# Making the Ancestors Proud: Healing the Pain and Hiding the Shame in the Academy

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## Abstract

This article incorporates experimental writing which combines interior monologue written in Trinidadian Creole and Standard English. As importantly, the article explores personal experiences and responses to issues of assessment, promotion and tenure in an American university within the larger context of the relevant literature.

***Keywords***: Autoethnography, authenticity, ~~transnational citizen~~

## Introduction

> "Writing difficult stories is a gift to self, a reflexive attempt to construct meaning in our lives and heal or grow from our pain" (Ellis, 2007, p. 26).

This autoethnographic narrative is a pleated text that uses an experimental writing style that combines an interior monologue written in the Trinidadian dialect, with "standard academic writing." However, the story is not linear. Instead it weaves in and out of some significant events which occurred in the present and past. On the one hand, it is a "writing story" that speaks to how I came to write this essay (Richardson, 1997). It includes several personal experiences that informed the writing and became an integral part of the narrative. The story explains the impacts and outcomes of the university's assessment process and procedures on me. Yet, on the other hand, this piece is also a story about how I navigated the waters as I dealt with the personal pain of being an Afro-Caribbean immigrant woman in an American academy.

According to Derrida (1998/1974/1967), text is placed sous rature (under erasure), it undermines and manifests itself, at the same time. Hence, the use of the strike through my labelling myself as 'a ~~transnational citizen~~' in this text. When writing, I realized that making my ancestors and family proud of me was of the greatest importance. Furthermore, I had to recognize, claim ownership and make their influence public, because drawing on their strengths provided me temporary relief from the pain and rejection encountered in the academy. And now the difficult story begins with the following interior monologue. It is my response to the previous attempts to publish my work.

**Interior Monologue: Hmm, It doh matter at all!?**

**Ubuntu[1]:** What is dat? Who tell you dat matters! Girl think 'bout yourself first!

How dare you to enter the pearly gates without gaining permission? Ha! Well, let me tell you…

Who told you that you could enter this gate before wiping your feet on the mat?

What does it matter if your concern is one for others and their well-being and building the community of scholars, so that they can do honest authentic and rigorous work that will help them be 'good men and women' in the community, and be concerned for the well-being of those they serve?

Did you not know that service and teaching doh matter? And how many students you guide into become scholars and writers and publishers doh matter? Hell, girl get with the program!

It doh matter whether you wrote peer-reviewed book chapters that are in the most highly recognized books with other notable scholars.

It doh matter if you worked on National Science Foundation (NSF) grants as the methodologist or evaluator and analyzed the data and contributed to the reports.

It doh matter if you held writing retreats and assisted young persons of any color or race or ethnicity to get conference presentations and publications.

Hell, what journal did you publish in? Count the number of publications you did?

You expect to get promoted based on the overall body of work and your acceptability in the community that recognize you enough to have you review material in journals, at conferences, for NSF and dem kinda thing.

Hell NO! In what journals have you published? How many refereed conference presentations that are published dem doh matter…ah so now you gone Trini on we?

Or, so is so you can get it out of your system, right?

Is not what the students and those you serve think and how much they value your contribution to their scholarship?

Is what the institutional hierarchy, the gatekeepers think. They ain't ready for authenticity and honesty yet…

You have to write with your students doh just teach them to write and encourage them to publish.

Publish with them. Make yourself first author sometimes.

Everybody doing it so who is you! You so good and honest and forthright you never do that …you stupid or what.

> Girl, get selfish for a little while! It doh have to be all the time, just for the next few months! Ubuntu! I am because you are! Well you are the same as you were when you was fast and out a place and want to come in de dance without wiping your foot…
>
> How you feeling now that you get it off yuh chest girl? Hmm, It doh matter at all…
>
> (Journal Entry, May 2017)

## Voice Over: Theorizing the Narrative

> "How do the specific circumstances in which we write affect what we write? How does what we write affect who we become?" (Richardson, 1997, p. 1)

