Missing Stories: The Messy Processes, Multifaceted Risks, & Multiple Roles of Critical Ethnographers

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Abstract

In this article, four critical ethnographers reflect on dilemmas that arose during individual research projects. We grappled with the question: What does critical ethnography require from us as we work to represent stories that emerge in contexts where students and/or teachers have been marginalized? After engaging in a three-year process of diffractive analysis, we arrived at the notion of missing stories, as stories that involve messy processes, multifaceted risks and multiple roles in the telling and hearing of people's stories in research.

Keywords: *missing stories, diffractive reading, critical ethnography*

> *There are not many people in this world who value the*
> *stories of those who struggle with what to most seems simple.*
> *The honor of sharing those stories ties you to the one speaking.*
> *Like a book the heart can open and close, unlike a book the*
> *heart bleeds: be mindful of the hearts you open.*
> –Haver Jim, Yakama Nation

The opening epigraph by Haver Jim, a former student who worked with Joy in an equity-centered project, grounds our thinking about what happens when we hear, tell, and elicit personal stories from vulnerable populations. It requires that we take seriously questions about who/how we are as researchers and what counts as good scholarship. In this article, we respond to critical race and feminist scholars who have urged us to *think with theory* (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) and move toward representing and doing critical qualitative research that centers on justice for marginalized communities—not merely as a means for promoting our social capital within the academy (Pillow 2003; Villenas 2012).

As four early career scholars, we often reflected upon and discussed "stuck" places, dilemmas of belonging, and representation in our critical ethnographic work. Our ongoing dialogue and diffractive readings (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) yielded the concept of *missing stories*. We conceptualize *missing stories* as encompassing the *processes*, *risks*, and *roles* of the stories we hear and tell in our scholarly work toward justice. By attending to missing stories, we open ourselves

to multiple truths within messy processes (Fine 2007), multifaceted risks in the hearing and telling of stories, and multiple roles in this work.

In Search of "Good Research"

When we consider how to move toward disrupting limiting and unjust norms in traditional scholarship, we take the stance that there is a crucial distinction between truth/the good in research. From an epistemological perspective, truth signifies individuality and singularity, traditional scholarship that accepts that *one* can arrive at a place of truth. This notion informs methodologies and processes, whereby the superiority of a researcher's goals, decisions, and outcomes are mediated and measured by limited, and limiting, perspectives on stories (un)told. Conversely, we envision justice work as plural where researchers move toward *the good* by radically opening themselves to multiple truths and outcomes through collaborative processes (Guitierrez and Penuel 2014; Tuck and McKenszie 2014). This pluralistic stance towards the good led us to unearth missing stories and deepen our collective understandings of justice. It is within the tension of that slash between truth/the good that missing stories are uncovered.

In search of good research, we asked, "What does critical ethnography require from us as we work to represent stories that emerge in contexts where students and/or teachers have been marginalized?" In particular, we grappled with Pillow's (2003) challenge to reflect on "Who can research whom, when, and how?" (176), and Villenas' (2012) charge to reframe the "we" (nosotras), "us" and "others" (nos/otras) of qualitative research. These questions led to collective analyses of both the data in our studies and ourselves—our decisions and movements in relation to justice. This opened up our reconceptualization of knowledge as a lived action (Brayboy and Maughan 2009), which requires more than simply naming injustices. These questions and concepts also opened our dialogue to movements and fractures of knowledge and ways that we must re-envision our work to deepen our processes as critical ethnographers.

Theoretical Frame

Each of our studies engaged in various forms of critical ethnography as methodology (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Villenas and Foley 2011). Critical race theory in education, critical whiteness studies, and feminist research framed our individual studies. Here, we highlight major premises of each and describe how each framework informed our collective analyses.

Critical race (Delgado and Stefancic 2013) and critical whiteness frameworks (Gilborn 2005; Leonardo 2002) focus on how race and racism impact policies and practices in education (Ladson-Billings 2013), and theorize the role of the researcher in studying race (Castagno 2008; Gallagher 2000; Lensmire 2008; Thompson 2003). The purpose of using CRT in our larger studies was to (a) unmask and explore racism, (b) employ storytelling and counter narrative to give testimony to voices of the oppressed, and (c) critique liberalism and its effects on laws and policies in schools (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Critical whiteness scholars have theorized the role of the researcher in studying race, resulting in a number of lessons for white[1] researchers doing race work:

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1. In this article we deliberately decapitalize "white" while capitalizing Color and Black as an anti-racist discursive tool to signify the elusive nature of whiteness as an identity marker.

- Whiteness is not monolithic (Gallagher 2000);
- Spatial dynamics shape how race is perceived by oneself and by others (Gallagher 2000);
- Playing the "good white" is highly problematic and must be explored (Thompson 2003, 8);
- Perceived racial matching of the researcher with the participants can be misleading (Gallagher 2000; Twine 2000).

A feminist lens helped us engage issues of identity, belonging, and power, and provided a conceptual orientation to move our conversation beyond a discussion of positionality toward a dialogue about epistemological foundations that sustain power relations, racism, marginalization, and hierarchical researcher-participant relationships. Feminist scholarship helped us navigate "methodological speed bumps" (Stich, Cipollone, Nikischer and Weis 2012) by illuminating contested spaces and lived realities in our studies. It allowed us to work in "the ruins" (St. Pierre and Pillow 2002), and excavate reflective spaces to reconsider representation of subjects. Ultimately, such poststructural feminist perspectives led us to diffractive analysis.

