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# Contesting Content, or How the Emperor Sheds His Old Clothes: Guest Editor's Introduction

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James Haywood Rolling, Jr

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# Contesting Content, or How the Emperor Sheds His Old Clothes

## Guest Editor's Introduction

James Haywood Rolling, Jr.  
*Syracuse University*

This brief article is written as an introduction to this *Qualitative Inquiry* special thematic issue, exploring the intersection of performance studies, critical race theory, and autoethnography. What do these forms of inquiry look like? The guest editor, a visual artist, has chosen the strategy of showing rather than merely telling.

**Keywords:** *autoethnography; critical race theory; performance studies; arts-based educational research*

Why is any episode of my personal story relevant to you, the reader? This is a fair question to ask, as I ask it often myself. As far as you are concerned I am a writer, but once upon a time I was a visual artist, a Master of Fine Arts, and that is all I thought I was. And for a time, I admit, I searched only for mediums by which I might sharpen that definition. Well, more than a decade later—at the time of this writing and as I seek to introduce this special thematic issue of *Qualitative Inquiry (QI)* exploring the intersection of performance studies, critical race theory, and autoethnography—I still see myself as an artist. However, if I am still a visual artist, I am one who is subject to new mediums, the three aforementioned theoretical forms that I am learning to negotiate through prose, poetry and imagery. The first of these forms to come to my awareness in rich fields of theoretical play was autoethnography, the central practice of my practice-based dissertation methodology.

As far as I am concerned, our story begins in Episode 3 with an unexpected correspondence received from Dr. Norman K. Denzin, a letter that

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first reveals how this guest editorial assignment served my own research identity, but also reveals much more.

### Episode 3: The Letter

Dear James,

You have done two very strong pieces for *QI*, folding performance studies, critical race theory, and autoethnography all into one. We would like to do a special issue in *QI* that does just this, and we feel you would be a good candidate to guest edit such an issue. Please let us know if you are able to accept our invitation. We look forward to hearing from you.

As ever,

Norman K. Denzin

The notion that I had developed an early ease and expertise in discourses relating autoethnographic, critical race, and performance theory didn't materialize for me until Denzin sent the letter. My lack of clarity was perhaps tied to my trepidation as a fledgling and newly hired faculty member for the professional certification programs in art education at a top-tier research university. The bulk of my scholarship had been published in journals outside the field of art education, so what exactly was expected of me? It is reasonable to presume that my research should help promote the field of art education. Yet it remains to be seen in the outcome of promotion and tenure decisions regarding my employment whether I have been hired to promote art education as it has traditionally been practiced or as it might possibly be practiced.

I've been transgressing borders for as long as I can remember—beginning when I was bussed to elementary school through fanciful White neighborhoods where my presence was manifestly alien, and transgressing once again as I was being bussed back home to the ghetto in which I lived. Transgressions were still being manifested during my undergraduate college career as I transferred from a major in architecture to a major in fine arts where I was cast/e as a generalist student because I did not present a clearly distinct concentration within the study of the visual arts. Hence, I first made sense of autoethnography through its theoretical echo of these and other similar lived contrasts between socialized expectations and the presence of rogue possibilities, and in its consistency with research questions in my dissertation as I was exploring regimes of propriety and the transgression of social identity.

Autoethnography opposes the ruling bodies of the reigning empire—applied and social scientific methods of inquiry (Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Jones, 2005). It operates within the interstices—and blurs the boundaries—between art and science. It is “part *auto* or self and part *ethno* or culture” (Ellis, 2004, p. 31), the transcription of human social experience through evocative and emotional written discourse; it becomes a form of inquiry that does not merely write up the research but is itself the story of discovery. Autoethnography contends with proprieties in social roles and acts of research, interrogating and thus disrupting the insistence of authoritative and abstract analyses, and allowing new interpretive stories to be insinuated into any discourse (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Gooding-Brown, 2000). Pratt (1994) has defined an autoethnography as “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them (p. 28). Pratt (1992) also defines the autoethnographic text as follows.

