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Expressions of “Voice” in Portraiture

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The various ways in which the researcher negotiates “voice are the focus of this article. The six aspects of “voice” as defined by portraiture are manifested through the researcher’s chosen methodology, research tools, observation and interview sites, and data analysis. The tensions in the research process and the choice to use portraiture for qualitative research are explicated through critical race theory. The author uses a case study of a White teacher in a racially diverse urban classroom to describe how matters of voice are situated within larger contextual issues, data analysis, theoretical frameworks, and personal and professional relationships between the participants and the researcher. While building a case for an alliance between critical race theory and portraiture, the author explores her various roles within the research, how these roles are constructed by historical and present-day contexts, and how intersections of race, class, and gender are manifested within the research process.

**Keywords:** critical race theory; portraiture; urban education; qualitative inquiry; race

In qualitative research the nature of “voice,” what it represents, who it represents, and who has the power to assert it, remains a topic of rigorous intellectual exchange. The ability to provide multiple opportunities for “voice” in privileged settings, without further marginalizing a group or an individual, is a concern for qualitative researchers from various genres of research. Qualitative researchers use the tools of interviews, surveys, field observations, shadowing, and archival data in their efforts to uncover the complexities of “voice” that provide answers and sometimes questions for their research. Feminist qualitative researchers contemplate “how to make women’s voices heard without exploiting or distorting” (Olesen, 2000, p. 230). As qualitative research approaches the “seventh moment of research” (Denzin, 2003), critical race theorists realize that regardless of the theoretical lens employed in the methodology, researchers’ plans to avoid marginalizing the research participants do not always translate into practice, particularly when the research is conducted on and about people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
Critical race theory (CRT) is one of a few research genres that advocates for researchers to demonstrate the strength and complexity of people of color in ways that value the cultural traditions of the people being represented. CRT embraces the multifaceted nature of communities and people of color that have been historically construed through research as deficit and dysfunctional. Ladson-Billings (2000) described the CRT perspective on voice:

> The ahistorical and acontextual nature of much law and other “science” renders the voices of the dispossessed and marginalized group members mute. In response, much of the scholarship of CRT focuses on the role of “voice” in bringing additional power to the legal discourses of racial justice. Critical race theorists attempt to inject the cultural viewpoints of people of color, derived from a common history of oppression, into their efforts to reconstruct a society crumbling under the burden of racial hegemony. (p. 265)

CRT uses both the tools of academic scholarship and the communal traditions of oral history and storytelling to contest the oppressive constructs of science and legislation that continue to stereotype and marginalize people of color.

The methodology of portraiture also incorporates traditional models of research with interdisciplinary modes of descriptive analyses. Although she does not specify that the methodology represent people of color, Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1986) “portraiture” attempts to tell the stories of people who do not have “voice” in the realm of academia:

> For the past several years my research has been for a more complicated, multifaceted definition of school effectiveness—what I call goodness—and my attempt has been to find research approaches that would correspond to and echo this more contextual, multifaceted definition, as well as reveal the voices, perspectives and wisdom of the actors in school settings, the creators of school culture. The method of inquiry I call portraiture, the motivation I now recognize as a modest gesture towards empowering school people. (p. 13)

The creation of portraiture is a response to the marginalization and sterilization of the experiences of teachers, administrators, and students in schools. The portraiture method rejects flat, stereotypical explanations for school success or failure and depicts the multiple layers of contexts represented by events and people.

The blend between CRT and portraiture is a viable partnership. When discussing her desire to create research projects that reflect her racial epistemologies and her desire to facilitate social justice, critical race theorist Melanie Carter (2003) noted the match between portraiture and CRT:

> I identified both Critical Race Theory and Portraiture as methodologically attractive. . . . These approaches engendered a methodological environment in which the researcher and the researched co-construct meanings instead of relying upon processes that dictate analysis and interpretation. These hybrid methods are not static modes of inquiry but instead create a methodologically respon-
sive and dynamic terrain—one that simultaneously accommodates and interrogates multiple conceptions of truth. (p. 32)

The interrogation of multiple conceptions of truth is linked to the CRT call to explore the intersections of race, class, and gender as these constructions rely on and buttress one another.

In the study explicated in this article, CRT and portraiture were employed to create a portrait of a classroom that is deeply affected by the district’s history of desegregation and the city’s continued economic crisis. Moving from the very large frame of a racially and socioeconomically divided urban city to one ninth-grade classroom, I used CRT to explore the layers of context that influenced the teacher/student interactions in the classroom. What began as an attempt to explain a classroom of racially diverse students’ response to literature and its teaching evolved into a portrait of a complex set of dynamics that encouraged or inhibited the White teacher’s pedagogical goals and practices. Portraiture’s rejection of one-dimensional analyses of school actors and actions complements CRT’s denunciation of stereotypes and acontextual explanations for the actions of people of color. The use of CRT and portraiture in the research study, the evolution of the project, and the ways that they interacted are presented through the connections between CRT and portraiture.

CRT

We would not deprecate the fact, then, that America has a Race Problem. It is guaranty of the perpetuity and progress of her institutions, and insures the breadth of her culture and the symmetry of her development.