To make sense of the disequilibrium and "stuck" places we encountered in our studies, we re-analyzed data and our researcher-selves from multiple theoretical angles using what several scholars (Jackson and Mazzei 2012; Lather 2014) have termed diffractive analysis. We use the term diffractive analysis cautiously because we are troubled by the ways it excludes thinking, intra-action, and the emotional heft that womanist theorists of Color have contributed to similar constructs of analysis (Anzaldua 1999; hooks 1995; Lorde 2007), but whose conceptualizations are marginalized within poststuctural feminist frameworks (Pillow 2015). Nevertheless, we found diffractive analysis of data through multiple theoretical frames—including frames that caused tension—to be helpful in keeping "analysis and knowledge production on the move" (Mazzei 2014, 743).

Drawing from Villenas (2012), we viewed this process as an opportunity to re-center the possibility of "we" or "nosotras" in research. Re-centering the "we" of our work deepened our critical analyses of data, methodologies, and reporting that we previously viewed through a singular lens. Together, we created spaces to debate, deconstruct, and reconstruct analyses, and even to know when to walk away from research. Specifically, we took formerly complete products of our research (i.e., findings and positionality statements) and broke them apart in order to create new mosaics with fresh imaginations, possibilities, and truths formerly hidden or obscured. Importantly, this process also included reading ourselves as actors engaged in dialogue with marginalized communities in search for justice (Ladson-Billings 2015). By opening ourselves/our studies up to diffraction, and a destabilization of traditional routes to truth/the good of research, we began to discover *missing stories* as a way to open up new routes toward justice.

Methods

In this section, we provide an overview of the context and foci of our studies (Tables 1 and 2). During our three-year process, we engaged in collaborative discussion and investigation of troubling moments in our respective studies. From collaborative critique and diffractive analyses, we recognized dilemmas we shared and gained fresh insight into the multiple truths present within the stories we heard, and the stories we chose (not) to tell.

Table 1. Overview of Critical Ethnographic Studies, Joy and Kindel

Study	Study Focus and Setting	Reflective Questions	Methodological Tools
Teachers in Lincoln Elementary, located in a town in the U.S. south (Joy)	A study of how teachers made sense of race in a majority white southern elementary school.	a. How does my ascribed white racial identity vary between participants and how do participants' reading of my race impact the stories that are shared? b. How does my racial identity present particular dilemmas?	**Framework:** Critical ethnography **Data collection:** 15 semi-structured teacher interviews, 7 semi-structured interviews with community members, 18 months of fieldnotes, 2 small group interviews with teachers, Classroom observations and artifacts. **Data Analysis:** Initial and descriptive coding (Saldaña 2015); memo writing; combined narrative and thematic analysis; critical race and critical geography used as a conceptual framework to analyze themes.
Preservice Teacher Candidates in a literacy methods course in a large Midwestern city (Kindel)	An undergraduate literacy methods course for 20 preservice teacher candidates enrolled at an urban-focused institution in a large mid-western city in the United States. The course (third in a series of three interconnected literacy courses) met at a largely African American school/Aftercare Summer Camp program where teacher candidates worked with children for about 40 hours over a summer.	a. How I can navigate the racialized spaces I work within without reifying white dominant narratives—intentionally or not? b. How can I navigate a terrain where trust is minimal and the risk of white dominance is everywhere? c. How can I (as a white woman) use critical race theory without colonizing it?	**Framework:** Critical ethnography **Data collection:** Preservice teacher candidate artifacts, audiotaped class discussions, pre- and post-questionnaires on racial attitudes, classroom observations; Parent letters, discussions with camp personnel; Newspaper article written about the course/aftercare summer camp; daily field notes. **Data analysis:** Pattern analysis (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2013) using critical race theoretical framework to ground analysis.

Table 2. Overview of Critical Ethnographic Studies, Sophia and Candace

Study	Study Focus and Setting	Reflective Questions	Methodological Tools
Minoritized Youth Identity and Belonging in a Chicago Public School (Sophia)	A study that examined how minoritized youth make sense of identity and belonging in a community-school	a. How do we perform our identity(ies) as researchers in the field? b. How do we engage in research while simultaneously working with and across varied groups of stakeholders that increasingly envision themselves as sharing little common ground? c. How does one manage the contingent ethical and personal dilemmas that arise?	**Framework:** Critical ethnography **Data collection:** 40 youth interviews; 10 teacher interviews; Staff interviews (organizers and executive director) 1 principal interview **Data analysis:** Coding, memo writing, horizontal and vertical analysis
Youth Empowerment program for "at-risk" girls at a rural NC middle school (Candace)	An "almost study" of a youth mentoring program for middle school girls considered at risk. Meetings were held twice /month at the school site. Program mission was to provide a safe, fun, and caring space for girls to talk, share, and discuss issues important to their lives.	a. How does one navigate the ethical dilemmas that emerge when demands for research encroach upon a service-based, personalized space with vulnerable populations? b. What is the cost of not engaging in research with vulnerable populations?	**Framework:** Critical ethnography Critical Youth Empowerment Framework (Jennings et al. 2006), theory as healing (hooks 1994). **Data Collection:** Student personal communications, video of dialogue sessions, peer interviews, 'researcher' reflections and fieldnotes. **Data analysis:** Coding and thematic analysis of research memos and girls' video journals, letters, and written reflections

To analyze our data collectively, we relied on intensive group discussions about common challenges, awakenings, and possible blindspots we faced as we coded data. With the goal of working towards "dialogical intersubjectivity" (Saldaña 2015, 35), we engaged in ongoing dialogic analysis including multiple readings and analytical diffractions of each of our research stories via emails, phone calls, meetings and multiple drafts. The *missing stories* we share below were borne of this ongoing dialogue and diffractive analysis.

