

**BETWEEN SCARLEM AND THE IVORY TOWER:  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF MARGINALITY IN CANADIAN  
COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES**

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We've got to look beyond a comfortable career, a safe niche behind  
academe's protective walls...intellectuals must at some point get our hands  
dirty (Michael Eric Dyson 2004, xxvii).

**ABSTRACT**

Canadian Communication and Media Studies programs have long incorporated the discourses of feminism, critical race theory, and class conflict while welcoming people of diverse genders, races, classes, and sexual orientations. While this approach is primarily a positive one, this paper explores how such liberating discourses also have the potential to alienate members of marginalised communities who enter these fields. Through an autoethnographic exploration of the author's journey from journalism school at --- to a doctoral program in Media Studies at ---, this paper examines how young scholars can become caught between their social origins and academe. It suggests that both individual faculty members and the larger post-secondary institutions must acknowledge this separation between rhetoric and embodied practice and attempt to overcome it before this embrace of the margins can become as liberating as it promises.

**Introduction**

I entered university as what Coté and Allahar (2007) describe as a "reluctant intellectual" (96). Though I had read works by Nietzsche, Plato, Sartre, and others, I had no interest in 'intellectual' pursuits. I was in university to get a degree and get out. I already felt alienated from the majority of my friends who were not heading to post-secondary institutions in the fall, and

although my family encouraged me to go to university, none of them had ever been. We agreed that getting a degree was a necessary hurdle to clear before pursuing a career and so I went to university—but I wasn't going to like it.

Studies demonstrate that many young scholars enter Canadian universities under similar circumstances (Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003; Coté and Allahar 2007; Lambert, Zeman, Allen, and Bussière 2004). A generation ago, 10 per cent of Canadians attended university (Coté and Allahar 2007). Now, 40 per cent of the population enter it and many students are the first in their families to go (Coté & Allahar 2007). These statistics, however, can be misleading. Not everyone gets to university—significantly more females enter university than males, particularly in communication programs (Statistics Canada 2003), most students are from cities rather than rural areas (Lambert et al. 2004), and their parents are more likely to be university-educated professionals who instilled early on the importance of education in their children (Lambert et al. 2004). More than anything else, university students are more likely to come from affluent families (Archer et al. 2003; Krahn 2004; Lambert et al. 2004; Lehmann 2007; Muzzatti & Samarco 2006). In other words, while Canadian universities do not preclude specific groups from entering higher education, the odds continue to be stacked in favour of a certain kind of student.

Canadian communication and media studies programs have attempted to buck this trend by acknowledging and supporting the study of the social margins (Alhassan 2007; Babe, 2000; Hamilton, 2002). Departments have, for example, adopted a heavier focus on feminism, critical race theory, and class conflict while attempting to create a welcoming environment for students and faculty members of diverse genders, races, classes, and sexual orientations. But whether these moves have led to a more inclusive relationship with the margins is difficult to tell.

Hamilton (2002) argues that communication programs in Canada have frequently aligned themselves with the margins. She writes that because of its “political, social, geographic, and economic marginality (mostly in relation to the United States)” many scholars would argue the discipline has produced an “epistemology of the margins” (Hamilton 2002, 19). It is no secret, however, that many ‘marginalized’ groups remain sceptical of the academic environment and, consequently, anyone from their communities who enters it (Bourdieu 2000; Bourdieu et. al 1999; Dyson 2004; hooks 2003; Muzzatti and Samarco 2006; West 1999).