A text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them . . . Autoethnographic texts are not, then, what are usually thought of as autochthonous or ‘authentic’ forms of self-representation . . . Rather they involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or conqueror. These are merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding. (p. 28)

Rogue narratives, once present in the corpus of approved knowledge content, become the nuclei for new discourses in identity. In what St. Pierre (2000) describes as a double move, simultaneous to my becoming subject to autoethnography as it continues to shape my public and professional identity, autoethnography has also become a new medium for me to make art and meaning out of the personal and professional identities that constrain me. As a result of this double movement, autoethnography generates agency within my very subjectivity, allowing me to “decode and recode” my identity “within discursive formations and cultural practices” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 504), and opening up possibilities for “continual reconstruction and reconfiguration” (p. 502).

In the search for content for inquiry, and in an era when we still speak the empire’s “mother tongue,” a conqueror’s cant, “the language of humanism . . . a discourse that spawns structure after structure after structure—binaries, categories, hierarchies, and other grids of regularity that are not only linguistic but also very material” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 4), we

most often overlook the content embodied in our own local experiences, our own life practices. Autoethnography is a means of inquiry that seeks to disembody content for inquiry from its embodiment in one's own life history and practices. As a means of inquiry within the pale of a deterministic and politicized epistemic dispensation, autoethnography presents itself as a "narrative performance"; the performer utters what must be considered "acts of social transgression," wherein

the telling of the story itself becomes a transgressive act—a revealing of what has been kept hidden, a speaking of what has been silenced—an act of reverse discourse that struggles with the preconceptions borne in the air of dominant politics. (Park-Fuller, 2000, p. 26)

Autoethnographic methodology dislodges subjective experience and moves lived evidence to the center of the researcher's hypotheses. Once disembedded from marginality, this new content disrupts the limitations of traditional research activity and becomes a harrow for combing through archaeologies of social context, the regularities of positivism, and the structures of hegemonic power. Autoethnography makes intentional use of the observer effect often confused by scientific laymen such as I with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.<sup>1</sup> The observer effect "refers to changes that the act of observing has on the phenomenon being observed."<sup>2</sup> Because self-reflexivity contains enough energy to disturb social and academic expectations, becoming self-aware within the deterministic framing structures of modernity will invariably change the constitution of those structures. Juxtaposing and rejuxtaposing the self as the instrument of inquiry within the confines of objective framing structures, altering those structures as one moves reflexively along, makes a form of performance art out of acts of story and self-representation.

In Episode 2, I discovered that the performances that reinterpret identity and subjectivity are often clothed in strange garb. But the acts of research described below are familiar.

## **Episode 2: Performance Documentation**

I was accepted into one of the MFA programs in the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University in 1988, on earning a full-tuition fellowship in their African American Studies program. It was in the library of the African American Studies Department that I discovered new forms of

research that I had not figured. Zora Neale Hurston. Langston Hughes. Aaron Douglas. Louis Armstrong. Marian Anderson. James Van Der Zee. Alain Locke. Others.

A lyric poem “shows” another person how it is to feel something. Even if the mind resists, the body responds to poetry. It is *felt*. Sociologically, each lyric poem represents a “candid photo” or an “episode” or an epiphany. People organize their sense of self around and through such epiphanous moments. (Richardson, 1997, pp. 180-181)

In that neglected attic library, I found documentation of critical performances. I found evidence that bodies caught up in modernity and held there in state, may somehow be born again into postmodern significance, into that “theatre out of mingling selves trying to understand their inversions” (Lhamon, 1998, p. 132). Such bodies of evidence were easy to identify because they were caught up in epiphanies.

Epiphanies are sudden manifestations naughtily flipping up the kilts of the emperor, Western Civilization, a grand narrative still bedecked in a display of his positivist status, a *de rigueur* ensemble of humanist assumptions. And yet underneath the emperor’s old clothes, narratives of ethnic, gender, racial, and other socially enunciated identities contend for relevance in the conduct of inquiry. This messy complexity was revealed to me in the nakedness of lyric poetry. The following exemplar of Western letters references the performance of Blackface and the antithetical African American in modern minstrel shows by African Americans themselves, a practice that became so typical in the years subsequent to the Civil War that “nearly all commercial blackface troupes consisted of black performers in blackface” (Lhamon, 1998, p. 120).<sup>3</sup>

#### MINSTREL MAN

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
And my throat  
Is deep with song,  
I suffer after  
I have held my pain  
So long.

