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Black, Queer, and Beaten: On the Trauma of Graduate School

By Eric Anthony Grollman

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By Eric Anthony Grollman

INTRODUCTION

Two years after I graduated with a PhD in sociology from Indiana University, I started seeing a therapist again. At my in-take visit, my therapist invited me to return within a week. “Right now, you’re full,” he said, commenting on the numerous issues that I brought up in explaining why I was seeing a therapist. He did not mean “full of shit,” as in offering lies or irrelevant information; rather, he meant that I was “filled to the brim” of issues weighing on my heart, mind, and spirit. This was not news to me, but hearing him say “full” emphasized the importance of finally seeking professional help after a few years of distress and unhappiness.

During my second appointment with the therapist, I offered a more focused assessment of my troubles. After two years as a tenure-track professor at the University of Richmond, I found it difficult to fully appreciate my job because past demons of grad school continued to haunt me. I remained fearful – perhaps even bordering on paranoia – that a student, colleague, administrator, alum, or member of the local community would take issue with my politics and demand that I be fired. I continued to obsess over what I wear, wrestling with concerns of conformity, comfort, safety, and authenticity. And, I occasionally had flashes of negative experiences during my six years in grad school, and regularly heard the voices of my grad school advisors when I made decisions about my future. Admittedly, though those difficult years were in the past, their impact on me continues today.

After letting me talk for sometime without interruption, my therapist chimed in: “Eric, you experienced a trauma.” He pointed out that I had even used the words “trauma” and

“traumatized” to describe my experiences. Indeed, in conversations with friends, family, colleagues, and students, and in my public writing (especially on my blog, ConditionallyAccepted.com), I had already been sharing my “trauma narrative” – the telling of my traumatic experiences to others. For example, in one blog post, “Is It Just Me? Slowly Disposing of ‘Grad School Garbage’,” I reflected on the emotional baggage that I carried from grad school into my job – even then using the term “trauma.”¹ But, without the guidance of a therapist, this kind of trauma narrative could “provide relief, but may, on occasion, occur in an inappropriate setting or at an inappropriate time.”² Any time I talked or wrote about grad school, I readily slipped into a rant about my awful experiences. After a while, I felt like a broken record, a wounded victim who could not move forward. That’s why I decided to stop putting off seeing a trained professional to work through the emotional scars and baggage.

Now the label “trauma” was real, coming from a therapist who has training in trauma work. Initially, I balked at this apparent diagnosis. “But...trauma is rape, or a horrific car accident, or having your house burn down.” Earning a PhD from a top program in my discipline *as trauma*? “That feels like ‘first world problems’,” I continued. But, he appropriately corrected me: trauma is defined by its impact on the traumatized person, not some objective or universal criteria for what could lead to trauma. He did, however, offer that I might have experienced “little t” trauma rather than “big T” trauma (e.g., violence, major accidents). Or, to be more diagnostically accurate, he suggested that I experienced complex trauma. Complex trauma is a form of trauma that tends to be prolonged (i.e., six years of grad school) and interpersonal in nature (i.e., graduate training). It occurs at critical developmental stages (i.e., early adulthood)

¹ <http://conditionallyaccepted.com/2013/09/13/gradschool-garbage/>

² <http://www.ptsdtraumatreatment.org/the-trauma-narrative/>

and compromises an individual's self-development (i.e., professional socialization) (Ford and Courtois 2009). This kind of trauma threatens the development and survival of the self.

Reflecting back on my earlier comments to my therapist, the label of "trauma" fit perfectly: feeling haunted and impacted two years later; flashbacks of past events; and, the ongoing symptoms of Generalized Anxiety Disorder. And, now I had a word to describe my experiences in graduate school and their lingering impact.

With the t-word in hand, I felt a sense of relief. I was traumatized, and seeing a therapist who is also a certified trauma specialist; I had a sense that I could finally move forward. To begin to heal, I decided to embark on a more effective way of completing my trauma narrative. I used a spiral notebook to journal about all of the negative experiences that occurred in grad school. Once I started writing, it felt as though I had opened the floodgates of my memories. I nearly filled the 70-page notebook. When I finally finished, I flipped through the many pages of frustrating, upsetting, and painful memories; "damn," I thought, "who wouldn't be traumatized by all of this?" I had nearly 70 pages of evidence that graduate school was difficult – evidence that I had been carrying in my brain and on my spirit for the past two years. Viewing it as an outsider, I could not help but feel great sympathy for myself for having endured so much. This trauma narrative, with the help of my therapist, led me to accept that I truly am traumatized. And, this awareness is an important first step on the road to recovery.

