

***Psychology Through Critical Auto-Ethnography: Academic Discipline, Professional Practice and Reflexive History* by Ian Parker**

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Ian Parker's bold and expansive autoethnography aims to lay bare the nature of contemporary psychology through a whirlwind journey over the course of 40 years tracing the twists and turns of his own academic development and career. As a young student entering his studies at university, Parker is disillusioned by the discipline as he observes the apparatus of the field turning people into objects, with the goal to predict and control. At the start of the book, Parker is careful to define autoethnography and, more importantly, to distinguish it from forms of reflexivity that rely on researchers simply talking about themselves. For Parker, autoethnography means "attending to the context in which knowledge is produced" and to the manner in which subjectivity is woven together with social practices. This approach is not without its contradictions, as an insider, investigating the field of psychology as a sort of an "ethnographer on a strange planet", Parker knows that the project itself is riddled with irreconcilable claims and goals.

The five connected sections of the book, containing four chapters each, begin with Parker's first days as an undergraduate student, as he puts it, "psychology begins for me in Newcastle in September 1975." His entrance into academia parallels his burgeoning interest in politics, instigated by the brutalities of the Vietnam War and writings about Marxism. His relationship to ideas encountered during these initial years as an academic are shaped by experiences in childhood – like his mother's interest in existentialism and the conversations that ensued at the dinner table – but these autobiographical connections are hinted at very minimally, allowing only the academic/professionalized aspects of his humanity into the autoethnographic narrative. It is during these early years, when after a false start at one university, Parker commits himself to political activity and decides that precisely because of psychology's "bourgeois nature" he wants to embed himself within the discipline to understand how it works.

The tone picks up in the third chapter of the first section, as Parker's undergraduate studies are revisited. Most of the topics that he encounters in the late seventies are familiar to undergraduate students today, whether it is Zimbardo's prison experiments, Milgram's obedience studies, Lorenz's imprinting studies, or Eysenck's studies on personality. This relevance reads as unnerving and uncomfortable, further amplified by the harrowing observations lightly woven into the text by Parker. In this chapter, entitled *Biology*, Parker writes that "psychologists who were seeking out those of lower intelligence, seeking them out in order to sterilize them and stop them breeding and those who endorsed divide and rule strategies which pitted different categories of people against each other because they

were supposed to be from different 'races' often got themselves off the hook, avoided the accusation of racism by saying that they were merely describing what was actually there and what was natural" (p. 35). This chapter, written about experiences and intellectual encounters taking place over 40 years ago remains radical and would be met with resistance by psychology programs today. After describing the imprinting studies familiar to any student who has taken a cursory introduction to psychology course where they will most likely see a smiling older man with small ducklings behind him, Parker points out Lorenz's involvement with the Nazi Party. Psychology continues to fight and erase its eugenic history (Yakushko, 2019) despite the glaring connections, made visible by Parker's astute weaving of critical histories and studies familiar to undergraduate students of psychology. These observations go not only for historical figures like Jensen and Eysenck but contemporary intellectuals like Noam Chomsky's refusal to critically reflect upon the connection between his linguistic theories and his political beliefs.

Not only are canonized names within the discipline of psychology re-membered, that is fleshed, made human by Parker's reflections but the larger context of the community in which knowledge production takes place is revealed to be more colorful through his oftentimes humorous storytelling. In one such example, as he considers the suffering that psychology can enable, Parker tells the story of Jiggs IV who played the role of Cheeta in Tarzan movies and eventually retired to a comfortable home in Florida where Jiggs IV was able to watch movies and eat snacks during these twilight years. Animals within psychology, Parker points out, are treated far worse than these performers. With such instances of effective and wry humor, Parker illuminates the violence that is so casually endemic within psychology.