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter,

You do not hear  
 My inner cry,  
 Because my feet  
 Are gay with dancing,  
 You do not know  
 I die.  
 —Langston Hughes

In the earlier quote by Richardson (1997), she locates equivalencies between candid photos, sociocultural episodes, personal epiphanies, and poetry in a way that reveals much about the quality of each. Hughes, in his candor, has documented a text rife with contention against the overt presentation of blackface performers, smiles painted on their faces. This carefully selected episode in inquiry is chosen for its epiphanous quality, not for its factual basis; we do not know who this minstrel performer is, where he lived, what he looked like, or what he ate. But we do know how he felt. The inquiry of the poet shows to us a working model of the human experience. If such episodes are epiphanous, they are also diaphanously so, revealing context in a slow accretion of translucencies mapped one atop the other and over the personal experiences of those who encounter them. We know what the minstrel performer feels because we have felt the same, if for other reasons.

Richardson (1997) writes that the task of the lyric poem—or, I would add, any other lyrical content carried across to us in print, in musical score, in voice, or in movement—is to “represent actual experiences—episodes, epiphanies, misfortunes, pleasures—capturing those experiences in such a way that others can experience and *feel* them” (p. 183). The poetic in acts of research and inquiry reduces the distances between my experiences and the experiences of others, expanding the possibilities that I might for a time feel my life commingling within another body of evidence. Richardson (1997) writes that poetry, “built as it is on speech as an embodied activity, touches both the cognitive and the sensory in the speaker and the listener,” touching us “where we live, in our bodies” (p. 143). In response, as a human being touched by the experience of others, touched by candor and contention, touched by poetry and the possibility of critical performances, I am also compelled to inquire.

#### PROCEDURES FOR AN INQUIRY

In the endings  
 and beginnings  
 there are signs and co-signs  
 the signs tell the story



the co-signs bind the story  
 hidden between the signs  
 whispering there  
 breathing the time  
 telling ambiguities  
 both unknown and forgotten  
 unwanted sentences  
 syntactical rifts  
 an un-named story  
 always in the signs  
 between the tellings  
 of signs gone by  
 of signs held dear  
 shaping signs  
 ambient signs  
 signs that blind  
     of multiple visions  
 in-between  
     the space-time continuum  
 the event horizon  
     between the binary orbits  
 and the sun's periphery  
     quantum bodies are overwhelmed  
 in the darkness  
     before the bright occluding sign  
 underneath the heavenlies

the eclipse of the sun is inexorable, yet nowhere to be seen  
 so my (re)search continues  
 as we grope for evidence of hanging bodies in our intolerable fields of play.

## Episode 1: The Visitation

The first episode of the story that has resulted in this special issue takes place long before the latter two and well before my development of a critical research consciousness. Critical race theorizing over recent decades continues as an extension of the initial work begun by progressive legal scholars. Drawing on a literature base in law, sociology, history, and education, critical race theory (CRT) represents an effort to understand the social construction of race and its centrality in the constitution of Western subjectivities and the intersection of race with other forms of subordination.

However, it is worth noting that the harbingers of CRT have been visited on the life experiences of its researchers as they seek to remove its camouflages through the act of theorizing. CRT seeks to challenge the camouflage of race talk in dominant ideology and thus operates within the liberatory and transformative paradigm of social justice. CRT thus valorizes narratives drawn on experiential knowledge, because it studies the effects of racism, classism, sexism, and other subordinating sociocultural practices on people like you and I (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27). I present to you the transcription one of my early introductions to critical race theory, a narrative excerpt from my (Rolling, 2003) dissertation.

I was with a group of undergraduate classmates in an art history class excursion to the Museum of Modern Art to see a special collection of drawings on a day when the museum was closed to the public. We entered glass doors to the grand lobby and lined up at the large reception desk. I had started college when I was 16 years old so I was still rather young and self-absorbed. I was not paying attention to what the instructor of our course was doing at the head of the line as she facilitated our entry into the museum. I was never talkative or chatty and was observing my surroundings with great curiosity since I rarely visited museums.