Messy Processes, Multifaceted Risks, and Multiple Roles

Missing stories encompass many possible syntactical translations—and can/should be used as a verb, adjective, and/or noun. Through analysis of our missing stories, we arrived at a new consciousness about our research *process*, the idea that sometimes in leaving one possible avenue of research, we find another that is more just (verb: missing as choosing absence, leaving, redirecting). In actively searching for what was missing in our work, we needed to view the work from new angles to see our stories in fresh and honorable ways (verb: missing as searching).

Conceptually, *missing stories* led us to a greater acceptance of the *risks* endemic to critical research: the need to honor participants' needs and desires and therefore forgo opportunities for traditional scholarship, sometimes read as academic failure (Adjective: missed stories, as opportunities we could not, or chose not to pursue). It also included deciphering the difference between moments too intimate to report and those too important not to make public. The former is a risk of not responding to the call for justice properly within moments of telling and hearing (Past tense verb: missed, an action we should/not have taken). The latter is a response to co-create stories that powerfully counter the status quo and oppressive systems (adjective: missing stories, as counter narratives that must be told). Finally, we recognize that *missing stories* are heard from the multiple **roles** we enter and exit (un)knowingly as mentors, teachers, friends, and researchers (Noun: Miss, as a proper noun, identities we embrace—those we seek and those assigned to us). Altogether, missing stories are stories of processes, risks, and roles resulting from tensions between truth and the good of justice-oriented critical ethnography.

The Missing Stories

The *missing stories* shared here through individual researcher vignettes, reveal our dissonance, challenges, roles, risks, pain, and process of (not) telling missing stories.

Joy:

What I Missed Along the Color Line

As a white woman with an interracial family and deep commitments to racial justice, I (Joy) am interested in how race and racism materialize in schools. My study took place over fourteen months in a majority white elementary school in the southern U.S., where I served in various roles for five years. I wanted to understand the meaning that race carried for teachers. Over the years, I established a friendship with Charlene[2], an experienced African American early elementary teacher. Through interviews and informal conversations, Charlene shared deeply personal and

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2. All names of people and places, other than our own, are pseudonyms.

professionally dangerous information with me. For example, in an interview Charlene voiced her rage about how she had been treated by white educators at Lincoln Elementary,

> White women might hate each other, but- they are going to stick together. I feel like they really don't know how people feel about them because it's just like they're in this La La Land…If I say we are friends, we are down. And if anyone comes to me and talks about you (Joy), I'm like no you're not going to talk about her. It takes a really special friend to cross that color line, for you to say we're really friends. And being in a place—when I started to be friends with you [four years ago], people came from nowhere and—you didn't see it, but I saw it. When they saw me talking to you, they wanted to know "What's going on? We need to know." The goal for me was divide and conquer. "If she doesn't have any friends she won't stay."

Charlene clarified that she did not include me in this generalization about white women saying, "Your soul isn't white. You're just the color white."

Throughout the study Charlene became increasingly upset by her daily experiences with racism at the school. Meanwhile, I had heard rumors that the principal was "trying to get rid of Charlene." As a novice researcher, I felt like I had to observe the conversations as they happened. As a friend, I felt like I had to remind teachers of Charlene's teaching ability and love for her students. In the end, Charlene resigned unexpectedly, without a goodbye. After she left, I remembered what she described as her frustrations, "not with the little people, but the big people," where she was "tired of fighting to be in a place that doesn't want [her]." In her final interview she had tears in her eyes when she said,

> It is 2012, and we still have racism. I keep hanging on because I have kids in my room, Rayquan, Marcus, and Tamara (African American students). I keep hanging on because of them, trying to finish my job with them. I feel like if I don't they will lose out and they won't be strong enough to stay here.

I wonder about those students too, and the impact of Charlene's absence on their schooling experiences. Still, I do not have complete clarity or closure about the reasons that she left, or where our friendship stands.

Making Sense of What I Missed

As a researcher, I wonder if I am partly to blame for her decision to leave, or if my perception of my researcher role held me back from *crossing the color line* after all. I have apprehensions about my ability to be the "special friend" that could "cross that color line" as Charlene described. Specifically, resisting the urge to be the "good white" (Thompson 2003), which is fraught with contradictions and self-promotion in the pursuit of "truth" in research. I was stuck between truth and solidarity on the side of justice.

These tensions send me to a place that Pillow and St. Pierre (2000) refer to as "the ruins," a messy space where power, identity, racism, and knowing are wrapped up in the lived places of the school. As I replay this story in my mind, I am again in the hallway, looking at Charlene's empty classroom, remembering her absence and my failure to cross the color line and stand in solidarity with her, wondering if my study of racism inadvertently perpetuated racism.

My memory takes me back to Charlene's explanation of the attacks on our friendship, "You didn't see it...The goal for me was divide and conquer." Remembering this insight casts a new light where I am able to see the silhouettes of my many blindspots: the conversations, meetings, and microaggressions (Smith, Hung, and Franklin 2011) that I missed in fleeting moments. The ruins of this hallway remind me that because of my many roles in the school, I was always part of the story as it unfolded. Originally I framed my role as co-performative witnessing (Madison 2011); and while that may be true, I also now see myself as within the story itself. A becoming with (Lather 2014) the action, the telling, and the hearing. Now, several years later, I understand this *becoming with* as akin to the book, *The Neverending Story* (Ende 1983) where a boy is reading a book, but midway through he realizes that he is not outside the tale, rather, his presence and actions are within the story itself.

