

“Speaking Up” and “Speaking Out”: Examining “Voice” in a Reading/ Writing Program With Adolescent African Caribbean Girls

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This account examines three significant moments in a weekly reading and writing workshop in order to reflect on the problematic notion of “coming to voice” for African Caribbean girls aged 14 to 15. The author discusses the process as both a program and a research inquiry. The aim of the inquiry was to explore some academic, social, and affective concerns for girls of this age. Program objectives included introducing culturally and gender-relevant curricula as well as facilitating critical literacy skills. The research is framed from a critical Black feminist perspective. The design was qualitative. Ethnographic methods were used (audio-taped transcriptions of fieldnotes of workshop activities, formal and informal student interviews, and student journal writings). The author concludes by sharing how the inquiry taught her some salient lessons in listening to research participants’ voices and in the politics and ethics of participatory literacy inquiries.

EDUCATORS CONCERNED WITH TRANSFORMING traditional classroom practice emphasize the importance of their students “coming to voice” (hooks 1989; Maher & Tetreault, 1994). I want to share what occurred when I provided young adolescent Black girls with opportunities to read, write, and speak themselves into the curriculum. I present three significant moments in these students “coming to voice,” that is, naming issues critical to their own lives. This discussion examines “speaking up” and “speaking out,” how African Caribbean adolescent girls positioned themselves through literacy activities and how their concerns helped me think about issues regarding curricular spaces for these students of color, as well as about my research aims and purposes.

Kay, Tamisha, Nadia, and Alice were 14- and 15-year-old girls who participated in a reading, writing, and discussion group which I conducted between March 1995 and June 1996 with Creole-speaking¹ working-class, immigrant girls, aged 13 to 15 from African Caribbean backgrounds in an urban middle school.² As a reading and writing project, I started the program with a set of critical literacy objectives (see Appendix). As a research inquiry, I aimed to understand how their social and cultural world looked from their perspectives. I wanted to explore some concerns (social, academic, affective) for girls of this age and cultural background generated from discussions and journal writing. What I really learned from these girls were salient lessons in listening to students’ and research participants’ voices and in the politics and ethics of dialogic, reflexive literacy research methods.

I begin with a brief introduction of my theoretical and research perspectives, followed by an outline of the methodology. Next, I describe three examples of student participation that helped me reflect on my program, research objectives, and the needs of the students. Finally, I share some ruminations about my own positioning in this research and how the project has helped me rethink my approaches.

Theoretical and Research Perspectives

A Black Female Perspective

Black feminisms represent a range of epistemic positions from which to work toward social change, falling under diverse, sometimes overlapping, and often conflictual rubrics (e.g., “Black,” “Third World,” “Afrocentric,” “Christian,” “womanist,” etc.). I identify myself as both a womanist and a Black feminist, because I think that these agendas overlap. *Womanism*, a term coined by Alice Walker in the late 1970s, derived from *womanish*, is a reworking of the term *feminist* in ways that takes into account the experiences of Black women and therefore has a variety of meanings (Walker, 1983).

In conceptualizing this discussion, I particularly draw on the work of Black female theorists who are thinking through transforming education from Black fe-

male perspectives (e.g., Cannon, 1995; hooks, 1994; James, 1993; Omolade, 1994). As a Black female educator, I am concerned about *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, as the title of a timely report indicates (American Association of University Women, 1992). Particularly, I am concerned with how schools may shortchange Black girls. Mindful that research can be a violent or a humanizing activity for participants, I espouse research for social change as well as action-oriented, participatory, and collaborative approaches to inquiry. Because I envision my literacy research as social activism, I want to conduct research that helps Black girls socially, intellectually, academically, and culturally. Middle school is a critical time for intervention in their lives.

The Student Voice

Black feminist bell hooks is known for her expression, “coming to voice.” In *Talking Back* (1989), she explained:

Whether a class is large or small, I try to talk with all students individually or in small groups so that I have a sense of their needs. How can we transform consciousness if we do not have some sense of where the students are intellectually, psychically? (p. 54)

This “coming to voice” is more than a metaphor. Drawing on professional voice training, Annie Rogers (1993) explained that it is also psychophysical, explaining that societal conventions of femininity teach females to cut off the spirit of liveliness and the breath from the bodies. They lose what Rogers calls “ordinary courage ... the capacity to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart” (p. 276).³

“Voice” is a particularly salient concept in the work of Black female scholars who emphasize how Black mis/education has been integral to the maintenance