I stood in the midst of my classmates and their conversations, dressed in faded jeans and old sneakers just as they were. As usual, I wore a black backpack with all my belongings, keeping my hands free. As the line was making its way past the reception desk, a security guard called my attention. I gave it to him casually. He asked if he could help me. I shook my head rather slowly, trying to decipher what felt to my limited perception to be a strangely coded message. He clarified; he said the delivery entrance was on the side of the building, suggesting I was in the wrong place. Suggesting I was a messenger. I felt like I had been slapped against the side of my head with his powerful, uniform-clad words, lobbed at me in his capacity as a representative of the MoMA, the institution on whose property I stood. I was left stinging. I was embarrassed at being singled out and wondered if anyone else had heard this comment. None of my classmates seemed to react at all. None of my classmates was approached in this fashion. I was alone. It was then that I noticed what the guard must have seen, that I was the only black person in the group. Frankly, I had never given real thought before as to how this must have appeared since it was a visual dynamic I could not gaze upon while occupying my own body. The silence of my counterparts while I fought a growing rage only served to reinforce our differences. They were oblivious to the subtleties in force.

I responded with great effort to control my breathing, to contain my response, to cap my rising emotion, to not embarrass myself by causing a scene. I focused on the guard alone, telling him that I was a student in the

group in front of him just like everyone else there. I wanted him to tell me why he thought I was different from everyone else. I wanted him to expose his own prejudice. He did not cooperate. Nevertheless, I knew before I asked him, I already knew, deep down I knew, so deep down I had never been conscious of it. I was a black, male college student in the early 1980s. Was I that rare? The guard I was addressing was also black. He looked at me like I was speaking to him in an alien tongue from an alien body in alien circumstances. He didn't seem to understand that all I wanted was a declaration of guilt. He didn't give one. I was trapped between my desire to bodily pursue him and vocally force a response, and my desire to remain dignified and reserved, my body quietly in the background. I could not do both. The guard didn't answer me. I choked down the unspent emotion as we entered the elevator. No one spoke to me. My lips were pressed together hard, my eyebrows squeezed into stiff furrows and my eyes did not attempt to meet anyone else's.

Lost low now, invisibly I thought, in the business of my own bedeviled beliefs, I did not notice as we approached a second reception desk on the upper floor that housed the special collection. As I was about to step past, I mistakenly met the eyes of a blond-haired young lady with a bright smile and a sharp suit mouthing out loud the same question as moments before, "May I help you?" My response was loud this time, piercing the museum's quietude: "No, you may not help me! I am with the group!"

I now had everyone's attention whether I wanted it or not. I think my course instructor may have spoken up at this point to say we were all together but I cannot remember that really, any more than I can remember anything about the special collection I went to see that day. The only thing I remember with vivid clarity was the walk from the museum to the subway. I had peeled away from the group and all I felt was my skin. I felt it tingling as though it were not truly a part of my body. I felt all of its surfaces amazingly, shockingly apparent. I was exposed. My skin was radiating messages, heating my body, glowing brightly with colors, marking my body, calling me out, hotter underneath its flesh than the sun on the surface of it on that particularly humid day. I had never felt my skin weighing upon my frame before. I felt like I was wearing skin, as if it was covering me like a heavy drape over my head and making me appear to all passersby as if I were just a messenger. A mere messenger to be given directions and sent quickly on his way to side entrances. I was a college student on a full tuition scholarship but no one walking past me could see that. Skin was all in the way. I felt ashamed and angry at what I was wearing, not the torn jeans and beat up sneakers, but the skin.

Why is any episode of my personal story relevant to you, the reader? If the motivation behind the evolution and infiltration of CRT is simply the transformation of an unjust society, then perhaps the relevance of this private episode is in its appearance in research literature, contesting to make itself public; if a widespread consequence of the development of performance

studies is simply the documentation of epiphanic forms of knowledge, then perhaps the relevance of the performance documents I have found and made is in their poetry, contesting foundational premises with confounding lyricism; if the engine in autoethnography is simply the fullest possible narration of the human experience, then perhaps the relevance of Dr. Denzin's letter to me is in his decision to invite a guest editor whose subjectivities fuse acts of research with the making of art.

In the end of all stories is the beginning of new ones, and the scholarship in this special issue, brimming as it is with contested content, has been collected toward a qualitative end.

