal within the fall semester.

Final kudos must go to the seminal individual who made able my continued registration and maintenance in the hardest and earliest days of my PhD program; that is the Associate Dean in my College for Academic Diversity. Without him and his financial support to pay for my registration and stipend, given the exclusion and in-access I was subjected to, I would have surely been out on my ... He played critical physical and metaphysical roles in the upcoming completion of my degree; at least in getting me to the point, today, where I craft this narrative. Dr. Dean was not the most sympathetic of characters in the onslaught of negativity, ugliness and the various nefarious forms of racism experienced by his students. For him, it was worse; he and his generations and those before them, lived through worse. He tells the story of coming to this same college for his PhD and in the entrance interview the professor turned his chair on him as he entered the office; it is the same inhumanity we suffer just in a revised and particular forms. I suspect Dr. Dean's philosophy through his encouragement to be tough was the remembrance that we as a people have made a lifetime of surviving and thriving in spite of all manner of the inconceivable; that we youngsters have it easy, and the least we can do, is what everyone before us has done: To handle it. Handle it I did, and I have. These are the friendly faces that assisted me in doing so, who kept me going along the blood-sweat-and tear-stained PhD trail.

Always there were diversions of the heart and mind. One fruit I have to show for my years in the PhD program is three volumes of poetry spanning writing from 1990 to the present. I have written my feelings, my impressions, and have written my way out of depressions and pity. I wrote to survive, I wrote in resistance. I wrote in a victory yet to materialize. I complete this PhD partly because I must finish what I started. More saliently, I finish as I see now my future lies through the portal of the dissertation and degree completion. It is more the writing of the dissertation as a purpose than the degree itself. I am a writer, and if that is not my life purpose, it is one of many. The degree and its dissertation is part of my sub-journey writing, finding my writing, and finding my voice. The essence of this journey materializes in the writing of this narrative, my first ever and here directed toward a scholarly audience.

Writing my life, my lessons, my teachings (the PhD), my inspirations, my journey, my dissertation, my path, writing my future and that future is one beyond writing that encompasses most creative pursuits. For instance, a most recent diversion has been the desire to put my poetry to music. Another nascent diversion of the heart has been my growing interest in cinema-therapy: my love and remedy through movies. I have evolved an interest to meld my love of music and writing to develop and construct film scripts. I expect my first story line will be my Mother's story and the depiction of Caribbean life in Trinidad, through culture, music and lime (the *Trini* noun for a hang out).

Diversions of the mind have been my consistent participation in campus forums, talks and seminars across the disciplines of the social sciences, the arts, law and policy. I so participated in broadening events that many people believed me to be in other areas of study other than my matriculation. Perhaps these activities provided the outlet that kept my critical mind active and out of a confirmed state of depression. I had devised my own psychological assessment as functionally depressed.

It seems as though I spent a good three or four years of my PhD program doing nothing: no classes, no research, just deferred doctoral credits waiting for a door to open

to move forward. Perhaps this is just the exaggerated feel of the dead times, or just the perception of my deepening, growing or expanding processes. Details evade me, and maybe too accuracy. One thing I assert, however, is that light did not shine until I overcame my demons of quitting and leaving a dream undone, to be a degreed scholar in agricultural economics emphasizing the process and policies of development. Perhaps it is the acceptance of the perceived worse case scenario and the embrace and peace and change of perspective to realize there is never such a worse scenario, that hope arrives. It was at this peace that the opportunity came to transfer to another department, the very same option I was given years prior by an advisor, as a way I felt to show me I was not up to par to study in the hallowed traditions and halls of Americana ag-farming-the white ideal and traditional way of life myth.

This opportunity arrived out of my refusal to keep spinning my wheels to pass departmental exams seemingly designed and arbitrarily marked for failure. Who your advisor was, who you were, and what country you came from, and the extent of the perceived promise and possibilities to provide continued livelihood for your professors and department, overseas, determined your value and what oversight and overlooking you would receive. At the time of my departure, the department underwent concurrent internal and external scrutiny on two points: why the passing rate on department exams were so dismal when students, usually professionals in the field, passed their courses; and concurrently, why the performance and skill of department graduates were so variant. Some students graduated in three years when they failed all three exams, while others were booted because they could not manage the same feat. In the midst of these polar opposites were the many students who took upwards of seven or more years, usually eight, sometime ten to finish the PhD.

