

Writing as an Art of Rebellion: Scholars of Color Using Literacy to Find Spaces of Identity and Belonging in Academia

Ethan Trinh and Luis Javier Pentón Herrera

In this dialogue, we explore the topics of identity, spaces, and writing from our own perspectives as members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community, and as first-generation, immigrants, and working-class scholars of colors in academia. In this piece, we propose writing as an art of rebellion against a system designed to silence the voices of marginalized educators (Park, 2013; Van Galen, 2017). Within this space, we return to our true self and tell our stories in creative ways: sitting at the kitchen table and engaging in walking meditation. Furthermore, we write with the vision of working toward building a trusting space for minority communities of scholars in academia.

How Does Writing Feel to You?

- Ethan:** Luis, let's complete this thought. "For me, writing is ..."
- Luis:** What do you think if, instead, we complete the thought of "for me, writing *feels* instead of writing *is*?"
- Ethan:** Interesting thought! I have considered writing as a process or, particularly, *a thing*, but I have not looked at writing as something related to feelings, emotions, or senses.
- Luis:** Yes, that is exactly how I look at writing, as a living entity that evokes emotions, feelings, memories, and helps us feel a particular way about what we are writing about.
- Ethan:** Let me tell you what happened to me yesterday. I went to share good news with a professor who claims to be interested in providing spaces and voices for graduate students of color (SOC). One of my articles had been accepted for publication in a journal. The response I received from my professor surprised me. The first words were that I should have published in a big journal rather than in a small one because, according to the professor, "only high-tiered

journals matter.” After our conversation, I felt discouraged; I felt as if my words, my messages, and my publication were not important in academia.

Luis: That is exactly the reason why I think of writing as a living entity because some individuals might judge or think of one’s writing as more (or less) important than others’, but what is the reason behind this? Who gives anyone the power to deem someone’s thoughts, ideas, and writing as more or less important? I am also personally experiencing how some publication “gatekeepers” impede, or devalue, divergent narratives in academia. Currently, I am working with portraiture, a qualitative methodology. I have received resistance from a couple of academic journals who believe portraiture’s thick description is considered creative writing. I knew the challenges associated with using portraiture in academia (Hampsten, 2015). However, I continue to use portraiture to rebel against this trend of emotionally-detached academic publications and to highlight the nuances and complexities of the participants’ lived experiences. For me, using portraiture is personal, which brings us back to the question “For me, writing *feels*”

Ethan: For me, writing feels like a shelter containing my emotions, my feelings, my anxiety, my narratives, my queer identities, and my secrets; similar to what you are doing with portraiture. When the reader navigates through my piece, they will find parts of Ethan-ness hiding within it. To me, that is the beauty of academic writing.

Luis: That is beautiful and very authentic, Ethan. For me, writing feels like an extension of my own voice, it feels as an opportunity to tell my stories, to create a space where my students – especially Indigenous Latinx students – are acknowledged, respected, and celebrated. For me, writing feels like an opportunity to be myself; an extension of who I am.

Ethan: I see there is a strong connection of your *SELF* and the community you are working with. In terms of extension of who you are, how do you use writing to come back to your cultural identities?

Luis: That is a very interesting question; I had not thought about it before. I know that my teaching practices have shaped my research. I primarily focus on the Latinx English learners (ELs) population because it represents my students, but I had not thought about how it could also be an opportunity to come back to my cultural identity and to who I am. For example, in my time as a graduate student, I

was stripped of my own form of writing. In a qualitative research course I took, I was interested in working on an autoethnographic piece as my final project. However, my professor told me that my emotions, my creativity, my culture, my poems, my lived experiences, and my stories were not important in/to academia. I was told to change my research to comply with what was perceived as “significant” in academic research. This experience made me feel as if my identity as a writer was somehow substandard and I felt forced to modify my voice and form(s) of writing to fit *in* with academic expectations. As a result, I became compliant with writing within established academic styles and guidelines. For this reason, I do feel that my writing – regardless of how academic might be – sometimes fails to encapsulate my essence and my identity.

Ethan: I would, then, claim that the academic environment is *toxic* to our writing identities. From our conversations, I see that academia has changed us and has separated us from our writing identities, pushing us to use vocabulary that does not reflect who we are, where we come from, or the home languages that we speak. Therefore, our writing identities have gradually been eradicated, making us, writers of color, forget our dreams, home, and identities.

