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Taking a Detour from a Journey: A Critical Auto-Ethnography on an Incomplete Term in Academic Administration

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Abstract

The trend of managerialism and neo-liberalism sweeping across universities demands peer-reviewed outcomes, which replace discourses of 'service.' Within this context I, a racialized immigrant faculty member from the global South, ventured on a journey as an Associate Director, Student Affairs. I realized that I needed to take a detour, as my commitment to service was competing with the expectation of meeting the ever-growing number of peer-reviewed outcomes. The situation reminded me of my previous experiences with the university administration around 'service.' Based on my subjectivities I had no choice other than to 'comply' with the discourse of managerialism and neo-liberalism. I gave up 'service' as an academic administrator to pursue research and publication. My decision raises questions about the fairness of similar compliance by other racialized, new immigrant academics. Using critical auto-ethnography, I challenge the current managerial and neo-liberal

Keywords: critical auto-ethnography; neo-liberal University; managerialism in university; racialized faculty in university

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As I celebrate my tenth anniversary in a Canadian university, I look back on my career in the academy and on my experiences as the school's Associate Director, Student Affairs. On a fine winter morning as I started my work, about eight years in, I accidentally met and chatted with an administrative head from the university. The conversation concerned the university's expectations of performance from academic administrators. Even though the conversation was informal, it represented and reinforced the prevailing discourse of managerialism and neo-liberal trends within the university.

I learned that academic administrators were expected to maintain their teaching and 'service' to the school but most importantly, maintain their research and publication. Service in academia is defined as engagement, participation, and contribution to the community, profession, university, and school in addition to teaching, research, and scholarly and creative activities (RFA Collective Agreement, 2009). The days following the conversation were challenging for me. I was shocked to realize the perceived triviality of service offered through academic administration and the significance given to research and publication within the neo-liberal university. It was a jolt to my much cherished desire to engage in service and institution-building that I had been so invested in. I considered ways of meeting all of the expectations while holding my academic position and realized that I had to change how I performed my administrative role. However, I was not willing to compromise my process-oriented way of working, as it was beginning to show signs of a growing community spirit among students and between students and faculty within the school, the very purpose for which I had taken the position.

Under these circumstances, I realized I had three options: (a) I could resist the university's expectations of research and publication and continue with service the same way I was providing it; (b) comply with the university's expectations while remaining in administration and maintain instead of challenge the status quo in the community or; (c) give up my administrative position to comply with the university's expectations of research and publication as an educator. This situation reminded me of my previous encounters with the power of the managerial academy and the 'self-disciplining' (Foucault, 1991a) I was subjected to in order to be eligible for promotion. I realized that based on my constituted subject positions as a racialized, new immigrant academic from the global South I could not resist the university's expectations and continue with service as any lack of performance would be attributed to my subjectivities and not seen as resistance.

I asked myself the challenging questions: Was I willing to be constituted as a 'non-performing' racialized, new immigrant academic? Or was I willing to change my way of working as an administrator, to allow myself the time to focus on research and publication? I knew that I was not willing to change my ways of working as an administrator. I was caught between desire and fear: a desire to provide a good quality service as an administrator, a desire to be 'successful' as a racialized new immigrant academic, and a fear of being misjudged if I did not meet the expectations. Based on my subjectivities I had no choice other than to 'comply' with the discourse of managerialism and neo-liberalism. I gave up service as an academic administrator to pursue research and publication.

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In this article I use critical auto-ethnography to document my journey as a racialized immigrant faculty member within the neoliberal and managerial academy. I use my lived experience to challenge the ‘totalizing’ regime of academic success and the continuation of colonial practices by addressing what Susan Chase (2011) describes as the sense of urgency; the urgency of speaking, of being heard, of collective voices and of public dialogue, for personal and social change. I use this “sense of urgency” to promote change by reclaiming the narration of my own life, demanding recognition of these issues, adding to collective stories to promote social movement and by raising attention to complex moral issues and the need for change. This paper evaluates the weakening relationship between the university and community due to an increased emphasis on research and publication and gains insight into the implications this has on social work education. In an applied profession like social work, service is an important aspect of work since engagement with communities provides up to date information on contemporary challenges, issues affecting communities, and appropriate ways of responding. Service also separates the theory-practice divide through engagement and enhances classroom learning by bringing in examples from the field and strengthening student-faculty relationships. This devaluing of practical knowledge and alternative ways of knowing is probed further within my narrative as well as the implications this has on racialized immigrant faculty and the long term losses to the university.