This awareness propels me to reconsider Villenas' (2012) challenge to consider the us/other dichotomy of research. I hear Charlene's words again, "Your soul isn't white," a symbol of solidarity juxtaposed by the us/other divisions that came with how "white women stick to-gether." I reconsider the ways I witnessed rumors and injustice. Injustice like the principal stating in front of our colleagues, "I'm working on getting rid of somebody"—where the "somebody" was understood to be Charlene. In this space of clarity, I both heard these stories and was present within them. Recognizing the never-ending possibilities of stories has changed my perspective on the hearing and telling process, and caused me to question what else I missed along the color line. I wonder if there are spaces where I can be a part of co-creating *missing stories* where the color lines drawn to demarcate racial divisions and perpetuate racism are not only discursively exposed, but materially deconstructed in a move toward justice.

In this shift toward justice, my larger research path has taken a turn toward joining in soli-darity communities, with institutions and leaders who are actively pursuing justice, "just justice" as positive peace, unpacking privilege and naming the ways that we benefit from injustices (Lad-son-Billings 2015). For me, this has resulted in a shift from understanding my work as "anti-racist" (Sleeter and Delgado Bernal 2004, 240), toward a more abstract concept with a steady anchor of justice. In this turn, I have left behind spaces where I see no hope of critical race praxis, or devel-oping and then translating critical theoretical insights about race, culture, and law into operational ideas and language for anti-subordination practices (Yammamoto 1997). In my search for viable theories of change (Tuck 2015), I now realize the importance of listening from multiple angles, taking part in co-constructing *missing stories*, and exploring new avenues on the road to what is possible in educational practices and institutions when justice is the guiding force.

Kindel:

Missing Stories, Missing Images

As a white woman, literacy teacher educator, and critical researcher with family ties to the African American community, I (Kindel) struggle to interrogate whiteness in educational policies and practices through my work. This study, part of a two year investigation, examined the effects of framing teacher candidates' early literacy course content through critical race theory. It took place during a summer field-based literacy methods course with 20 university pre-service teachers (three African American, one Vietnamese, sixteen white). During the field-component of the course, we tutored young children (all African American and in grades K-2) participating in a

summer camp hosted by an organization called Neighborhood Builders and the children's elementary school, Pinkney Elementary. The *missing stories* and images I discuss arose because of a front-page newspaper article about the tutoring program, excerpted here:

> There has to be a reason they put up with this—all these children crowding on the floor with university teaching students, knees and elbows knocking. The summer program staff around them standing backs-against-the-wall as if trapped on narrow window ledges. And when the children claw their way upright to sing their song about how to pick out books—complete with hand and body motions—the place looks ready to burst. Many are poor. Many of their families' rent is subsidized. Most of them attend [Pinkney] Elementary School…where children were involved in far too many of the school's discipline incidents and poor test performances. [The camp's] children had accounted for about 90 percent of the suspensions at [Pinkney]. And organizers of the summer school thought they should assure the [university] students that if they were concerned about their safety at [camp], there would be security…[3]

The article portrayed the children as needing to be saved by the mostly white professor and students. The image selected for the front page, a young white woman reading with a five-year-old African American boy, reinscribes that portrayal.

The backstory: tipped off by a video of our tutoring, posted on the Neighborhood Builders website, Jefferson called me asking to do the story. He interviewed me over the phone, asking,

> The principal of Pinkney Elementary School told me that these kids had the most behavior problems during the school year, do you agree? Are you concerned about your safety when going to [the camp?] How far behind are the children in reading?[4]

I tried to convey that the children didn't seem to have behavior problems and, based on our initial assessments, did not seem 'behind' in reading.

After the article's publication, I received numerous laudatory messages from my university. At the same time, parents, children, and the *Neighborhood Builders* staff, were livid at the narrow portrayal of their camp. On the day of the article's release, we all gathered in the cafeteria to celebrate the last day of tutoring. The tension in the room was palpable. The director sat me down and, rightfully outraged, demanded: "Who told the reporter these things? Did you tell them these things, Dr. Nash?" I told her that I did, but that he took my words out of context. She talked about why she worked for *Neighborhood Builders*: "I work here because school failed my son. I work here because I want to give these children what my son never got." She charged, "That is the story that needs to be told."

Missing Stories, Missing Images: A Diffractive Analysis

Diffractively analyzing (Mazzei 2014) the missing stories/images through a critical whiteness frame (Gillborn 2005; hooks 1995; Lorde 2007; Vaught 2008) was like fracturing a ceramic plate and piecing the fragments back together to make a mosaic; something entirely different. The

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3. John Jefferson. "Elementary Students in KC Attend a Different Kind of Summer School." *Kansas City Star* (Kansas City, MO), July 8, 2013.

4. Paraphrased questions based on my notes from the interview.

plate—the newspaper article—told an essentialized, distorted white savior narrative. Indeed, I had "intra-act[ed] from within" (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, 134), naïvely following the reporter's truth-telling norms. I could not shape the narrative because I was trying to "use the master's tools…to dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 2007, 111). In allowing half-truths to be told, I neglected my ethical responsibility and reinforced a white supremacist status-quo. Fracturing the story, I see that as a critical white researcher working in communities of Color, it is/was my relational responsibility (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) to speak back to half-truths, and forefront counter-stories instead (Vaught 2008).