—Anna Julia Cooper (1892, p. 178)

CRT began in the realm of legal studies as a critique of the lack of emphasis placed on issues of race in legal theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In the politicized discourse of CRT, racialized critiques of legislative acts are further constructed and deconstructed regarding intersections of gender, class, and sexuality. The critiques further depart from legal studies in that the critical race scholars value the experiences of people of color (Tate, 1997) through their spoken words, their traditions of storytelling, and their use of standpoint research (Williams, 1991). The following five principles outline the tenets of CRT:

1. CRT recognizes that racism is endemic in U.S. society, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically.
2. CRT crosses epistemological boundaries.
3. CRT reinterprets civil rights law in light of its limitation, illustrating that laws to remedy racial inequality are often undermined before they can be fully implemented.
4. CRT portrays dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy as camouflage for the self-interest of powerful entities of society.

5. CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical examination of the law and society. (Tate, 1997, pp. 234-235)

Those scholars primarily associated with the theory have implemented the tenets of CRT in various ways. Using the lens of CRT to discuss the multiple contexts and influences under which certain civil rights decisions were made, Derrick Bell (1995) created a lens for assessing the outcomes from the civil rights era. Bell’s “interest-convergence” (p. 20) principle details the process in which the decision making and the implementation of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision helped the United States show good faith to European countries and benefited Whites by creating alternate hierarchies of schooling to maintain racially stratified education opportunities. Bell stated that African Americans progress in their battles with civil liberties only when Whites are allowed to benefit as well. This principle is especially salient to this study because the classroom being captured is deeply affected by the policies implemented from a recent court desegregation order.

CRT problematizes essentialist stances of race, gender, and class (Delgado, 1992) and asserts that a larger body of published work by scholars of color is necessary to ensure the accurate telling of stories from underrepresented groups. When discussing previous attempts by White researchers to capture the lives of people of color, Delgado (as quoted in Crenshaw et al., 1995) stated,

> A number of the authors were unaware of basic facts about the situations in which minority persons live or ways in which they see the world. From the viewpoint of a minority member, the assertions and arguments made by non-minority authors were sometimes so naïve as to seem incomprehensible—hardly worthy of serious consideration. (p. 49)

The statement that White people view different cultures with dysfunctional lenses and are often unknowledgeable about other cultures that affect their lives, presents a gateway to discussing the pedagogical decisions of the teacher and the resistance and accommodation efforts of the students in this study. CRT advocates for more researchers of color in education to present research that explains classroom phenomena with regard to situating teachers and students as cultural and social beings (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) led the academic charge to apply CRT to the field of education research with the express goal to examine factors of race, class, and gender on macro and micro levels of schooling. These applications of CRT address questions in teacher education, educational research paradigms, the historical and present effects of court-ordered desegregation, and students’ behaviors and beliefs. In the past 10 years, CRT has been used by various scholars (Duncan, 2002; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Smith-
Maddox & Solorzano, 2002; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999) seeking to highlight the lives of parents, teachers, and children of color.

Three studies in particular resonated with the study that will be described in this article. Using the stories of college students of color, Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) provided multiple examples of racism that students face in their academic environments. They used the term “microaggressions” (Delgado, 1992; Solorzano, 1998) to describe those unconscious or subtle forms of racism that people of color recognize and absorb on a daily basis. In their work, Solorzano and Yosso (2001) suggested that exposure to microaggressions during long periods of time, without support systems to combat their wearing effects, leads students of color to adopt complex coping mechanisms or leave the university. Notably, students of color in the research study described in this article are constantly exposed to racial microaggressions that possibly have led them to react to teachers and other students in similar ways described by Solorzano and Yosso.

Solorzano and Bernal (2001) conducted a study highlighting the various types of resistance practiced by high school Chicano1 students. The students’ levels of resistance ranged from oppositional behavior that had no elements of social justice attached to it and worked against the student, to resistance that was purposefully conducted to defy negative stereotypes and work toward academic excellence and social transformation. Similarly, the students in the research study exhibited the same range of resistance.

Fernandez’s (2002) work with Latino students also has reflections in the research study. Fernandez found that her research participants were critical participants in their educational experiences. They recognized their power as individuals to make serious choices about their futures based on the information they had been given and their own notions of success. The students in the research being presented spoke critically about their teachers and educational experiences as well as their own fluctuating motivation, much like Fernandez’s participant, Pablo, spoke about his experiences. Solorzano and Bernal (2001), Solorzano et al. (2000), and Fernandez (2002) each explored the students’ stories of marginality and their counterstories of resistance and success.

Portraiture’s “Goodness” as Emancipatory as Empowerment

Counterstories in CRT, depictions of people of color as survivors, activists, and emancipators, are called elements of “goodness” in portraiture. In fields of research, education, and law, where images of pathology prevail for people of color, critical race theorists and portraitists focus on community strengths instead of community deficits. CRT and portraiture both advance and highlight the sustaining features of cultures and communities that are rarely promoted. Critical race theorists describe this concern for difference over deficit
as part of their commitment to social justice (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), whereas portraitists describe it as a form of empowerment (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986).

The desire to counter stereotypes of people of color with selected contextualized images is an element of CRT’s emancipatory practice. Solorzano and Bernal (2001) stated,

We envision a social justice research agenda that leads toward (a) the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and (b) the empowering of underrepresented minority groups. Critical race researchers acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower. Likewise, a critical race methodology in education recognizes that multiple layers of oppression and discrimination are met with multiple forms of resistance. (pp. 313-314)

One form of resistance is the use of counterstories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) by people of color that often remain untold in academic settings because they are viewed as anecdotal and autobiographical (Calmore, 1995). Critical race theorists believe that by demonstrating the power of people and communities of color, these counterstories serve as beacons of understanding and sources of potential or past excellence that can be cultivated and/or repeated.