My passage from the department came through innocence and naïveté. I asserted to my advisor and the department chairperson that I was not willing to take the main exam in perpetuity, considering I did not think I failed it the first time; denied of course I was for a review to validate this assessment. By my assertion, I was making, taking and stumbling into an outcome, surprising to others and even to me. For in my righteous indignation I did not realize my assertion was the door to my exit; but that I did, walked out and through a department that granted only its third PhD to an African American male or female by year 2000. Wonder you should of how many others pursued, but were stifled, waned or defeated. This is the record for a land grant university – so what if it is in Midwest Michigan.

This trajectory and change landed me in the Department of Resource Development. I am wont to tell you the details, the players, the dynamics or of my decisions to this outcome. As in everything else in my life, my choice met with reinforcement: people were receptive; I was accepted. The open window of holy scriptural lore comes to mind: when one door closes, a window opens. This window was not without its drawbacks, however. I spent another two years or so passing a new spate of department exams and fumbling to find an appropriate dissertation subject given disciplinary cross-boundaries between advisors and myself. One of the consistent themes of my academic experiences is the character of advisors along the way. I spoke of my personal bad advisor stories. The observation I made is that often than not, advisors may appear friendly and beneficial, but really are just standing by waiting to see you fail. This is an image of overseers observing a spinning wheel, never inserting a hand, direction,

inspiration, or mentoring to guide your boat out of a wind tunnel, it is the common testimony shared among students of color.

As I write this narrative, the universal reinforcements keep appearing. A call just came in, someone seeking after my absence at church reminds me of the scripture in Deuteronomy, of sweet honey and the rock that speaks to being in the midst of a hard place and finding something sweet. My sweetness has always been God's grace, never changing.

Writing this personal narrative as an introduction to my dissertation serves many purposes. First, there is the intention to frame my own scholarship. Second is the focus to construct my ownership and identity to and with the project and my dissertation. Third, through the process of writing and the journey of becoming a writer, I frame also a particular way of seeing the world.

This process of identification, framing scholarship and becoming a writer in the public domain began recently after a year of working on my current project. The start of that year came when a professor I knew from previous interaction invited me to work on his project and derive my dissertation from a collaborative endeavor on citizen participation and urban neighborhood organizations. I spent all summer reading materials, becoming versed in project history and trying to gain a footing from being a development economist to reading the social science of urban affairs, community development, psychology and ecology. All beneficial to my original field of study, and I would add, an expansion of the original paradigm. I learned first hand the tenet and study of multidisciplinary inquiry.

This initial goodwill led to my introduction to the writing and person of Parker Palmer, the renowned educator and spiritualist who came to the university to participate in a slew of discussions and conversations about finding the authentic self. The announcements of his visits came with a listing of his books, essays, articles and other writings. The first of his writings I read was a book identified by the New York Times blurb "A phenomenon in higher education". Surely, this book was a phenomenon in my higher education. The book is entitled *To Know As We Are Known—Education As A Spiritual Journey*.

I shall tell you, the fullness of this title comes to me now and not the first time I read the book. Even though I recognized my PhD as a wilderness experience, much like the original Israelites in the desert of biblical times, the book's subtitle did not mark my thoughts on its relevance to my lived experiences nor on how I should read its contents. Further insights I gather today read, "A Master Teacher offers a new model for authentic teaching and learning." This is another reinforcement as I have been identified with the markings of a Master Teacher from shamans, seahs, palm readers and other such power people on the fringes of knowledge. Again this theme of the dichotomy of margin to center: framed as who knows, how they know, and who justifies. Urban residents need answer these questions for themselves when they work in collaboration of visiting community development practitioners and professionals. Just as struggling graduate students, further burdened by the perceptions and biases of color must answer these questions as they frame their own spheres of thought in an academy that is more often than not negating. These are similar stories, different dichotomies, all of moving from margin to center.