White supremacy is the norm in the United States, because "American society as we know it exists…because racial discrimination continues" (Hochshild 1984, 5). hooks (1995) discussed white supremacy as "the exploitation of black people and other people of color" where whites wish to "exercise control over our bodies and thoughts" (184-85). The ordinariness of white supremacy in the newspaper article is clear (Delgado 1989). Derogatory, animalistic terms describing "narrow ledges," children "clawing their way up," "knees and elbows knocking," combined with assertions about "discipline problems" and "poor test scores," and university students feeling "concerned with their safety," narrated a false dichotomy between poor/Black and savior/white. Solidifying this master-narrative, the reporter chose a front-page photo featuring a white woman university student and five-year old Black child (Jefferson 2013) to accompany the story, even though the class had a fair representation of students of Color. In the end, in response to objections about the story, the reporter wrote a lukewarm apology to parents and others concerned--an apology that did not address the article's missing pieces and images.

Here are the missing pieces of that article and backstory, fractured and reassembled—the truth—the mosaic, the *missing stories*, written by a caregiver of the child featured in the front page photo:

> There were some gross assumptions in this article. The writer assumed that all the campers are poor and misbehaved children. This program is ran by [96% African-American and Hispanic workers] none of whom were shown. I go there daily and have never been informed of any behavior issues by the Neighborhood Builders staff. The Neighborhood Builders staff accompany the children on weekly field trips, skating, swimming, train ride, Chiefs sports lab, and the library. So no matter how narrow the ledge, they have shown up daily and stood tall to create an awesome environment…All of the children are clean and well-kept when showing up in the morning. [Jefferson] describes the children as if they are little animals crawling around on the floor and clawing to a stance. What was the purpose of this description? Then the comment about being living in [neighboring apartment complex] and being poor. Help me understand the purpose behind this? Yes, many may come from working middle class family (now considered the working poor) but that was not portrayed either. The…parents that I see when dropping off my grandson are working parents that take their children to the program for their children to experience a structured summer program close to home.

Sophia:

Who are you, Miss?

The title of this missing story points to the complexity of racial and ethnic identity in my (Sophia's) study. While conducting research in Chicago, I explored low-income, minoritized (McCarty 2002) youth perceptions of identity and belonging. Two dilemmas emerged during this research: first, I struggled to articulate my racial/ethnic identity and thus understand positionality upon entering the field as a doctoral student. Second, I withheld my mixed racial background from Latino youth as a strategy to gain insider status. As the astute youth asked powerful questions such as "Who are you, Miss?," my journey through the dilemmas of figuring out who I was as "Miss" began.

I did not anticipate the power dynamics within the community-school partnership. As I gained entry to O'Donnell through the guidance of the executive director of Redwood Park Council, Quinn, I felt an allegiance to him. However, I learned the ways that his staff struggled with him as a "white male who doesn't always get the needs of the community," as one organizer said. I asked Quinn about his relationships with the all-Latin@ staff. He explained, "You have to listen, Sophia. You or I can't be the only ones speaking." I learned that Quinn saw me as part of what Villenas (2012) called the nos/otros of qualitative inquiry, suggesting divisions between groups rather than a "we" of a community. As a researcher, I was positioned as part of the "You/I" with Quinn, which was different from the "they" that made up his staff. Divisions persisted, and I was often in the middle trying to figure out where I belonged. The Latin@ organizers, who were my link to the youth, did not trust me initially due to my positioning alongside Quinn, who they sarcastically referred to as "jefe."

I was also perceived as white by white school leadership, the "You or I," because of my academic status. Simultaneously, white leadership viewed me as "able to understand where the kids come from" (Principal, November 2012). The principal wanted to use my Latina-ness to help him gain access to the students, saying, "You can help me find out what's going on inside my school." I felt deeply conflicted about both the perceptions and expectations of my identity and the fact that if I stayed silent, I would fail to answer the question: Who are you Miss? Ultimately, what was critical was the truth I told the youth.

Although I have a Cuban father who died when I was too young to remember, I grew up with a white mother in a wealthy white community despite our working class background. I felt used when I perceived that the white principal wanted to leverage my Latina-ness to gain information about youth. My Latina-ness was somewhat false because I grew up in different circumstances than the youth and community organizers, who perceived me as white. One organizer persistently commented on my "not being from the neighborhood," positioning me as an outsider. I felt the need to prove my Latina-ness.

These tensions demand that critical ethnographers consider their relationships with multiple stakeholders. I faced moments when I had to figure out with whom to align myself and why. Stich, Cipollone, Nikischer and Weis (2012), raised ethical questions related to researcher identity such as, "how do we engage in research while simultaneously working with stakeholders […] and managing the contingent ethical and personal dilemmas that arise" (463). Negotiating identity in the field—helped me to reflect on my own racial and ethnic identity struggles between the us/them dichotomy, and how best to build relationships with the youth.

"You're White, Right?"

