CultureWise: Narrative as Research, Research as Narrative

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   The CultureWise Project gathers and analyzes first-person narratives of students while they reflect on their decisions to quit, stay in, or return to school. Why do students decide to go to college, to leave it once they are there, or to return after they have left? What makes some students want to stay in school and others want to leave? These are issues with which our project is concerned.
   We focus on minority and low-income students who often experience academic culture as an environment that contrasts sharply with their own, a circumstance that may lead them to quit school. Specifically, we are gathering narratives from students at three different stages or 'places' in their education: high school students deciding whether to enter college, those in college, and those who have dropped out of school and are contemplating returning later in life.
   We six researchers represent a diversity of race, age, gender, and political identities, lending the project a variety of representations and perspectives often missing from such endeavors. At present each of us is working in a specific cultural context of personal interest. Erec Smith is studying how minority students are represented in fictions, films, tales, and scholarship. Vershawn Young is studying African-American male and female students at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Bridget Harris Tsemo is studying African-American and Latino upper-level undergraduates who are considering professional or graduate degrees and are participating in a summer research program. Jennifer Cohen is researching Mexican-American girls in a Chicago public high school. Paula Mathieu is working with homeless and formerly homeless adults returning to school in a program at *StreetWise,* a non-profit street newspaper that provides income and on-site education to vendors

in Chicago. Jim Sosnoski, who has been working in electronic environments for a decade, will design the project Web site so that future storytellers can publish their tales in the variety of media they're accustomed to finding on the World Wide Web. Both Jennifer and Paula are planning to formulate teaching materials as a result of their research.

As our project develops, we plan to publish these narratives along with our analyses of them in a volume titled *Culture Crossings: From Streets and Neighborhoods to Campuses*. We imagine a print version of this book, as well as an accompanying online version or Web site. The students with whom Jennifer works are currently learning Web page design and will be invited to link a page with the current project. At-risk minority students, their teachers, and administrators are the intended audience.

While we are a collaborating group, each researcher brings her or his own desires, agendas, methodologies, and stories to the project. This has led at times to fruitful discussions, at others times to conflict, and at still others to the coexistence of different approaches to narrative research, teaching, and technology.

While this project is not fundamentally rooted in technology—in that people have been telling stories and entering or leaving school long before the age of cyberspace—it does make use of and respond to electronic technologies in a variety of ways. As teachers, our uses of technology have primarily relied on using cyberspace as writing space. As researchers, however, we have witnessed a variety of responses to technology, ranging from frustration to enthusiasm in using computers as writing spaces to engaging more multimedia capacities. We have seen writing groups initially excited at the thought of collaboratively publishing a collection of writing become so dismayed by persistent computer problems that they return to more trustworthy pencil and paper. Yet we've also seen high school students who are often passive and disconnected in their school classrooms jump at the chance to take a workshop on building multimedia Web pages. Technology promises to push the boundaries of narrative in multidimensional ways, but only for those who have reliable access to it. Even as we acknowledge the problems of access, our group is considering publishing the CultureWise collection on the World Wide Web, thus cautiously assenting to Philip E. Agre's description of the Internet as "a range of self-governing public forums for developing one's voice" (40).

To represent the diversity of approaches to both our research and our experiences with technology, we offer a series of our individ-

ual stories—the narratives of our research. Although the use of narratives in research (and as research) has become much more common than it was a decade ago, it may help those readers for whom this practice is not familiar if we describe what we each hope to accomplish by collecting narratives. In our conclusion we try to consolidate our individual hopes and fears about our work into some collective visions for the CultureWise Project.

Jennifer Cohen

As part of the CultureWise Project, I will begin my discussion of narrative as research one afternoon many years ago as I headed to the Indiana Dunes State Park with my high school boyfriend. The route from Chicago to Indiana used to pass through South Chicago, a neighborhood characterized most obviously by its huge steel mills. But, in the 1970s the Illinois state government constructed a skyway to pass over this lower and working class industrial neighborhood. Drivers don't have to look at the poverty of the people living there, Blacks, Mexicans, and mostly Eastern European whites fighting unemployment since the mills started closing in the 1970s. We don't have to see the dumps created by the mills or rows and rows of tiny houses shadowed by an expressway built without entrances to allow the people living there to use it. But in those days, not even a skyway could spare travelers the smell of the mills' pollution, the sight of the yellowed sky, or the view of the orange flames shooting ominously from the mills' tall smokestacks. As I worked furiously to roll up my window before the smell in the air got to me, my boyfriend turned to me and said, in his characteristically laconic way, "Someday the whole world will smell like this." His comment characterizes the area for what it was to us and everyone we knew: a dystopia settled right next door. A place nobody would want to live. No wonder we were glad to avoid it.

