Rejected

Looking from the Outside In

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REGRESSIVE

On the journey to the PhD, there are moments when the pursuit of scholarship that you believe to be important to your community feels like a formidable task—filled with excitement, uncertainty, and the chance that this work might even be acknowledged. As a third-year doctoral student, I've come to see conference proposals as part of the process, an essential step toward cementing one's footing among the scholarly community. The stakes are high; these moments validate your research and open doors to academic networks and future opportunities, which are quite important to one's career.

With this in mind, my colleagues and I decided to embark on the journey of submitting a proposal to present our collective research at one of the largest educational conferences in our field. This proposal was not just another submission—it was an assertion of our voices, experiences, and refusal to be overlooked and discarded in the academy, something that happens to marginalized individuals. Our proposal centered on our experience in cultivating a counter-space. We created a space where we could authentically explore and share our lived experiences navigating this new academic environment as Black scholars at a historically white institution.

Ashlee et al. (2017) describe autoethnography as a way to push back against societal norms by using personal stories to explore their larger cultural impact. Collaborative autoethnography takes this a step further by combining personal stories with research techniques typically used to study groups or cultures (Chang et al., 2014; Palmer et al., 2020). Grounded in autoethnography, we framed our stories and responded to prompts we created as a means to collect data, resulting in a cohesive narrative that sought to challenge the field of education's commitment to its mission regarding equity. With trusted professors reviewing and providing critiques of our work, we revised and reworked our proposal and eventually submitted it with a mix of hope and trepidation. Then came the waiting—the stretch of time between submission and mid-November when decisions would be released.

Befitting of the typical grey-esque weather during this time of year, a text message from a friend in my cohort, who had also submitted a proposal for the same conference, prompted me to check my inbox: "Hey! Have you heard back yet?" I immediately went to my inbox; at first, there was nothing. I replied that I hadn't received a decision yet. I closed my inbox and began to finish the paragraph I had been working on. About a half hour later, I refreshed my email and saw it— an email from the conference. My heart began to race as I clicked the link, logged into the portal, and stared at the decision: rejected.

The rejection wasn't the worst part; after all, I understood that not all work is accepted. What was unsettling for me was the feedback from one of the reviewers. Two reviewers provided constructive feedback, offering valuable suggestions for improvement. Yet, Reviewer One scored our proposal a 2 out of 5 for scholarly significance. A 2 out of 5! The audacity of reducing our

lived experiences to such a dismissive score angered me and left me a bit off-kilter. Who was this reviewer to decide the significance of our stories?

Logging out of the portal, I felt a mix of anger and exasperation. The feedback lingered in my mind, forcing me to wrestle with questions about my competency. For weeks, I avoided revisiting the comments as the weight of rejection settled. Yet, even with the feeling of rejection looming, resilience began to take root, reminding me that the mountain I climb is not mine alone to scale—it is part of a much larger journey, shared by many who refuse to be reduced or erased.

PROGRESSIVE

Feedback, when delivered with care, can be a powerful tool for growth. It has the power to guide budding scholars to new heights they were not aware of. Constructive feedback should feel like an invitation to improve, not a condemnation that leaves the author questioning their ability, especially when the reviewer has also been and continues to be in a space where they, too, are authors. After all, we're all creators, and I'm sensitive "'bout my ish," like Erykah Badu (1997) once said. Scholars, much like artists, pour their hearts into their work, and when feedback is dismissive or harsh, it doesn't inspire growth—but it has the power to wound. For me, the feedback from our proposal cut deeply, particularly the remark about the lack of scholarly significance.

What I longed for in that moment was some form of encouragement—something like, "This is an interesting topic with potential." That single phrase could have been the lifeline I needed to dive back into the proposal immediately. After all, that was the kind of critique we'd been receiving from our trusted professors. That kind of feedback has the power to recalibrate and even reignite passion rather than extinguish it. Instead, I was left stuck in a spiral of self-doubt, wondering if our experiences even mattered in the eyes of the academy.

As time passed, I realized that it wasn't just about the words, though—it was about who was speaking them. I couldn't help but consider that the reviewer's dismissal might have been limited by their social background—one that didn't see the significance of our work. I wondered just how different the feedback might have been if it came from a reviewer from a marginalized background—that's assuming the reviewer wasn't from a marginalized community—someone who understood the weight of what it means to create space for voices that are so often silenced.