What Parker Palmer's *To Know As We Are Known* did for the conceptualization of my research is along the line of providing a roadmap to a treasure. I realized in the reading of that book the seminal role of relationship/friendship to a doctoral student's success and career. In the sphere of the academy, from professors and advisors, as they interact with students, there must first be the recognition of a common humanity -- The seeing and embracing of an individual beyond perceptions, biases, stereotypes, prejudices and pre-assessments. Such human civility given and shared allows for relationships and in a best-case scenario friendships. I make the distinction between relationships and friendships because relationships may be positively or negatively cast and manifested.

Conceivably, it is too simplistic to say relationships are positive or negative. While this distinction may be accurate, a greater truth of distinction may be that relationships may be personal, internal or external. I understand in the writing of relationships and friendships that professors and administrators, faculty and staff do not bestow that honor to each other, so how can they make that extension to the peon graduate student. Be that as it may, I acknowledge that even the mildest modicum of a positive relationship, perhaps a friendship on the part of an advisor or professor to students may allow them to be involved within the livelihood of the student. Such a relationship may create the opportunity for that advisor or professor to invest, partake and take a personal stake, fully participating, in finding and designing success with the graduate student. This begins the framework to conceive of relationships along the personal internal/external dichotomy. The personal allows for the perception of others' humanity as it serves as a mirror image of oneself. An external relationship creates the possibility to negate and render invisible those who have no relevance to how you see yourself, or so perceived.

A useful way to conceptualize a positive, personal or internal relationship or friendship is to ask the question 'what is a relationship creating'; or is it empowering or debilitating. Perhaps the mark of a positive relationship is a creative process that serves the highest intentions and best outcomes of all involved. These relationships, or creative processes web and mesh to form a sense of community for the student that places him or her in a place, a department, in which they feel a part, have ownership and claim to construct a collective. That collective then serves to reinforce and support student freedoms to craft their process of inquiry and specialization with the room to develop and practice as nascent scholars and critical thinkers.

Within this frame of positive, personal and internal relationships, friendships and collectives, an individual student has and finds the means to create life-giving connections for the importance of their work and growth as scholars. I see this as participation. One cannot participate if your identity or being is not recognized, acknowledged or given place. This is the framework, the process and access denied to most graduate students of color: from a lack of humanity, to an external perception of other, to a lack of relationships and friendships, to the lack of a safe collective in which to work and be known as equal scholars, to the lack of mentoring to be guided to success.

I also believe participation requires the connection between the compartments of individual lives for students in the academy and for residents to participate in neighborhood organizations. The personal life and existence is connected and informed by the community life; community being the department, university, college or academy, or, the block, neighborhood, or city, state, nation or world.

I wonder as I conceptualize and map this framework, if relationships and friendships can be construed as a resource, the operationalized unit of analysis of social capital or sense of community, perhaps. In this discussion then, positive and personal relationships and friendships are resources and the first and second order, the necessary and sufficient requirement of success for students and for residents. As pivotal as it is in the academic context, sense of community is also the central construct of my dissertation research in citizen participation in urban neighborhood organizations.

“...To conspire any longer with this racist system?” (Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p.34). This quote is the phrase that turns my thoughts from the creative role of enabling relationships to the role and agency of individual empowerment, in both spheres that is the student and the citizen. This quote says to me that non-participation, on the part of any citizen, resident, student or individual is a conspiracy with whatever system, ideology, perspective, practices, or a focus to silence, oppress, marginalize, exclude or annihilate. To not participate, to not have a voice, to choose to be silent and uninvolved, is to conspire with racism, prejudice, bias, elitism, sexism, classism, lack of one's own validation, place or belongingness.

For both the student and the citizen resident there is this need to find and lay claim to one's agency and power to create success and participation, to bring and affect change in environments where we operate. Are so-called-minority students of color and the urban poor allowed to explore who they are, advance what they want, in connection to their places of orientation, departments or neighborhoods; or are such identities negated or handed to them? Even if one is negated place, identity, and honor, marginalized individuals and populations must still engage and be, not apart from their own center but through it. How this is accomplished, becomes one-person's story, my story of moving from margin to center, and may have relevance to others in similar or applicable situations.

In this effort of writing, telling and living one's own story, I advocate for thinking outside the box. Confidence builds by doing things one has never done before; to accept and seek connection and familiarity anywhere found, creating circles of positive reinforcement and like mirror images. Confidence emerges also by clinging to the success of others, not to blindly emulate but to derive some implication for one's own way. Every individual and group will have to determine where to create his or her collective and reinforcement. Central too is the need for functional organization, for the individual to be organized. I believe to start small and immediate and expand from there, is what builds a strong foundation for community. The motto that “together we can achieve” empowers in both concept and practice.