But, in owning the experience of trauma, I also felt a sense of sadness, even embarrassment. I wondered how an experience that other graduate students found enjoyable turned out to be traumatizing for me. Was it really that bad? *What's wrong with me?* And, why me? Why did grad school have to be so hard for me? Why did privileged classmates have a tough experience, but not a *traumatizing* experience? Should I have dropped out when things

first got tough? Should I have transferred schools? Should I have conformed even more to make my life easier – or, never conformed at all, despite the risk of professional marginalization?

SOURCES OF TRAUMA

As a good sociologist, I can find the answer to my questions, not through beating myself up or blaming myself, but through my sociological imagination – understanding my personal biography within the broader social context (Mills 1959). As I tell my students in my Sociology of Gender and Sexuality courses, there is another, related perspective: a feminist consciousness that emphasizes that “the personal is political.” With these two perspectives in mind, I realize it is better to ask questions about the program, the discipline, the university, and the academy in general rather than about my personal failings or weaknesses. Working through the trauma and, more broadly, taking a critical view of my academic training and career, are necessary steps toward healing and recovery; but, I also sense that they are necessary to prevent premature burnout in my career.

Micro- (and Some Macro-) Aggressions

An important dimension of the broader context of graduate school that I cannot overlook is the oppressiveness of academia experienced by marginalized students and scholars. I entered grad school with the naiveté of many new grad students; I assumed that academia is a space of social justice, open-mindedness, equality, diversity, and inclusion. In actuality, it is rife with discrimination, including major forms like blocked opportunities and sexual harassment, but also more subtle forms like microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle, perhaps even unconscious, messages that marginalized people (e.g., women, people of color) either did not belong or are inferior to privileged people (e.g., men, white people) (Sue 2010). It did not take long before that bubble burst. In fact, I had not even attended my first class in grad school by the

time I was first subject to a racist microaggression. “You all have ghetto booties,” a fellow member of my cohort told me and the other two Black students in our cohort, despite all being poorly endowed in the rear. Flat-assed or not, raised in the suburbs or not, our bodies had been racialized, classed, and marked as “ghetto.” Today, I wish a voice had yelled, “RUN, NOW” at that point, because it was the first sign of six years of trouble.

Surely, interactions with fellow grad students, especially at parties with alcohol, proved to be predictable opportunities to face microaggressions. At one party, “you’re gay – don’t you like my shoes?” asked a heterosexual woman to the other gay man in my cohort. The advanced student assigned to me as a mentor remarked in a hushed tone, “the Black students keep to themselves,” and immediately offered “explanations” for such behavior – all of them being about Black people, and none of them being racism in the department. After I shared with a fellow student – a heterosexual woman – that I had just gotten my regular HIV test, she said, with relief, “I’m glad *I* don’t have to worry about that.” Clearly, she was ignorant about both LGBTQ people and about the transmission of HIV/AIDS. I took a moment to notify her that heterosexual people were also capable of transmitting the virus, but it seemed that she was no longer really listening. Even in classes, I found myself frustrated by fellow students’ unwillingness to acknowledge racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and cissexism as *systems* of oppression – that is, social systems that shape every aspect of society, not mere variables to obligatorily add to one’s statistical models.

I’d like to say that fellow students’ ignorance reflected that they had not yet completed doctoral training in sociology, that our professors would be far more enlightened than us. This sort of wishful thinking set the stage to be repeatedly surprised and disappointed by the assumptions, comments, and actions of the faculty in the department. In one event during my

second semester at Indiana, an advanced student warned my cohortmates and me not to “talk Black” during phone interviews for that summer’s mandatory research practicum. Her comments were finally addressed five weeks later in class after the professor had asked fellow professors and us (probably just the Black students) how to approach the subject. In that conversation, she agreed with white students in my cohort that she heard quotation marks around the student’s comments, suggesting that we were too sensitive and/or too stupid to get it. Later on in grad school, that professor alluded that my Ford Predoctoral Fellowship (awarded almost exclusively to students of color) reflected a form of “reverse racism”. And, she once gleefully petted the forehead of a fellow Black student, *without* her consent, outside of the department office. Her actions, and the failure of the department to properly intervene, demonstrated the department’s inability and, perhaps, disinterest in addressing the problems of racism and racial tension.

