“It’s Going to be Otherized”:
Doctoral Students of Color and Questions of Writerly Voice

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Part 1: Background and Research Questions

In 1999, the University of Minnesota established the Community of Scholars Program (COSP) to create an institutional environment that supports the academic and professional success of graduate students of color across disciplines. Based in the Office for Diversity in Graduate Education (a unit under the Office for Equity and Diversity), COSP began its own Writing Initiative in January 2014, featuring research and programming to support the writing projects of graduate students of color. Writing-related programming (in the form of consultations, workshops, and writing groups) continues to develop in response to the findings of a research project that began in fall 2014. An Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing grant would support this ongoing research project, one that lies at the intersection of writing studies, critical race studies, and higher education.

Research on the experiences of graduate students of color in U.S. academic institutions has focused on career choices (Levin, Jaeger, & Haley, 2013); research identities (Murakami-Ramalho, Piert, & Militello, 2008); physical, cultural, and intellectual isolation (Gay, 2004); and mentorship (Patton, 2009). Lesser known are the specificities of the strengths and challenges of graduate students of color regarding writing at the doctoral level. To determine how best to support doctoral writers of color, COSP conducted focus groups in fall 2014 involving 23 students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds representing disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, health sciences, and engineering and sciences. We asked, How might knowing the expectations and assumptions placed on doctoral students of color across disciplines inform the way we support these student communities? Four major themes have emerged from this research: (1) relationship-building is a necessary skill/asset to navigate the academy; (2) overcoming challenges contributes to tenacity and perseverance; (3) a holistic approach is needed to support writers at various stages of the graduate program; and (4) academia can silence students who do not align with disciplinary expectations.

A subset of the fourth theme from the study is that of writerly voice, and for the 2015-2016 academic year, we want to build on our focus group research and examine a particular tension that exists for doctoral writers of color: How can one balance personal voice (involving one’s cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic communities), with academic and disciplinary writing expectations? What are the similarities and differences in the experiences regarding writerly voice in academia for U.S.-born and non-U.S.-born doctoral writers of color? By situating the study this way, we methodologically mount a critique of frameworks that render student communities of color as a monolithic entity.
Part 2: Project Description

**Project goals.** The question of writerly voice initially feels abstract, hard to pin down, but we know from our transcripts that it is a real question, a genuine concern among graduate students of color. This seemingly intangible question of voice haunts our transcripts: “I’m told that I should divorce my writing, my research, from my personal. Then, what I do is that I write really objectively and very scientifically, but that’s not who I am.” If “putting a pen to paper is an extension of who you are,” then what are the implications of “feeling naked in front of the eye of the Other,” as one graduate writer expressed? As we continue analyzing the transcripts, we see the need to further examine the nuances of writerly voice as they relate to the diversity even within the category that defines COSP members -- that of “graduate students of color who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents.” Our research reveals that while commonalities exist within this particular student population, we have the responsibility to recognize the complexities of what it means to serve all domestic communities of color. These communities are often totalized under the umbrella heading, “people of color,” while distinctions about writerly voice emerge, for example, among writers who are monolingual and those who are multilingual, and those who are U.S.-born and non-U.S.-born. We need to better understand the unique and shared experiences of these racialized communities, ones that engage other equally crucial group memberships such as legal citizenship and language. For example, our multilingual focus group participants talked about having to write in English when an idea is better served in another tongue. And still, our mono- and multi-lingual research subjects brought up this notion of the disciplining that happens in scholarly writing, where one’s writing is “going to beotherized” and where “I don’t trust the space.” In short, as a next step in our project, we as researchers look to tease out the implications of scholarly voice for monolingual and multilingual and for U.S.- and non-U.S.-born domestic graduate students of color. Thus, capitalizing on our existing research -- and without necessarily ascribing to empirical methods -- we wish to mount a sustained effort to inquire about what writerly voice looks like for dissertators of color, and how writerly agency becomes a source of concern for such student communities.

**Methodology.** We aim to conduct four disciplinary focus groups, each consisting of six students at various stages of their doctoral programs. Since a larger number of COSP students are in the social sciences, two of the focus groups will consist of students representing social science disciplines. One group will be for students in the humanities, and another group will focus on students in the health sciences. A total of 24 doctoral students will participate in the focus groups (6 students x 4 groups). Each focus group will be 60 minutes in length.