In my dissertation research, I try to accomplish several things. One of which is to show the importance of individual and collective characteristics to the behaviors of individuals and to outcomes of the community as an entity. This is a tenet reinforced and true for the student sphere. The collective skill, resources and access can be just as important as the skill of the individual student: maybe a difference between a functional five-year PhD program and one that runs to nine years or longer.

Finding agency and empowerment does occur, however, first on the individual level. It is therefore central to know when a process of participation is conceived, what are the contexts of challenges or duress, what are the psychological behavioral and perception characteristics of individual students and citizen resident? How do they perceive themselves: able to change things, having self-efficacy and prior examples and experiences of being successful? Perhaps these combined characteristics form foundations from which new behaviors and successes are forged, in new arenas and contexts. Can such characteristics and traits be transferred, supported or otherwise trained? How can so-called-minority students be encouraged to find their successes despite the inhospitability of the academy? The answer to this question is the holy grail of student retention and success rates. If such traits can be transferred it is also a mechanism and process of garnering greater neighborhood and citywide participation rates.

The dissertation looks at individual, neighborhood and social-context characteristics. In essence, I assert that the reality beyond the individual matters in observed outcomes and individual behaviors. I look at my own experience in my ongoing PhD process, and realize these same factors have played a central role; no factor has operated separate from others. Everything is systemic in nature. I came to my research topic by realizing the insistency of positive and personal relationships, if not friendships to a graduate student's success. I assert in my research the same relationship dynamics are necessary to garner greater numbers of citizen-resident participants in urban neighborhood organizations. Such friendships and relationships create webs and collectives of inclusion that infuse and create access, capacity and skill and empowerment. When one is not struggling to survive, one is creating, being, identifying, and feeding: others and oneself.

The applicability of this research to community residents and practitioners as well as to other minority students, faculty and administrators, is the importance of forming and sharing friendships and personal relationships with those they teach, instruct, train or work. Relationships and friendships can be the fertile ground and foundation of knowledge building and information sharing. It facilitates a teacher and learner cyclical and shifting dynamic. In Parker Palmer's perspective, knowledge builds only as a relation to how internal or external its exploration.

I struggled to write a paper on my dissertation topic as I was not personally related or invested to the topic of my dissertation research. I did not own it. Community organizations struggle with participation levels perhaps because they seek involvement without being involved with residents. Is it simple to say that outcomes do not derive apart from relationships? This appears to be the thesis and logical conclusion.

This framework of personal relationships and friendships, collectives, place and sense of community, access, capacity, agency and empowerment, all relate to a new paradigm that I assert is apropos to both the academy and the city. In this framework, reality is de-compartmentalized and integrated. This paradigm relates to a new way of living and studying, working and a new perspective on the importance and relevance of relationships to our collective livelihood and security. If relationships existed in the academy, one wonders if crazed students would be pushed to recent incidences of violence.

In this framework, relating and relationships is no longer the sole province of the personal, integrated into the public and the external, it is a return to the basics in a world

of technological isolation. The personal and the professional manifest an alignment amongst an individual's intellect, emotions and spirit, bringing forth the greatest possibilities for creating, productivity, and desired outcomes, whether those outcomes are graduation or participation rates. Relationships allow individuals to realize their functional roles in spheres of the academy and the city. Students function as burgeoning scholars, achievers, learners and teachers; and residents emerge as citizens representing and exercising their democratic rights of voice, loyalty and representation. The goal then is to relate oneself to others and processes in the accomplishment of tasks and outcomes. How am I related to this knowing that is the dissertation topic, the other researchers or community individuals involved? How will relationships inform my understanding, and in how I perform this role, as a person, as a student, as a researcher, as a scholar and as a writer? This is the new way of working, most apropos to the field of community interests. There is no community apart from you and I, and whether and how we relate, relationship or friendship, but always in fellowship, might provide the accuracy in the questions we ask, the processes we take, the answers we receive and the understandings we gain.