Now, I'm conducting ethnographic research in South Chicago, driving there as often as three times a week. I observe and talk to a group of second-generation Mexican-American high school girls at the local public high school to learn about their literacy practices. As I gather the explicit and implicit narratives of the place, I also reflect on the narratives shaping me as a researcher, for the stories I tell are deeply implicated in what I am able to learn about South Chicago and the people living there. For the first time I notice there are no exits along the main thoroughfare, Lake Shore Drive, from South Chicago north to the affluent neighborhood surrounding the University of Chicago, where I grew up and now live.

This isn't something I noticed back then because there is an exit almost every two blocks in my neighborhood if you are driving from downtown along Lake Shore Drive. But the politics of race and class exclusion that designated South Chicago a place to avoid are literally set in concrete, painfully obvious now that I'm looking.

As writer and activist Minnie Bruce Pratt observes, our notions of homeplace begin in the experience of our physical surroundings. Those of us with economic, racial, heterosexual, and religious privilege, she writes, must learn to see that the comforts of home are based on the violent physical exclusion of others. I agree with her that it is crucially important to recognize that home functions as a worldview structuring what we are able to perceive. When we make the choice to step out of home, we have made the decision to change. We may feel a loss of material and even spiritual comfort, but what we may gain in return is "a way of looking at the world that is more accurate, complex, multi-layered, multi-dimensioned, more truthful" (Pratt 17).

One goal of my ethnographic research is to bring out this complexity by bringing the voices of the students I observe into the discussion. As it stands, it is unlikely that anyone outside the students' circle of friends who is not making a specific effort to hear them will know about their experiences. In general, their voices are absent from research on girls. Yet, in their personal lives they feel the effects of that research, which represents them as deviant and culturally deficient by foregrounding statistics on teen pregnancy, drug use, and dropout rates. There is no denying that the students at this high school are counted as at-risk: test scores are low, dropout rates are high, and classroom discipline is an obsession. But a persistent focus on statistics of student failure silences the students' own narratives and obscures the fact that those statistics represent complex lives shaped by difficult decisions adolescents make every day (Ross Leadbeater and Way).

The narratives I have heard at this school contribute directly to the CultureWise Project's goal of increasing understanding at UIC and in the communities it serves about the obstacles and opportunities students encounter in education. Like many ethnographers studying literacy and researchers studying girls, I recognize an important relationship between the students' identity formation and their experiences of formal education (Heath; Levinson and Holland; Luttrell; Ross Leadbeater and Way). Because schools are contested cultural institutions, students form their identities both within and against school (Luttrell 93). Students are more likely to

cultivate a "schooled identity" (Levinson 221) crucial to keeping them in school when they can find a balance between the needs for self-assertion and external recognition (Luttrell 95). As educational psychologists Bonnie Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way point out,

> Identity development for adolescents includes comparison of oneself with the standards and ideals of others in ones' community. Rather than merely a search for self-coherence or commitment to self-chosen values, beliefs, and occupations, identity formation is a social process of judging others and being judged. (3)

The Mexican-American girls I observe have cultivated schooled identities because they intend to graduate, but do not receive the recognition they need in school. They use the schooled skills of reading and writing to tell stories about themselves that help them form their identities but do this almost exclusively outside of school. For example, about half the students I observe have access to computers and use them daily to talk to peers—and especially men—in international Internet chat rooms.[1] At their own initiative, the students spend two to three hours a day, three to five days a week, writing in Spanish to Latinos in South America and Los Angeles. The Internet is central to the narratives they construct about themselves. With it, they use their literacy to forge proximate relationships that can offer recognition online and the next day as they recount their cyberadventures to their friends. Using literacy, they craft new ethnic and national identities in response to a globalization of Latino culture and experiment with gender identity in a relatively anonymous context.