### Writing: A Method of Inquiry

The years kept rolling by and the memories kept returning. On two different occasions after what was then a horrendous experience, I tried to achieve two goals—firstly, meet my writing goals and secondly, clear my mind of the negative experience to be able to move on from the pain. Three years later, here I was again, re-visiting my negative responses to the reviewers' critiques which were written into my two papers, along with their suggestions concerning how the work could be revised and resubmitted for consideration for publication. However, in my third attempt that resulted in this paper, I realized that I had chosen unconsciously or subliminally, to making my ancestors proud of how I was navigating the academic waters. Furthermore, I was dealing with the pain of being a ~~transnational citizen~~. I felt compelled, therefore, to agree with Richardson's (2009) thoughts that,

> Writing is itself a method of inquiry that leads to new ideas—new concepts, maybe even theories. To engage this method one needs only be willing to accept uncertainty for a while and take the risk of finding out things one didn't know—or even want to know. (p. 308)

The concept transnationalism, according to Faist (2010), is often used "to refer to migrants' durable ties across countries—and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as trinationally active networks, groups and organizations" (p. 9). By adopting this helpful construct, I argue that transnationalism limits/delimits who I am in this "in-between and betwixt" space in the US academy (Fournillier, 2011). I own my Caribbean-ness, but my physical presence as a member of the diaspora allows me to assume an African ascendant self (Dillard, 2006). Moreover, I write this narrative, from the vantage point of being a Black woman of the diaspora. A concept that Faist (2010) suggests has been used often to denote religious or national groups living outside an imagined homeland. Furthermore, Goodall (2018) reminds us of the importance of explicitly locating and identifying one's positionality:

> If we know "who" is writing an account and fully understand her or his position in the world in relation to the subject matter, we are better able to judge the plausibility, utility, and accountability of that interpretation. (p. 4)

In this piece, I describe a pivotal moment in my academic career and as importantly, I highlight the spirit-filled strengths that I discovered through writing from the familiar standpoint that my Caribbean space afforded me. I felt that moving through the ebb and flow of my attempts to overcome the pain of rejection, resulted in creating the performance piece, the interior

monologue: "Hmm, It doh matter at all." It summarized my previous attempted publication experiences, and my emerging performativity. Finley (2011), for instance, described performativity aptly, as "the writing and rewriting of meaning to create a dynamic and open dialogue that continually disrupts the authority of meta-narratives" (p. 442). In doing so, I found that the writing was a tool to: (1) try to heal the pain that I felt; and (2) hide the shame that resulted from the negative academic promotion process.

In this paper then, I perform the writing up of multiple identities that are associated with the following: growing up in the Caribbean, completing post-graduate work in the USA, subsequently, adopting the cultural art form of Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival as the focus of my doctoral dissertation, and since 2000, living and working in the USA. This autoethnographic performance narrative therefore, moves back and forth in a nonlinear fashion as I share my analysis and interpretation of the process of trying to write out of and through the pain of some devastating academic experiences, and the enlightenment that has come from so doing (Pollock, 2007). Indeed, writing as a method of inquiry, as I mentioned earlier citing Richardson (2009, p. 308), is a risk-taking activity in which one finds "out things one didn't know—or even want to know." Snippets of the following lines from Spry's (2011) performance narrative echo, as I link writing with autoethnography:

> Autoethnography is body and verse
>
> It is self and other and one and many
>
> It is personal, political, and palpable
>
> It is messy, bloody, and unruly
>
> It is a subaltern narrative revealing the understory of hegemonic systems
>
> It is wholly none of these, but fragments of each. (pp. 497-498)

**Setting the Stage**

After what I thought was a successful five-year period of time in the academy of: conducting post-tenure research, teaching, and carrying out an inordinate amount of professional and community service, I thought that I should bite the bullet and submit my academic work for review and promotion. I shared my academic portfolio with my mentor and a few trusted colleagues and believed I was ready for promotion. Following the submission of my portfolio, the highest-level, reporting officer's request for a meeting with me came as a major surprise. I can still remember first the shock, then the pain, then the shame all tied up together, as I listened incredulously to the administrator tell me that my work would not be submitted for external review.