  The movement from being an outsider—"Who are you Miss?"—to becoming, "Sophia, our older friend," is documented below:

> V: You're white, right? Why do you come here every day? We don't mean to be rude. You seem white. I don't know; most Latina girls are...they are ratchet [slutty] or they defend their gang-banger boyfriends. You have like, I don't know, the way you carry yourself. It's just different. You don't seem like a Latina. You're not like us. (Field notes, December 2012)

I reflected on this exchange as a moment when I felt that what I said to the youth mattered or would/could determine the level of trust I built with them. I knew they were just trying to figure out why I was there to "study" them, suspecting I was different.

  I struggled with the moments where access into the social worlds of the youth required my willingness to reveal pieces of myself. An important part of relationship-building involved me sharing that I had experienced classism growing up in a wealthy white community, and yet I did not face the same educational inequities present in Chicago. I was honest about my access to the various forms of capital that often are aligned with school success. In our conversations, youth appreciated our similarities and differences, and most importantly, they seemed to not care if I was white or Latina. They began to see me as, "Sophia, our older friend," knowing I was there to tell their stories. They accepted me in spite of my whiteness and came to trust me.

  Although I saw myself as aligned with the youth, I also critiqued how I did not stand up to the ways in which the racialized logic (Lewis 2003) of the school reproduced inequity through tracking Latino@ students. I remained distant from the white leadership, and did not have the language at the time to fully unpack the racialized structure of the school (Omi and Winant 2014). Instead, I found it more productive to talk *with* the youth to learn about the racial inequities and "tiers of education in the same school" (Interview with Sophia, June 26, 2013). I offered counter-narratives of youth experiences, focusing on positive youth identities, rather than the racialized, deficit discourses that were reproduced in their school (Rodriguez 2015). Thus, part of the "truth" I wanted to tell related to youth perceptions of school inequalities.

  Youth perceptions of my race/ethnicity initially mattered. As issues of race and racism become more rampant across the country, I now realize that as a critical researcher, I have a responsibility to engage in and name the racialized structures that continue to oppress minoritized youth *with* the youth I research regardless of my fears. While I remain committed to the voices of those in communities that I am part of, I have found more safety in naming racism through sociological theories of race as I now have the language and experience of witnessing patterns of racial injustice across schools in the country. The moments when I chose not to critically expose truths about deficit discourses and teachers' racialized ideologies about Latin@ youth abilities or racism in the community-school were to me the missing stories. The things I missed as a researcher related to my own uncertainty about identity and anxieties about belonging with/to whom in the field. I see my future work as a call to advance racial justice by seeking out more stories and not missing the opportunity to share those stories.

Candace:

Becoming Miss

"When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid" (Lorde 1997, 13).

I (Candace) claim the margins as the space for my work. Claiming the margins as a site for critical work and a sense of belonging were particularly important to my survival as an untenured African American faculty member in a predominantly white institution. I inhabited this space as a borderland where productive resistance and collective action found in the everyday theorizing of everyday people—the small story—became electric. In listening to the small stories of youth, I learned that these wondrous liminal spaces can be deeply personal, fraught with uncertainty and the fragility of lived experience. Although rich with the possibility for qualitative inquiry and meaningful scholarship, the vulnerability of youth participants and the inherent risk they take in sharing their truths remind me that perhaps not all stories should be the stuff of research. This illuminates my dilemma in both claiming the margins as sites for critical ethnographic work and resisting the draw of research when I, in communion with my participants, deem stories too personal for research.

My entry into the field of "almost research" occurred in my third year as faculty—a critical year for tenure track faculty seeking reappointment. As a new scholar, I was in search of community, places of belonging, and sites for research. An opportunity emerged when I served as a guest speaker for sixth graders at a racially diverse Title I middle school. The principal, a soft-spoken African American woman with an understated power and deep respect and affection for her students, stayed for my talk. She asked me to mentor a small group of seventh and eighth grade girls, who, in her words were "at risk of promise."[5] I was concerned that a mentoring relationship might make future research problematic, but I did not mention research. Not yet.

Messy Processes in Liminal Spaces

The work was straightforward—make a promise to kids for whom too many had been broken and show up ready to engage, challenge, and care every time. I entered a half empty room and looked into the questioning eyes of the girls who would be my toughest teachers, reluctant students, beautiful daughters. These adolescent girls, awash in an externally imposed stigma of failure and language of *at-risk,* met me at the door, wrapped me in the hot, fast talk, and eager demands of youth, and anchored me to this place. Ever the lover of the small story, I hoped this would become a space of connection and belonging where my research and commitment to community might flourish.

Early on, they challenged and pushed against my privileged presence, occasionally poking fun at the proper way I talked: "You don't talk Black, Miss." That they thought I didn't "act Black" was clear in their questions and the ways they, sometimes lovingly, sometimes not, teased me about my "white people" interests (hiking). I also didn't "think Black" specifically when it came to the issue of fighting. One feisty seventh grader remarked more than once, "Miss, you telling me different stuff than my Mama. She say, if somebody put they hands on me, I fight or else people will think you're weak." During one of our meetings, a brilliant eighth grader who did not trust

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5. The initial program included four eighth grade girls (one Latino, two White, and one African American) who graduated. The next year and a half of the program was comprised of ten African American seventh graders.

my presence or the reason for the group questioned the authenticity of my Blackness when I professed my ignorance of a Black comedian's role in a movie. She remarked, "A real Black person would know who Kevin Hart is." [6] I was taken aback. In a space where I had experienced belonging, I was still very much an outsider. My positionality as a privileged, educated Black woman among young girls who questioned my ability to see them was complicated by attempting to make sense of what research might look like in these entangled spaces.