Luis: Mmm ... Many people would think *toxic* is a very rough word to use, but I would definitely use *mainstream*, which reminds me of the social processes of integration, assimilation, and acculturation. Reflecting back on my experiences as a graduate student of color, I can see how I became assimilated into the academic writing culture and I have not stopped since.

Setting the Foundation: Coming Together at the Kitchen Table

Let's sit down. We are sitting at a kitchen table and talking via Skype. You are having a late lunch and I have just finished a bowl of Pho. Now, we are sitting together in this virtual table (space) to continue the conversation we did not finish last time. The first thing we need to do is define, for our readers, what we consider to be a kitchen table discussion from both of our cultures. For me (Ethan), a kitchen table in the Vietnamese culture is where families get together after a hard-working day to cook, eat, laugh, share, and learn with each other. For me (Luis), a kitchen table conversation reminds me of growing up in Cuba with my mom and my maternal family when we came together to

eat, talk about our day, and laugh about the good and bad things we had experienced in our daily activities. For us, the kitchen table was about unifying our family and re-energizing each other to continue throughout the week.

The concept of the kitchen table as concepts of unification and sharing in our cultures leads us to discuss the three topics below.

Writing Identity

How does the symbol of the kitchen table define our writing identities?

Ethan: In a piece titled “*Quê hương*,” where I speak from the perspective of a Vietnamese immigrant in the United States, I code-meshed between Vietnamese and English to describe the complexities of “*quê hương*” (homeland) in multiple layers, including personal, cultural, social and political. Similarly, in this dialogue, I continue to weave Vietnamese symbols, in the form of a kitchen table, to represent my culture and language to rebel against assimilation in western academic writing.

Luis: From your comment and my experiences, I see that the first way in which we use writing as an art of rebellion is to center our identities. As thinking about how my culture has impacted my writing identity, I look back at the topics that have inspired me throughout the years, such as ELS, immigrant education, and Indigenous Latinx students in the United States. I see how strong my background as a Spanish-speaking Latinx immigrant has shaped my writing identity. Further, it is interesting to see how some topics that are also part of me, such as LGBTQ+, remain topics I do not feel comfortable addressing (yet) because, in my culture, talking about non-traditional views of gender identity and sexual preference are still considered taboos.

Academic and Research Identity

What inspired us to focus on our line of research?

Ethan: As a queer Vietnamese immigrant and teacher of color (TOC), I want to explore queer TOC’s identities in their teaching practices. Particularly, I plan to look deeper into the topic of queer-inclusive curriculum. What inspired me to do this work is the critical writing instruction potentially encourages queer students and TOC to share their lived experiences participate in social change. From this work, I hope to inspire others to continue co-disrupting the

heteronormative, sexist curriculum and textbooks in traditional learning spaces. It is inspiring for me to see collaborative (published) works created by queer communities of color rather than a single-authored research because, in our communities, communal efforts matter.

Luis: During my time as a PhD student my research primarily focused on bilingual education, Spanish, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in very broad perspectives. However, when I started working on my doctoral dissertation, I fell in love with the topics of Indigenous Latinx ELs and students from limited or interrupted formal schooling backgrounds. These two topics, inspired by my students, have become my main line of research since I graduated from my doctorate. I realized how little I knew about my Indigenous Latinx ELs, some of whom also had interrupted or limited schooling, and it was important for me to learn more about them. Since then, I have become fascinated with their stories, their academic experiences, and their resilience. To me, my research has faces, names, dreams, and lives. Without a doubt, my research is 100% influenced by my Indigenous Latinx students.

Political Identity

How does our political identity shape our writing as immigrant-first generation scholars?

Ethan: In my publications in *small*, peer-reviewed journals, I have used my writing to stand against heteronormativity and sexism in schools (Trinh, 2019a), to fight against the “enoughness” of graduate SOC (Trinh, 2019b), and to liberate my Asian Vietnamese self from heteropatriarchy (Trinh, 2019c). I politicize my work because I want to transform my writing into loud, critical voices against those oppressing our creativity.

Luis: I do think my stance as an ESOL teacher (and prior EL) certainly shapes my writing and what I write about. I have consistently written about the need to support and advocate for our ELs. More recently, I have become very active in writing about Indigenous Latinx students, who continue to be an invisible, marginalized, and underserved population in our K-12 schools (see Pentón Herrera, 2018, 2019a). For example, I recently shared in an article a life-changing event where I learned that one of my students, Diego (pseudonym), was Ixil (Maya) and was learning Spanish as a second language and

English as a third language. I blamed myself for not knowing about Indigenous Latinx students, like Diego, and blamed academia and teacher preparation programs for invisibilizing Latinx Indigenous populations in academia (see Pentón Herrera, 2019b). In this sense, I am using writing as an opportunity to speak up for those who cannot *yet* and to make their stories visible; I use writing as a form of advocacy. At the same time, I am using my writing as an opportunity to rebel against those who think individuals like me (immigrants, non-native English speakers, K-12 teachers) do not deserve to have a voice or should not have a place in academia.