I chose critical auto-ethnography as it is about “making the personal political” (Jones, 2005, p. 763) and about “creating space for a dialogue and debate that shapes social change” (Reinelt, 1998, p. 286). It explores the lived experiences of individuals within their historical and cultural context. The purpose of auto-ethnography is to “illuminate the reader’s understanding of [a] cultural event, place or practice” (Tracy, 2010, p. 16) through the ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’ of one’s self-reflexivity which is beyond the scope of other research methods (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010). This method highlights the operation of power within various contexts and the individual’s response to those situations in order to raise important political questions (Denzin, 2003). Soyni Madison (2005) clarifies the political function of auto-ethnography by using the term ‘critical.’ According to Soyni Madison (2005), “[c]ritical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness and injustice within a particular lived domain” (p. 5). These considerations have inspired me to use this method and to delve critically into my subjectivities to raise larger questions about the fairness of the current performance appraisal system on racialized new immigrant academics in North American universities.

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Less than a year after my immigration to Canada, I was hired by the university. My hiring in this School, reputed for being progressive was ‘a dream come true’ for me. Unlike most immigrant stories of labor market discrimination (Das Gupta, 1994; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2007), my story seemed different. I was excited at the possibility of contributing to the progressive social work practice both through scholarship and activism, as I had done in my home country. However, this excitement was short-lived as I was confronted with the realities of my day-to-day existence in a western academy.

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As a tenure track faculty, I was expected to engage in teaching, research, publications, and service. As a new immigrant, I had to make a fresh beginning in *all* of the above areas while reorienting myself in a new country. However, as I strived hard towards fulfilling these varied expectations equally I was continually confronted with a single, “totalizing” (Foucault, 1991a) message of the importance of research and publication. The message left me confused and uncomfortable. I could not comprehend why and how the expectations for tenure and promotion had shifted *solely* to research and publications, instead of teaching. I wondered who benefitted from and what was being undermined by these expectations.

At the time of my hiring, the university was on the threshold of its transition to a managerial and a neo-liberal university. Kogan (2004) refers managerialism to “the condition in which management becomes an end in itself and displaces values and primary objectives” (p. 2). Sit (2008) alleges that managerial practices have transformed knowledge into a commodity like other goods and services. Deem (2001), refers managerialism to “the introduction of targets and intrusive monitoring of efficiency and effectiveness... done through staff appraisal, overt measures of employee performance and outcomes, and more subtle self and peer regulation” (p.10). Shore (2008) considers neo-liberalism as the “transformation of the traditional liberal and enlightenment idea of the university as a place of higher learning into the modern idea of the university as corporate enterprise... maximizing economic return and investment, and gaining competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy” (p. 282).

In keeping with these markers of managerialism and neo-liberalism the shift in this university included an increasing pressure to increase class sizes, an increasing emphasis on research and publication while applauding the ‘entrepreneurial professoriate’ (Anderson, 2002) who brings in dollars through research grants and publications. In doing this the university has moved away from its long standing tradition of recognizing institution building and community engagement as important ‘services’ rendered by its academics. This shift is similar to the one argued by scholars that neo-liberalism has privileged research over teaching and service (Fairweather, 1996; Gaffikin & Perry, 2009; Hughes, 2007). There is increasing competition and pressure on academics to pursue research grants and get funding dollars for the university (Gaffikin & Perry, 2009; Jacobs, 2004; Newson, 1998; Polster, 2005).

Unaware about these changes at the university level I began my work and made efforts to meet the requirements (from my understanding) for tenure and promotion. At the end of the first year, I was invited to join the Board of a non-profit agency serving my diasporic community. Around the same time, a group of women representing a particular ethnicity from my diaspora to start an organization for women and seniors also approached me. I decided to get involved with both these activities. The situations in both agencies demanded a lot of my time as one of the agencies was going through a crisis and the other was just starting-up. Based on these reasons I could not dictate to the agencies how much work I would do, as in my opinion that would not have been in keeping with the spirit of community practice (Lee, 1993; Rubin & Rubin, 2001; Weil, 2005).

After two years of engagement with these agencies, I realized that while I had a good record of service with the community, it was still not as important as research and publication. I wondered why then I was expected to engage in service as a part of my work contract at all. I

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questioned the lack of importance to service as compared to research and publications. Was it because service is considered ‘less scholarly’? I challenged this notion of service that undermines its contribution to the development of knowledge and research. It is interesting to note that this lack of importance to service is not only incongruous with my beliefs but with the mission statement of the university as well.