At last, three years later, as I write this paper, I am able to share openly what I refused to write in the two earlier paper submissions. In spite of the reviewers' requests to revise and resubmit the articles, I deliberately never revised them. In this article, I focus on the problem—how one's worth as a scholar in a North American academic space can be challenged successfully by the dominant perspectives of individuals who hold power. I also recognize how I hid behind my writing and refused to make my case explicit. I tried to use my writing as a tool of inquiry but admit it was far from being truly, autoethnographic. The reviewers commented, for example, *"We feel that this section is potent with autoethnographic possibilities."* I am now writing a more

autoethnographic piece that affords opportunities for what seemed to have been missing—authenticity and openness.

***Figure 1.*** **The flower garden: Covering the pain of rejection**

## Sankofa: Going Back to Move Forward

I was known as the "Villa Song Bird" during my time as a student at the Teachers' Training College, because of my vocal ability as a mezzo soprano. The late Daphne Pilgrim Cuffy, lecturer and dean at the Teachers' Training College, gifted musician, mentor, and adopted campus mother, had taught me to use my instrument, my singing voice, to express my deepest feelings. And so, as I drove slowly from the university campus after my performance assessment meeting in the faculty, I sang, the fondly remembered Caribbean folk song: "Death oh, death oh mi Lord! When ah mi body go down in de grave, then ah mi soul gyan shout for joy!" (When my body is put in the grave, my soul will shout for joy). I stopped at a hardware store and purchased flowering plants that would blossom in the summer/fall.

I returned to my North American "home" miles away—and an ocean away—from my Caribbean "home" and dug a deep hole in the front yard around the mailbox. I needed to bury so very deeply, the wounding moments of hearing the negative assessment. I dug a grave from which the feeling of rejection would only come out on resurrection morning. The beautiful blossoms from the flowering plants that reminded me of my Caribbean home, became the everlasting wreaths. I was repeating the ritual that I had noticed so many times in the Caribbean at the funeral services of my family and ancestors—dig the hole, bury the body, take the young children back and forth across the grave to protect them from the spirits, while everyone wailed and cried out loud as the grave diggers covered the coffin with the dirt and then placed the wreath on top. Only this time, the blooms would last longer than the flowering wreaths back home that died with time, in the tropical sun. As the flowers bloomed, I shared photos of them

with friends of family who knew how much the beauty of nature meant to me. However, I struggled to let go of the disappointments, the anguish, the shame, and the pain that was similar to that felt when a close family member died and was buried. The negative moment of rejection remained alive and well and was indelibly etched in my mind/body/soul.

After a few days, I decided it was time to write a letter to myself. I wrote as a form of resistance. I sat at my "home" office desk and using the memory of what I had learned from Sam Selvon (1987), a Caribbean novelist, par excellence, penned an interior monologue. By using the Trinidad Creole dialect, Selvon was one of the first writers to capture the experiences of Caribbean immigrants living in England**.** Selvon's (1987) work, *Lonely Londoners,* taught me that writing did not have to conform to the norms of a Euro-western standard. The piece was therefore, deliberately written as bi-dialectical, in Trinidadian Standard English and Trinidadian Creole. Caribbean Creole "native language" varies according to the county and its history in acrolect (formal speech), mesolect (midway speech), and basilect (informal speech) (Patrick, 1999; Smith, Warrican & Alleyne, 2020). Selvon knew what it was like to be an immigrant and had made Trinidadian Creole the focus of his writing. He was not afraid to use his Trinidadian Creole dialect to share the pain of the immigrant living and working in a foreign culture, supposedly the "mother country." In response, I wrote the interior monologue: "Hmm, It doh matter at all!" I realized that the ancestors were at work pushing me to use what I had, my creole tongue to navigate the troublesome, stormy academic waters.

**Post-performance Reflection on Assessment Experiences in Academia**

***Aside***

With my Caribbean childhood, university student and professional experiences in the USA, mentioned earlier, I could be identified as a '~~transnational citizen~~' and I normally categorized myself as a woman living in the diaspora. Despite my best efforts, the narrative of my negative, academic promotion and assessment experience filled me with self-doubt and continued to haunt me. In true Caribbean style, I performed on the pages of this article, an interior monologue in which code switching occurred rapidly, even in the same sentence.