1. Caribbean Creoles are sociohistorical products of more than two languages. They evolved out of the abject conditions of slavery. When Europeans invaded Africa, they shipped its inhabitants to plantations in the Americas. Fearful of African revolt, the slave traders grouped speakers of dissimilar languages together. Thus, in these strange new lands, Africans creatively developed new and common tongues. English Caribbean Creoles (e.g., Jamaican Creole) have substratum grammars and other grammatical features (such as tones) originating from West African and Bantu languages. (For discussions of creoles, pidgins, and dialects, see Dalphinis, 1985; Sutcliffe, 1992; Winford, 1994.)
2. I am using a number of terms (e.g., race, gender) which theorists (Davies, 1995; Gillborn, 1995; Weiner, 1994) remind us are not monolithic, but are changing and complex and can be problematic and contradictory. At times, I refer to these students as African Caribbean, at other times as Black. I am by no mean conflating experiences from various places in the African diaspora with African American realities.
3. My point here is, as Rogers (1993) noted, that “voice” is not a mere metaphor. However, Rogers and her colleagues, for me, ignore the historicity of Black females, presuming, it seems, that Black women can find or claim a voice in the same ways as White women. See Davies (1995), who addressed these distinctions. Davies (1995) would argue here that this derision relates to “the historical fact that Black women were seen/are seen/have been seen as having nothing important to say.” (p. 5).

of the status quo. Black students and other students of color are often denied the right to learn about their own cultures from critical or their own informed perspectives (Joseph, 1988). Beverly McElroy-Johnson (1993), an African American junior high school teacher, argued that teachers who ignore issues in the lives of minority students leave them “voiceless.” She explained:

When I use the term *voice*, I am thinking of a strong sense of identity within an individual, an ability to express a personal point of view, and a sense of personal well-being that allows a student to respond to and become engaged with the material being studied by the other students in the classroom, and the teacher. Voice, in this sense, is having a place in the academic setting, other than just a desk and a book. Voice is the students’ participation and acceptance of the academic and intellectual process. It is the students’ desire to express ideas in a clear, coherent way, because that student understands that his or her thoughts are important. It is the solid understanding of why an individual must communicate clearly and effectively the recognition of self within the student that gives that student the ability to express with confidence.... Voice is identity, a sense of self, a sense of relationship to others, and a sense of purpose. Voice is power – power to express ideas and connections, power to direct and shape an individual life towards a productive and positive fulfillment for self, family, community, nation, and the world. (pp. 85–86)

I recognize that one cannot “empower” or “give voice” to girls merely through weekly writing activities. In fact, more recent observations of African American and African Caribbean girls in classroom settings have shown me further complexities of this notion of “voice.” It has become clear that although Black girls may “learn” to be silent or complacent in classrooms, they, indeed, have a lot to say (Henry, 1997). Their silence, or non-speech, is a text in itself.

In the reading and writing project, I was interested in providing students with issues that they deemed relevant to their own lives, allowing them to think and reflect on them, to understand their underlying causes, to problem-pose and problem-solve. In this way, literacy, or critical literacy, can be both a tool and a weapon (Jongsma, 1991). I am interested in the traditional but also the hidden and obscured dimensions of literacy that have to do with culture, class, gender, race, and relations of power. Indeed, Black feminist Barbara Omolade (1994) argued that for Black women and girls, traditional forms of literacy education have required silence, invisibility, and other forms of accommodation. More than Rogers’ notion of “telling one’s heart,” student voice can be “transgressive,” first requiring us as educators to “transgress” the boundaries of rote, assembly-line pedagogy (hooks, 1994). Carol Boyce Davies (Davies & Ogundipe-Leslie, 1995) explained that, for Black women, “transgressive speech” challenges situations of oppression:

[It] talks back to authority when necessary regardless of consequences. Speech and speaking out and coming to voice are all forms of the search for modes locating places of authority, identifying the issues that are critical to our survival as a people, and above all, express the inner feelings, needs, and desires of Black women in society. (p. 8)

Critical Perspectives on Literacy

Postmodern, radical, and critical theorists (Giroux, 1996; Joseph, 1988; Macedo, 1993; Omolade, 1994) point out that state and public discourses of “literacy” often refer to skills toward productive but “domesticated” workers in a capitalist system rather than creating independent and critical thinkers. Black ESL students who have immigrated from former colonial countries might be particularly subjected to what Macedo (1993) called a “colonial literacy model,” or “literacy for stupidification” (p. 204). That is, they come from educational systems in which they learn the false authority of European civilizations. More generally, research from a number of countries shows that schooling teaches children to defer to the teacher and to the authority of the text (Davies, 1993; Freire, 1970; Goodlad, 1984). In this workshop, as I discuss later, we had to unlearn these behaviors.

Caribbean Students and Literacy

Discussions of language for pupils of African heritage throughout the African diaspora are highly political and often entrenched in an implicit paradigm of pathology or inferiority (Coard, 1971; Edwards, 1986; Henry, 1996). Caribbean Creoles are often devalued as inferior or as “bad” English (Edwards & Redfern, 1992), and students are frequently reprimanded for using their first languages in the classroom. Teachers unaware of language and dialect interferences may assume that pupils’ cognitive abilities are inferior (Cummins, 1984; Solomon, 1992). Schooling can create a fear of public speaking for those who speak non-Standard English. Peers (Mac an Ghail, 1993) as well as teachers (Solomon, 1992) may discourage children from expressing themselves in their most heartfelt ways by avoiding their mother tongues and dialects. (Even in our program, the normalizing discourse of Standard English was evident. For example, on Tamisha’s birthday, I had brought doughnuts to the session and she was excited. “A dis one me a tek, I mean, I’m taking this one.” she said, bashfully, glancing over at me.)