Through an autoethnographic account of my postsecondary experiences in three communication and media studies programs in Canadian universities, I explore the subtle—but no less significant—experiences students from marginalized communities can encounter when entering the field. In so doing, I seek to shed light on why this distrust of academe persists, specifically in a discipline that many scholars define by its own “in-betweenness” or “marginality” (Hamilton 2002, 19). Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1990, 2000, 2007) frameworks of habitus and reproduction, I interrogate how communications programs can *sound* welcoming and liberating to students but *feel* limiting and exclusive. Using my own experiences, I offer a glimpse of the field that can only surface through an autoethnographic narrative. I conclude this investigation by suggesting that academics must strive to become more self-reflexive about the ways in which the liberating discourses called for in scholarly publications play out between the ivory tower and the social margins. Numerous scholars and departments throughout Canada work on projects that reach marginalized groups both within and beyond their communities. But until promotion and tenure committees look more highly upon community work and active social engagement, these efforts will continue to be seen as low priority for professors seeking to advance their careers and maintain their often-precarious positions within faculties. If this work

is not incorporated into the daily practices of more communication scholars, however, the ivory tower will continue to appear disconnected from many groups outside it who see professors as people who publish books and articles about liberation but rarely demonstrate the sincerity of their convictions.

### **An outsider's methodology**

Muzzatti and Samarco (2006) argue that autoethnography provides authors with an opportunity to “explore the boundaries of their experiences... without being obliged to conform those experiences to prevailing conventions” (3). For this reason, it is “an outsider's methodology” (ibid). Autoethnography, therefore, is “a valuable tool for exploring difference and for offering resistance to dominant paradigms” (ibid). Parker (2005) writes that autoethnographic narratives form a sense of identity that emerges “as ‘figure’ against the ‘ground’ of culturally given images of the self” (71-72). He asserts that “because individual lives are made possible by material conditions and social networks, the discussion of any particular narrative should connect with broader narratives” (81). Therefore, while I can speak only to my own experiences, in so doing I seek to highlight similar situations that may arise as others make the transition into academe.

An additional purpose of this article is to interrogate the uses of “marginal” and “marginalized” in communication and media scholarship. This examination is not to discredit the idea of marginalization but to problematize some of its scholarly manifestations. I am aware that by identifying myself within a marginal position in academe I can stand accused of performing the practices I critique. As I will make clear, however, I do not call for scholars to discontinue using the term “marginal” or its imagery. I suggest, rather, that those taking up this discourse must be particularly self-reflexive about its use. While initially this exploration of

marginalization may not seem to apply to every faculty member in Communication and Media Studies departments, the themes of power and control are omnipresent in the field. Hamilton (2002) writes that “notwithstanding the specific areas to which critical scholars may direct their interest, all share an opposition to the *liberal pluralist notion* of social power, which sees power as potentially equally shared and as neutral” (10, emphasis in original). It seems that the concern to locate and reveal marginalized groups and their struggles is a staple of critical communication research in Canada. In fact, Alhassan (2007) argues, marginalization may be the thread that holds the field together. In performing this analysis, I hope to open a space for dialogue that will challenge some of the taken-for-granted approaches to this fundamental concept within the field.

### **Leaving Scarlem**

Considering this call for transparency, I must begin this autoethnographic endeavour by identifying myself as a white male of English/Scottish descent from a predominantly working-class neighbourhood in Scarborough, Ontario. In this article, I use the popular slang term “Scarlem” rather than Scarborough for two reasons: first, it connotes the ethnic diversity and notoriety of the neighbourhood by virtue of its similarity to “Harlem;” second, it highlights the imaginary nature of this space, which has become so mythical in its status within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) that I argue it stopped resembling anything based in ‘reality’ long ago. While I explore some of the ways I have felt marginalized in Canadian universities, I make no claims to have experienced the same challenges as others coming from different ethnic/cultural/gendered/sexually-orientated backgrounds.

Though Scarborough would not likely be described as a peaceful or idyllic place by most residents, the area's reputation for crime and violence far outweighs what most locals experience in their daily lives. In the neighbourhood where I grew up, rarely did we give a second thought to walking the streets at night. The parents on my street were mostly first- and second-generation immigrants from China, India, Sri Lanka and England who had reached a certain level of success and were determined to see their children receive the education they never had.<sup>1</sup> Due primarily to this push from my family, I entered the journalism program at --- University in ---, hoping to pursue my love of writing while earning a degree that would lead to steady work. As Tremblay et al. (2007) demonstrate, the major contributing factor to student success in my generation, like those before it, has been financial resources. Other studies reveal that income level and parental education are the most common predictors of university success in Canada (Andres et al. 1999; Krahn 2004; Lambert et al. 2004; Lehmann 2007). This correlation means that the chances of succeeding in university are much slimmer for residents of a place like Scarborough, where the average household income is \$65,000 and less than 15% of the population have a Bachelor degree (City of Toronto 2008a), than residents of a place like Rosedale, literally in the centre of Toronto, where household incomes average \$112,000 and almost 60% of people have some form of post-secondary education (City of Toronto 2008b).

