

WRITING WITH YOUR FAMILY AT THE KITCHEN TABLE: BALANCING HOME AND ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES

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*“How I got over,
How I got over,
My soul look back and wonder, how I got over!”*
—Clara Ward, “How I Got Over” (1951)

Prince Edward County, Virginia was home to my mother’s family. Her mother was born and raised there and my own mother spent the first five years of her life there, staying with her grandmother while her mother and father worked to set up a home in neighboring Richmond. Prince Edward was the site of family gatherings and the setting for most of the stories my grandmother shared with me. While it certainly represented a great deal of good, there was also pain and hurt behind many of the stories in this space. In 1959, Prince Edward County’s Board of Supervisors voted to close all public schools rather than face integration. The movement to impede *Brown vs. Board of Education* was part of a larger strategy throughout the South to resist the *Brown* ruling at all costs. Massive Resistance, the term coined to reflect this stance, was rampant across the South, but got its start in Virginia.¹ Communities took various approaches to circumvent the *Brown* ruling, but none reacted quite as forcefully as Prince Edward. Public schools would remain closed for five years. While the white community created a private segregation academy to serve its children, the Black community struggled to craft intervention plans that were sustainable. I wrote my dissertation about the temporary one-year school system, the Prince Edward County Free Schools Association, that was established from efforts on the part of Prince Edward’s Black community, its allies, and President John F. Kennedy’s administration. The Free Schools were part of a litany of programs designed for and by the Black community. Using archival records and interviews with former Free School students, I argued for the Free Schools to be seen as an institutional response to the rhetorics of Massive Resistance.

Many of my family members were affected by these closures. Some would have parents who took work in nearby Richmond or other counties to move their families. Other families were separated and

school-age children sent to live with relatives or paired with strangers through placement programs to allow them to continue their educations. Still others remained in the county without any access to public K–12 education for five years. Those years left an undeniable pain in the lives of many, some of which persist today. I wanted to write about Prince Edward both as a means to connect me to the stories, spaces, and people I loved, but also from a desire to process and understand. My project was a pathway towards understanding rhetorics of race and the possibilities of literacy to speak back to institutional structures that marginalized Black communities. The work was also an opportunity to go back to the stories my grandmother had shared with me, to visit Prince Edward, and listen to elders speak about their experiences. My dissertation could take me home. The story of completing my dissertation is one of navigating and balancing the epistemologies and expectations of home with those of the academy. I believe my experience of writing a dissertation about family spaces holds lessons for both underrepresented graduate students and those who work to support these students during their graduate school years.

To present my story I follow in the steps of scholars of color across multiple disciplines who use Critical Race Theory (CRT) and autoethnography as a means to present their experiences (Collins; Delgado; Edwards; hooks). Personal narratives have often been critiqued for a perceived lack of rigor according to the expectations of traditional academic scholarship. CRT holds that personal stories are a means for underrepresented groups to push against master narratives that often silence the experiences of those who are othered, and views stories and lived experiences as “sources of strength” (Solórzano and Yosso 24). We learn from the stories that are shared with us. While I do not think my story represents the experiences of all graduate students of color, I do believe that my experience of trying to write about home, or write myself home, has implications for those who work with underrepresented graduate students writing theses and dissertations.

Starting at Home Base

I was fortunate to be raised by a family who loved words. My grandmother loved stories, my father introduced me to rhetoric before I knew it was a discipline, and my grandfather read anything he could get his hands on. It was my grandmother who taught me to read before I attended school, and my mother who made evenings magical with visits to the library that would culminate with us lugging a paper bag full of books back to the car. My earliest memories of home life are almost always connected to reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Many years later, I was fortunate to also be welcomed into a graduate program that respected the knowledge I brought with me, and challenged me to make meaningful connections between what I call the epistemologies of home, and the new discourses and ideas to which I was being introduced. What wasn't easy was reconciling within myself that I could in fact bring the stories of home into the academy as a way to make myself feel more comfortable.