With what he attributes to luck, Parker finds a home within psychology and completes his PhD learning along the way that the "world of psychological research was itself quite a macho place." During this era, academia as an organizing system of power is demystified as each experience reveals the mechanics of the discipline that Parker is further embedded within. Like the formative studies he encountered early in his relationship to psychology, this too has unnerving resonances with graduate student experiences today, from the narratives that are employed to soothe fragile egos at lunchtime seminars to unapproachable scholars who present an engaging front from a distance only but are rather closed off when approached to finding that in order to say anything meaningful one must go outside of psychology for relevant content. At the end of the journey, Parker is able to secure a position after interviewing at several universities. It is at this point of the autoethnography, the experiences he details no longer resonate with PhD candidates today. Instead, as students today complete their PhDs in an extraordinary climate that follows many years of neoliberal dismantling of higher education, the text sometimes reads like an unintentional fantasy about a version of a life not available to current students of psychology.

Retracing the steps of Parker's career in the remaining chapters, the reader encounters *The Who's Who of psychologists of the Global North* and is a witness to his own establishment as one of the most prominent thinkers in the field. As readers, we accompany Parker through his illustrious academic career until when we finally - in the closing chapter - sit with him as he contemplates and eventually leaves his position. The decision to leave is the result of a bureaucratic trap designed to disempower academics and further shift academia toward a neoliberal market formula. Even with his experiences of institutional brutality, on a recent visit back to the university to support colleagues and students he is reminded that "it is possible to survive and resist an institution, to make it work for us instead of against us." Frequently engaging the reader, at the end of the text we are left holding a rubble of words that ask haunting questions that we, as readers who joined him on the journey, assemble and then are compelled to carry with us. These are some of the questions I will take up next.

Parker's study of psychology's disciplinary formation through personal memory reads like an uncomfortable time-capsule of late twentieth century, early twenty-first century negotiation of power. The strategies that are depicted through Ian's extraordinary recollections continue to define academia. I have been to those colloquiums where

organizers fumble toward awkward explanations regarding the low attendance. I have been to those conferences. As a female scholar, I have had senior male scholars walk toward me after I presented a paper and while smiling telling me, "good job, sweetie", indeed academia continues to be a macho place. As a critical theoretical scholar, I have entered far too many white dominated spaces that supposedly centered social justice issues. As a white woman, I have to interrogate that, interrogate whether my presence is advancing the conversation. We - by that expansive pronoun I am referring to everyone involved in the discipline of psychology demystified by Parker's detailed professional autoethnography - have to interrogate our individual and collective complicity with white supremacist capitalism that has chosen psychology as an effective method of manipulation and control. Perhaps unintentionally, this book encouraged me to enter a deeper state of reflection about my complicity. This need to center accountability is especially great for spaces that consider themselves critical. As Caroline Russo (2018) frames it, "the praxis of accountability directs us to recognize how our words, actions, and decisions are always embedded in relations of power and to act from that recognition" (p. 20). Critical psychology must look within for manifestations of white supremacy and racism especially because scholars of color within psychology have been using sophisticated methodologies to effectively and persistently highlight and combat racism within academia (Okafor, 2017). Yet, do we ever cite them?

The brilliance of Parker's book is in the questions that it implies, in the spaces between the words lurk many questions that anyone involved in the institution of psychology is confronting- not necessarily openly. What does it mean to be accountable, who are we accountable to, how do we demonstrate this accountability within psychology when we recognize psychology's complicity with white supremacist capitalism? Whose knowledge is legitimated by the psy-complex? What are the methods of dehumanization that psychologists must indoctrinate themselves into in order to scale the ladder of hierarchy in the discipline of psychology?

The very big yet basic question of how do we define psychology hovers throughout the autoethnography. As Parker notes, there is an illusion of coherence among very different approaches about what it means to be human. In many psychology departments - again, this is meticulously documented by this book - people are more likely to put effort into avoiding one another and questioning each other's validity rather than collaborating. Perhaps the unifying theme is that psychology as it is institutionalized legitimates the perspectives and priorities of the global north, marginalizing and diminishing the views of those that may trouble these often patriarchal, or "macho" as Parker writes, perspectives. I wondered if his own definition of autoethnography, which diminishes feeling, slips toward this tendency, I wondered if the lack of references to black and brown scholars and scholars from the global south simply reinforce and strengthen a white supremacist version of psychology.