At ---, I learned about journalism jobs drying up, about media conglomerates swallowing industries whole, and about the rapidly increasing speed (and decreasing depth) of news analysis demanded by the internet. I was determined, however, to finish my journalism degree and start working full-time as I could not afford to switch programs or to pay for more rent and tuition. Despite enjoying courses in philosophy and sociology, I was not willing to leave a fairly

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<sup>1</sup> In Scarborough, the top five ethnic origins are Chinese (19%), East Indian (9.5%), Filipino (5.3%), Sri Lankan (4.5%) and Canadian (4.3%) respectively (City of Toronto 2008a).

concrete, professional program like journalism behind for an ‘impractical’ degree in a more theoretical discipline. As Bourdieu (2007) argues, such decisions are perhaps best understood through the concept of *habitus*—a set of dispositions that structure one’s attitudes and practices in accordance with the opportunities that are available to one’s social group. Bourdieu (2000) writes that “the sense of one’s place is a practical sense,” often evoked in remarks like “That’s not for us” or “‘It’s too expensive’ (for us)” (185). This practice of limiting oneself by denying what has historically been denied anyway is how institutions like universities continue to reproduce dominant social relationships.<sup>2</sup> Though it is beyond the scope of this article to tackle the reproduction-in-education debate, I hope to demonstrate some of the ways this process can play out by drawing on my own experiences.

Before turning away from the issue, however, I would like to briefly examine the unique position within which journalism programs are situated in relation to theories of social reproduction. Journalism programs walk a fine line when attempting to help students find employment within the corporations that own mainstream news media, and which often perpetuate dominant social relationships, while also trying to challenge these relationships by asking students to think critically. In a 1985 special issue on teaching critical communication studies, Will Straw writes:

The ethical and strategic dilemmas faced by critical media teachers within Journalism schools are considerable and well-known. The most fundamental of these is the clash between the vocational function of such schools and a pedagogy threatening (and often seeking) to disrupt that function. An ethical dimension is

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<sup>2</sup> By “reproduction” I refer to the nuanced ways in which social groups and institutions generally perpetuate the status quo, not to the reductionist argument that Morrow and Torres (1995) associate with a branch of structural Marxism whereby the ruling class simply implants its ideas on the masses.

necessary if one is to avoid either judging pedagogical success by one's ability to render students professionally unemployable, or fostering unreasonable expectations as to the possibilities for intervention in the professional media field (7).

Straw (1985) argues journalism careers, unlike those in social work or public policy, are much less likely to provide reasonable levels of income *and* the ability to pursue oppositional politics. Twenty years later, Mike Gasher (2005) writes that Canadian journalism schools remain “servants of two masters” (665) one being the predominantly corporate news industry, the other public universities that demand research, teaching, and community service. Gasher suggests that this “structural tension” (665) has become even tighter in recent years and it shows no signs of reaching a resolution.

During my time at ---, I realized how journalists can influence the acceptance of stereotypes and “common sense” beliefs when stories about Scarborough would appear in the news. Articles, often relating to gangs or gun crime, tended to present the same tropes that I would later hear repeated on campus. Monikers like “Scarberia,” “Scompton,” and “Scarlem” circulated widely. These names allude to the desolation of Siberia, the crime and violence of Compton in South-Central Los Angeles, and the large visible minority population of Harlem in New York City. As one journalist wrote in the *Toronto Star*:

The city, nee borough, latterly eastern rump of amalgamated Toronto, is perhaps most famous...for giving us the term “Scarberia”, a generic descriptor for urban blandness verging on blight...It is, phonetically, not the prettiest sounding name,

that “Scar” an unfortunate syllable to segue into “borough”, harsh to the ear...esthetically bleak, with its pasty residential neighbourhoods, dreary apartment complexes, ubiquitous strip malls, no-tell motels, rigid thoroughfares and a used car lot on every corner (DiManno 2007, A2).