All students need practice in writing and reading as ways to communicate (Gundlach, Farr, & Cook-Gumperz, 1989). My program objectives were shaped by research showing that reading and writing activities together promote greater learning than when they are treated as separate subjects (Staton, 1989; Tierney, 1990). Staton (1989) studied dialogue journals of students with limited English proficiency where children responded to literature through journals and the teacher regularly wrote back to pupils. Staton found that this approach increased self-knowledge, language skills, and cognitive abilities. Golden and Handloff (1993) indicated that further research inquiries are needed to explore the nature and development of students’ responses to literature and the development of these responses through journal writing. Moreover, Egan-Robertson (1993) argued that research has not adequately documented immigrant readers’ responses to literature about their own cultures. Along with the critical literacy

perspectives mentioned earlier, these empirical research studies laid a theoretical foundation for my program objectives (see Appendix).

Literacy, Race, and Gender

This is an exciting moment in literacy theory. The “New Literacy” promises to engage students with their worlds (Willinsky, 1990); reader response theory recognizes the experiences readers bring to literature (Rosenblatt, 1976). Yet, many of these theoretical positions lack the interplay of gender and race/culture as integral to their conceptual frameworks. Research is needed in which the social meanings of race and gender are components of this new literacy education.

Researchers in urban classrooms argue that children need opportunities to write authentic, meaningful texts (Blake, 1995; Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1995). Through journal writing, Brett Blake (1995) studied 11 fifth-grade Black and Latina girls in a low-income area in Chicago. She concluded that “girls need permission to write in formal classrooms” (p. 58); they need opportunities to read, discuss, write, and express themselves in safe, private contexts. Boys may not outnumber girls, but their concerns frequently override those of young girls. Furthermore, as Gilbert (1989) illustrated, in most stories, men dominate, and women are passive and self-sacrificing. Indeed, as classroom research shows, girls often betray their voices (Blake, 1995; Fine, 1991), creating themes and writing stories that avoid derision from boys. Fordham (1996), Fuller (1980, 1983) and Mirza (1993) reminded us that Black girls’ schooling experiences and cultural constructions of femininity cannot be conflated with those of other cultures, and that their own voices need to be heard.

Thus, there is a pressing need for research focusing on race and class in education to make gender a central construct (Mirza, 1992, 1993). Black theorists argue for curricula and pedagogies that accurately reflect, critically examine, and build on Black historical and cultural realities (Brathwaite & James, 1996; King, 1994; Smitherman, 1994). Most discussions of Black education, however, overlook the specificities of Black girls. For example, Kunjufu (1984) claimed that African American girls are successful because their mothers raise them to be “academically aggressive”; and Hale (1982) claimed that African American girls “naturally” do well in school. However, a range of research shows that Black girls are expected to adopt “female” roles of passivity and complacency; they are invisible to teachers as serious learners; they receive less encouragement and rewards; they are assessed for their social skills rather than academic achievement; they are evaluated by their physical characteristics such as hair texture and skin color; they are considered sex objects as they mature (Evans, 1992; Grant, 1984; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987).

Researchers have not adequately examined the reasons for which Black girls may adopt traditional female roles of passivity and silence. A few research-

ers have shown that acceptable school behaviors of African Caribbean British (Fuller, 1980, 1983; Mac an Ghaill, 1993) and African American girls (Fordham, 1996) mask “culturally resistant” attitudes and behaviors. Mirza (1993), however, refuted “resistance” studies, urging for analyses that illustrate Black girls’ differential cultural construction of femininity. Thus, these studies reveal contradictory findings. Clearly, more qualitative investigations could shed light on these findings, especially research in which the students’ voices are heard.

I am by no means participating in liberal, pluralist notions of “gender equity,” a contradictory notion (Bryson & de Castell, 1993). Moreover, to speak of “gender appropriate” or even “gender sensitive” curricula, can pinion girls from various cultural and racial groups into elitist Western European norms as well as into essentialized notions of female and male identities and behaviors. Rather, I am trying to explore ways in which to conduct literacy research as a Black woman working with adolescent Black girls. I am also grappling with practical and theoretical concerns regarding feminist research methods in such an environment.