Now, I have finally the luxury of a positive relationship with my advisor as well as with other scholars and professors on campus even outside my formal academic committee. Everything is not roses and cream -- there are still thorns. I still deal with passive aggressive resentment from students and faculty. It perplexes me really. For, I wonder why are people threatened, little me as I am with no power to affect their lives or livelihoods. I came to a realization long ago through my experiences with a female advisor, not the creative letter writing one, but another. No matter how depressed, lost, ineffective or unproductive one perceives him or her self to be, if you are a person with innate skills, abilities and light, you shine, and those insecure, in fear or envy, spite and resist you. Nothing else explains human irrationality so well.

As a person of color in the academy, this is what we endure, in addition to the cutthroat politic.

Everything has its good and bad. I choose now to emphasize the good, there has been enough bad, and so it will always be. I have forged and framed my own definition of community and collective. I still have challenges to broach for my completion, but it is without the agony of negativity and the constant insecurity of true support.

Interestingly enough, I find the same constructs that formed my personal success frame the theoretical perspectives of my research: sense of community, perception of control and efficacy of community psychology, prior patterns of behavior of behavior studies, and enabling or disabling environments of community and ecological studies.

For a preliminary presentation of my research, a traditional scholarly approach structured the first three chapters of the dissertation. I provided a background and context for the study and my inquiry along lines of discipline and theory. It was all very reductionist and theoretically value-deprived. I am currently in the process of reconceptualizing the inquiry to give a different presentation. One that is based on my own ideas of scholarship appropriate to the topic of participation in a community context. Time will tell the outcome and the success of that process.

In the meantime, I try to live Parker Palmer's tenet of education, to know as we are known. In another one of his essays, *The Heart of Teacher*, he writes, "When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject, not at the deepest levels that embodies personal meaning." He says, "...I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of

concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth.” Thus far, my dissertation research, though three chapters deep, has been just the thing, a congeries of concepts, known from a distance. I am seeking the embodied and personal meaning of my research to my life, and to know my inquiry more intimately. This narrative was the beginning of that exercise.

This wilderness journey of the PhD has been about me getting to myself, finding and stating my truth as a scholar and a writer within the process of earning a terminal degree, despite all the years of damnation and negation. I still am. The current challenge came to read and reinterpret my research in ways more central to my identity as a woman and student of color in the academy. I have devised lessons and wisdoms from my own survival.

Moving from margin to center for me has meant the recognition and respect earned from my advisor, my doctoral committee members, and other faculty within the academy, across disciplines, with whom I work and interact. This movement from margin to center meant invitations to present and publish my work in international and national forums. Being at the center brings the prospect that I might conceptualize a graduate student conference for students like myself, struggling for their graduate tenures to be less as exercises in survival, and more of scholarship and knowledge. I hope that for those coming after me, the process will go beyond having to prove oneself, repeatedly, and over again. Moving from margin to center has been the finding of myself, centered within, confident to advance my own interests and inquiries and to extend a hand toward collaborative endeavors, fearlessly, with my soon to be peers and colleagues. I found that my move from margin to center came effortlessly, because of persistence and perseverance. I persisted to know and remember who I was and whose I was despite circumstance, conditions, appearance and the lack of almost every necessity for a doctoral candidacy. The reward of being center is nothing less than being collected unto myself, with perceived control and efficacy and not any accolade that rests precariously external.

Spurred by this research and my own journey, I seek to encourage marches from margins to centers for others excluded and undermined: so-called minority students and urban and poor residents. The novel aspect of my research is its approach to inquiry that employs a variety of aspect in one research topic. These aspects include a multi-level and multi-disciplinary nature of the study as it looks at both individual and neighborhood-level factors that inform an individual’s behavior. The multi-disciplinary nature of the study relates to the variety of constructs, concepts and theoretical frameworks taken from a variety fields that mainly include the four areas of community ecology, community development and community psychology, and urban affairs.

The interesting aspect of my methods comprises the use of indexed factors combined into collective and neighborhood characteristics, conceived to infer larger measures of efficacy. Through these combined modes of research methods and conceptualizations, I wish to show that urban citizens and residents can affect their lives and environments regardless of negative and debilitating appearances, conditions and a lack of resources; conditions not dissimilar to the reality of many so-called-minority graduate students. In both cases, that affect is realized by the same goal and process of relationships.