This derogatory image of Scarborough was completely new and strange to me; however, many of my peers and professors from elsewhere in Canada did not seem to have a problem with it.

Through raised eyebrows and ‘innocent jokes,’ I came to understand first-hand Goffman’s (1986 [1963]) concept of *stigma*, the process in which the reaction of others spoils normal identity. My few friends from Scarborough who also attended university shared similar experiences. One friend of Sri Lankan descent told me that he was always “the brown guy” at his university, surrounded predominantly by white girls from Oakville and Ancaster (two relatively affluent suburbs west of Toronto). Before a party, one of his classmates wanted to pick him up at the border of Scarborough because she was scared of being robbed while driving all the way to his house. As Flaras and Elliott (2007) write, “Canadians like to see themselves as a predominantly ‘raceless’ society that disdains the evils of prejudice, discrimination and racism” (116). Upon further inspection, however, racialized communities and stigmatized postal codes remain “stratified unequally against a ‘mosaic’ of raised (dominant) and lowered (subordinate) tiles” (Flaras and Elliott 2007, 117; see also Porter 1965). On another occasion, I received a tear-filled call from my partner who was attending ---. She explained that a professor had given a research assistant position to another student when the professor found out she was from Scarborough, an hour’s subway ride from the downtown campus. The professor told her that it would be too difficult to come to weekly meetings at her office and so saved her the

inconvenience of travel time by not giving her the job! These experiences, and others like them, led us to feel alienated from the majority of privileged students from affluent neighbourhoods who seemed to better fit within the dominant culture. All of these incidents were little reminders that we were what Bourdieu (1999) calls “outcasts on the inside” (421)—we were students who had made it into higher education but knew we did not belong there.

Many of us dealt with feelings of inadequacy or inferiority by performing what Goffman (1986) terms stigma management (see also Granfield, 1991; Lehmann, 2007). We mimicked the styles and attitudes of our well-to-do peers.<sup>3</sup> We bought designer jeans from discount clothing outlets, traded our T-shirts for brand name polos, and tried to restrict our use of certain kinds of slang. While this allowed us to blend in, it never solved our problems. When peers wanted to dine in expensive Yorkville restaurants or attend parties in \$14-a-drink Queen West lounges, we had to make excuses not to join them or rack up more debt. And when people namedropped highbrow authors or musicians, we simply nodded and grinned—admitting that we had no clue who these people were would expose us as outsiders.

By my second year of J-school, I desperately wanted out. I knew I could not be a reporter who casually referred to parts of the city as “gang turf war zones” (D’Andrea and Kohler 2005, A8), “nighttime killing fields” (Leeder and Powell 2005, A1), or “Toronto’s new murder capital” (Wingrove 2009, A6). My experience speaking with journalists and working as one showed me that no one was trying to dupe the masses or lie for the ruling elite. At the same time, the demand to follow conventions like quoting traditional ‘experts,’ relying on the police blotter, and filing stories within hours of receiving them does not allow most journalists—despite some reporters’

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike many forms of marginalization, class is often difficult to identify. It is possible that, in mimicking affluent students, others believed that I was affluent as well. It is also possible that I recognized more people as affluent than there actually were. The statistics, however, provide evidence that most students in higher education come from privileged backgrounds (Granfield 1991; Krahn 2004; Lambert et al. 2004; Lehmann 2007; Muzzatti and Samarco 2006).

best efforts—to challenge the dominant system. During this period of uncertainty, I discovered critical theory and cultural studies.

### **Entering the discourse of the margins**

In the introduction to *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Tucker (1990) explains that marginalization is “that complex and disputatious process by means of which certain people and ideas are privileged over others” (7). Discussing her own experiences as a marginalized black woman in Kentucky, hooks (2000) writes:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body...We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town...Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both (xvi).