Ironically, the department’s response to the (mis)handling of the “don’t talk Black” incident yielded more, quite perverse racist microaggressions. In my second year, two presumably well intentioned white women students proposed diversity as the theme of the upcoming department holiday party. They cheerfully proposed, “we can have a diversity of foods!” Grad students and faculty were encouraged to bring foods from their own racial, ethnic, cultural, and/or national background. Perhaps fittingly, some began referring to the event as the “ethnic party.” The celebration of our racial and ethnic background felt more like a request to feed into delicious stereotypes about people of color. Rather than genuinely celebrating the diversity of *people* in the department, we settled on a one-time sampling of foods that we expected from people based on their racial/ethnic/cultural/national background. Privately, Black students shared their disgust; we wondered whether we were expected to bring fried chicken and watermelon or food from the African ancestry that was stripped from many of us through

enslavement. But, after the party, we knew to expect to continue to feel invisible and inferior in the department.

Ever the (naïve) optimist, I decided to try my best to be a good sport about the party, seeing the good intentions underneath the carelessly chosen party theme. I made and brought a vegetable rice medley, affixed with a heartfelt note about a flavorful dish that, as a whole, is greater than the sum of its distinct and diverse ingredients. However, as I walked into the building of the party, a strong gust of wind carried the note high up into the air. It seemed to take off into the sky, never returning to the ground. It was an odd omen for any hopes of diversity and inclusion in the department. For white students and faculty, it was a hit – it became an annual tradition. After some years, the then-department chair begrudgingly dropped the “ethnic party” theme upon repeated pleas to do so because it was so offensive to students of color.

These microaggressions were just one part of the oppressive reality. The department’s students, staff, and faculty remained overwhelmingly white in the time that I was there. Opportunities to hire faculty of color were dashed by assumptions that none would want to come to the Midwest (so why offer the job to them?) or by using targeted hires for the non-white spouses of white faculty whom they so badly wanted. Professors’ sexual harassment of students went unreported, unnoticed, or ignored entirely. At least one international student was initially denied the opportunity to teach because of his prominent accent; he was told it was for the sake of his (white US-born) students who might not understand him. Despite being analysts of the social world, the department was predictably ignorant – perhaps willingly so – of social inequality within itself.

Unfortunately, I know well from my own research on discrimination that such experiences are not mere minor inconveniences; as they accumulate, they actually threaten your

health and well-being. And, the health costs of facing discrimination are substantially higher for people who belong to multiple oppressed groups (Grollman 2012; 2014) – in my case, being LGBTQ *and* of color. I was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder in my third year of grad school. My therapist at the time suggested that I might have been experiencing chest pains because my heart was not into what I was doing; that is, often the physical symptoms of anxiety mirror the source of the mental or emotional problem. Perhaps she was, and still is, right, but I could not think of a satisfying alternative to the academy; would not the challenges as a Black queer activist that I faced in grad school exist everywhere?

Experiencing anxiety seemed pretty serious to me. The demands of school were so hard on me that I was now living with mental illness. I shared the new diagnosis with sympathetic friends, some whom I suspected suffered from anxiety, as well. And, in (naïvely) assuming that my professors cared about my well-being, I also shared the news with a few of them. That only opened the door to begin experiencing microaggressions on the basis of my mental health status. The then-Director of Graduate Studies responded, “oh – too much service?” Her passive aggressive remark suggested that I was overburdened with service to the department and community – the very outlets that were helping to minimize the stress of research and teaching. Another trusted professor corrected me, suggesting that a little bit of anxiety is good to keep me productive. A third made a joke of it, pointing out that I was a research assistant for an interview study on people who had had heart events (e.g., heart attacks). It was as though I was now being stigmatized for the mental health consequences of the stigma of being Black and queer – another layer of challenges I experienced in grad school. The irony is, the department is well known for research on mental health, including work on the stigma of mental illness.