Like most universities this university expresses its commitment to advancing applied knowledge and research that is responsive to societal needs. If what is expressed in the mission statement is expected to be the true intent of the university then how can the university accomplish this mission by giving importance *only* to research and publication? How can the university commit itself “to advance applied knowledge and research that addresses social needs” without its partnership with agencies and communities that often happen through service? I say this on the basis of my experience as an academic in the global South where I was involved in research projects that emerged out of community work and were instrumental in challenging the status quo and obtain justice for slum and pavement dwellers.

The findings of the first research project were used to challenge the decision of a State Government to evict and deport pavement dwellers (people who live on streets) at the High Court and the Supreme Court of the country (George, 1983). The findings challenged the stereotypes against pavement dwellers and provided an evidence of their residency and contribution to the city. The case resulted in an unprecedented ruling by the Supreme Court that granted pavement dwellers the fundamental right, like any other citizen, to reside in any part of the country. Similarly, the findings of a second research project were used to demand alternative accommodation with amenities and services (electricity, water, and sanitation with a room for a daycare center) for pavement dwellers engaged in rag-picking (picking up recyclable material from garbage bins as a source of livelihood) in another city (George, 2006). Service in those environments was considered an integral part of the work performed by faculty and students. Research paired with service and community engagement enhanced the level of education received by students as experiential knowledge was incorporated back into the classroom through use of case studies, scenarios and/or alternative learning materials. I realized that after engaging in this kind of research for decades before moving to Canada, I would no longer be able to practice it in the managerial academy where I worked as performance is solely assessed on annual outcomes of research and publications and not on community credibility or change (Larner & Le Heron, 2005; Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997; Shore, 2008).

An emphasis on outcomes based research undermines the significance of process/ service vital to undertaking research. Community engagement, on-going relationships with communities and community participation at all stages of research (Potts & Brown, 2005) are indispensable if research has to truly accomplish its mission of being relevant to society and meeting societal needs. Research that does not follow such a process reproduces the dominance of the academy over communities and a possible danger of misrepresenting communities’ interest (Soyni Madison, 2005). In my opinion, insistence on outcome based research that ignores on-going relationships with communities signals an ideological shift (Deem & Brehony, 2005), a shift of the academy from its promise of engagement with the broader community to its surrender to neo-liberalism. The lack of congruity between the university’s mission statement and my experience

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with service left me guessing whether it **was** due to naivety or it **was** an intentional act of the university to mask its neo-liberal intent from its public image.

Based on my own position as a tenure track academic I could not engage in research that was organic, process oriented as the time bomb of tenure, promotion was ticking away, and I needed to produce outcomes of successful research grants and publications. It was ironic that while I was teaching about the social change role of research to my students in the Social Work Research course I was teaching, I could not practice it myself (Fine, 2006; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Potts & Brown, 2005).

This was an ideological shift, an ethical compromise with my desired self. I realized that with this shift, I was losing my way of 'doing' and 'knowing through doing.' I began losing my confidence, as a precious part of my identity as a community-engaged scholar and activist was being demeaned by the existing practices within the academy (Featherstone & Fawcett, 1995). Mohanty (2004) argues that "[t]hrough such constructions and the investments in marginalizing Others, the result is to deny marginalized peoples their political and historic agency" (p. 213).

Being a racialized scholar from the global South I could not challenge the existing discourse of knowledge production at the university as I feared that such a question would be attributed to a lack of intellectual capacity to produce knowledge. Generally, the countries from the global South (Connell, 2007; Spivak, 1993) and marginalized populations (Smith, 1999; Pe-Pua; 1989; Schreiber, 2000) are most often perceived as consumers and not necessarily as producers of knowledge (Connell, 2006).

Women with immigrant status continue to experience difficulty gaining acceptance and legitimation by colleagues and students based on their gender, race, ethnicity and foreign origin, which is evident by the lack of representation in academia, tenure, promotion, and compensation (Skachkova, 2007). As a new hire in a tenure-track position, I was expected to accept the existing practices of knowledge production and fulfill the requirements rather than challenge it. Foucault (1991b) describes this as "micro-physics of power" (p. 139) to which individuals surrender in order to produce a specific kind of self: in my case, I was working towards being a 'tenure worthy' self. I surrendered to the prevailing discourse of managerialism and gave up my service to fulfill the expectations of research and publication.