In some obvious ways, my experience was nothing like hooks's. I had never faced racism or gender discrimination like she describes; nevertheless, her imagery spoke to my experiences. Each morning, I literally took the subway from the end of the line to the centre of the city only to feel tired, poor, and out of place before I returned home each night. hooks (1995) later writes that she was working “to identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation,” to show it also as a “site of radical possibility” (341). I felt driven to pursue this idea.

At the end of my undergraduate studies, I applied to graduate programs in Ontario and Quebec. I wanted to take what I had learned and approach media—specifically journalism—from a different angle, one that would allow for a deeper analysis of the cultural and political issues that I felt needed highlighting. Much to my surprise, I was accepted everywhere. I opted to attend --- University, where the Interdisciplinary Master of Arts in Popular Culture sounded appealing and the fellowships and bursaries would provide enough funding to support my graduate work. In the new program, I felt too personally involved with the politics of Scarborough to deal with it directly. I chose to focus my research on the community of Jane-Finch in north-west Toronto. I was interested in how places like Jane-Finch and Scarborough were scrutinized as objects of knowledge by the dominant news media who, à la Foucault's (1995) panopticon, seemed to play the role of the unseen prison guard looking out at his or her 'criminal' subjects. My professors provided me with encouragement and the conceptual tools that I needed to think about and perform critical media analysis. I was surprised that faculty members were interested in my proposals and happy with my spare, journalistic style of writing. I had been under the impression that academe was about complex, impenetrable uses of language and theory.<sup>4</sup>

During this year of graduate studies, I was a constant fixture on the bus route between Scarborough and ---. I told everyone at home that I would only be away for a year. But shortly after entering the program, I knew there was much more work to complete. My thesis critiqued the role of the news media in constructing marginal spaces, but I wanted to move beyond criticism. As Celeste Condit (2009) argues in a recent forum entitled "Has Communication

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<sup>4</sup> Though I think Judith Butler (2007) has a point when she asks "Is there, perhaps, a value to be derived from such experiences of linguistic difficulty?" (xx), in the back of my mind, however, I now constantly think about a passage by Dyson (2004) in which he writes that "It was Jesse Jackson who once remarked to me, 'If you say something I can't understand, that's a failure of your education, not mine'" (Dyson 2004, xxvii).

Research Made a Difference?” critique is far more painless and acceptable than attempting to make positive change. She writes:

An academic can do criticism, because one can use the tools of logic and analysis to show how someone’s discourse is untrue (because inconsistent or incomplete) but an academic *qua* academic can’t praise discourse or point to the positive workings of discourse, and therefore cannot show people how to construct good rhetoric...Only critique is acceptable academic practice because only a contradiction or omission can be certainly demonstrated” (Condit 2009, 5-6).

While Condit’s assertion may be overly pessimistic, it points to the difficulty within the field of going above and beyond criticism. I wanted to produce—and still do—work that helps bridge the tense relationship between privileged cultural workers in the media and in universities and marginalized communities, to improve both the (re)presentation of these neighbourhoods and the material conditions within them. This is the focus of my work in the Faculty of --- at ---.

### **Encircling the limits of liberating discourses**

The ---, as Nick Dyer-Witheford (2007) writes, “has traditionally been seen as a conservative finishing school for the sons and daughters of Ontario’s business and professional elites” (55).

He points out, however, that a pocket of engaged intellectuals in the --- have developed a curriculum that is taught “from what can broadly be described as a Left perspective” (56).<sup>5</sup> It was here that I took my plans for a dissertation that would critically interrogate the way communities

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<sup>5</sup> This is not the only campus performing such work. Over the years, the majority of communication and media studies programs in Canada have had faculty members who engage in important work relating to community representation, engagement, and grassroots politics. For a survey of these faculties, see Dorland (2002).

like Scarborough are constructed through the media. And it was here that I realized my task was considerably more difficult than I anticipated.