**The Spirits of:** my great-grandmother who taught me the art of story-telling; my adopted mother who always told me to hold my head up high and stand tall regardless of how others viewed me; Rex Nettleford (1993), Caribbean icon, scholar, artist was probably one of the most brilliant Caribbean African thinkers of the last century. Nettleford looked for and found ways to use his incredible intellectual gifts to empower Caribbean African people, and to come to their defense and protection in a frequently hostile world—all of their spirits rose up in me as I penned the words of the interior monologue. The writing process allowed me to express freely the thoughts that ran through my head, as I dealt with the pain and feelings of rejection, shame and anger. However, writing the monologue still did not free me enough to be honest in writing the first two submissions that skirted around the negative assessment experience. I was not free enough to name and to speak directly to what pushed me to write the monologue. I realized that the monologue was actually about much more than just my individual assessment experience.

The reviewers stated explicitly, for example: "We don't know what 'the experience' is other than you making certain inferential arguments. There is very little narrative and descriptive

text to underscore the experience." Indeed, I was afraid of being too personal and demonstrating vulnerability in my writing. As Ellis (2007) reminds us, so very well:

> Autoethnography starts with personal experiences and studies "us" in relationships and situations. Doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience. When we write about ourselves, we also write about others. (p. 14)

What then was the purpose of this paper? I wanted to address some of the key ways in which academic gatekeepers assess one's worth, and to map graphically the resulting impacts on the individual. I judged that my worth as a scholar in the North American academic space was challenged, by the dominant perspectives concerning issues, such as: (i) the implicit and, at times, explicit expectations to research and publish only in Tier 1, academic journals; (ii) the need to conduct funded research; (iii) the need to demonstrate excellence in teaching and service to the university and larger community. Gill (2009) argues interestingly enough that "academia represents an excellent example of the nonlinearization of the workplace and that academics are, in many ways, model neoliberal subjects, with their endless self-monitoring, flexibility, creativity and internalization of new forms of auditing and calculating" (p. 241).

The current situation in the academy has led to the multiple issues discussed in, for example, Gutierrez y Muhs, Niemann, Gonzales and Harris' (2012) collection of cogent essays: *Presumed Incompetent.* As importantly, the essays point to what Harris and Gonzalez (2012) describe tellingly as, "Third World Feminist recognition that the business of knowledge production, like the production of tea, spices, and bananas, has an imperialist history that it has never shaken" (p. 14). I discovered, as I combed the literature for critiques of the academy, that there was a call from several members of the academy to break the silence and examine the hidden curriculum and injuries of the neo-liberal university (Gill, 2011). Such academics believe that "sharing our individual stories and engaging with our colleagues about our concerns as faculty (concerns they are just as likely as we are to have…) can but only lead to a better end than the one facing us now" (Bunds & Giardiana, 2017, p. 233). Like Gill (2009) and Bunds, and Giardiana (2017), I began with what I experienced and my struggles to write publicly about them. I explored how I was analyzing and interpreting the writing and reflected on the assessment process and procedures. I found an alignment with the views of the scholars mentioned above and my own experiences.

I also found that the scholars shared the belief that those of us who were critiquing the system were, in some ways, privileged. Furthermore, some academics cautioned that we were biting the hands that feed us by writing about personal struggles. Gill (2014), for example, further explains that:

> There has been very little research on the experiences of academics, a marked reluctance to examine our own labour processes, organizational governance and conditions of production. Despite the growing interest in reflexivity in recent decades, the experiences of academics have largely escaped critical attention. (p. 17)

In turn, I questioned: What my academic role was supposed to be? Why did I and so many other scholars seem to view the promotion experience as a challenge to our identity and a struggle to

prove ourselves worthy of being an effective academic? How then do I account for the types of lessons that my graduate students, my children, and my colleagues who read my writing learn, if I am less than honest about the impacts of the promotion and assessment experience? If I conceal my feelings of being rejected and fail to explain that my abilities to continue writing and publishing my research have been seriously affected? I realize that although I did not die from the bullet that hit me in the head, at the meeting with the assessment officer, it remained lodged deeply in me. With it, came feelings of paralysis, as well as fears of repercussions for being open and truthful with the individuals who assessed my work.