Design of the Study

I used an interpretive design for this study, the important features of which are that (a) research is longitudinal, (b) fieldwork is gathered in context on the site, (c) the researcher experiences the program firsthand with the participants, (d) data are generally in narrative form, (e) focus is on finding participants’ meanings in that context, and (f) data are analyzed inductively (Brown-McGee, 1994). The data to be discussed here were collected and analyzed from a workshop which spanned over 24 sessions of approximately 40 to 45 minutes from March 29, 1995 to June 6, 1996. More precisely, the data to be discussed in the following section are derived from students’ writings, a transcription of a workshop activity (a play), interviews, and conversations with teachers and students.

The total pool of data was derived from a range sources: (a) *Fieldnotes* – I took fieldnotes of the children’s responses to texts and their interactions with one another after each session and the frequent “debriefing” meetings with the ESL teachers, Mrs. O’Brien and Mrs. Johnson. (b) *Students’ writings* – Students kept a folder in which they reflected on the texts read or issues discussed. Their writings were photocopied and analyzed for themes. (c) *Audiotapes and videotapes* – I began by audiotaping and then videotaping the sessions of group discussions and conversations with teacher Mrs. Johnson. Relevant segments were transcribed. (d) *Student feedback interviews* – Students provided individual feedback about the workshop and their self-evaluations of their personal and academic growth on May 29 and 30, 1996; on the following day, we revisited the questions and discussed reflections as a group. These 20-minute interviews and conversations were audiotaped.

Feminist Fieldwork

In feminist fieldwork, the contours of the research design are constantly changing, as are the people involved (Lather, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Parameters may shift according to the needs of the participants and emergent findings. Shulmit Reinharz (1992) argued that, in a sense, all feminist research can be considered “action-research” in that it works toward social change. Although there is no single feminist methodology, Mehreen Mirza (1995, p. 165) delineated four basic assumptions that can also apply to feminist research with girls: (a) It should address women’s lives and experience in their own terms and ground theory in the actual experiences of women; (b) it should promote an interactional methodology in order to end the exploitation of women as research objects; (c) research on women should provide the women studied with explanations that could be used to improve their life situations, such that they do not become objectified; (d) the researcher is central to the research and her feelings should be central to the process.

Modus Operandi

Beginnings. As an inquiry and a reading and writing workshop, this project emerged from both my observations of these girls in their class and from my conversations with their teacher, Enid Johnson, in February 1995. In March 1995, we agreed on the need to develop the self-expression, thinking skills, language awareness, and writing abilities of her female students (from Jamaica and Belize, Central America), or as Mrs. Johnson put it, “to open up” (14-Feb-95). Maher and Tetreault (1994) wrote that in the classroom voices are “fashioned” not “found,” from ongoing conversations with each other. This process was one of unlearning old behaviors and relearning to dialogue with one’s personal experiences and with the issues read in literature.

I began meeting with seven girls aged 13 to 14 at the time. We met on a weekly schedule for about 30 to 40 minutes. For the first 3 months (six sessions from March to June 1995), we read from *The Diary of Latoya Hunter: My First Year at Junior High* (henceforth, *The Diary*), a biography of a Jamaican schoolgirl living in New York. I shall elaborate on the modus operandi with *The Diary*, as it was the place from which many other topics cascaded. More importantly, through generating themes, the students were able to examine issues of relevance to their lives. It helped me come to understand the kind of writing they produced and the issues they wanted to discuss.

I chose *The Diary* as a means to connect with the lives of the girls. Their responses helped me understand them and helped build our relationships. (I, too, am of African Caribbean origin.) It also provided a springboard to facilitate thinking and writing skills. Usually, we would read sections of *The Diary* to-

gether. Students would volunteer to read aloud. We then related the passage to our personal lives. Each girl kept a journal (a folder) in which she responded to portions of it. Sometimes I would bring in articles of interest. I spent the first weeks encouraging them to speak up and speak from their own experiences. It took those first few weeks to convince them that there is never only one “right answer” gleaming on the pages of a book. It was a difficult learning process to read oneself, write oneself, speak oneself into our curriculum. As alternative educators remind us (e.g., Cannon, 1995; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Miller, 1993), teaching and learning processes often inscribe us into a unidirectional model of education in which the teacher does the thinking, knowing, talking, and decision making, and in which the students passively comply and regurgitate.

By the fourth session, with my prompting and encouragement, the girls began to initiate and write about various issues from their own experiences. For example, after reading a passage about how Latoya’s mother forbade boys to call the house, we compared societal expectations for dating and marriage in the United States with their countries of origin. The girls wrote on topics such as relationships with parents or guardians and these adults’ opinions on dating, their own growing awareness of sexuality, and boyfriends.

In the last two sessions for that school year, the girls “peer conferenced,” using guiding questions suggested by Muschla (1993) such as “What things do I like about this piece? What do I want to know about? What suggestions can I offer? Is any part of this piece confusing?” Such sessions can be vacuous ventures or intermediary steps toward hermeneutic conversation. Indeed, these interactive sessions were literacy practices in which the girls were learning to “speak up.” The sessions also helped me realize that they needed further practice sharing and responding confidently to each other’s work and ideas. Goals for the new school year in 1995–1996 included working in “peer groups” (Muschla, 1993) to help them become good audiences for each other (Daniels, 1990) and to learn to legitimate their own ideas (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Follow-up activities would include group discussions and writing activities relevant to their own lives.