As I worked through the cannon, the distance between the streets of Scarborough and the landscaped paths of --- seemed to increase tremendously. In the gothic buildings scattered around campus, I felt more alienated from the community I had entered academe in the hopes of improving. When I went home and saw friends working dead-end jobs in their early twenties with tens of thousands of dollars in student loans to repay, how could I explain that I was reading Foucault, Deleuze, and Marx with the intention of helping people in Scarborough? My academic work was not making a direct difference in anyone's life in Scarborough; yet, it took up the vast majority of my time. Though faculty members were encouraging, I questioned whether one could ever simultaneously become a professor and assist people in the community. As I began to ask questions about the role of the intellectual, I gravitated toward the work of Henry A. Giroux, one of the most vocal scholars in Canada to have written extensively about the role of the intellectual in university.<sup>6</sup> I soon realized, however, that Giroux's body of work presents one of the most striking examples of the disconnect I experienced when reading the major texts in the field.

Though Giroux's writings about intellectuals performing acts of liberating pedagogy and emancipatory politics initially appealed to me, I became frustrated and dissatisfied as I read through his books. His titles are powerful and provocative: *Education Under Siege: The Conservative, Liberal, and Radical Debate over Schooling* (1985), *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture's War on Children* (2001), *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (2007). Who would not want to defend something under

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<sup>6</sup> I also refer readers to Gramsci's (1971) discussion of organic and traditional intellectuals, Said's (1996) lectures on representations of the intellectual, Sartre's (1974) essay "A Plea for intellectuals," and Posner's (2003) overview (albeit a pessimistic one) of the history of public intellectuals.

siege? Who would argue that innocence should be stolen or that the university should be enchained? After reading these texts, however, I felt no closer to discovering the answers or insights I had hoped to find. Instead, “emancipation” and “liberation” started to lose their meaning as words so often do when repeated so frequently. In his book *Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling* (1981), for example, Giroux argues that political issues must be discussed “within classroom social relationships that illuminate, concretize, and demonstrate a more radical notion of liberation” (108). I became eager to pursue these noble goals. In *Education Still Under Siege* (1993), I read similar lines published twelve years later: “The discourse of the transformative intellectual takes the issues of community and liberation seriously... creating conditions for emancipatory forms of self and social empowerment among both educators and students” (Giroux and Aronowitz 1993, 53). Again, I could not have agreed more. Ten years later, however, Giroux was producing two or three books per year and arguing for similar liberating projects. As he writes in *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear* (2003), “if emancipatory politics is to be equal to neoliberal capitalism, educators need to theorize politics not as a science or a set of objective conditions, but as a point of departure in specific and concrete situations” (Giroux 2003, 65). I was struck by how the more recent quotation sounds quite similar to the passage from 1981. While it is not my intention to downplay Giroux’s contribution to critical pedagogy and the fields of Communication and Media Studies, I have to wonder how so many texts can sound so timely, so urgent, and yet so repetitive. I do not dispute his premise that, at risk of oversimplifying his arguments, the public needs to critically debate and participate in emancipatory politics without interference from corporations or ruling elites. But the fact that Giroux repeats this argument for three decades leads me to believe that he is either not serious about achieving this goal or he has simply had

little effect by writing these arguments in academic texts. This is, of course, a problem that all scholars attempting to put theory into practice encounter as they endeavour to affect change.

It is ironic that, as a critic of the corporatization of higher education, Giroux has been the Global Television Network Chair in Communication Studies at McMaster University since 2004. This problematic relationship with corporate media points to an institutional situation in which funding, even for ‘anti-corporate’ scholars, often comes from corporations and where rhetoric is rewarded while action is relegated to a “second shift” (Few, Piercy, and Stremmel 2007). “Most of us chose this career because of our commitment to a profession that is relevant to people’s lives,” write Few, Piercy, and Stremmel (2007), “we did not leave our interest in social action at the doorstep when we entered academia” (47). The pressure to publish, secure funding, teach, supervise, and attend conferences, however, limits the time academics have to pursue practical community issues. “To survive professionally,” they contend, professors “inevitably lose or subsume important parts of themselves” (57). I realized, through reading scholars like Giroux, that academics can gain significant cultural capital by speaking about the margins—even if the actual activities that would take individuals into marginalized communities are less frequently pursued than the abstract and theoretical work that is likely more valued by tenure and hiring committees.