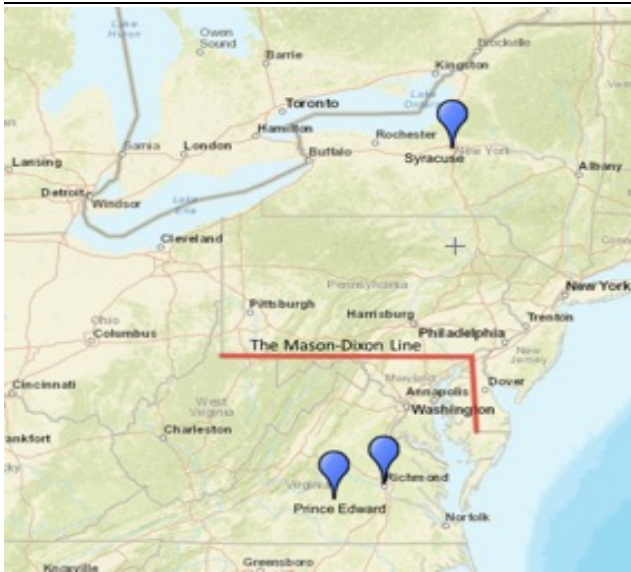
As a first generation graduate student of color, I spent much of my graduate school career trying to balance doing the work that was asked of me in the midst of a fierce homesickness. I was admitted to Syracuse University's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Doctoral Program in the fall of 2007. I came to the program, and the state of New York, from Richmond, Virginia. I received both my Bachelor's and Master's at Virginia Commonwealth University, which was less than five miles from home. Part of the reason for this was financial, but also coming from a close-knit family, there was never any expectation or push for anyone to move far away. My relatives lived within twenty minutes of one another and I never thought of leaving the area. There were no immediate models of anyone who had pursued higher education and left. The imperative to leave only came because of meager job prospects.

My experience of leaving home and joining the academy shares many similarities with those who have written about what it means to occupy the status of what Denise Taliaferro Baszile calls the "onto-epistemological in-between." Taliaferro Baszile describes this feeling from the standpoint of being a Black woman on the tenure track, but as Kirsten Edwards has suggested, this feeling is shared by many graduate students as well (114). For those of us from underrepresented communities, our mere presence in the academy is often a testimony to the hard work and dedication of our families who made sacrifices for us to pursue educational spaces that they themselves may have been barred from. This awareness—the

knowledge that we carry with us the sacrifices of many to be in institutions of higher education, coupled with the fact that these spaces can be unwelcoming because of institutionalized racism—often results in feelings of despair and isolation. Literature on the experiences of women of color in the academy have consistently documented the harsh reality of what it means for some who climb the rungs of academia.² With more education often comes more exclusion, both from home and from the very spaces we seek to gain in the academy. How do we reconcile? How do we work through these feelings of isolation and homesickness for spaces and communities where we feel welcomed? I don't expect that I can answer all of these questions in the space of this essay, but I do believe that my own experience of quite literally trying to write myself home is a contribution to existing literature about the ways in which we can help graduate students navigate writing about home spaces and communities in the academy.

Honk at the Mason Dixon Line

I began my PhD program with excitement and gusto. I loved teaching writing and working with students and other instructors. At the onset, I felt like the PhD would not only offer me an opportunity to secure a job at the end of the program, but a chance to think critically and theoretically about the writing classroom. I thoroughly enjoyed my courses, found my instructors and fellow students to be supportive but rigorous; however, while my new community was thoughtful and supportive, they weren't home. Despite the distance between Richmond and Syracuse, I held fast to the people and spaces that grounded me and made me feel like a whole person. It was not uncommon for my husband, daughter, and myself to drive home once every six to eight weeks just to have weekend meals with my family. We'd gleefully honk the horn once we crossed the Mason Dixon Line in Maryland, giddy because we knew we were almost there. I frequently visited Virginia in an effort to keep connections with family and friends. Those connections helped not only to lead me to my dissertation project but also sustained me as I worked to understand who I was as an academic. While I had wonderful mentors and examples of what it looked like to be an academic, I was still trying to figure out what this meant for me given my context of home.



The map above shows the geographic distance between Syracuse, New York, Richmond, Virginia, and Prince Edward, Virginia. The image includes the Mason-Dixon Line which demarcates the traditional borders for Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, and Delaware.