Later stages. The following academic year (September 1995–June 1996), I continued to introduce engaging texts for Black girls (now adding films and videos) from which we generated themes for critical discussion and writing. These reading, writing, and discussion groups became problem-posing circles (Freire, 1970), a process that draws on personal experiences to analyze social situations, a particularly good method for young teenage girls to raise issues about their personal experiences. Nina Wallerstein (1987) argued that problem posing can be especially relevant to students who experience alienation, cultural dissonance, and emotional barriers in a new country. Recent immigrants from the Caribbean may live separated from family members back in their homeland for periods of time during resettlement. Moreover, these girls expressed the difficulties of coming to North America and learning the linguistic, cultural, and symbolic capital to be accepted and participate fully in the society.

Kay, Alice, Tamisha, and Nadia

Alice, Kay, and Tamisha were chosen for discussion because of their consistent participation in the group for the entire program. (In transitional ESL programs, students may arrive and leave at any time for many reasons such as immigration laws, struggles due to resettling, and family demands.) Nadia arrived in the country toward the end of our program. However, her participation becomes important in the conversational analysis below. In what follows, then, I examine the problematic process of “coming to voice” for Creole-speaking African Caribbean immigrant teen girls.

Kay: “Speaking Out” Through Writing

Kay was born on May 9, 1981 in Jamaica. She is the youngest of four children. Two of her three brothers live in the United States; one resides in Jamaica. After her mother died of cancer in the mid-1980s, she went to live with a relative, before immigrating to the United States in 1992. Kay was always crisply dressed in well-coordinated clothes. She was energetic and, at times, flippant. She bobbed in and out of being an enthusiastic fireball and a disinterested participant in the reading and writing workshop. Although Kay claimed to read widely, naming her favorite genres as romance, horror, science fiction, biographies, historical fiction, and adventures, Mrs. Johnson explained that Kay would sign out a myriad of books from the school library, which stayed in the locker until recalled for inventory!

Mrs. Johnson recalled that when Kay came to the United States at 11 years of age, she could identify the letters of alphabet and a few simple words such as “and” and “to.” Given this context, it is understandable that Kay often resisted writing in the beginning of the program. In resplendent adolescent style, Kay enjoyed playing aloof about writing and predictably uttered any of the following during our sessions: “Do we have to do this?” “I don’t have a pen.” “What are we supposed to do?”

Voice becomes problematic for students like Kay who find themselves in a strange and new land, as well as for non-White students who do not speak Standard English, yet who are compelled to express themselves in what Carol Boyce Davies (Davies & Ogundipe-Leslie, 1995) called “a master discourse” (p. 9). During the first few months (March–June 1995), Kay would not write a response or she would not hand one in at the end of the session. For example, of the first five writing responses on *The Diary*, she completed two. However, she showed interest in the story, signed out the book from the library, and participated in the discussions. She named her own diary “Kay-Kay”:

Dear Kay-Kay

I have been reading about Latoya today. In her book she brought up some great poin Like her mother think boys can’t call her. (23-May-95)

Here, Kay’s detachment can be interpreted as a reluctance to write. Perhaps, as Brownyn Davies (1993) wrote about her own literacy research in which children “resisted anything that seemed like work,” writing in this instance was “something to be avoided if at all possible” (p. 56). However, I considered this journal entry significant in that Kay did write something. Yet, she neither problem-posed nor did she make connections to her life. Thus, Kay did not illustrate the concepts outlined earlier by McElroy-Johnson (e.g., the ability to express a personal point of view, . . . to express ideas and connections). In her exit interview (30-May-96), Kay explained, “If I’m in the mood, I’ll write good; if I’m not, I’ll just write anything. If the topics are good, I’ll concentrate and write.” When asked, “What makes a good writer?” She answered, “Concentration. Spelling, the way you write so that people can understand and if what you’re saying makes sense.”

I decided to not squelch student creativity and expression. Thus, I ignored “errors,” particularly in the writing of Alice and Kay, working rather from my assumptions, based on current research literature, that fluency, control of syntax, writing skills, and self-expressivity would be increased through the use of personally engaging and culturally responsive literature and activities with specific themes for girls of this age; and that the use of group talk and journal writing would enhance language and thinking skills (Golden & Handloff, 1993; Pappas et al., 1995; Staton, 1989; Tierney, 1990). Their teacher taught grammar and spelling quite systematically, and the ESL department at this school practiced current approaches to developing reading and writing (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Coehlo, 1988, Samway & Whang, 1996).