It is interesting how Giroux evokes riskiness by speaking of “fugitive cultures” (1996), “living dangerously” (1996), and “abandoned generations” (2003). These phrases seem to imply that Giroux has placed himself in jeopardy by writing about disenfranchised groups; yet, in doing so, he gains from what Foucault (1990) calls “the speaker’s benefit” (6). Foucault explains ‘the speaker’s benefit’ by examining the way scholars have written about sexual oppression:

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power... conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making (6-7).

Similarly, Giroux positions himself as taking a risk by speaking out on these issues even though it is fairly commonplace in Canadian communication studies to talk about uneven power relationships and marginalized groups. It is important to note that Foucault does not argue society was never repressed or that repression itself is a ruse; he instead asks “why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?” (8-9). He implies that if the topic of discussion is said to be repressed then those who talk about it most are somehow fighting against power itself. In other words, it does not matter whether the topic is *actually* repressed—I would argue that speaking about the margins holds considerable rewards in the field of Communication and Media Studies—what matters is the way in which it is positioned as repressed and therefore in need of liberation.

When I first found critical theory and cultural studies and attempted to bring these ideas back to Scarborough, I could not understand why family and friends were not interested in hearing about them. I see now that I was not necessarily liberating anyone by talking about theories of emancipatory politics and false consciousness. If anything, I was perpetuating the

cliché of the academic telling marginalized groups how and why they are marginalized through convoluted language—one of the reasons such groups tend not to like academics. I realized that my neighbourhood was not condemned to silence; it was condemned to speak about itself, to justify its existence, to stay on the outside of the panopticon so to speak. Baudrillard (1994) argues that such “subject-resistance is today unilaterally valorized and viewed as positive—just as in the political sphere only the practices of freedom, emancipation, expression, and the constitution of a political subject are seen as valuable and subversive” (85). Baudrillard asserts that it may actually be more subversive *not* to speak: “All the movements that only play on liberation, emancipation, on the resurrection of a subject of history, of the group, of the word based on ‘consciousness raising’...do not see that they are going in the direction of the system” (86). By not entering the liberating discourses that have become institutionalized in certain academic spheres, my friends, family, and neighbours may have been acting more subversively than I was by forcing these calls for liberation upon them. This is not to say that such groups should remain silent or ignore theoretical work, but perhaps the best strategy is for these groups to enter this fight on their own terms and for academe to assist in such work rather than having well-meaning scholars, who likely understand the theories of marginalization better than the daily experiences of living on the margins, prescribe what should be done.

### **You can't go home again**

When I return to the neighbourhood in which I grew up, I have to explain that I just happened to make it into higher education—I am not gifted or some kind of born intellectual. In fact, I think it's quite the opposite. As Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) explain, a pervasive myth exists of the wonder child or *le miraculé*, “the working-class child who succeeds ‘against all odds’” (175).

This narrative implies that anyone with intellectual merit will become a professor and ignores other factors like symbolic or cultural capital that creates distinction among students—not to mention the economic capital necessary to pursue post-secondary education. In Scarborough, I am also weary of appearing pretentious or condescending to friends and family. Avoiding this reaction is difficult when the mere words “cultural studies” or “critical theory” tend to make eyes roll.

When acquaintances find out that I am a doctoral student who has already published a book, I usually see a look of disbelief in their eyes. They are always surprised, not because they doubt I am capable of the intellectual labour involved, but because, well, that’s just not something people like ‘us’ do. It is not part of ‘our’ world. Evidently, I am no longer a part of their world either. hooks (1995) writes that “when I left that concrete space in the margins, I kept alive in my heart a way of knowing reality” (342). In the same essay, hooks switches from speaking as *I* to speaking as *we*. She writes that “this ‘we’ is that us in the margins, that ‘we’ who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance” (343). As a university professor, she claims that she can continue to speak from the margins but I am not so sure. I do not believe she can return to that ‘we’ in the full sense of the word. She is still a woman, a visible minority, and comes from the ‘wrong side of the tracks’ so to speak. But hooks left the margins to come to the ivory tower. In my experience, you cannot go home again—at least not completely. It is true that, unlike hooks, I could mimic the dominant culture in the university but this would never be more than a simulation as there would always be a sense of not belonging. As to going home, well, Scarlem never really existed anyway. It was, and continues to be, mired in a discourse imposed on it from the outside. Like “the Orient” Said

(2003) describes, Scarborough has always been a figment of the dominant culture's imagination—a scapegoat for the city's troubles.