   Yet from an educator's perspective, these literacy practices are in direct competition with the largely functional literacies demanded of the students in school. The students' literate identities conflict with their schooled identities, creating a dangerous disjuncture between knowledge and formal education. By researching their narratives, however, I am able to learn what teachers and administrators do not have time or opportunity to explore. My findings suggest that students will find ways to narrate their experiences and so create self-identities. Some are clearly using technology in creative ways to do this. By inviting students to assert themselves creatively through narrative in the classroom, educators can create openings for student initiatives to renew school curricula. Such educational practices, in turn, build a reciprocal base from which

formal education may better shape the students' analytical abilities to help them perceive, articulate, and address problems they encounter in life.

Research as narrative presents its own challenges, however. Many ethnographers informed by feminist, anti-racist, and post-modern theories actively question traditional methods of narrating research findings. They are aware that ethnography's origins are closely aligned with modernist, colonialist cultural narratives in which the ethnographer's assumption of power, voice, and legitimate knowledge have historically silenced the people *he* has observed. Many researchers strive to resist this inherent power relationship. Even postmodern narrative structure, however, which aims to decenter the ethnographer's authority and demystify the construction of ethnographic narrative, often ends up recentralizing the ethnographer's experiences (hooks; Lather; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Ballerino-Cohen). Feminist ethnographers strive to empower women and girls by exploring the relationships between gender and power risk. Yet we risk remaking others through the lens of our own descriptive powers and recentralizing ourselves as we explore the implications of our research.

While I confidently pursue narrative as research, therefore, I remain more cautious about how to craft research as narrative. Narrative is a powerful tool indispensable to researchers studying populations that historically have been silenced and denied the capacity for rational thought or moral reasoning.[2] As a white researcher studying a traditionally disempowered population, I have chosen to step out of my childhood sense of homeplace and into someplace new, I must proceed especially carefully, "at the edge between my fear and outside, on the edge at my skin, listening, asking what new thing will I hear, will I see, will I let myself feel, beyond the fear" (Pratt 18), sensitive at all times to dynamics of power and privilege and always exploring ways to craft a reciprocally beneficial relationship. Activist researchers such as Ellen Cushman attempt to remake the relationship between researcher and subject by allowing those she studies to make use of her skills to help solve their own problems. Others, such as Patti Lather, experiment with narrative style, writing so that the voices of others continually interrupt her own narrative, and therefore her seamless authority. Such carefully reflective work inspires my own research and pushes us all to recognize the complex relationship between narrative and research.

Paula Mathieu

As my part of the CultureWise collaboration, I am gathering stories from vendors at *StreetWise,* a nonprofit street newspaper sold by Chicagoans who are homeless or at risk of becoming so. As director of the *StreetWise* computer learning center and facilitator of its writers' group, I work with economically struggling men and women who choose to be writers and storytellers. My research interests revolve around the official and commonplace stories of the world, and how these stories often ignore or vastly misrepresent the life experiences of those who lack power in our society.

I could write many different narratives describing my research interests and how I got involved working at *StreetWise.* To tell it one way might highlight my upbringing and how the specificities of my race, gender, and class have shaped my politics and life decisions. To tell it another way might focus on how a chain-of-events unfolded to bring me to *StreetWise,* while a third might dwell in pedagogical and cultural theory and a discussion of computer technology. Like metaphors, stories highlight certain elements while hiding others.[3] In the film *Rashomon*, the storyteller says, "We all want to forget something, so we tell stories. It's easier that way." That feels true to me. In telling stories, we tactically highlight certain attributes and justify certain ideas or beliefs about ourselves while avoiding or downplaying others. The interesting and frightening thing about stories, however, is that they can communicate much more than we may know or control. As I write this story, I carefully choose to tell some things, but I also realize I may tell you more than I think I'm telling you, or perhaps something different. At the same time, though, I think stories are important, perhaps because they are so telling.

May 6, 1999: I just got off the phone with Joel, a vendor and writer at StreetWise. *He was very down. His best friend Bill (another* StreetWise *vendor, a student and friend of mine) died a few weeks ago—48 years old, from 'natural causes,' the only findings of an autopsy for a poor man with no family. Bill's kidneys had been bothering him, and he probably died from an illness that a little medical attention could have treated, but his appointment at the free clinic was set for a week after his death.*

Joel told me he is tired, tired of fighting his own illnesses and our sick society where democracy is dependent on money. His weak heart and aching legs keep him near home most of the time—he doesn't vote, feels his socialist views have no place in our current political process, and with Bill gone he's lost hope in interpersonal