In this issue, Lace Marie Brogden sifts through childhood report cards and other artifacts of her schooling, an "educational researcher as artist working within," blending notions of archaeology and bricolage in her effort to understand curriculum as lived; like Slattery (2001), Brogden explores the power of autoethnography to excavate narratives, evoking memories and eliciting insights "that contribute to our understanding of students and classrooms" (Slattery, 2001, p. 395).

David G. Garcia introduces the reader to "Chicano-Latino ethnographic theater" as he examines the playwriting methods of the comedy theater trio Culture Clash. In the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Jones (2005) describes the many forms performance ethnography can take:

Ranging from recreating cultural performances for audiences invested and interested in understanding, preserving, and/or challenging particular identities and ways of life . . . to presenting individual (autoethnographic) experiences as a means for pointing up the subjective and situated nature of identity. (p. 770)

Karen V. Lee reflects on memories of discrimination and the irony of occupying the liminal space between a culture of diversity and a culture of prejudice. Her writing recalls "the impossibility of separating our life stories from the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are created and the ways in which performance as a site of dialogue and negotiation is itself a contested space" (Jones, 2005, p. 774).

Damion Waymer's negotiation of Black men's lived experiences considers the nuanced and varying efforts of such men to confront white privilege. Waymer's writing extends the discussion of African American identity and "moves discourse to storytelling performance, from autonomous texts to situated practices, from received storylines to emergent dramas" (Jones, 2005, p. 774); Waymer's autoethnography creates a space where "questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable" (Diamond, 1996, p. 4).

Kimberly Powell focuses on the growing contemporary artistic practice of taiko drumming and its role in Asian American identity politics; in so doing she works to move ethnography “away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, pp. 433-434).

I, James Haywood Rolling, engage in a secular form of blasphemy as I messily contest the name of a dead father, and the influence of forefathers, popular racism, and foundational research forms, inserting myself into the past to “create the conditions for rewriting and hence re-experiencing it”; like Denzin (2006), I seek “a dramatic, performative poetic” in research writing, “a writing form that enacts a methodology of the heart, a form that listens to the heart” in service to the human need to “learn how to love, to forgive, to heal, and to move forward (Denzin, 2006, p. 423).

Yarma Velázquez Vargas addresses the challenge of creating a text that unfolds “in the intersubjective space of individual and community” and that embraces “tactics for both *knowing* and *showing*” as she explores unspoken issues of race and ethnicity in Puerto Rico (Jones, 2005, p. 767, emphasis in original).

Jonathan Wyatt revisits his literary scholarship surrounding the death of his father and the continuing experience of loss; in this new writing Wyatt makes use of the Deleuzian concept of “stammering” and speaks “in and through experiences that are unspeakable as well as inhabiting and animating the struggle for words and often our failure to find them” (Jones, 2005, p. 772).

Contested content requires researchers of any ilk to ask, What kind of knowledge is this? What is the value of the evocative methodologies presented here? How might these research narratives reach beyond the boundaries of the scholarly community to serve the needs of those who do not research, of those who have not yet seen or heard? What does scholarship look like when it wears no clothes? In these uncertain days, in the midst of a waning empire of scientific content, these are fair questions to ask.

## Notes

1. Heisenberg’s uncertainty (or indeterminacy) principle is a characterization of the uncertainty in the measurement of a single elementary particle that has multiple quantities in that “increasing the accuracy of the measurement of one quantity increases the uncertainty of the simultaneous measurement of the other quantity.” Retrieved November 10, 2006, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncertainty\\_principle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncertainty_principle).

2. Retrieved November 10, 2006, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observer\\_effect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observer_effect).

3. For a fuller treatment of postmodernity as it relates to African American identity, see Rolling (2007).

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**James Haywood Rolling, Jr.**, earned his EdD and EdM in art education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and his MFA from Syracuse University. His research focuses on post-structuralist and poetic aesthetic interrogations of the certainties and norms of modernity, examining the archaeologies underlying the (re)constitution of stigmatized social identities from previous interpretations ensconced in Western visual culture. Dr. Rolling is an associate professor in the College of Visual and Performing Arts/ School of Education at Syracuse University, New York.