I could not help but agree that after going through the negative academic assessment meeting, reflecting and researching the central issues, and writing this article, nothing seems to have changed in the academy, since Harding stated forcefully in 1974:

> It becomes increasingly clear that where real questions are denied, real belief and commitment to humane endeavors also disappear, and no force appears that is adequate to move men and women out of the cramped and sullen individualism which characterizes so much of white American life. Instead, the people gather—remaining profoundly apart—in a miasmal setting of alienation, cynicism, and fear, fully prepared to deny all demands of justice which their own history would urge upon them, unable to know or to do what must be done. They appear before the world on bright video screens, but the real arena of their spirits is more like a small and dreary prison where the winter has only begun. (pp. 3-4)

I seem to have been fighting against the individualism and parochialism that African-centered scholars like Harding (1974), referred to in the above quotation. It was clear to me that I was being called to "speak the truth" in my writing about the assessment experience (Evans, 1970). Not that there is only one truth but as Harding (1974) explained in citing Mari Evans' (1970) work:

> …to speak the truth to the people concerning themselves is first to open to the people the lives and struggles of our ancestors. This assumes, of course, that we black teacher-scholars have identified our own fathers, and are indeed open to them. (p. 9)

If I was going to be true to one of my many selves—Caribbean/woman/native ethnographer/ other—in terms of my responsibility as an African ascendant person (Dillard, 2006; Dillard & Okaploka, 2012)—then I knew I had to finally write this article and break the silence. It is/was very important to "speak the truth" about how the work of the ancestors like Sam Selvon, Daphne Pilgrim, Cuffy, Rex Nettleford, and a host of others have helped me deal with my doubts and fears about being an academic. These Caribbean writers/scholars became a buttress in times of need, as the performative piece was vital, as I navigated the writing and inquiry process (Pollock, 2007).

Andre Tanker, yet another Caribbean musical artist, afforded me a release valve that I needed while trying to gain the courage to come clean about how that assessment meeting had affected me. Andre Tanker's *Home* (1970s), described as "a song of self-realization, a rediscovery of self," helped me to come to terms with why I leaned so heavily on the work of several Caribbean scholars in: my dissertation (Fournillier, 2005), my other publications (e.g., Fournillier, 2009), and the style of writing like Selvon's in the interior monologue, presented

earlier. Indeed, it was not just because like them I am from the Caribbean, but it was a way for me to stay connected and sane during the scholarly journey in a foreign space, and to connect deliberately with the ancestors who continue to give me courage.

Like Andre Tanker, I could also relate to these opening lines of his song: "Ah (I) went away, ah leave, and ah come back home, ah come back to stay, ah must see mih (my) way" (Tanker, 1970). I agree that straddling two worlds, and performing the identities of ~~transnational citizen~~ and diasporic woman, and identified as a faculty member in the academy, are not that easy. Early in my teaching career, one of my colleagues identified me as British as he critiqued my high standards of grading assignments. I rebutted by responding that I was not British, but—Spanish, French, Asian, African, and British—I was all of these. Additionally, I had to face a graduate student who reminded me that although I might have gained US citizenship, I would never be "American."

Presently, acknowledging and owning the systemic disease in the academy make much more sense, and could help heal the pain of rejection and shame of not being truthful about it. I wondered as I wrote: "Is that what memories do to one? Do they write on the body inscriptions that cannot be erased?" Mobley (1993), in her review of Toni Morrison's use of memory in the novel *Beloved*, reminded me that "The process of consciously remembering not only empowers us to tell the difficult stories that must be passed on, but it also empowers us to make meaning of our individual and collective lives as well" (p. 363). I can in some ways agree with Ellis (2007) that writing this difficult story was "a gift to self", and I hope in some ways to the readers (p. 26).