Intellectual Oppression

Currently, my primary area of research is medical sociology – one of the largest and most reputable subfields of sociology. And, I exclusively use quantitative methods, and generally attempt to publish in generalist and mainstream academic journals. But, I entered my PhD program planning to study the experiences of queer people of color using qualitative methods. I had little concern about prestige and status; I simply wanted to study those things about which I was most passionate. But, the program is deeply invested in prestige and status – its own, and that of its graduates (which feeds back into its own). As such, my training was just as much about prestige and status as it was about the actual subjects that I wanted to study. Unfortunately, as I learned, what academics value (or do not) intellectually is a reflection of societal values; this includes the devaluation of communities of color, women, queer and trans people, poor and working-class people, fat people, and people with disabilities.

My first glimpse at intellectual oppression in sociology occurred before I began my first year in the program. I asked the then-Director of Graduate Studies about pursuing a joint PhD with gender studies. He responded with what he likely saw as practical advice: it would be much more difficult to get a job than if I just studied sociology. I trusted his assessment of the academic job market, deciding to stick with sociology only. I figured that I would be fine pursuing a graduate minor and/or completing my qualifying exam in gender studies. But, when ready to declare my minor, another professor discouraged me from selecting gender studies; he said, “you can just read a book about gender.” Instead, I was pushed into the (quantitative) research methods minor. By the time I chose the topic of my qualifying exam, I already knew not to bother with anything related to the lives of oppressed groups. I settled on social psychology – another large, reputable area in the discipline, and one of the program’s strengths.

The reflection of classist, racist, sexist, cissexist, and heterosexist oppression in sociology was not a simple matter of choosing courses, minors, and exams. The message was made explicitly clear to me. A “good” sociologist does not study trans people, or women, or bisexual, lesbian, and gay people, or Black people, or poor people. A “good” sociologist gets their training in an acceptable theoretical subfield like medical sociology, sociology of education, or social psychology. And, then, you might just happen to select some oppressed population as the “case” for your research. For example, one does not study racism in queer communities; one studies social movements and just happens to choose LGBTQ movements as their case.

There were two concerns that were implied in the aforementioned message. The most obvious to me was that sociologists do not value the lives of people of color, LGBTQ people, women, poor and working-class people, or any other oppressed group. These groups are not important to sociology in their own right. The work of sociologists who did not shy away from these areas was seen as suspect or inferior. And, such values were not only reflected in the “practical” advice that I received (e.g., do not devote your dissertation to studying transgender health); it was reflected in the department’s practices, too (e.g., receiving funding for a summer program in statistics, but not for a summer program in sexualities). The second concern, which has taken me a lot longer to recognize, is that a sociologist who prioritizes the study of race and racism, or gender and sexism, or sexuality and heterosexism has their priorities mixed up. Perhaps they are too driven by their personal connection to the community, or by bias, or by desires to make a difference in the world. However, privileged sociologists who study issues unique to their own communities or approach sociology with a privileged lens (e.g., whites studying politics while ignoring race and racism) are shielded from claims of being subjective, biased, or doing “me-search.”

The legacy of “objectivity” as an ideal approach to science continues to pervade sociology. We respect early sociological theorists like Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx because they offered broad assessments of the nature and evolution of society, but as detached experts. Some scholars have advanced a “value-free” approach to sociology as a means of legitimating it as a science, thereby distinguishing it from social work or mere personal opinion on social issues (Berger 1963). (Ironically, such value- or bias-free sociology failed to recognize the contributions of sociologists of color like W. E. B. DuBois and women sociologists like Harriet Martineau). In the past 50 or so years, more critical approaches to sociology have emerged, and qualitative research methods (which are less concerned with “objectivity”) have become more respected in the discipline. However, many sociologists, including many at my graduate program, continue to buy into the myth of being detached from their research. The goal of sociologists, past or present, is not to understand particular communities, especially as they understand the social world; it’s to understand all of society, to be an expert on all things sociological. Good sociologists understand people perhaps even better than they understand themselves, but they are not *of* the people nor *with* the people.