Similarly, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) described the methodology of portraiture as a source of empowerment for schools, communities, and researchers. When constructing portraits, the researcher highlights those habits and contributors to the ethos of the site that are affective mechanisms for promoting learning. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) described these affective mechanisms as aspects of “goodness.” In the portraiture methodology, the researcher consciously seeks to identify the strengths of the site and the ways in which challenges are addressed. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) stated,

Research as empowering work should not be complaining and cynical. It should not simply be an arrogant pursuit of pathology. (I hasten to say as well that it should not reflect an uncritical romanticism.) Empowering work should be empathetic and critical, generous and discerning. (p. 26)

Lawrence-Lightfoot envisioned portraiture as an opportunity for empowerment for both the practitioners and the researcher involved in the project. She described the potential for empowering school people as the opportunity to “give voice to those who rarely get the chance to enter into public conversation about schools” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986, p. 26). The portraitist’s conscious decision to provide opportunities for empowerment to people who are marginalized in academic discourses on the issues of schooling mirrors the critical race theorist’s decision to make known the emancipatory practices of people of color through research and scholarship.

When creating the search for goodness, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) was researching schools that had been identified as effective schools that pro-
duced strong graduates with high rates of college attendance. In contrast, the school in this study, North High, is not a model for good teaching practices and supportive learning environments. It functions in an urban context that is rife with racial tensions and economic challenges at all levels of the district and the city. Most of the teachers are waiting to retire in the next 5 years and are visibly frustrated with the district politics and changing demographics and culture of their schools. High failure and drop-out rates for all students, particularly students of color, plague the district and result in a continuous blaming of the multiple community stakeholders.

Perhaps because North High is not a model for school success, the opportunities for “voice” among students and teachers who are so visibly frustrated with and isolated by the system of schooling are more empowering. This research was empowering to the participants because it gave the students and the teachers a chance to voice their opinions concerning issues of schooling that are rarely asked of them. It also gave them the opportunity to “reflect on their work, their goals, and their values” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986, p. 26). Both the primary teacher participant and the 6 focus group students in this study affirmed that their participation in the study prompted them to become more conscious of their classroom interactions, the choices of content, and the forms of instructional delivery.

It was emancipatory because the conversations allowed students, teachers, and the researcher the chance to reflect on issues of motivation, content, and pedagogy that continue to affect students’ learning experiences and environments. This self-reflection gave the students the opportunity to see themselves as valuable and knowledgeable stakeholders of their own educations, and it gave teachers the chance to revisit elements of good practice and define elements of student engagement. The study also was empowering because it gave me, the researcher, “the chance to explore and test out ideas against the complicated, and often unforgiving, context of ‘the real world’” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986, p. 26). Throughout the research process, I was able to learn as a scholar, participate as an activist, and reflect as a student.

The Research Study

The research study was formally conducted during the period of one high school spring semester with a ninth-grade English classroom of students. The class consisted of 26 students with diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and 1 White, middle-class teacher. I completed 46 classroom observations, 12 interviews with the primary teacher-participant, 2 individual interviews with each of the 6 focus group students, 4 focus group interviews, and 3 group interviews with the teachers in the English department. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and thematically coded. Several class periods were videotaped, and all focus group interviews were video-
taped and audiotaped. Although formal observations and interviews began during the spring semester of 2000, I collected archival data, court rulings, newspaper articles, and curriculum documents from the district and the school prior to entering the field. The reasoning behind the design, implementation, and analysis of the research is explicated through the six elements of voice.

**VOICE IN PORTRAITURE**

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1987) described the myriad roles and actions of the research in terms of “voice.” They acknowledged that all research has elements of voice; however, in portraiture, the examination of the ways in which the researcher deals with her or his lenses and tools for construction must be shared with the reader. “The portraitist’s voice, then, is everywhere—overarching and under-girding the text, framing the piece, naming the metaphors, and echoing through the central themes” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85). In the methodology of portraiture, the multifaceted nature of voice must be recognized, evaluated, and integrated within the telling of the data. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis stated that there is no part of the research that goes untouched by some aspect of the researcher’s voice. CRT and portraiture view the researcher as a complex subject that wields substantial power regarding all aspects of the research project. Researchers using the portraiture methodology and CRT openly acknowledge that their ideological biases and experiences affect their data analysis, selection of imagery, and their inclusion of empirical evidence. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis stated,

Portraiture admits the central and creative role of the self of the portraitist. It is, of course, true that all researchers—whether working within the quantitative or qualitative methodological paradigms—are selective in defining and shaping the data they collect and the interpretation [sic] that flow from their findings. Even the most scrupulously “objective” investigations reveal the hand of the researcher in shaping the inquiry. From deciding what is important to study to selecting the central questions to defining the nature and size of the sample to developing the methodological strategies, the predisposition and perspective of the researcher is crucial, and this perspective reflects a theoretical, disciplinary, and methodological stance, but also personal values, tastes, and style. (p. 13)

Ladson-Billings (2000) acknowledged the link between the personal and professional in CRT in the same ways that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis insisted that the “voice” of the portraitist affects her or his research design and implementation. These sliding constructions of the Self and Others are intrinsically tied to institutional practices and situational events regarding issues of race, class, and gender that shape research practices.
Voice as Autobiography

The researcher brings her own history—familial, cultural, ideological, and educational—to the inquiry. Her perspective, her questions, and her insights are inevitably shaped by these profound developmental and autobiographical experiences. She must use the knowledge and wisdom drawn from these life experiences as resources for understanding, and as sources of connection and identification with the actors in the setting, but she must not let her autobiography obscure or overwhelm the inquiry.

—Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 95)

I begin with voice as autobiography because it includes my history far beyond my work as a scholar in the field of education. CRT acknowledges that autobiography is necessary for Black writers because they “need to justify who they are and to describe where they come from as part of the description of where they want to go” (Culp, 2000, p. 488). In addition, Ladson-Billings (2000) explained the benefits of using a framework that welcomes an open discussion of the role of the researcher:

Thus CRT asks the critical qualitative researcher to operate in a self-revelatory mode, to acknowledge the double (or multiple) consciousness in which she is operating. My decision to deploy a critical race theoretical framework in my scholarship is intimately linked to my understanding of the political and personal stake I have in the education of Black children. All of my “selves” are invested in this work—the self that is a researcher, the self that is a parent, the self that is a community member, the self that is a Black woman. (p. 272)

Ladson-Billings addressed those elements of research, such as choices of theoretical frameworks that are rarely interrogated, as being biased and connected to the “selves” of the researcher. She recognized the false attempts to produce “objective” research that is sterilized of human understandings and interpretations of the world. As part of my unmasking of my choices and perceptions, I present a brief overview of my academic background.

I am not a “boot-strap” success story as I hail from places of financial and academic privilege. As a gifted and talented student at the Illinois Math and Science Academy, a public boarding school for the “best and brightest” around the state, I rarely sat in lectures or learned from textbooks with dictated curricula. The Illinois Math and Science Academy teachers had two and three master’s degrees or a doctorate in their fields of study, previously worked outside the field of education, valued students’ intellect and personal experiences, and made the students co-constructors of knowledge in all subject areas.

My secondary preparation made my academic transition to Spelman College very smooth. By teaching me about me, my history, and my place in this world as an African American woman, Spelman facilitated my academic and
spiritual growth. The experience remains bittersweet, knowing that I had to wait 12 years in majority White schools to hear the multitude of African American women’s voices, and that many other African American women will never have such an amazing experience.

My experiences at Illinois Math and Science Academy and Spelman led to my decision to become a teacher in an urban setting. Education was my first career choice. After graduate school, I was hired to teach at North High School in the transitional program. The program was created to meet the court-order directives for district desegregation and to meet the academic needs of failing students of color and poor White students. Currently, North High’s student population is almost 50% students of color consisting of African American, Latino, and Asian American students. Although my teacher education training was significant, I relied heavily on my participant observation of teacher practices at Illinois Math and Science Academy (Lortie, 1975). During my teaching experience, I also relied on my interactions with African American elders and community members to structure my class discipline and relationships with the students.

My history with North High motivated me to return to the school to conduct research. My multiple “selves” influenced this decision as an African American woman and former teacher who continued to feel extremely connected to the goals and needs of the students in that community. In addition to my ties to the students and their parents, I shared a history as a teacher, and in some cases as a friend, with many of the present North High teachers and administrators. Because of my connections to the school, I returned to North High with several biases and assumptions about the faculty and students. I continue to believe that the majority White, baby-boomer teacher population with whom I worked wanted their students to experience academic success. I continue to believe that the students wanted to acquire meaningful and relevant knowledge to help them reach their personal goals. These biases toward the school, administration, and the teachers were interwoven in my ideological framework.

**Voice as Preoccupation**

With increasing presence in the text, the portraitist’s voice as preoccupation refers to the ways in which her observations and her text are shaped by the assumptions she brings to the inquiry, reflecting her disciplinary background, her theoretical perspectives, her intellectual interests, and her understandings of the relevant literature.

—Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 93)

Explications of the roles of the researcher are intrinsic elements in portraiture and CRT. Tyson (2003) asserted that an emancipatory researcher’s
ideology be made visible and that her or his goals reflect liberation for the community being represented. The creation of emancipatory research is an amalgamation of the researcher’s multiple epistemologies, some of which are embraced in current academia and others that struggle to claim a space in the narrow definitions of rigorous research.

Similarly, Carter (2003) discussed the roles of the researcher in the academy. She suggested that critical race researchers must use their academic knowledge to redefine traditional modes of research. Both Tyson (2003) and Carter connected with Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s (1987) belief that the researcher is defined through a myriad of indoctrinating experiences inside and outside the researcher’s discipline. Thus, the researcher brings her or his total self to the research.

Part of my wholeness lies within my history in higher education. While in graduate school, I studied theorists that matched and complicated my beliefs about student learning and teacher pedagogy. I studied the institutional and structural aspects of schooling and how the high school curriculum, the extracurricular activities, and the emphasis on the individual in U.S. public schools privilege White middle-class students and disenfranchise students of color and poor students. Understanding the plethora of ways that racism is inherent in all structures of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995, 2000; Williams, 1991), particularly the institution of schooling (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997), changed the way I view teachers’ and students’ experiences in public schools.

For example, the English curriculum that the primary teacher-participant, Julie Williams, struggled to teach to a demographically diverse student population was implemented after the court-ordered desegregation of the district and was targeted to meet the affective needs of students of color. Bell (1995) stated that education legislation enacted under the guise of interest-convergence, with the potential to reform inequitable schooling practices, became distilled and distorted through further policy implementations at the state, district, and classroom levels. Although the initial legislation may have caused the Boulder School District to take action, the state and district’s procedures were based on their interpretations of the law.

In the English curriculum, new textbooks and independent reading materials that contain more literature by and about people of color were hastily selected due to the district’s time constraints for ordering the materials. English teachers were left with the task of learning to teach a new curriculum with little guidance concerning pedagogical strategies for discussing issues of race, class, and gender in the texts and society. Schools, departments, and teachers translated the spirit of the court remedial order in autonomous isolation.