As I reflected on this, I imagined a more equitable review process, one where reviewers make up a diverse group of people, individuals from all walks of life, bringing varied perspectives that could foster understanding. Such a system would not only make feedback more meaningful but also create a space where scholars like me felt supported, where mistakes can be seen as being a part of the learning process, not a failure. It would be a space where the chisel of feedback shaped and polished, rather than shattered, the work we dared to offer to the world.

ANALYTICAL

Weeks passed, and the creeping thoughts continued to chip away at my confidence. I knew I couldn't remain in that place of doubt for perpetuity. If I wanted to grow as a scholar, I had to confront the feedback head-on. Although wholly unmotivated, I pushed beyond those feelings to review the comments in their entirety, determined not to let them derail my progress.

As I revisited Reviewer One's feedback, I couldn't help but notice their assertion: this proposal, the reviewer claimed, wouldn't contribute much to the current discourse. This dismissal felt more like a door slamming closed rather than an invitation to grow and improve. So, I began to search for the comments section in hopes of looking for more specificity regarding the reviewer's comments, just hoping to make sense of how they may have arrived at such a conclusion. However, it was to no avail; there wasn't much detail regarding their assertion that the paper did not contribute much to the scholarship.

Their words forced me to reflect not only on the feedback itself but also on the broader understanding of the academic review process. This experience taught me a sobering lesson with regard to humility, that is, even reviewers have blind spots despite their expertise. No one individual is capable of knowing all things about every subject. Yet, some seem reluctant to admit when a topic they are reviewing and are expected to provide meaningful feedback for falls outside their expertise. How much better might the review process be if reviewers acknowledged their limitations and sought guidance from colleagues with more familiarity or insight?

As I reflected, I began to recognize patterns when it comes to how I engage with critique. I've always valued feedback, realizing that feedback makes you better because, after all, I'm a novice, and there's no shame in that. Constructive feedback, in particular, feels like a roadmap—it's clear, actionable, and empowering. It reminds me that I'm still learning, yet it constantly challenges me to be open to refining my work. However, feedback like Reviewer One's—vague, dismissive, and unconstructive—has the opposite effect. Instead of clarity, it brings confusion. Instead of growth, it brings doubt. It just felt less like a tool for improvement and more like a weapon, blunt and harmful.

This incident has helped to sharpen my understanding of feedback and how it can adversely impact students when it isn't constructive. Such feedback has also made me keenly aware of the feedback I provide to students, which I hope is empathetic—and an acknowledgment of the vulnerability present when students share their ideas or art.

I closed the reviewer portal that day, not quite understanding what my next steps would be regarding Reviewer One's comments. However, this rejection simultaneously renewed my commitment to approaching others with the same gentleness and clarity that I desired.

SYNTHETICAL

In the grand scheme of things, I've come to understand that Reviewer One's comments were just a necessary stepping stone—although a very uncomfortable one. I know it to be a part of my growth as a scholar. When I first reviewed their critique, the sting of rejection was sharp, and it lasted for days as their words reverberated in my mind, again, at times challenging my sense of competence. However, upon further reflection, I've understood I'm not alone in my experience. I imagine many doctoral students have wrestled with the similar discomfort of rejection at some point in their academic journey.

Through this process, I've also understood that we academics must accept that the path to success is as much about perseverance as it is about precision. Every manuscript, book chapter, conference proposal, etc., will not be accepted. I must embrace that truth, because the review process is woven throughout an academic's life. Learning to reframe feedback—constructive or not—is a skill in and of itself, one that requires tact, patience with oneself, and self-compassion because all comments can be used as opportunities for growth.

And so, as I think about Reviewer One's remarks, I realize that their critique could have easily derailed me had I allowed it to. But with time and some dialoguing with trusted friends, I understand things differently now. I don't have to allow unconstructive comments to diminish my sense of self or my scholarly aspirations. In fact, I can turn those experiences into fuel for the cause. As I revisit the moment, I find myself more determined to prove that reviewer wrong and rise above my muddled opinions with self-doubt.

Yet, I envision a future where reviewers approach their role with empathy and intention, offering feedback conducive to building up students' confidence honestly. That vision inspires me to advocate for change—not just for myself but for emerging scholars who might encounter similar moments. This synthesis of past challenges, present reflections, and future aspirations reminds me that feedback, even when it stings, is not the end of the story. It's simply another chapter that can strengthen my scholarship if I allow it to.

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