This intellectual oppression made me feel as though I did not fit in the academy – and, that I must conform in order to succeed. Forget the master’s thesis on racism in queer communities. Forget the joint PhD with gender studies. Forget the graduate minor in gender or sexuality studies. Forget the qualifying exam on gender, sexualities, or race/class/gender. Forget training in qualitative methods. Forget the dissertation in trans studies. Those are not the things that a “good” sociologist would do. The intellectual oppression also sent the message that my own identities as a Black queer man were unimportant to the discipline. My own communities –

Black and LGBTQ – were not important in their own right. In fact, I'd be an even better sociologist if I suppressed my identities and cut my ties with my communities.

Beating the Activist Out of Me

As I noted in the previous section, part of the challenge that I experienced in my graduate training was the suspicion of a sociologist's efforts to understand the lives of oppressed communities, particularly from their perspective of the social world. Efforts to make visible invisible communities, amplify the voices of the voiceless, empower the disempowered, and liberate the oppressed through research were seen as "bad" sociology, antithetical to the value of objectivity. Though many people pursue academic careers, or at least PhDs, and, more specifically, enter the discipline of sociology because of a desire to make a difference in the world, it became painfully clear to me that activism and academia do not mix.

Perhaps the suspicion of activism should have been clear to me through the "practical" advice that steered me away from the study of oppressed communities, particularly using qualitative methods and critical theoretical frames. But, it took explicitly hearing it from a professor to know this suspicion was reflected in the training that I was receiving. In my third year, taking a course on pedagogy and higher education, I was asked to give a one-, five-, and ten-minute-long description of my work in preparation for conferences and networking. I was barely a few words in – "I came to sociology as an activist..." – before the professor interrupted me. "We didn't beat the activist out of you yet?" There it is. She made it transparent that the program was, by design, attempting to "beat the activist out of" me.

Over the years, I have reflected on this comment, how much it surprised me yet how aptly it actually described my academic training. It strikes me as odd that she chose the language of beating something out of me. The violent imagery conjures up memories of Black activists of the Civil Rights Movement who were sprayed with fire hoses, attacked by police dogs, and beaten by police officers. It brings to mind images of trans women and drag queens of color who

fought back against a police raid on Stonewall Inn in New York City in 1969, which brought national attention to the emerging gay liberation movement (Armstrong and Cragge 2006). I cannot help but take offense that she would use the violence of a white-dominated institution against my Black queer body as an analogy to the graduate training that I was receiving. Indeed, she had predicted just how damaging the six years in grad school would be for me. Later in my training, another professor would publicly correct me about scholar-activism, reminding me that “activism and academia don’t mix.”³ And, another once said, “ok, Mr. Activist,” in response to my suggestion that two subfields cosponsor a session at an upcoming sociology conference. Clearly, there was little tolerance for anything deemed activism. And, the program was determined to “beat” me until I was no longer an activist.

To some degree, the program kept true to its promise to beat the activist out of me. The program’s professional socialization – that is, the lessons I learned about how to be a “good” sociologist – demanded that I develop a *fourth* consciousness: Black, queer, and *activist*. As a Black queer person in the academy, or any social institution for that matter, I had already developed a triple consciousness – the summation of (and contradictions between) DuBois’s concept of the “double consciousness” held by Black people in racist America and Orne’s concept of “queer consciousness” held by LGBTQ people in homo/bi/transphobic America (DuBois 1903; Orne 2013). In grad school, I began to wrestle with the contradictions between my activism and my career in academia because the former was not allowed to exist within the latter. “Black American” is viewed as an oxymoron, as is “queer American.” Unfortunately, so, too, is “Black queer” or “queer Black.” Despite finding support to tie my activism to my academics in college, I now experienced “scholar-activist” as an oxymoron. Given the

³ <https://orgtheory.wordpress.com/2013/03/31/why-activism-and-academia-dont-mix/>

devaluation of scholarship on people of color and LGBTQ people, one could say that “Black sociologist” and “queer sociologist” (and, especially “Black queer sociologist”) were also seen as contradictions of terms.