The girls always called me "Miss" although they knew I was a college professor. This began as an expression of distance—of wariness, and a test of my intentions and authenticity—but eventually, Miss became a term of endearment, an expression of trust and respect. Even the tone of their voices changed. Later, when they called me Miss, it was a demonstration of care—a girl standing close to me, leaning against my shoulder, or smiling into my eyes. Yes, I was an educated woman with privilege — but in those moments, Miss became an avenue of sisterhood, a confidence shared, advice given, care found. In the "thick of things" (St. Pierre 2008), we had finally reached a point where we were able to develop a mission: to provide a safe, fun, and caring space for girls to talk, share, and discuss issues important to their lives. Our goal: to increase girls' sense of self-worth and improve girls' perspectives toward education. The girls named themselves Diamond Girls, and our meetings became more fluid and relaxed, a place where "hope and struggle live on together" (Glass 2014, 105) through the shared stories of dreams, family, abandonment, homelessness, racism, and boys. In the knowing and being with one another, I believed the best kind of research becomes possible. St. Pierre (2008) affirms this being in the "thick of things." She wrote:

> …our face-to-face interactions with people make our work especially valid, we are present in our research, in the thick of things, talking with and observing our participants…extended time in the field-being there and being there longer-makes our work even more valid. (321)

Because "[q]ualitative inquiry is not distant; it's live and in person; it happens right now…" (St. Pierre 2008, 321), I shared my own stories of loss and marginalization—my search for belonging, to model (and practice) the fruitful risk in telling one's truth. In reluctant bursts, the girls shared small stories: what it felt like to be the victim and the perpetrator of hurtful rumors, abuse, lost fathers, tough mothers, ailing grandparents, teachers who dismissed them, and school suspensions. Each meeting provided sacred space for them to write down their truths, and they always had the choice to share, or not. Eventually, they did this unbidden: slipping scraps of notebook paper into my bag, or rushing back before I left the building to press their thoughts into my open hand. Sometimes they brought new girls, saying, "Miss, she needs you. She has problems Miss." These girls didn't join our group, but they were heard in that moment, and they too would greet me with a hug or a shout—"Hi Miss!" across the busy hallway.

Colleagues encouraged me to pursue research with a persistence that implied I was wasting my time otherwise. Admittedly, it seemed an efficient way to blend service with research, but when I approached the Diamond Girls with the idea, they responded, "Who's gonna read this, Miss?" "Ooh! My Mama would beat my butt if she knew I said that [told her business], Miss!" There was also the (mis)perception that writing was no longer just about small stories. Despite my explanations that any research would be their truths, the girls were reluctant to forego what they saw as the freedom to talk about their own theorized lives (hooks 1994), and the power to share messages that unfolded in their own time and in their own way.

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6. The student was referring to Kevin Hart, a popular African American comedian.

With each visit, I felt a subtle nag of the hegemonic selfishness of a turn towards research, and the partial, flawed glimpse of reality that such research may impose (Newsom 2001). My research heart said, yes, find a way to center these girls' voices—let them tell their own stories! Surely, the interactional thickness of our time together also validates the rich work we have done together. Yet, the time spent carving out a space of shared connection with these vulnerable girl-warriors to reveal the psychological heft of their burdens and depth of their dreams, was not a site for research. I read my decision to forego research as a partial failure, but it was also a reading of the moment anew. This choice, where something was lost, something was "missed" also made room for missing as seeking/finding/creating new avenues for critical race praxis (Yamamoto 1997); this was sacred ground.

Diffractive Readings of Missing Stories

In this section, we pivot around our diffractive readings of the *missing stories* described above. The term *missing stories* originated during our discussions of Candace's Diamond Girls, who referred to her as "Miss"—a term used to distance, then endear, and finally to symbolize trust and respect. As we discussed this term, and Candace's struggles with her "almost research," the idea of what was "missing" opened up an alternative route to understanding the struggles that we all shared. For Candace, her resolve that her role with the Diamond Girls was indeed "Miss" (not Doctor, not professor) made space for moments that would have likely been lost under the gaze of formal research. While we did not know what to call it at the time, our discussions about Candace's multiple roles and her dissonance on how to proceed in her work with the Diamond Girls helped each of us to engage in diffractive readings of our own *missing stories*, and reimagine our roles as critical ethnographers.

We offer a graphic representation (Figure 1) to demonstrate how missing stories emerged in multiple ways—as roles, risks, and processes—and how we viewed each through a lens of justice and good research. Diffractive readings allowed us to see multiple truths, translations, and possibilities present within stories. We also discovered new ways to analyze data, reflect on self-as-researcher, and better envision future research projects.
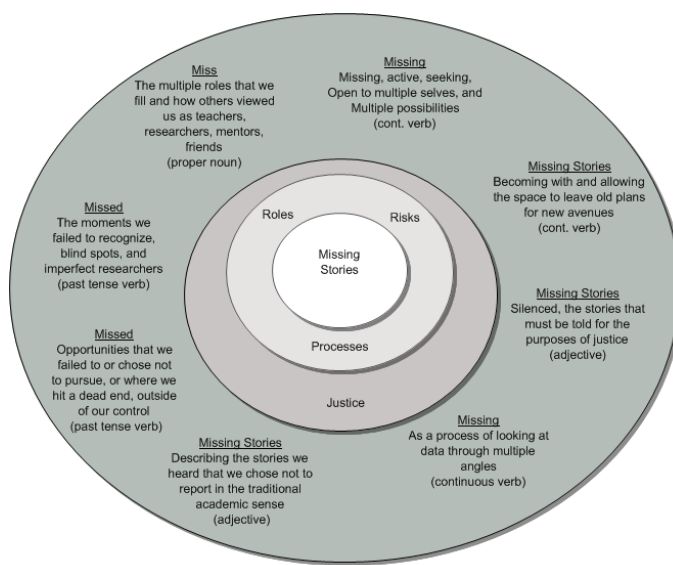
Figure 1. Missing Stories Graphic Representation. Courtesy of Leah Panther, University of Missouri, Kansas City.