My knowledge of the curriculum and the way it was constructed, combined with my application of interest-convergence, demonstrates “voice as preoccupation.” The role of multicultural content in a racially diverse class-
room was the initial driving question at the heart of this study. My concern with the teaching of diverse content expanded into my theoretical framework and shaped the choice of the school and the classroom for the research project. My preoccupation with the teaching of English also contributed to my interactions with my teacher participants. These interactions in the form of interviews, observations, and shared professional space in the English workroom are aspects of “voice in dialogue.”

**Voice in Dialogue**

With voice in dialogue, the portraitist purposely places herself in the middle of the action (in the field and in the text). She feels the symmetry of voice—hers and the actor’s—as they both express their views and together define meaning-making.

—Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 103)

There were many ways that I was active at the site and part of the experience of the classroom. I observed classes, held informal conversations with the faculty and staff, and conducted formal group and individual interviews. “Voice in dialogue” is about the ongoing construction of the story that happens in the two-way interviews and multivocal conversations.

Often, the conversations revealed as much about the interviewee as they did about my interests as a researcher and my experiences as an African American student and teacher. Although my voice strongly comes across in the individual interviews, it is more muted in the group interviews with the teachers and student focus group. During these interviews, I facilitated the dialogue across the groups so that the teachers and students could respond to each other’s feelings and observations. Parker and Lynn (2002) stated that the stories told in interviews can “build a case against” injustices and provide meaningful insights into the lives of people of color. The stories gleaned from these interviews function in the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in that the participants’ narratives were past and present reflections of themselves, internal critiques of themselves, and external critiques of society, and they were situated in “specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 51).

**Student Focus Groups**

The students’ narratives were collected from individual and focus group interviews with 6 students from the class being observed. Bernal (2002) and Villenas and Deyhle (1999) recognized the need to hear students’ voices when...
discussing issues of schooling that affect them in that moment. Because ado-
lescents make decisions that affect their entire lives while in high school, their
thoughts and feelings toward their educational experiences are crucial to
understanding their decision-making processes and creating counterstories
that are absent from current education research.

Solorzano and Bernal (2001) stated that the “the centrality of experiential
knowledge” is a key element of CRT as well as an offshoot of CRT, LatCrit: “A
CRT and LatCrit framework recognizes that the experiential knowledge of
Students of Color are legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding,
analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education”
(p. 314). They described the experiences of students of color as a strength that
should be documented through various research methods. The focus group
interviews clarified classroom events and students’ behaviors by giving stu-
dents the opportunity to address their own affective responses to their educa-
tional experiences. The students’ responses in both the group and individual
interviews provided powerful insights into past events, their relationships
with their families, and their constructions of their multiple identities.

The focus group interviews occurred every 4 weeks of the semester, after
the end of each of the four literature units. The focus group interviews were
no longer than 1 hour and took place during the school’s lunch hours. I pro-
vided drinks and pizza as a sign of my appreciation and because the students
sacrificed their only social time during the day. The interviews were video-
taped and audiotaped so that I could act as a facilitator during the conversa-
tions and easily locate the speakers when transcribing the data.

The focus group students, Dina, John, Chris, Susan, Brittany, and Alvin,
were chosen to assure diversity of race, socioeconomic status, gender, and
varied academic success. They reflected the ethnic and economic diversity of
the class and school. At the start of the semester, the class was composed of 6
European American boys, 6 European American girls, 1 Southeast Asian girl,
4 African American girls, 5 African American boys, 3 Latinos, and 1 Latina.
The focus group was balanced according to gender and academic success so
that multiple perspectives were represented.

The focus group alleviated the pressure of individual interviews on stu-
dents and provided opportunities for a more natural conversation stimulated
by other participants’ responses (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Although it
was important to study the students in the classroom setting, it was equally
important to hear their voices outside the classroom. Borrowing from femi-
nists’ traditions in research (Madriz, 2000), I used group interviews to allow
the students to interact with each other in less formal ways and to use their
language and their frames of reference. Madriz (2000) stated that the “focus
group is a collectivistic rather than an individualistic method that focuses on
the multivocality of participants’ attitudes, experiences, and beliefs” (p. 836).
As we sat in a circle eating pizza and drinking soda pop, the students spoke
more freely about their families and personal interests when in the focus
group session than when these same questions were asked in the larger class
sessions. Often, I posed the questions and then removed myself from the discussion.

I put myself “in the middle” as someone seeking to learn from them about them. What engaged them in the class? What did they not like about the lessons? How did the literature and the activities make them feel about themselves, their peers, and their places in the world? These questions reflected the data accumulated from the coded classroom observations, field notes, and the teacher’s content choices. Students’ perceptions and understandings of the literature and the class activities were the focus of these questions. The focus group interviews gave me a chance to clarify events in the classroom and gave the students the opportunity to better understand each other.

An unexpected outcome of the group interviews was the students’ willingness to share personal stories. Two students shared painful stories about regretful choices. These stories gave the group deeply personal information about the 2 students’ home lives and families. Their willingness to tell unsolicited narratives and the other students’ sympathetic and careful questioning of these accounts spoke volumes about the powerful nature of safe spaces and the students’ desire for others to understand them.