As I pursue an academic career, the question “Who am I?” takes on new meaning. I do not feel at home in Scarborough anymore, nor am I at home on campus. I hope, however, that my experiences between these two worlds can provide me with the motivation and the knowledge needed to make a significant difference in both spaces. While the trope of “the exile” remains problematic in literary and cultural studies, it seems oddly appropriate in this situation. As Said (1990) writes, “exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (357). He adds that it “is sometimes better than staying behind or not getting out: but only sometimes” (360). I can assure the reader that anyone entering the university system from a marginal social group understands what Said means.

### **Looking to the future of Communication and Media Studies**

Many scholars in critical communication studies speak about improving the university's relationship with marginalized groups. The field was founded on the dubious myth, as Hamilton (2002) points out, that Canadian communication studies is inherently critical of social power and concerned with the margins. This myth may make the university more comfortable with the social margins but more needs to be done the other way around. On an institutional level, liberating discourses will never be more than rhetorical devices until tenure and promotion committees value community work in addition to traditional research and publications. As Dyer-Witford (2007) notes, “University-business linkages have been rationalized under the name of breaking down the ‘ivory tower’ and connecting academia to the ‘community’” (58). He argues that “once such an ideological motif has been launched...it is very hard to reject arguments for

connections that go beyond the business community” (ibid). This rhetoric of working with the community has allowed the private sector to benefit from the knowledge and skills of engineers and biologists and it is now time for more communications and media scholars to follow suit by complementing their research interests with active participation in communities that stand to benefit from them.

Individuals could perhaps take a lesson from Canada’s own “marginal man” Harold Innis (Watson 2006) and make talking to community members a priority once again. As Canada’s first major communications scholar, Innis devoted much of his time to what he called “dirt” research, “shorthand for getting out and talking to ordinary people” (Watson 2008). Most of this research consisted of Innis seeking out conversations over cigarettes with people on trains to and from school.<sup>7</sup> If more scholars spent time talking to ‘marginal’ people in addition to calling for critical public spheres in scholarly journals, I think the field would look significantly less airy and more meaningful to communities outside the university. As hooks (2003) notes, lifting segregation laws is not the same as desegregation. “Rather than simply accept that class power often situates me in a world where I have little or no contact with other black people, especially individuals from underprivileged classes, I as a black person with class privilege can actively seek out these relationships” (hooks 2003, 36). This step involves making an effort to expand one’s social world and communicate with others. It needs to more often accompany traditional scholarship in Canadian Communication and Media Studies. Ultimately, academics must be self-reflexive about how the liberating discourses they write about end up reaching the marginal communities

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<sup>7</sup> Watson (2008) notes that “when Innis moved to Toronto to start university, his money was so tight that he literally starved himself to minimize the costs to his family, with the result that he returned home at Christmas depressed, thin, and ready to drop out” (xi). Evidently, Innis was marginalized within the ivory tower at one point. And as Alhassan (2007) recently wrote in the *Canadian Journal of Communication*, “Innis’ ambivalent position as a scholar of both the centre and the margins represents the perfect metaphor for Canada, a postcolonial country that is also part of the hegemonic states of the world, politically speaking” (114).

with which they claim to be concerned. When students enter Communication and Media Studies programs because they are interested in helping marginalized communities but begin feeling more marginalized themselves, there is clearly a disjuncture between the discourse and the practice. It is this problem that members of the field must explore more deeply before talk of emancipatory politics benefits anyone other than the speaker.

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