Queer Walking Meditation: A Queer Walk to Love and Connect

Ethan: Let's take a break, Luis. Let's do a (virtual) walking meditation. Walking meditation is about mindfulness and enjoyment of each moment of our lives (Nhat Hanh, 2015). Let's take a meditation walk and continue the conversation.

Luis: While walking, let's talk about the piece you wrote where you used queer walking meditation as a theory. Tell me more about it.

Ethan: Thank you for reading my piece. Initially, I used walking meditation as an autoethnography to tell my mom's story as she survived domestic violence and how I am learning to forgive my dad despite his actions (Trinh, 2018). I realize that when I practice walking meditation I connect with the past and the present, here and there, "with peace, solidity, and freedom" (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 19). When I use walking meditation as a form of autoethnography, I want readers to feel the pain that my mother and I experienced, and I hope to use those emotions to connect with the readers on a personal and spiritual level. Then, from that event, I developed a theory I call *queer walking meditation* where we connect intersectional lives, walks, and stories of queer self to teach queer marginalized students (Trinh, 2020). My message is to encourage immigrant queer people and TOC to resist internalized homophobia and integrate our lived experiences into critical discourses to discuss the topics of homophobia, xenophobia, and racism for the benefit of our transnational immigrant students. Therefore, in relation to that walk, I would like us, in this virtual walking meditation, to think about how to create spaces of peace, of solidity, of freedom, of collaboration, of acceptance for each other.

Luis: Ethan, this virtual walking meditation inspires me. Although we are not “walking” (living) in the same space, we can definitely support one another. I think it is critical and significant in academia to focus on the value of meaningful teamwork, genuine support, and wisdom-sharing that occur throughout the process of collaboration, rather than prioritizing superficialities like the order of authorship. I recall an interview I had in 2018 for a tenure-track position where most questions revolved around my capacity to publish in recognized, high-tiered journals as a solo and/or first author. In the interview, I got the feeling that the action of publishing as a solo and/or first author in high-tiered journals was more important to the interviewers than my capacity to collaborate with other faculty members and/or support my colleagues and the department.

Ethan: I believe your experience takes us back to our initial conversation where I mentioned the phrase *toxic academic environment*. Someone might think I am being too harsh, but what we have been doing, walking, writing, sitting in different spaces in this conversation shows that, although there is no common physical space for us to meet, collaborating beyond the constraints of physical spaces is possible. Let’s come back to our foundation, the kitchen table, to continue this art of rebellion in our own writing and to purify the toxic academic environment.

Final Thoughts

As we prepare to write our final piece for this chapter, we reflect on how far we have come in our collaboration on this piece using multimodal forms of conversations, from sitting at the kitchen table to taking a queer walking meditation. Those are the forms of autoethnographic writing that we, queer teachers and scholars of color, should expose nakedly about ourselves so that our peoples will have hopes to continue this walk, this sitting, this conversation in the future – inside and outside of academia. Representation and visibility matter: it matters for those individuals who do not see themselves represented in scholarly works in academia; it matters for those who do not see or know someone who looks like them in respected academic positions; it matters for those who are told their stories and ways of writing are deemed *less than* or are not important enough to be considered a successful scholar.

We then reach the question, *why do autoethnographic works of queer soc matter in academia?* Because this work is about (re)humanizing scholarly work

to embrace all peoples; it is a powerful and humane way to build bridges for stories of underrepresented and unvoiced scholars, especially queer scholars of color, who are misrepresented in research and literature. We talk about our writing as an art of rebellion and as a powerful discourse because *our writing matters*. This collaborative form of writing matters in a direction of representing the unvoiced but critical scholars, to disrupt the political, hierarchical, and heteropatriarchy systems in the society we are living and teaching. We, thus, become political and critical scholars who want to connect the voices of queer scholars of color together through this collaborative, autoethnographic writing.

We would like to end our chapter reinforcing the idea that writing is “an act of identity construction, a political act that is very much connected to the personal and professional” (Park, 2013, p. 7). Through writing, marginalized scholars can contribute their (in)visible voices to construct a space of belonging and self-identity in academia.

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