**Student Individual Interviews**

As opposed to the focus group interviews, I asked the students to share their personal histories and family structures in the initial and culminating individual interviews. Fernandez (2002) stated, “We must recognize and address the lives of students of color who are often the objects of our educational research and yet are often absent from or silenced within this discourse” (p. 46). To include their voices, the individual interviews focused on the students within and beyond the school. I asked students to talk about their racial and ethnic backgrounds, neighborhoods, family structures, extracurricular activities, future academic goals, feelings about school, their teachers, and the subject of English. The 30-minute interviews were held during the students’ lunch period or after school and took place in the school library.

In the second individual interview, which was less structured (Bishop, 1999), I asked the student to reflect on his or her English class. Using data from the focus group interviews and the classroom observations, I asked follow-up questions about the student’s levels of engagement with specific texts and class activities. In both sets of individual interviews, the students also asked me about my work, my career goals, and my past academic experiences. I often offered personal stories to validate their experiences or provide a second point of view. Aside from the principal, one vice principal, and one science teacher, I was the only professional African American woman in the school building and the only African American woman under the age of 35. In short, I was an anomaly in innumerable ways: as a young African American
teacher, a doctoral student, a child-free adult, and a natural-hair wearing, professionally dressed woman. The students’ inability to categorize me made them eager to ask me almost as many questions as I asked them, blurring the lines of interviewer and interviewee. I welcomed their interests and sought to answer their questions as an element of “praxis” that forced the students to struggle with their limited categorizations for African American women.

**Teacher Interview Groups**

During the teacher group interviews, I shared my old experiences in the classroom and my new knowledge from graduate school. I chose to interview the English teachers in groups for the same reasons that I used a student focus group. Although I used an outline to facilitate the interview, I attempted to remove myself from the conversations so that the teachers would take up the issues of content and pedagogy with each other. Madriz (2000) suggested, focus groups minimize the control the researcher has during the data gathering process by decreasing the power of the researcher over research participants. The collective nature of the group interview empowers the participants and validates their voices and experiences. (p. 838)

The teacher group interviews gave teachers the opportunity to see each other as knowledgeable professionals with similar and dissimilar dispositions concerning the curriculum. Although the teachers often engaged in informal conversations about the curriculum, the formal interviews produced surprising results. Teachers became more aware of the levels of autonomy they were exercising in their classrooms; moreover, the conversations led teachers to share materials after the interview ended.

The interviews with the teachers were held where few staff or faculty members, aside from those in the English department, felt welcome—the English workroom. These audiotaped group interviews were semistructured (Bishop, 1999) and no longer than a class period to accommodate the schedules of the 15 teachers. In the first group, I was able to interview 2 teachers. I interviewed 3 teachers in the second group interview and 2 other teachers in the third interview. One teacher, who missed her interview time, wrote her responses to each of the questions I had given to the teachers prior to the meeting. The number of each group was highly dependent on the number of teachers with the same planning period and the willingness of the teachers to sacrifice a planning period. The interview data provided a historical background and current contextual information relating to the implementations of the curricular reform. After almost 10 years of struggling with the imposed multicultural curriculum, the teachers seemed to have made peace with the changes by picking and choosing those elements they valued; all used some of the new content and incorporated more authors of color into their reading.
assignments. But these assignments, the amount of inclusion, and the books chosen greatly varied across the department.

My former performances as the sole African American English teacher and the youngest teacher in the building and my new role as researcher were not much different. In both cases, my views on race and class conflicts between students, teachers, and administrators were rarely solicited or welcomed. My former colleagues remembered that as a teacher, I was very outspoken about the rights of students of color and challenged other teachers’ deficit notions of students. However, as a researcher, I consciously reframed my approach to speaking on these issues. Whereas I formerly took a confrontational stance toward teachers’ misconceptions or alignment of students of color, during my time in the field, I attempted to adopt a more pedagogical, questioning stance toward these same comments. My new approach to conversations about students of color did not alter my relationships with different teachers, but it diffused some of the previous tension from these interactions.

**Individual Teacher Interviews**

Because of my positive relationship with Julie, the primary teacher-participant, there was very little tension in our interactions. Over the semester-long project, Julie and I completed 11 formal interviews. A 90-minute life history or career interview (Goetz & LeCompte, 1989) was completed at the beginning of the project. This interview covered her sociopolitical background, her history in the field of education and English education, her beliefs about teacher and student roles in the classroom, and her theoretical framework surrounding the merits of teaching literature in the classroom. A similar 90-minute interview at the end of the semester gave us a chance to reflect on the outcomes from the semester.

During the semester, I conducted nine reflective “Friday” interviews with Julie. These interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes long and generally took place at the end of the week. The length of the interview depended on the number and significance of expected and unexpected outcomes from the previous week of class. During these interviews, Julie reflected on her pedagogical choices concerning the teaching of literature and her perceptions of the students’ responses to those choices. In turn, Julie would ask my advice on classroom issues, ways to define and explain events, and the theoretical underpinnings of her activities. The interviews provided us with the opportunity to debrief issues concerning individual students, whole class responses, and our reactions to class interactions. These ritualized conversations (Goodall, 2000) were informative and extremely valuable for the research as well as an opportunity for us to discuss literature, the students, school events, and administrative changes.
Portions of the classroom observations were used to frame my interview questions and guide Julie’s reflections toward the goals and objectives for the lessons. To protect the students’ privacy and to allow them to speak with total anonymity, the data recorded in the student focus groups were not discussed or shared with Julie during the data collection period. In addition, withholding students’ reflections prevented Julie from making adjustments to lessons based on students’ responses in the focus group and gave me a clearer picture of her practice. Any adjustments made to the curriculum came from Julie’s individual interpretations of the students’ needs and levels of engagement and our ongoing conversations about daily events in the classroom.