In exchange for success in the academy, I was forced to rip myself apart. The very reason that I entered academia – activism – had to be separated from my academic self. And, to a lesser extent, I had to detach my activist self from my racial and sexual identities; this demand proved challenging because every attempt to survive as a Black queer person in academia was deemed to be activist in nature. Co-leading an LGBTQ grad student social group, just to have some sense of community: activism! Attempting to invite social psychologists, who study identity, to think about and eventually do research on sexual and gender identities: activism! In my seminars, regularly pointing out that race shapes every social interaction because – as race scholars know well – racism is a widespread social system: *militant* activism!

I do not know that I ever successfully developed a quadruple consciousness as a Black queer activist academic. I do know, however, that it left me ripped into four parts. I began my new position at the University of Richmond far from whole. I spent the first two years living in intense fear that I would be “found out” as an activist, that wearing anything short of a full suit and tie would leave me vulnerable to racist and heterosexist microaggressions. The fear consumed me. And, I was never able to be fully present at work, despite taking the position because it actually supports me as Black queer activist scholar. One cannot be present if they are not whole. And, one cannot be whole if they have been violently ripped into distinct parts, if they do not feel safe enough to be authentic.

Sadly, I can now say that grad school landed me in therapy, albeit with a job and a PhD in hand. Graduate training traumatized me. It is almost embarrassing to admit that. But, as my

critical assessment suggests, the program was structured in a way that would inevitably be traumatizing. I became an academic – a professional identity that is posed as a contradiction to my racial, sexual, and activist identities. Success in the academy was not a mere matter of compromise, or even conformity; I had to undergo a transformation that left me with emotional, psychic, intellectual, and spiritual scars. Trauma, unfortunately, was an inevitable consequences of obtaining my PhD.

The Final Straw: Post-PhD Plans

I was traumatized by my graduate training all of the way up to completing my degree, and then beyond it. In fact, it seemed that the trauma became more severe in my final year. I faced resistance from my committee first in deciding to finish the PhD early by department standards, and then in deciding to apply for and ultimately accept a position at a liberal arts college. As my fifth year concluded, I announced my intention to make my sixth year my last; I would go on the academic job market while completing my dissertation, all within a year. Each of my four committee members expressed concern: “it’s too much work”; “you won’t have time to think”; “you won’t get a job.” I could barely stomach the idea of a sixth year, so I stood firm in rejecting the idea of two or three more years in the program. I won that battle, only to find the job search would be a battle, too.

“You’re not applying to liberal arts colleges, right?” my main advisor asked, though it was clear it was actually a statement or directive. “Of course not,” I responded genuinely. Despite entering the program five years earlier with every intention to pursue a career in a liberal arts college, I had taken the advice to hide those desires; instead, I played the game of “aiming R1,” being as successful as possible by research I university standards so that any school would hire me as faculty. Some sort of perversion of the expression, “shoot for the moon – if you miss,

you'll be among the stars." I had been playing the game so well that I had convinced everyone – even myself – that I was bound to work at a school much like the one I attended as a graduate student. But, in secretly applying for a liberal arts position just to see what it was like to complete an application – or, that's at least what I told myself – my intentions were revealed. My advisor invited me to send him a list of liberal arts colleges to which I might apply; he responded only with reasons why each one was a horrible fit for me. For the school at which I ended up (University of Richmond), he simply said, "nope" – as in, do not even bother applying. I applied to all of these schools anyhow, but also to research universities. I decided to let the market do some of the decision-making for me.

I interviewed at my current institution and fell in love with it. I knew on the interview it would be a great fit for me. When I returned, excited to share my experience, my main advisor was more interested in preparing me to interview at a research school that I had no interest in. He dismissed my love for the University of Richmond as the first-love feeling every job candidate feels for the first school they visit. I begrudgingly interviewed at the research school, just to say that I did and to give me leverage to interview with Richmond; and, I saw so many red flags that it was clearly not a hospitable place for a Black queer activist scholar. Fortunately, I received an offer at Richmond. I recall wanting to hurry the dean off of the phone so that I could release the tears of joy and relief I held back during the phone call. I paced my apartment, muttering, "omigod," and crying; there are few times in my life that I've felt as happy as I did then.