In the following example a few months later, Kay showed that indeed she could express herself in writing, “when the topics are good.” Kay not only wrote copiously but also presented some interesting hypotheses regarding an extremely high-profile case, the acquittal of O. J. Simpson in the criminal prosecution of the deaths of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman:

I think that OJ. had a fisel [fair] traial. I also think that nicole family should [could] of plane the mader [planned the murder] because it was not like thay like OJ in the beiging [beginning] any way and Nicole could of hided [hired] a hit man to kill her because of what she said in her dreary [diary]. I also understand that nicole and OJ. Had a dring [drinking] problem and witt duges [drugs] but I realy [think] that the traial was fare. I don't think that their is anyway in the world that one man could could kill two people and you did not here a sound and one of them could of got to the phone and call 911. Yes he is a football player and sey he is sopose to be strand [strong] but it is imposable for one man to kill two people and how did he get back if so quite [quickly] (27-Oct-95)

Kay passionately argued each of these ideas in a group discussion prior to the writing activity, “How could he kill two people, and none of them didn’t scream, none of them didn’t fight back? THAT is VERY impossible!” Her thesis framed the argumentation in her writing. Here, Kay was asserting her ideas in a

coherent way with a sense of powerful conviction. At first glance, her reasoning may seem illogical; Kay was relating an underlying message that things are not always as they seem. Timothy Lensmire (1994) provides an explanation here:

stories represent a sort of compromise between privileged version of how the world is ... and how we, as individuals, would like the world to be. When we tell stories, we draw on given cultural narratives about the world, and our place in it, and we manipulate and twist these narratives in ways that express our “idiosyncratic worlds” (p. 387).

Trying to work through similar contemporary social ills, during our prewriting discussion, Kay used this moment to sort through some questions:

No, you see, this is what most people say. You know, like, they say, it takes well – “*A Black man, right, has more heart than a White man*” cause a White man, well it means the same as woman – I mean – can go ahead and kill their child but they never hear that like a Black woman go and kill their child... But they say, “How much White people you hear now killing their babies, dumping them in the lake?” You never hear something about the Black girls.

Kay was referring to another high-profile case in which a White woman drowned her two sons then invented a story of a Black male abducting them. Kay’s query gave rise to a discussion of how and why the media might be more interested in some cases than others, looping back into the Simpson case and criminalized images of Black people based on race, gender, and class.

In this discussion, Kay was drawing on cultural story lines, uttered in homes, churches, hair salons, and grocery stores, regarding this high-profile case of a wealthy Black ex-football hero accused of slaying his White wife. Kay was trying to “read the world,” to look at the contradictions in cultural and national narratives and to make sense of them. By insisting twice in her written response that the trial was “fair,” she was unleashing a cluster of stories and scripts while positing hypotheses to absolve O. J. Simpson. Kay was deconstructing the complex political interplay of race (O. J. as a Black man, his interracial marriage, his in-laws’ attitudes to him), social class (a story about the rich and famous), gender (the subtext of Black men and the criminal justice system), and power (both the power of money and power of the justice system). Speaking out, no longer reluctant to write, Kay was using writing as a “tool” to analyze an event in which race, class, gender, and power were intricately encoded.

From this student-initiated session, I learned that students come to class with real-life questions that a teacher cannot always predict, and that students, like Kay, who may be labeled as “low” or “poor” readers are constantly reading the world and anxious for spaces to express their heartfelt views.

Nadia and Alice Speak: Patriarchal Retellings

I tried to raise Black feminist questions and issues throughout the course of the

workshop in that I attempted to have the girls reflect on particular power relationships in which they may find themselves as Black females. Not all student activities challenged situations of oppression. Interestingly, Nadia and Alice creatively spoke their own language using story lines locked in tradition, culture, and patriarchy.

Alice was 15 years old, 5-feet tall, soft, round, gentle, quiet, and full of compassion. She was studying in the United States on a 2-year visa. Separated from her brother and three sisters in Belize, she lived with an aunt and uncle while attending school in the Chicago region. For Alice, “learning to speak the language” was the hardest adjustment to life in the United States because “the language different because they pronounce the words different from us.” Nadia was almost 15 years old. Petite, wiry, and full of energy, she had only been in the United States for 8 months, where she lived with her large family (eight brothers and sisters).

Aware of their “reluctance” to write and their difficulties of “mastering” American language and literacy practices, I used drama as a creative way of self-expression. The aim of the following skit was to practice thinking through and developing a story line. Alice and Nadia, partners, decided to create a play, each drawing on her own language and culture:

- Alice: Me say gal me too busy wid me husband cooking yo no. [I say girl, I’m too busy with my husband’s cooking you know.]
- Nadia: Eh?
- Alice: Me too busy wid me husband cooking. Me have too much plan to do inna me house. [I’m too busy. I’m cooking for my husband. I have too many things I’ve planned to do in my house.]
- Nadia: What you cook fe yu husband?
- Alice: Whe you call that ting? Cow foot soup? Girl it was so good.
- Nadia: Cow foot soup Eh! Eh! (laughs) You can cook cow foot soup?
- Alice: Girl what you laughing about? I been cooking cow foot soup from when I was small. My mom teach me how to cook that cow foot soup. Ay yai yai!
- Nadia: Praise the Lord!
- Alice: I gotta go home and cook some cow foot soup for my husband.
- Nadia: Okay, see you later.
- Alice: Okay, gal!
- Nadia: Peace and Love! (16-Mar-96)