Multiple and Contradictory Roles

Each vignette demonstrates the multiple and contradictory roles we played in our research. Sophia's story told of how as both insider and outsider, youth and educators viewed her ethnic identity and cultural knowledge disparately, which affected how she could/did access the community's trust. Her identity and role as researcher were questioned: "Who are you Miss?" This question had implications for access and opportunity in research spaces, but the answer was complex. The assumptions behind the identities Sophia did (not) occupy informed other people's judgments about her role in particular spaces (Gallagher 2000). In a related way, Charlene's affirmation that Joy's "soul is not white" juxtaposed by Joy's retrospective grief over the role that she may have played in Charlene's resignation, created a reflective space where the "color lines" were blurry, and the impossibility of playing the good white (Thompson 2003) was brought to bear. Similarly, both Kindel and Candace were conflicted in their projects: Kindel, in her role as a community partner and university spokesperson, and Candace, in her role as an educational researcher overshadowed by the Diamond Girls' need for a mentor. Our close connections to communities and ethical obligations to accept our multiple roles and settle into unplanned processes were a part of "becoming with" (Lather 2014, 5) and "intra-acting from within" (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, 114) spaces where we aimed to center justice.

The Risks of *Missing Stories*

Missing stories sometimes resulted in missed opportunities in/of research. We encountered key decision-makers who thwarted our best efforts, or we failed to pursue opportunities that may have led to interesting action or data. A key examples is Candace's project, as missed research. Her decision not to research the Diamond Girls was in part an act of resistance not to 'betray' their small stories, the living theory of the Diamonds; and partly a result of her inexperience to navigate and reformulate a research project that would honor the girls' voices. Stuck in the liminal space of risk, Candace chose to forgo potentially powerful research. In all of our projects, there are stories that will be heard only by the researcher because in those moments the interconnections of the *we* in research necessitated taking risks to honor intimate stories by not pursing or reporting them. These untold, hidden and protected *missing stories*, serve as a catalyst in our new level of understanding as well. Honoring the hearts opened to us through stories is a requirement of good research.

***Missing Stories* as a Process**

Finally, somewhere between roles and risks was the idea that *missing stories* include questions related to fleeting moments and unknowable, potential failures. How should Sophia have responded to questions about her ethnic and racial identity? How could Kindel have interrupted the ripple effects of the disparaging newspaper article? How should Joy have responded to the rumors about Charlene? Was Candace's conclusion not to conduct formal research with the Diamond Girls the best choice? While some readers might not have encountered these questions as stuck places, we analyze these refusals (Tuck and McKenzie 2014) and missteps to expand our knowledge about the process of choosing "the good" over a singular truth—as a move toward justice.

Lessons Learned from *Missing Stories*

We found that sometimes *missing stories* came at a cost of time unaccounted for in academic expectations that did not make room for unpublished scholarship. *Missing stories* also required personal risks where the work was emotional and uncomfortable. Still these *missing stories* beckon us forward since they are not constituted in words, rather by our responsibility to be a part of re-imagining and doing justice work.

At this point in the journey, we find ourselves at a place of "radical openness…a profound edge" (hooks 1995, 206) with regard to our roles, risks, and processes. In finding our way out of the stuck places of this messy work, the group process has been invaluable. As Freire (1994) reminds, "Hope is rooted in (wo)men's incompletion, from which they move out in constant search—a search which can be carried out only in communion with others" (72). We assert that finding, participating in, and remaining in dialogue with critical communities is essential to the work of critical ethnographers. This mosaic we created by diffractively analyzing our *missing stories,* enhanced our ability to rethink previous analyses of and entanglements with/in data through new theoretical lenses. Because we each came at our work from various regions, identities, and theoretical leanings, it was neither a smooth nor a linear process, but the collective reading of our work was vital to our work as critical ethnographers.

It is important to state that, in the end, we never arrived at consensus about if we contributed enough to communities with whom we are in dialogue. Yet, it is in this not knowing, from a space of imbalance and tension that critical ethnographers can engage new truths that contribute to justice work. In these spaces, we must continually choose to embrace the dissonance of belonging, the pursuit of doing good research, and the call to honor *missing stories* in all their iterations.

We assert that critical methodologists must transcend the question: Does this constitute scholarship? We must carefully consider moments where leaving a project does not mean departing from justice, in fact it may be justice work. We have offered these diffractive readings of our *missing stories* with/in and across our experiences in hope of advancing *the good* work of critical ethnographers. Introducing the concept of *missing stories* as messy processes, multifaceted risks, and multiple roles taken up by critical ethnographers, we embrace the concept that "a researcher cannot tease herself apart from the world because she is part of and results from the ongoing intra-action of the world" (Roulston and Shelton 2015, 394). To this end, we hope to advance the conversation about when and where untold stories, academic failures, new possibilities, multiple tellings, and counter stories are the most valuable and best versions of the truths derived from engaging in research measured by justice.

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