My family life felt like it was worlds away from academia. In academia we are rewarded for work that is often done in isolation. Long hours in an archive, time spent studying one particular site, or mastering a finite problem is rewarded with grant funding, publications, and, hopefully, tenure. This method of work that most often privileges the individual was counter to the ways in which my family often learned and worked together. I was raised with traditional communal principles and practices for problem solving. As a family, if there were big problems to solve or something we were working towards, most often we did so as a family unit. Conversations about said problem or issue would take place in my grandmother's bedroom. She would sit at her dresser, my mother—her oldest child—would sit in a chair beside the bed, my aunt often stood beside the dresser, and us grandkids would take a seat wherever there was room. Whoever had the problem would begin the conversation, with others contributing to the description of the issue as was appropriate. My grandmother would listen and often begin the problem solving with others contributing where it seemed most appropriate. This wasn't always as idyllic as I'm remembering, but it proved to be most advantageous for us as family. There were always people to share your burdens with, and you knew that if you couldn't figure something out on your own, there were others who would help you. It's not hard to see why leaving

this type of community and learning to adapt to the methods privileged by academic institutions would be difficult.

During my second year in the program I began to feel the pangs of homesickness in a way that I hadn't before. Coursework was almost over and I knew that would bring a period of isolation as I prepared for comprehensive exams and the dissertation. Suddenly, the community that I had come to value in Syracuse would be more distant as all of my cohort members would no longer be held together by coursework. While this is certainly not anything particular to my situation, I was worried perhaps more than others about the solitude of exams and dissertation writing. That worry was remedied a bit when I started thinking beyond exams to my dissertation, and began to conceive that going home, in some form, could be an option.

On a snowy Saturday in November 2008, I was sitting on the floor in my apartment office, which doubled as my two-year-old's bedroom, with books (and toys) spread around me. I was supposed to be working on a seminar paper about contemporary rhetoric and sites of resistance. I distinctly recall reading Kenneth Burke, I.A. Richards, Michael Calvin McGee and the like, and taking notes like a robot and feeling empty. While these theorists seemed to be interesting people and no doubt had important things to say, I was horrifically homesick. I missed still having warm days in November, hearing people say "soda" instead of "pop," seeing the lights that framed the billboard for Sauer's Vanilla, and the taste of food that welcomed me home. Even more than those things, though, I missed the stories of my community. My grandmother passed two years before I began my PhD program and I longed to hear her wisdom, to have her guide me, and to sit on her bed with its cool white comforter, listening as she provided counsel for whatever ailed me. As smart as she was, I was sure she could have made mid-twentieth century rhetorical theorists seem relevant to me. I remember sitting on the floor, looking out the window at the snow piled up past the tires of my car and asking myself: How am I going to find my way? How will I find a path and a place in academia? I'd entered a world that felt so different to me, a Black woman from the South, a wife, and mother. At that moment, I didn't see how I'd ever feel comfortable as a scholar in the ivory tower because my ways of knowing, of problem solving, and of doing, seemed incompatible with academia.

In my moment of angst, I called home and my mother acknowledged my hurt and carefully redirected my attention back to my work. "I'm so sorry you're feeling this way," she said, "What are you writing

about? Who are you studying?” I told her about my readings. Admittedly she wasn’t that interested in rhetorical theory, but I also told her that I was struggling to bridge my readings with the stories from home. It was in that moment that divine inspiration happened. My mother said to me, “You should write something about Prince Edward.” My dissertation began in that moment, with a conversation shared with my mother, a phone call that was an attempt to help me connect to home.

Ideally, for most graduate students the dissertation is a time to explore a project that is meaningful, create new knowledge, show what you know, chart pathways into the field, and, of course, secure a job. There is no doubt that my dissertation was all of those things, but I found rather quickly that what felt most pressing, what pushed me to write every day, to shrug off the feelings of inadequacy and the moments of doubt, was that I wanted my writing to take me home.

While I was excited about the opportunity, there were challenges. Reflecting back on my experience, with the distance of almost three years, there are three things I can share that may be of use to mentors and faculty working with graduate students from underrepresented groups who seek to write about (or with) their home communities. As the epigraph suggests, there were moments where I questioned how I would finish this project, but I am sharing my testimony of “how I got over,” in hopes that it will be of help to others. I will share my experience as a way to discuss the importance of welding support from multiple communities for underrepresented graduate writers. For some graduate students, especially those who seek to connect both home and academic epistemologies, inviting ourselves (and our communities) into scholarly spaces often requires struggle, negotiation, and reflection.