The Buddhist scholar and author Reverend angel Kyodo williams (2016), writes about the necessity to cultivate the capacity to feel that white people must develop in order to center human rights. The system, Kyodo williams explains, wants white people to be disembodied that then creates conditions that dismember brown people. How else does the body tolerate viciousness otherwise? - she asks. Parker does not believe that autoethnography needs to involve researchers talking about themselves, and at times I wondered how it is that I can read an autoethnography but have no real sense of the person who is writing it. That is strikingly different from many scholars who effectively employ autoethnographic methodologies to explore deeply complicated psychological concepts along with the formation and consequences of institutions. Critical psychologist Loren Cahill's (2019) work on blackgirl geography explores autoethnography as a sophisticated tool to collapse temporal dynamics and to lift the expertise that flowers in intersectionality while resisting fragmentation - often a method of dehumanization targeting black women and girls and arguably a technology of control employed within the discipline of psychology. Cahill writes, "autoethnographies are rooted in culture, situated knowledge, and viewing the personal as being deeply political" (2019, p, 52). Unlike Cahill's work, Parker's autoethnography fragments his identity, severing the personal from the professional - a decision that is challenged by many writers who are not white males.

While reading Parker's text, I continued to feel the presence of another recent text, *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry: A Mosaic for Writing Our Daughter's Body* by Venus E. Evans-Winters (2019). Evans-Winters's autoethnographic work, like Cahill's, resists the policing of the White Educated Elite who dominate qualitative circles while- similar to Parker - simultaneously reflecting on her own academic training, culture, and socialization. As Evans-Winters explains, "our place in the world shapes how we consume and produce knowledge as well as how we choose to disseminate knowledge" (2019, p.3). These engagements with affect and personal histories give access to a deeper understanding of systems (professional and otherwise) and lives, and their connections. Both Cahill and Evans-Winters demonstrate that it is not self-indulgent but instead radically ethical to acknowledge affective circulations. Parker's text is not lacking affect, the concern is that it instead validates a certain kind of affect - Derek Hook (2005) identifies this as the hegemonies of affect - that is affect limited to certain kinds of bodies, namely those holding power within psychology- white and often male. Autoethnographic work has the potential to interrupt structures of power through affective presence and integration, while also clarifying who the researcher is accountable to (Okafor, 2018). The affective technologies deployed by the discipline of psychology, the psychology that is depicted by Parker's text, the affective technologies of whiteness and masculinity, constantly disrupt, dehumanize, and deny access to transformative dialogues.

Ian Parker's book is about disciplinary formation, the parasitic impact of neoliberalism on academia, indoctrination, rebelliousness and perhaps even radical possibilities provoked by the questions that are implicit within the text, like *what is it all for?* On a simple level, who is this book for? And on a much more fundamental level, what use does psychology have in our complicated world? The flood of names evoked in the text left me feeling a unique institutional claustrophobia. I knew many of the names that were generously sprinkled into the narrative, but quite a large portion of those named were not familiar to me and the context was not quite deep enough for me to integrate it into my existing understanding. Some of the most known names in the discipline were further made human by Parker's deep knowledge of their political practices and personal tendencies. These portions I wanted to collect as an article to make available for undergraduate students as an aspect of their introduction to psychology.

What use does psychology have? In part, this question hovers in the text because it is written from a place of deep reflection - and even anger- reviewing the course of more than four decades of involvement within the psychocomplex. This question is also made more visible by the context in which I read the book. I received it at the beginning of the height of the coronavirus in New York City. I am writing these words as in all fifty states of the United States and in several countries around the world people are insisting on collective liberation, flooding the streets demanding justice after yet another black man was brutally murdered by the hands of police. What role do psychologists have in this movement? What role do we have in responding to the deep yearnings expressed during the pandemic and the protests? I do not know if Ian Parker's text can answer whether psychology is capable of interrupting the very violence it perpetuates. But, what he accomplishes is no small feat as his autoethnographic narrative provokes this question among other important questions psychologists need to ask themselves. Genuinely sitting with that difficult question is necessary for anyone involved within the field of psychology and I hope Parker's book invites that reflection for those who read it.

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