This play reflected the students’ home experiences. The girls evoked a labor-intensive dish which often involves simmering down the “cow foot” into a rich stock for 6 to 7 hours before adding other ingredients to make a hearty soup. Alice often spoke about her domestic and culinary responsibilities at her aunt’s house, such as making elaborate Belizean dishes for Sunday dinners. Nadia also expressed the theme of differing food practices in her exit interview 2 months later: “They [Americans] just go to MacDonaldis or Burger King. Jamaican food, like you *cook!*” Perhaps, they were expressing a nostalgia for their former ways of living, evoked by the memory of certain dishes. Nadia also revealed her own religious background, oscillating between her evangelical background (“Praise

the Lord”) and Jamaican youth culture influenced by Rastafarian language (“Peace and Love”).

Assuming a traditionally female position in the play, Alice could not stop and talk too long with Nadia, because she had to go home and cook for her husband. We talk about what we know, the experiences that surround us. Although locating their identities and a sense of themselves in the world, voice is not always liberatory. Their own stories in their own language relate women’s place in the social structure, falling into traditional retellings of a sexist world.

Tamisha: “Speaking Up” About Issues Critical to One’s Life

Tamisha immigrated to the United States at the age of 12. The youngest of five children, she had two brothers and one sister back in Jamaica. In the United States, she lived with her mother, grandmother, and her step-father who died because of alcohol-related illness in August 1995. Tamisha was tall and outgoing. She used to pull her straightened hair back until it barely stretched into a ponytail. She once recalled the pain of being mocked as a new immigrant because she dressed “old fashioned.” Indeed, she worked hard to assimilate to American teenage norms in her dress and speech. At school, Tamisha often used “tough,” “street” language. Tamisha was not afraid to ask questions and jostled frank discussions into the group. More streetwise and brazen than the others, she disclosed her interactions with boys. She read the following to the group:

Dear Diary

Some times my mother and my father say that I have a boyfriend because of the way I act som times. Sometime I act like a growing up lady. They also said that I dance or act nasty and I just act the way I like to act. Some people said that I am nasty too. But some times, if a boy ask me for a kiss or a huge I said OK but I only kiss or huge handsome boy. (23-May-95)

Tamisha’s speech and writing tended to be “transgressive,” in that she used private discourse in a public arena; she initiated unspeakable topics in school. Many of the group’s questions about gangs, dating, and sex were initiated by Tamisha, allowing me to understand their needs and concerns and to reshape the curriculum. For example, Tamisha’s questions prompted me to show two films, *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (Harris, 1992) about teen pregnancy, and *Mi Vida Loca* (Anders, 1994) about girls in gangs.

Tamisha’s transgressive speech, her ability to locate herself, to “speak up” and “express the inner feelings, needs, and desires” (Davies & Ogundipe-Leslie, 1995, p. 8), also caused me to think about my purposes and ethics as a researcher. It was her 14th birthday, November 18, 1995. We had just finished watching a segment of *Just Another Girl on the IRT*. Tamisha asked, “When would be a good time to begin being sexually active?” As we had discussed this difficult question with no set formulaic answer 2 weeks earlier, I immediately invited comments

from the other girls. Three things happened at one: I asked the group, “What do you think?” Kay whispered “When you ready.” And pointing to the video camera, Tamisha blurted out, “Turn that thing off!” I obeyed. After a long pause, Tamisha recounted a rather disturbing personal story, which, for ethical reasons, I choose not to disclose here.

Tamisha’s personal account paralyzed me momentarily. But it also recentered my focus on the priorities in my life and research. Instantly, reading and writing, and even documenting the project as a research inquiry, took a second place to creating what Jacqueline Jackson (1976) called a “competent education for Black women,” one that does not engage in “subterfuges,” one that emphasizes “cognitive and affective training helpful in moving individuals through life as adult citizens on an independent and interdependent, but not dependent, basis” (p .18). The above discussion finished with a confirmation of this space as one where Black girls could make meaning.

Concluding Remarks

Opening Discursive Spaces

I attempted to provide opportunities in which students could develop confidence in their own abilities to express themselves, as well as opportunities to grapple with personal and social issues. These were steps in getting a glimpse of their own authority and challenging existing relations of power in everyday life. Although I shall not make claims about how this intervention may or may not have changed their overall perspectives, their own words do tell much: “I’ve never been more excited about anything at school,” Kay said, jumping up and down in front of her locker, anticipating a second segment of, and discussion on, *Just Another Girl on the 1RT*. “This group is good,” said Tamisha, “because sometimes you want to ask your mother things, but you just can’t and we learn things here.” Alice developed more self-confidence to express herself: “Well, like before, if I talk to someone – [I learned] like, don’t be afraid. Like what’s on your mind, you could just tell somebody what’s on your mind. And don’t keep it in.” Nadia, said that she learned about her own sense of identity in relationship to others: “That nobody is different from ... It’s good to work in group.... because you get more understanding than if you work by yourself.”