The emphasis I gave to service affected my chances of getting promotion along with tenure. Based on the consideration that I needed to generate more research and publications, I once again surrendered to the power of the university administration. I decided to apply only for tenure and not promotion. I had learned a hard lesson that in a neo-liberal academy the system rewards only those "entrepreneurial professors" who commit to generating research income and to peer-reviewed publications (Anderson, 2002). These experiences had clearly revealed to me the power of the managerial academy through decisions based on principles of standardization (Sit, 2008) and the adoption of private-sector practices of accountability (Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997). Anderson, Johnson, and Miligan (1996) perceive them fitting with Foucault's (1991a) assertion of "governmentality" by coupling "individualization" and "totalization" (p.19). Anderson, Johnson, and Miligan (1996) find that managerialist approaches to performance appraisals and reward systems in academia encourage individualism while reaffirming the

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totalizing message that there is only one “right way” to succeed. Zipin (2006) examines how these “governmentalities” highlight institutionalized bullying and weaken the autonomy and agency of academics (p. 26). Marginson and Terry (1995, no. 13) describe reviews as “the key parts of the education panopticon, a way to steer from a distance” (p. 9). These changes have constrained creativity and leadership within faculty members (Clegg, 2008; Kezar, Lester, Carducci, Gallant, & McGavin, 2007).

In the two years following my tenure, I worked towards qualifying for promotion by fulfilling the university’s expectations for research and publications. As a part of the endeavour I attended seminars that focused on workload modeling for success in the academy acknowledging fully that I had to ‘regulate’ and ‘discipline’ my conduct. Lerner and Le Heron (2005) find workload modeling and performance appraisals powerful tools used by universities to ensure accountability and the self-regulating performance of faculty members. In their opinion, these tools send strong messages about the ‘right’ amount of time to spend on a task. The seminars were helpful and I was successful and was recognized in the annual performance appraisals through merits. Being a recipient of merits brought immense joy to me as I felt ‘recognized’ and ‘acceptable’ by the western academy. I was engrossed with the euphoria of success and did not even pause to critically reflect at the price I had paid for this success; the price of giving up service.

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In my seventh year I had already gotten through the hoops of tenure and when I was sure of my prospects for promotion, I decided to take the administrative position as the Associate Director, Student Affairs, within my school. There was a feeling among my colleagues that the closeness that had once characterized relations among students and between faculty members and students in the school was fast eroding due to a number of factors. There was a feeling that the situation adversely affected students from diverse backgrounds of age, maturity, immigration status, and proficiency in English language. The school felt a need to rebuild the lost spirit of community and create a climate conducive to the enhancement of students’ learning and engagement within the school. The climate in the school resonated with scholars who have critiqued managerialism and neo-liberalism for turning academic institutions into capitalist enterprises (Barnett & Griffin, 1997; Clark, 1998; Fisher & Rubenson, 1996; Giroux, 2003; Kelsey, 1998; Meemeduma, 2001; Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997; Slaughter, 1998; Slaughter & Leslie, 1998) and has transformed knowledge into a commodity like other goods and services (Sit, 2008). The situation in the school awakened my dormant desire for service.

I was uncritical and thought that administrative space was a protected space and not a managerial space.... I visualized the possibility of a dynamic and developmental role (besides the academic role) this position could play. I could envision the tremendous opportunity of advocating for students’ interests in the neo-liberal university; of developing supports and/or improving services for enhancing students’ learning. Through reaching out to the student community and responding to issues relevant to them, I saw a possibility of building a spirit of community among students and between students and faculty members. The work seemed to fit very well with the anti-oppression mission of the school. I perceived my role to be developmental rather than a managerial function. I was excited at the opportunity and decided to take up the position.

I treated my administrative position as a site for progressive practice geared towards enhancing students' learning and engagement and perceived myself as students' advocate and an ally. In addition to administrative function of the position, I collaborated with students on a number of issues that adversely affected their learning and performance. This involved reaching out to the larger student body through student friendly ways and forming action groups of students around different issues. This involved work with students as well as with different departments of the university and the school's faculty members to initiate a range of initiatives (new programs and policy) for students. The work also involved working closely with the student union, in providing direction by engaging union members in re-visioning and strategic planning and making the union more accountable and responsive to the student body. Opportunities were created for a dialogue and meeting between students and faculty through different programs and fora. These efforts seemed to be effective and students from diverse backgrounds were beginning to feel that the school was responding to their issues.