The Struggle: Standing in the Academy and the Family Kitchen

For some graduate students the chance to connect a project between the academy and a community they are part of may be a wonderful endeavor; for others it may not. I was fortunate that for the most part my family was encouraging; however, I realize that for some moving between these spaces may be difficult. Stories abound about the ways in which the academy can distance you from communities outside. In my own experience, I was fortunate that my family both congratulated me as I left to pursue a Ph.D. and welcomed me with open arms whenever I would return. For those working with graduate writers doing projects with communities that may be suspicious or

untrusting of the academy, it is important to understand the range of feelings that can emerge during this process. Doing research that feels like it has connections with those you directly care about can bring excitement. There can also be a realization that it may be uncomfortable to go back to that space. While overall I was eager to get back to home (both physically because of trips to the archive and interviews) and metaphorically through the stories of my grandmother, there were moments when I struggled.

For example, while numerous family members and friends of our family were affected by the school closures, many would not grant me an interview for the dissertation. They had a great deal of mistrust for institutions and were hurt by the closures. Familial connections did little to provide them solace. Given the pain of their experiences, they were very guarded about how their stories might be shared. I respected their positions, but it was a moment for me to realize that no matter how much I thought I could stand solidly in both spaces—home and the academy—sometimes one wouldn’t allow me to occupy both. My own dissertation chair was extremely helpful in these instances. She didn’t push me, nor did it ever feel as if she was making me choose a space to stand. In this very example, one of the takeaways I gained was to be able to interrogate the silence expressed on the part of family members as meaningful resistance. Their refusal to share their own stories spoke volumes about the gravity of the situation they experienced. Rather than try to encourage them to share, or convince them that I wasn’t part of the institution they didn’t trust, because I certainly inhabited both spaces, I chose to speak of this silence as their own very powerful rhetorical act.

The Negotiation: Balancing Academic and Community Audiences

Most graduate students are acutely aware of the audiences the dissertation serves: committee members, job search committees, and perhaps journal or acquisition editors for articles or manuscripts. For those writing about their community, there is the additional audience of home. I often described my own process of writing as writing with my family at the kitchen table. This was an accurate description because I often wrote at the kitchen table with family around. This also described the process I hoped my writing would take because I wanted to write in such a way that my nonacademic community would understand as well.

The initial work of finding family and community members to talk with me gave me some practice with learning to negotiate the expectations of both communities. I had to describe my project in a way that was understood by both those in the discipline of writing studies, and my own community. It was the stories my grandmother told me that gave me some of the initial inquiries into the topic, and whenever I would talk with prospective interviewees, I would often share those stories first. These stories gave me an opportunity to demonstrate how the project originated from home and made me recognizable to the community. For most of my interview participants my degrees and academic genealogy meant very little compared to my family's history.

I wanted very much to use interviews and oral histories as a way to present a holistic picture of the Free Schools year. I was inspired by feminist research methodologies that support researchers' efforts to include participants in the process and encourage researchers to recognize their stance throughout the process.³ While these practices served me well, at times it was difficult to write in a way that would both please the academy and also make me feel responsible to my home community.

Part of this was because the dissertation, for most graduate students, has a particular set of genre expectations: literature reviews and methods sections aren't always easily navigable for nonacademic audiences. To remedy this, I followed traditional expectations, but worked hard in the chapters where I examined archival materials to put my own analysis and voice in conversation with those of my interview participants. This wasn't easy, but I felt like this move allowed for two very important actions to occur. First, it allowed my analysis to be in conversation with those who had directly experienced the Free Schools year. Second, it helped those core chapters to become about their stories. This wasn't always an easy task because in a dissertation you are performing and showing that you have command over a subject. I was also trying to negotiate and share the space with my research participants, an action that was further complicated because the community had been silenced for so long.⁴ I didn't want anyone to think I was just another researcher coming in to take their stories and leave. I wanted them to feel that we were collaborating, as much as is possible in a dissertation.

Integrating the voices of those who directly experienced the Free School posed an interesting dilemma that required constant negotiation on my part. For example, when I read the archival documents, I saw the central documents (mission statement and curriculum guide) espousing a commitment to

developing students to become active citizens. I spent time sharing the archival documents with my interview participants, and talking to them about my own understanding, but I was also aware of their take based on their own lived experiences. During interviews, however, former students didn't feel that the citizenship component was a big part of their experience. Most of the students were surprised by what was shared in the archive because while it wasn't in direct opposition to their experiences, it wasn't something they readily recollected. It was an interesting moment for me to have their voices in conversation with the archival documents and my own analysis. This moment proved challenging at first, but the encouragement I received from my dissertation chair helped me to see this as a possibility to engage with these complexities. As a researcher I reconciled with this by writing about it. I had a moment where I worried that the contradictions would detract from my argument, but what I came to realize was that these contradictions were important moments for not only my dissertation, but for myself as a scholar trying to learn what it meant to be accountable in both spaces.