Clearly, this action research project opened up spaces for these particular marginalized voices. The girls gained experience in self-expression and in articulating their own views through drama, group talk, and writing. They also had opportunities to engage in themes that they found urgent or relevant to their own lives. Some of these themes, of course, would be of interest to girls across cultures, being taken up differently among various groups. Omolade (1994) wrote, “Black females need a space for authentically reproducing themselves

as well as a place for learning about the world” (p. 150). Such spaces may not always be easily found in multiracial, multicultural classrooms, but they are possible. On the other hand, it might not have been possible to explore many of these issues in the same ways in a heterogeneous classroom. School is rarely a place for explicit discussions of private discourses; critical educators argue for these discussions (hooks, 1994; Joseph, 1988).

Beyond “Culturally Relevant” and “Girl-Centered” Curriculum Resources

There can be a danger for educators desirous of “transformative” learning environments to feel that we have done our part by providing “culturally relevant” texts or books with female protagonists. Indeed, such acts can go far in allowing children to see themselves reflected in literature and to make connections with their own lives. In this project, I was reminded of how the complexity of social locations – language, socioeconomic background, gender, race, and national origin – all configure and are implicated in our identities and ideas in far-reaching ways. Thus, although I thoughtfully chose themes that were culturally engaging for this population of Black girls, their interests and ideas revealed a more complex web of socially regulated discursive formations.

Rethinking Research Aims and Purposes

This research inquiry has caused me to think deeply about how my womanist/feminist stance affects my research and my daily interactions with participants. It poignantly reminded me of the reasons for which I conduct research as a Black woman (and how these may be antithetical to the demands of academe!). As educators interested in literacy research and practice, we often work with students and teachers with a neatly packaged theoretically rigorous agenda full of student-centered “workshop” activities. But a commitment to students’ voices and to collective curricular and pedagogical decisions necessitates a willingness to allow our researcher aims and agendas to be reshaped or even die off. For example, when Tamisha pointed to the video camera and told me to “turn that thing off,” she precipitated a more reflexive and open relationship of self-disclosure in the group setting. She took seriously her voice and authority as a group member, one in which she brought her own questions and personal experiences to the curricular material in the journey toward self-knowledge. Importantly, by demanding, “turn that thing off,” Tamisha helped me think about my researcher role and my relationships with participants. For example, it mattered urgently, henceforth, that the girls find a forum to speak and think through issues. Again, I want to emphasize that these are students who rarely see themselves reflected in the curriculum as working-class, immigrant, Black teenage girls. Although mindful that schooling can “shortchange” Black girls and mindful of the conse-

quences of learning to read and write “Standard English” conventions, issues of syntax and phonology had suddenly become of less concern to me.

Tamisha’s request caused me to think less about how to write about the project, at least, until the end of the project; consequently, I refused to call it outreach or research (categories important in the academic assessment of faculty activities), but began to affectionately refer to the project as “outsearch” as a way of deriding the (White male) academic theory/practice binarism. I am reminded of feminist social scientist Shulamit Reinharz (1984, 1992), who suggested that learning should occur in three areas of a research inquiry: The researcher should learn about herself, the subject matter under study, and about how to conduct research.

Political and ethical questions emerge from inquiries that are action-oriented inquiries in which students or research participants are encouraged to “speak up” and “speak out.” For example, when the tape recorder gets turned off, does what is said and what is done become part of the story? Do we want an intriguing story at the cost of participants? Do we want to get on with our research and ignore information that we may deem incidental or extraneous to the inquiry? What might be the various meanings of non-hierarchical relationships in research? Working with disempowered groups, such as Black women and girls, adds another layer of sensibility to democratic, participatory relationships in research.

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APPENDIX

Program Objectives

1. To initiate strategies to improve the critical literacy skills of middle-school immigrant girls of African Caribbean heritage through a weekly reading, writing, and discussion group during the school year 1995–1996
2. To introduce culturally relevant curricula with engaging themes for African Caribbean girls which will enable students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and will generate curricular themes
3. To provide a safe forum to address themes of concern to young teenage girls (including controversial, taboo, or private topics, such as violence, sexuality, family, and personal issues, etc.)
4. To document the process of implementing problem-posing literacy circles with early adolescent girls of African Caribbean descent

Future objectives include (a) lending academic support to classroom teachers based on these and future findings with adolescent African Caribbean girls, and (b) co-developing thematic units and curricula for this population of students with interested teachers.

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