

She Ain't Got No Teeth: Renderings of Positivist Science, Technology and the Sociological Imagination Using Ethnography as Pedagogical Process and Product

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ABSTRACT

Critical qualitative inquiry in today's university context must contend with the causes and effects of academic capitalism: student loan debt, status competition, and individualism just to name a few. Uncritical technouptopian renderings of digital technologies in the era of quantitative big data overshadow qualitative research as epistemology, praxis and pedagogy. I consider how we can cultivate iterative practices in contexts that marginalize *and* benefit from qualitative inquiry. This composite case study is drawn from courses taught between 2012 and 2014 in a highly selective residential U.S. college. This case study uses examples of critical engagements between students and various digital texts. Student responses, texts, and reflexive praxis describe how they developed a critical read of positivist science and digital texts throughout the course culminating with an assignment to write an autoethnography that interrogates their social class position. I center *digital* texts (e.g. blogs, new media journalism, opinion-editorials) as institutional and individual ethnographies. During the course students problematize the subordination of societal interests to technological positivism. They excavate digital texts for ideology and the means of production and consumption. After a descriptive setting, the case traces the genealogy of an assignment that unfolds over multiple class sessions. Students deconstruct an online quiz, a digital genre made popular by websites like BuzzFeed. A quiz item about social class and dental hygiene prompted a student to proclaim that poor women, "ain't got no teeth." This call and response between student and text facilitated a read of poverty, globalism, gender, race, and class. I present evidence of students using qualitative research to create a sustainable ethnographic practice of resistance worthy of Mills' sociological imagination.

Neo-liberal logics have transformed knowledge production into a zero sum global competition for status, jobs, and mobility. That ideology is transformed into institutional contexts that privilege positivist science like science, technology, engineering and math. Learners internalize these ideologies as individual work ethic. In this context, a good student is an individual disembedded from social structures who acquires technical skills with clear occupational ends. Students articulate pressure to choose the "right" majors, "get" the right grade, and beat a linear path to a "good" job. These processes intersect in ways particularly pressing for qualitative research, namely the proliferation of digitally mediated data and texts as positivist exemplars of knowledge production. Using qualitative research as a pedagogical model, students develop a critical practice of interrogating self, society, history, biography, and intersecting oppressions. The practice is critical in the sense that we develop an interpretative paradigm to critique common sense understandings of the world. Readings, lectures, and assignments are both ethnographic *process* (i.e. ontology, epistemology) and *product* (i.e. reflection and assessment). In final assignments students produce an *autoethnography* that positions their biography within a historical, social, and structural systems of inequality.