But, the joy was short-lived; I knew getting my committee on board would be a challenge. My main advisor instructed me to meet with each committee member one-on-one; in hindsight, I realize this was not for their advice, as he said, but to be talked out of my decision to accept with Richmond. Their pressure to decline the offer intensified when another research

university called me to schedule an interview. “You’ll become irrelevant,” one committee member warned. “You’ll slow down on publishing,” another predicted. The underlying sentiment was that my choice to prioritize my happiness, my health, and taking a job near family was foolish, or even career-suicide. Essentially, I had presented myself as “R1-bound,” so I would be wasting the program’s time and effort in grooming me for such a position just to end up at a liberal arts college. Ultimately, I stood my ground, responding that it was my mistake to make (if, indeed, it was a mistake to take the position). I decided to challenge the cycle of sending “good researchers” to research schools, while “liberal arts-bound” students are not pushed as hard on the research front. And, later, in commiserating with a friend on the market who went through a nearly identical experience at another school, I discovered that my experiences were not unique to me. The “R1 bias”⁴ is real; careers outside of research I universities are seen as inferior.

Unfortunately, I have not yet lived happily ever after. That’s the curse that is trauma. For the first two years at Richmond, I continued to second-guess my decision to take the position. I repeatedly asked my partner, “do you think I should have taken the job at [the research university]?” And, I asked whether I should go back on the job market. The voices of my dissertation committee are so firmly implanted in my head that I regularly hear them ask, “are you sure?” But, there have been moments when they actually have asked this question. In every conversation I’ve had with my main advisor since I graduated, he has reminded me that he would support me in finding a “better” job in a heartbeat if I decided to leave. Once, at a sociology conference, he awkwardly announced, “I need to talk to you about your future”; I avoided him, and later found out it was to say “people have asked whether you are happy at Richmond.” With

⁴ <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/university-venus/r1-bias>

time, I have gotten better about appreciating the job that I fought so hard for, that I ultimately cut ties with my grad school advisors over. But, it has been a struggle. I have been consumed by the fear of professional harm for being an activist and the self-doubt for working at a liberal arts college (both symptoms of the trauma). Being fully present in my job and being able to actually enjoy it is a work-in-progress.

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH: FINDING MY VOICE

In beginning to name and, hopefully, recover from the traumatizing experiences of grad school, I learned about the concept of post-traumatic growth – “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). This type of growth is not simply adapting to or effectively coping with a stressful situation; it reflects a fundamental positive change in the traumatized person, their outlook, values, and/or personality. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) note that post-traumatic growth reflects improvement beyond one’s pre-trauma self. In their work, they have identified five domains of post-traumatic growth: greater appreciation of life and changed sense of priorities; warmer, more intimate relationships with others; a greater sense of personal strength; recognition of new possibilities or paths for one’s life; and, spiritual development (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). One day, when I have fully recovered from the trauma, I may be able to realize each of these domains of growth to varying degrees. But, even before the word *trauma* entered into the picture, I had already experienced a sense of new possibilities for my life.

The temptation to feel regret – for attending grad school, for staying despite the challenges, for attending that particular program, for staying with those advisors, for not conforming more, for not resisting more – appears occasionally. I want to feel sorry for myself. I want to be angry with *them*. But, I cannot change the past. And, I realize, given the structural and

cultural factors that far exceed my individual efforts, it was inevitable. I find some solace in who I have become – not the traumatized me, but the me who now has a raised consciousness about the oppressive realities within the academy. Shortly after I finished my PhD, I created ConditionallyAccepted.com – a blog for scholars on the margins of academia – which has expanded to 2 regular contributors, dozens of guest bloggers, and a readership that is quickly approaching 500,000 views in just two years. My research has not (yet) shifted to inequality in academia and higher education; but, I have become vocal about discrimination, harassment, and poor graduate training in my advocacy in academia. My critical lens on racist, sexist, cissexist, heterosexist, and classist oppression has turned back on academia itself. Thus far, one avenue of growth has been finding my voice – a voice that my graduate program attempted to steal from me. Despite being beaten for being an activist, I have actually become fiercer in my activism, but now with the academy as my target.

As I continue to recover and grow, I imagine I will become stronger and more vocal. My goal is to ensure that no other activist, or person of color, or queer or trans person, or woman, or working-class person is beaten in the process of furthering their education.

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