I was enjoying my role as an administrator as it offered me immense opportunities to change how students are perceived and treated in the current neo-liberal university. Just as I was beginning to see the initial evidence of success, I accidentally met and had an informal conversation with an administrative head of the university. While I felt absolutely 'protected' and encouraged in my school that is known for its anti-oppression mission, the conversation with the administrator representing the broader institutional perspective, took me by surprise. This conversation reminded me of the reality of the presence of managerialism and neo-liberalism, revealing yet another dimension of its prevalence. It made me realize the relative insignificance of service in comparison to research and publication. I was baffled once again. The administrative head and I talked about the expectation of research and publications from administrators and how their performance would be assessed on the basis of their research and publication outcomes. In the days following the conversation, I was disturbed. I changed my plans and decided to give up my position. I took a detour from a journey I had set out on, a journey of building a new community within my school.

I realize that my decision to leave the administrative position to do research and publications has raised a lot of questions in my mind as unlike earlier years of my service, this time I was tenured and should have felt less vulnerable. Excavating deeper, I realize that there were other reasons for my response of compliance. The experiences I had encountered in my first seven years of work have had a profound influence on my sense of self and the way I conducted myself in the university. These experiences had stolen the most critical aspects of my professional identity, core values and ways of knowing and doing my professional work. My identity as an activist scholar and my cherished value of grounding my scholarship in practice (service) and producing knowledge through such practice had been lost. As a result, I felt devalued and diffident. I felt vulnerable as I had to learn ways of knowledge production recognized in the western academy. I was overwhelmed as I not only had to make a fresh beginning but also keep up with the competitive work culture I had not experienced as an academic in my home country. Above all, I had internalized the situation of postponing my promotion as a personal failure and feared that I had misrepresented the racialized immigrant scholars from my country. This failure made me personally invest myself in becoming successful in the academy both for myself and for my fellow scholars.

At the time of my appointment as an academic administrator, I was deeply invested in being successful in the academy and was also keen on being a progressive administrator. I had assumed that in taking academic administration my investment in seeing myself as a successful academic would not be threatened as I thought the expectation would be to meet the demands of the administrative position. The discussion with the institutional head made me realize that I was once again wrong. I realized that my investments in seeing myself as a successful academic and a progressive administrator were not compatible between themselves. To be a successful academic demanded development of an entrepreneurial self that was invested in outcomes through research and publications. On the contrary, the investment as a progressive administrator demanded focus on process and grassroots work with various groups of students along with negotiating services from various departments in the universities. I knew that since I was deeply invested in both of them, I would not be able to accept a lesser investment in any one of them.

I considered focusing merely on my administrative role and not engage in the community-building processes with students. This change would have given me time to engage in research. However, I questioned what the reason was that had inspired me to take the position – was it not institution-building? Would I be able to achieve institution-building with a task-focused approach? How would I feel if I did not accomplish the goal of institution-building? My answers were negative and I could not see myself as merely an academic administrator without a progressive role.

I also asked myself: What would be the implications of resisting the university's expectations of research and publications? I realized that based on my constituted subject positions as a racialized, new immigrant academic from the global South, I did not have the luxury of resisting the discourse of research and publication. I knew that with my constituted subject positions, even as an administrator I could not escape the disciplining gaze of the education Panopticon (Foucault, 1991b). I also knew that I had to 'perform,' since any lack of performance would be attributed to both, my constituted subject positions and the community of racialized scholars from my country I was representing (Essed, 2007). I could see myself being held up as an example of an unsuccessful racialized immigrant academic who took an administrative position to hide her research incapability. As Essed (2007) describes it, the feeling that 'I cannot be less than perfect' overruled me. I could not risk being 'imperfect,' as it would not be seen as a personal failure, but would be attributed to my subject position as a racialized, new immigrant faculty. In addition, at a personal level I was not willing to go through the trauma and dejection I had experienced earlier. Based on my constituted subjectivities I had no choice other than to 'comply' with the expectations of the regime. I gave up administration.

Based on these personal experiences I use this auto-ethnography to question the following questions: What is the loss to the academy due to a shift in the expectations around service? What is the implication of such a shift on students and the larger community? How can a managerial and a neo-liberal academy be held accountable for its promise of its relevance and involvement with the broader community? What could the academy be doing to value the history and strengths that a new immigrant faculty member may bring? What are the opportunities left for racialized faculty members to hold higher positions in the academy if the academy continues

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to reproduce experiences and fear of racism among its racialized members? Could a centre of learning and enlightenment be also a seat of privilege and oppression of its subjects?

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POST SCRIPT

As I have settled back into my position as a faculty member, I have had time to critically reflect on my experiences over the last ten years. I have reengaged myself in service to the larger community as I perform my expectations as an academic in a neo-liberal and capitalist academy...

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