The recruitment process for the focus groups will involve e-mailing all doctoral students of color in the disciplines relevant to the study. Students who wish to participate in the study will then self-identify in a number of categories: (1) U.S.-born or non-U.S.-born; (2) monolingual or multilingual; (3) racial/ethnic identity; (4) academic department; and (5) stage in the graduate program. Our goal for each focus group is to achieve a balanced representation of students from each of these categories. The questions that will guide the focus group discussions are as follows:
1. Do you feel your racial/ethnic identity plays any role in determining your dissertation topic?
2. If applicable, what have been your experiences as a student of color conducting research within communities of color?
3. How do you balance your personal voices (based on cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic communities), with academic and disciplinary writing expectations?
4. If applicable, what has been your experience navigating academia as a multilingual writer?
5. What can the University do to support graduate writers of color?

After each focus group, we further intend to conduct up to 30 minutes of follow-up individual interviews with 6-10 participants to ask more in-depth questions.

Role of postdoctoral associate. In order to conduct our proposed research, we are seeking $6,000 to supplement the salary of a postdoctoral associate, Dr. Jasmine Tang, who will conduct research at .25 FTE or 10 hours per week. Half of the 10 hours will be funded by the ISW grant, with the remaining half supported by the Office for Diversity in Graduate Education. Due to limited budget, we are unable to hire additional research staff without assistance from other sources.

Dr. Tang is uniquely qualified to conduct this research because of her extensive knowledge and expertise as a former writing consultant with the U of MN Center for Writing and Metropolitan State University. Having earned the doctoral degree at the U of MN in an interdisciplinary field (American Studies), Dr. Tang has firsthand knowledge of the University environment and has the breadth and depth of experience to interact with graduate students across disciplines. Critical to the success of this study is the researcher’s ability to engage with graduate students from multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. Dr. Tang is exceptional in communicating across cultures, evidenced by extremely positive evaluations from COSP students who have participated in her writing workshops and consultations. With an article that will be published in the next issue of Writing Center Journal, she also has a demonstrated commitment to contributing to scholarly research on critical race studies and writing consultancy (Godbee, Ozias, & Tang, 2015). While funding from the ISW grant will go towards Dr. Tang’s salary, she will be working in collaboration with Dr. Noro Andriamanalina, COSP Director. Dr. Andriamanalina has 13 years of experience working with graduate students and is deeply tuned into the experiences of COSP students and the graduate student community at large. Drs. Andriamanalina and Tang are co-authors on publications that result from this larger project of which the ISW grant will be a part.

Timetable. Our next phase of research will involve qualitative, self-reflexive methods in the form of focus groups and personal interviews. We plan to submit the IRB application for expedited review in August and will begin the research in September 2015. The following is the timeline for the study, which will be the primary responsibility of co-PI, Dr. Jasmine Tang, at 10 hours per week for the 2015-16 academic year.
| August 2015 | **Assist in developing and submitting the IRB application for expedited review**  
- provide research description and purpose  
- outline recruitment process  
- develop research participant application form  
- develop focus group and interview protocols  
- draft consent form  
- submit IRB application  
- communicate with IRB staff |
| --- | --- |
| August - September 2015 | **Recruit research subjects**  
- ensure data privacy and integrity of process  
- identify dates, times and locations for focus groups  
- e-mail COSP students in relevant doctoral programs about research study  
- monitor research participant application process  
- identify and assign focus group participants based on discipline, department, racial/ethnic identity, country-of-birth status, language status, and stage in the graduate program  
- communicate research protocol and procedures to all participants |
| October - November 2015 | **Conduct focus groups and follow-up individual interviews**  
- facilitate one focus group per week  
- conduct follow-up interviews on weekly basis  
- communicate with participants  
- begin transcribing data |
| December 2015 - January 2016 | **Transcribe data**  
- use Express Scribe to transcribe data verbatim  
- draft and submit proposal to present at National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) in June 2016 |
| February - March 2016 | **Analyze data**  
- code and identify common themes and unique experiences of the participants from focus groups and interviews |
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<tr>
<th>April - May 2016</th>
<th>Draft and disseminate findings</th>
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<td>• draft manuscripts for Journal of Diversity in Higher Education and/or Across the Disciplines</td>
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<td>• prepare for NCORE presentation (if accepted)</td>
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<td>• identify findings to be incorporated into “Breaking Boundaries” training session for UMN faculty and staff</td>
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<td>• present to Associate Deans Council</td>
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<td>• engage in conversations with colleagues from Center for Writing, WINS, and Department of Writing Studies</td>
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**Part 3: Relevance and Plans for Dissemination**