These conversations also taught us about each other’s lives, families, and cultures. Given multiple negative portrayals of White teachers in racially diverse classrooms and educational scholarship, I was very pleased that Julie trusted me enough to allow me to research her practice. Several times throughout the semester, Julie and I made incorrect and accurate assumptions about our mutual understandings of race, class, and gender; about our experiences as women; and about our experiences as teachers. By exploring these assumptions, we delved into the other person’s ideology and expanded our views of “the Other.” Calmore (1995) stated, “Many adherents of Critical Race Theory see an interlocking set of oppressions that extend beyond the singular base of race and include the bases of gender, economic class, and sexual orientation” (p. 320). Our conversations demonstrated how each of us negotiated oppression and highlighted the different and similar types of oppression present in each of our lives. The interviews greatly contributed to the creation of themes and corroborated the classroom observations and interviews that served as “voice as witness.”

**Voice as Witness**

This use of voice underscores the researcher’s stance as discerning observer, as sufficiently distanced from the action to be able to see the whole, as far enough away to depict patterns that actors in the setting might not notice because of their involvement in the scene. We see the portraitist standing on the edge of the scene—a boundary sitter—scanning the action, systematically gathering the details of behavior, expressions, and talk, remaining open and receptive to all stimuli.

—Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 87)

While completing the observations in Julie’s classroom, I chose the position of nonparticipant observer so that I could effectively code the flow of conversation and record classroom interactions. My participation would have altered the pedagogical practices and student responses that I was trying to document as well as splintered my own focus and limited my ability to
create thick descriptions of the learning events during observations (Goodall, 2000).

The impact of my presence in the classroom was decreased by my position as nonparticipant, but it cannot be dismissed. Julie remarked several times that she felt the students seemed to “perform” more when I was in class. She felt that the students were more alert and eager to participate when I attended. The students were curious about my role in their classroom as well as my identity as an African American female scholar. At the beginning of the study, I formally addressed the class. To alleviate students’ apprehensions, I made it clear that I was neither recording nor monitoring their behavior for disciplinary consequences.

In particular, the African American students seemed the most pleased and the most wary about my presence in the class. The lack of African American adults in positions of authority was a critical problem for the school and often noted by the students. My being in the classroom would be the only interaction most of them would have with an African American teacher at the high school level. They displayed the most interest in my work and were more likely to engage me in conversation before and after class time.

In the district, African American students are overrepresented in the categories of suspensions for discipline infractions. More so than other racial groups, because there was no acknowledged second-language barrier, they were often blamed by the local media for the low district test scores and graduation rates in the city. Their racialized place as the district “whipping boy” made the students less likely to trust any outsider, particularly one that looked Black but “acted White” (Fordham, 1996), documenting their behavior in a classroom.

The African American students’ lack of trust was also apparent when I attempted to videotape the class. Although I began the study videotaping each class, I quickly moved to videotaping on certain days. Several of the African American and Latino students did not wish to be videotaped, therefore causing me to separate the two groups of students. The videotaping created a physical and psychological partition in the classroom and privileged those students who acquiesced to being videotaped. The separation of the two groups of students was counterproductive to the classroom milieu. The physical division in the class seemingly reinstated the students’ feelings of marginalization that had led them to passively resist being taped.

These classroom dynamics played out over a span of 20 weeks of observation. The English curriculum is literature based; therefore, I attended classes on an average of 3 days a week. During the course of the spring semester, I spent 48 days observing the teaching of literature. Throughout the time in the classroom, I maintained a field journal. The journal and the raw data from the coded interactions were my primary sources of “voice as interpretation.”
Voice as Interpretation

Here we not only experience the stance of the observer and her place of witness, we also hear her interpretations, the researcher’s attempts to make sense of the data. She is asking, “What is the meaning of this action, gesture or communication to the actors in this setting?” and “What is the meaning of this to me?”

—Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 91)

In partial acknowledgement of my inherent biases surrounding my ideology of teaching and learning in the English language arts and my support of multicultural education, I employed a coding scheme to triangulate with the data from the interviews and the descriptive field notes. Data analysis from the interaction analysis coding scheme was supported and challenged by the different sets of completed interviews and thick descriptions of classroom events.

CRT recognizes the social science skepticism against scholars’ ways of knowing and their presentations of data or evidence (Evans, 2000). To address criticisms of interpretivistic data, I used a more generally acknowledged research tool. The triangulation of the student and teacher interviews with the coded analysis also speaks to the criticism that behavior coding limits understanding the “why” of student and teacher actions (Delamont & Hamilton, 1986). Triangulation helped to tease out the themes concerning student engagement or disinterest and students’ understandings of the curricular materials.

Although scholars may question the use of such a traditional research tool, I assert that CRT and portraiture welcome the use of multiple tools to create rich textured portraits of the participants. Claude McKay composed “If We Must Die” using the European sonnet as a means to demonstrate his ability to adopt, mimic, and transpose the Western art form into a meaningful, liberatory work of art that called for revolution (Barksdale & Kinnamon, 1972). Critical race theorists have welcomed interdisciplinary approaches to researching issues of equity and equality. When discussing the potential growth of CRT, Calmore (1995) suggested,

Critical Race Theory presents the opportunity not simply to carve out space to challenge established intellectuals and reinterpret established practice: as a growing movement, it can provide opportunities for new types of intellectuals to emerge. (p. 326)

Although CRT and portraiture challenge traditional modes of research, they also recognize the value of claiming these same tools to reflect the needs of the research questions and the goal to create liberatory research (Carter, 2003; Tyson, 2003). Therefore, the coding scheme is a valuable instrument for help-
Carter (2003) stated that “data do not talk: people do” (p. 36). That is why the use of the coding scheme is not the dominant research method; it is a supportive measure that helps to shape the interviews and the field notes.