Respect: On Choosing Mentors

Some of the earliest conversations I had about my project happened with family members before I even approached mentors and colleagues. Phone calls home provided stories and questions along with contact information for new connections. My family's interest in the project made me even more interested in it as well, but I do remember being anxious about taking those home conversations into the offices of my faculty mentors. I'd never had any indication that they would steer me away from any particular type of scholarship; however, I was afraid that somehow making home such a central part of my work, especially the very work that would be used to help me get a job, might seem like navel-gazing and less rigorous than the work of others.

My concern about how my work would be perceived because of the close ties I held to the space and people was not unfounded. Critics have argued that those who study or research areas closely related to one's own life "can essentially invalidate a scholar, calling into question the training, professionalism and the quality of their work" (Ayoub and Rose). Joseph Heath warns that "me" studies are problematic "when people decide to study, not their own lives per se, but rather their own oppression" (par. 7). He believes that for those scholars who study and research their own oppression, their claims won't be as critical because they lack "the capacity to question one's own view, and

to correct one's own biases" (par. 9). Ultimately, Heath's concern is a perceived lack of rigor for research directly related to one's identity. I worried less about my own ability to ask critical questions and practice self-reflexivity and more about the way people might perceive me, a Black woman, writing about home. Would audiences assume I wasn't able to produce rigorous, well-grounded, theoretically supported research?

I found that my conversations with faculty calmed these fears and anxieties. My mentors reassured me that my research had direct implications for conversations in the field of writing studies. What I believe was most meaningful about those conversations was the stance faculty members embodied. Initial conversations with faculty helped me to frame my questions and map out possibilities for answering them, but more often than not, those early meetings with faculty mentors were about listening. The act of having my mentors actively listen was integral to my developing the confidence needed to carry the project through in this space. When a student wishes to pursue a project that is at once both personal and attached to them, it can feel threatening to be interrogated in the way that we as academics often do. My mentors demonstrated respect for the local knowledge I had of the area and subject matter, which increased my confidence early in the project. This is not to suggest that mentors or writing center tutors can't ask questions or make suggestions—this is part of one's job as a dissertation director or committee member—but what I found most useful in the beginning of the project was that faculty acknowledged my own unique position as both researcher and community member.

This listening and awareness on the part of my dissertation chair and committee members also encouraged me to practice constant self-reflection. I needed to be aware of both my position as a researcher, but also as someone who still wanted to be welcomed and respected by the community that nurtured and raised me.

The further I progressed in my education, my family continued to be there as my support network. That was especially crucial as I reached advanced degree programs and the numbers of underrepresented peers diminished. My committee also acted in an equally nurturing capacity while maintaining the critical rigor necessary for both the degree and the subject matter. They did not seek to drive the project, but provided critical insight and consistent support. The committee respected my place in the project and that respect was passed to the community members who were gracious enough to share experiences and provide

input. From my experience, respect and understanding go a long way to show underrepresented students that you are not acting as a barrier, but part of a village of support that serves to help us craft and refine work that honors the epistemologies of home.

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Notes

1. For more on the history of Massive Resistance see George Lewis's *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* and Epps-Robertson's "The Race to Erase Brown: The Rhetoric of Massive Resistance."
2. Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzales and Angela P. Harris's collection, *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, presents accounts of the challenges women faculty of color face.
3. My dissertation was influenced by the work of Jacqueline Jones Royster who describes the complexity involved in writing about and being accountable to a community that one belongs to in her seminal work, *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*.
4. The history of Prince Edward's school closures remained absent from most history books and conversations about the civil rights movement. Recently, historians have presented stories about the closure periods (Bonastia; Titus). Bonastia suggests that the reason for this silence is because Prince Edward's story lacks the typical features of a civil right movement story: "Face-to-face confrontations in the streets, sometimes spiked with gruesome violence, lured pens and cameras to the Deep South. Rhetorical clashes in courtrooms, and the quiet suffering of locked-out children in the Upper South, provided little competition" (15).

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