“We do not write because we must; we always have a choice. We write because language is the way we keep a hold on life. With words we experience our deepest understandings of what it means to be intimate. We communicate to connect, to know community.”

*(bell hooks, 1999, p. 13)*

The implications of this project for the way writing is taught and/or learned are significant in terms of generating, sustaining, and supporting issues of equity and access: an underlying thread of this project is to contribute to and promote racially inclusive theories and practices in graduate education. We believe this project will attest to how lived experience and writing are inextricable. In our study thus far, students have noted that in the selection of a dissertation topic, for example, they work under the weight (or burden, perhaps) of their racial identities: that is, if they study their own racial/ethnic communities, their objectivity and legitimacy are questioned. If they do not study their own communities, their expertise may still be questioned. And in still other cases, students can feel pigeonholed into researching something that has to do with their personal histories. While many would agree that we cannot take the self out of the writing, it is still hard for some to see how we cannot take the racial self out of the writing, too; further, seeing writing as an “epistemic right” can dramatically reconfigure the way we view graduate writing (Godbee, 2011). The next phase of our project allows these possibilities to emerge in the research: we will be able to more deeply inquire about the implications of voice, agency, and racial identity in graduate-level research and writing.

This project will also help us better understand how the process of writing helps doctoral students better prepare for a career in academia. Writing fosters learning for doctoral students---in this case, learning about what it means to write in an academic discipline. While this may appear to be an afterthought of our research, we argue that this intersection of disciplinary writing and professional development is quite crucial: our
research has thus far revealed deep concerns among graduate students about being disciplined in the academy and what this means for the job market.

The target audience for the dissemination of the research results will consist of scholars and professionals in writing studies, critical race studies, and higher education. Our goals are as follows:

- Publish in scholarly journals such as *Across the Disciplines* and *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.
- Present at professional conferences such as National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (June 2016), Council of Writing Program Administrators (July 2016), and American Education Research Association (April 2017).
- Share findings with U of MN colleagues to enrich the writing experiences of students of color and international students at both undergraduate and graduate levels.
  - Incorporate findings into the “Breaking Boundaries” workshop for UMN faculty and staff that highlights the experiences of graduate students of color and international graduate students from the global south. Since spring 2012, the Office for Equity and Diversity has partnered with Global Programs and Strategy Alliance to implement the 90-minute session facilitated by Dr. Andriamanalina (OED) and Thorunn Bjarnadottir (GPSA). The session focuses on “uneartthing” the departmental culture and creating a more inclusive environment to support the success of graduate students with regards to acclimating to a predominantly White environment, communicating with the advisor, conducting research, and curriculum development. To date, nine departments have participated in the session across collegiate units. Going forward, through the results of this study, we intend to focus more on writing experiences.
  - Converse with Graduate School colleagues to present to the U of MN Associate Deans Council to discus the role of collegiate units in supporting graduate writers of color.
  - Enhance collaborations with the Center for Writing. For example, our findings would be relevant to writing consultancy practice and tutor education at Student Writing Support in their efforts to foster and sustain an open and inclusive environment for writers from disciplinary and linguistic backgrounds (Center for Writing website).
  - Engage in conversations with administrators of Writing for International Students (WINS) to determine if the experiences of multilingual graduate students can help to inform the undergraduate writing curriculum, particularly for international students who are interested in pursuing graduate degrees.
Collaborate with faculty and staff in the Department of Writing Studies, as our research will shed light on the particularities of graduate writers of color at the University.

In conclusion, the COSP Writing Initiative is one of the few programs (if not the only) of its kind in the United States. Receiving the ISW grant will allow us to further research the unique and shared experiences of COSP students, thus building momentum on an existing study that will inform our programming and enhance the experiences of graduate writers of color.
References