The coding scheme was designed (see Figure 1) to reflect the overarching research study questions about the teaching and learning of literature in a ninth-grade class that used both European authors and authors of color. The Flanders Interactive Analysis Code system created by Flanders (1970) to record teacher and student behaviors was adapted using Beach and Marshall’s (1990) four ways to teach literature and an added affective component. Beach and Marshall suggested there are four interconnected approaches to the teaching of literature: textual, social, cultural, and topical (p. 242).2

Beach and Marshall (1990) stressed that each of the four approaches—textual, social, topical, and cultural—is integrated among the other three. These theorists see the four approaches as concentric circles of student knowledge and pedagogical content. The five categories of the coding scheme are defined more as pedagogical tools for designing and implementing lessons rather than controls for student responses and interactions. They also are intertwined because of the students’ responses to the teacher’s questions and activities. However, in the classroom observations, the four approaches were useful for labeling both the methods of instruction and students’ oral responses during the class periods. The coding scheme mapped the teacher’s
pedagogical choices and targeted interactions between the students and the teacher.

The use of coding highlighted which strategies the teacher employed most often, the students’ responses to those strategies, and the variations of the strategies with regard to the genre being taught. It drew attention to areas of dissonance and harmony that were cradled in the rise and silence of classroom dialogues. I was able to explore these tensions with the students during the focus group meetings, with the primary teacher participant in our Friday meetings, and with the other English teachers in the group interviews. The stories selected for the text are supported by the coding scheme.

Moreover, the stories are told against the historical background of the city and district and their relationships with communities of color. CRT and portraiture convene through the emphasis that is placed on context and the contextualization of events. The role of history to better understand and contextualize the present is important to both portraitists and critical race theorists. CRT attacks ahistorical presentations of events for their failure to accurately convey the underlying and underexamined issues and concerns that influence historical events. Similar to CRT, portraiture advocates for the inclusion of a historical perspective, broadly defined by the actors and the events, that sheds light on underexamined proceedings and procedures. The students’ and teachers’ stories are shaped by historical traditions and current circumstances.

Voice Discerning Other Voices

When a portraitist listens for voice, she seeks it out, trying to capture its texture and cadence, exploring its meaning and transporting its sound and message into the text through carefully selected quotations.

—Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 99)

The chosen stories illustrate a complicated set of macro and micro dynamics that affect the instruction and learning in the classroom. For example, to depict the subtle and overt meanings behind the participants’ actions, a student’s subtle body language is investigated, Julie’s whispered responses to questions are interrogated, and mutual laughter from the focus group is highlighted. The power of the researcher is greatest in the choices she or he makes when presenting the data in written form (Richardson, 1990). It is the author’s selection of events and details that provide the reader with the final portrait.

The portraitist and the critical race theorist understand that the ultimate level of “voice” involves the decisions about what information is given to public consumption. What stories are we telling and for what purpose? Because critical race theorists in education acknowledge that the researcher is
the filter and the disseminator of the work, they encourage researchers of color to research students and teachers of color (Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race researchers use the stories and counterstories of people of color to share portraiture’s “goodness” and defy current stereotypes about what happens in schools. Portraiture and CRT view the aesthetic whole, the final project, as a political act that facilitates change and liberation for people who have gone without voice.

CONCLUSION

CRT and portraiture acknowledge the author’s political role in making meaning of the texts and shaping the story being presented to the world. “Voice is important—how voice is expressed, how voice is informed, how our voice differs from the dominant voice” (Calmore, 1995, p. 320). The author’s authority or “voice” is the guide, the griot, and the expert of the stories the author tells and the information she or he presents. It is the author’s responsibility to demonstrate the complexities of people’s lives and the contexts influencing the choices they make. The power of “voice” and the acknowledgement of that power is an integral part of empowering and emancipatory practices that CRT and portraiture promote in scholarship.

The combination of the six aspects of voice led to the construction of the portrait of a classroom of students who were motivated by a complex set of dynamics. The final portrait shows a teacher who struggled to meet the needs of all her students in interesting and relevant ways. The portrait is not perfect because the portraitist and the participants are flawed. However, the explanation of how power and privilege are ascribed to the influences of race, class, and gender that constrain and enable the students is a story that deserves to have “voice.”

NOTES

1. When describing students as Chicano, Hispanic, or Latino, I am using the language that the researchers used in their articles. In my own research, I defined the students as they defined themselves, as Mexican American.

2. The textual approach to teaching literature focuses on an analysis of the writer’s conventions in the forms of literary devices, genre, and text structure. Social knowledge deals with questions and knowledge concerning large societal issues such as debates about violence and sex in Hollywood films, social interactions between students and their peer groups, and systematic and institutional approaches to dealing with people at various times in history. Cultural knowledge overlaps with social knowledge because they share an emphasis on the student’s relationship to the text through personal experiences. Cultural knowledge, however, is distinct because it includes questioning “who we are and how we have come to be who we are” (Beach & Marshall, 1990,
p. 245) with respect to various societal groups. Topical knowledge is the application of students’ background knowledge of different academic fields, famous people, or specific events. The teacher may ask students to research information on a specific topic related to the historical context or present-day social issues being focused on in the text.

REFERENCES


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