**Epilogue**

I recognized and admitted that I needed to work in order to live and, in turn, feared how those in authority would perceive me when they read what I wrote in the earlier pieces. I was therefore cautious, the reviewers sensed it, and pushed me to explain and provide details of my experience. One reviewer stated: *"I think this needs a sharper clarification so that the nature of your research focus is verbalized. You hint at many things, but it might be helpful to ground it specifically on the research focus here."* I had deferred to the assessment of the academic authorities and held my tongue, but for only so long. None of us, however, are innocent actors in the academy, and never have been. Moreover, I agree with Zinn (1997), that it may be "worthwhile to examine the arguments for 'disinterested, neutral, scientific, objective, scholarship', if there is to be a revolution in the uses of knowledge …it will have to begin by challenging the rules that sustain the wasting of knowledge" (p. 503). One reviewer viewed this citation as *"a somewhat outdated critique of the academy. There is a great deal of scholarship including the Humanities and in the area of education that no longer fit this mold."* It is interesting, that in spite of all the changes, there still lingers the fear that if one is not doing "science, evidence-based work" one has to be twice or three times as good; and qualitative inquiry continues to be a "contested science" (St. Pierre et al., 2006). I feel compelled to ask myself: "How do we honor our relational responsibilities yet present our lives in a complex and truthful way for the readers?"

And so, I am resisting the fear of being emotional as I am aware of its link to memory, a major feature of the narrative. I am encouraged by Olney (1999) who explained that:

> Emotions are essential to the creation of a memory they organize it, establish its relative importance in a sequence of events much as a sense of time. …[further] order is essential for a memory to be considered a memory, and not as a thought or, vision at some particular instant, unrelated to past events. (p. 373)

I am paying attention to the value I have for honesty and authenticity, while listening to the voices of my ancestors who made sure we remembered that we needed to make them proud. I hear the voices of my great-grandmother, my mother, and my aunts who would remind us, "One day, one day Congotay" (One day will be Congo's day). According to Winer (2009) this Caribbean proverb was used to indicate that "the oppressed will one day be freed, that one day justice will prevail" (p. 240). Winer views "Congo" here as a referent for all people of Black African ancestry and not just people of Bakongo ancestry. This proverb is the one that best fits this article, given the premise advanced by Cheikh Anta Diop (1989) regarding the cultural unity of Africa. I also remember the line game that I played as a girl as we sang: "One day, one day Congotay! ah meet ah ole' lady, Congotay, with a box o' chicken', Congotay, ah ask her fo' one, Congotay, she did not give me, Congotay, she's a greedy mama, Congotay." Half of us were chickens and half attackers. The attackers tried to get past the greedy mama to capture the chickens for their side. Our laughter between the lines resound in my head as I recall the game; and it feels like Resurrection morning or in the words of another folk song, "De Morning Come." The language of the interior monologue, the lyrics of the music, the proverbs, and the games supported the narrative that I used to describe and re-interpret the academic assessment experience, to remember my struggle to navigate the waters of the academy and to wrestle with the notion of being identified and rejected as a ~~transnational citizen~~.

I realize that there is nowhere to hide, and the ancestors and scholars like Yvonne Brown (2019) have given me the strength to remove the mask and show my face. Brown (2019) shared, "After some five decades of embodied pain and ruminations, I was moved to inquire formally, into black peoples' human conditions; beginning with my own autobiographical memories of growing up in Jamaica from 1943 to 1965" (p. 29). I too had arrived at the point where I wondered whether the pain of rejection came from what Dubois (2015) refers to as "double consciousness." And I hear the question: "How does it feel to be a problem? How is my experience different or similar to 'being black' in the USA?" I came to the US with a national identity, with pride and self-determination. However, after the assessment experience, I felt that not only me as a Black Caribbean woman, but also the value of my scholarship and knowledge of my people, were all being rejected. I was being called to share the pain of my brothers and sisters of the diaspora who work in the academy. I, too, felt the sensation that Dubois described:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 2015, p. xxiii)

Thankfully, the ancestors were watching over me and allowed me to recognize in writing this article that it does indeed, take time to get past the embodied pain. I close as they continued to shout loudly to me: "One day, one day Congotay!"

**Endnote:**

[1] **Ubuntu** (Zulu pronunciation: [ùɓúnt'ù]) is a Nguni Bantu term meaning "humanity". It is often translated as "I am because we are"; also, "humanity towards others", but is often used in a more philosophical sense to mean "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity".

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