*relationships. Joel's one remaining hope is to write and tell stories.
He writes as much as he can: he finishes three articles every other
week for* StreetWise, *while working away on his autobiography and
contributing to a street newspaper in Boston. Despite his hope-
lessness he feels the need to speak out, to tell a few stories of home-
lessness, of having to scrape together every last dime to make sure
the body of his best friend isn't thrown into a mass paupers' grave,
of what life is like for those who don't have the comfort to ignore
such stories.*

I have a hard time owning the term 'researcher' or thinking of
what I do at *StreetWise* as 'research.' I am not trying to study the
students there as objects of inquiry, nor am I trained to do so. In
collecting narratives as research, I am inquiring (and I hope inter-
vening) into the state of public discourse that is diminished by its
lack of stories like the ones *StreetWise* writers tell. My pedagogi-
cal goal is to find ways for the writers to publicly circulate their
work—through 65,000 copies of the biweekly newspaper, public
readings, a book collection we're compiling, as well as through the
CultureWise book. My wish is that the writers themselves and their
reading public will see them as authorities who deserve to be
heard, to be listened to carefully.

At the same time, though, I hope their writing and participation
in the CultureWise Project will have positive consequences for the
writers. In articulating their stories, perhaps the writers will gain
some sense of control, at least narrative control, over the events of
their lives. Perhaps they may gain a sense of distance from painful
events or perspective on certain injustices. They may hone some
practical skills, such as organizing an essay or using a word-pro-
cessing program. They may find community with other writers and
from sharing their work. They might find pleasure, reasons to strug-
gle or protest, or even a clearer sense of one's self. George, a mem-
ber of the writers' group, describes why he tells stories: "The story
we tell of ourselves is our most important story. In telling it, we
reinvent ourselves in ways that take us forward. Who I am informs
me on who I want to become. It's a vision for the future. A man
with no story has no future."

October 21, 1999: StreetWise *Computer Learning Center. I walk
past Kenny and notice he's getting an error message each time he
tries to send the e-mail message that took him all morning to type.
When I try to help, I realize the computer is in an endless loop, and
we'll have to reboot. I notice he has two Web browsers open, plus
three other programs, and with our machines' limited memory, this
likely helped bring on his problem. I let him know we'll have to*

shut the machine off, and he'll lose his message. I remind him gently that he needs to try to close programs down before opening others, and I suggest he come to the next computer workshop, which I hold twice weekly at 1 p.m. He shoves his chair away from the machine, stands up, and shouts, "I can't make the workshops. I've got to sell my goddamn newspapers! I'm trying to learn these computers, but I can't remember everything." When he calms down he says he will try to come by in the next week or two to learn more, then finish his e-mail. "In the next week or two," I sadly say. We smile, shake hands, and he walks out to sell his newspapers.

One thing I've learned over the past two years from talking with vendors is that it takes a lot of time to be poor, and a lot of energy. One must deal with a variety of humiliations and bureaucracies—public aid, the legal system, Department of Children and Family Services—plus one must hustle to make a small amount of money go a long way. To wait in lines at these agencies takes lots of time. To sell enough newspapers to pay for a place to live takes lots of time, work, and the ability to face rejection. To travel on public transportation in Chicago—especially to the increasingly underserved, less affluent parts of the city—takes tremendous time and patience. So realistically, even when students at *StreetWise* are motivated to work on their writing or on computers, as many are, the time available can be very small. Writing becomes yet another demand on their time. And computers, on the one hand with their promise of connectivity and being 'out there' in the World Wide Web and on the other hand their steep learning curves and fickle behavior patterns, become at the same time a motivation for students and a source of deep frustration.

I see my job at *StreetWise,* in part, as taking some of my time, a luxury that I have, to work with writers collecting their stories. At the same time, though, as a teacher and director of this learning center, I know I run the risk of becoming yet another white face of institutional power. In my teaching, I can't erase this power imbalance but I try to acknowledge the power I have, critically interrogate my own practices, and as best as I can use my power in ways that might benefit the students. This approach owes much to feminist pedagogy, which as Carolyn Shrewsbury describes, doesn't pretend to erase the authority of the instructor but seeks to move "from power as domination to power as creative energy" (11). Answers to how to do this are constantly in process, and I receive important critical feedback from the instructor I have hired for the center, from the students, and from the executive director of the organization. When reading and discussing a draft, for example, I

try not to impose my readerly expectations on the text; instead I use our weekly writers' group meetings to solicit responses from the other writers, and frame my responses as questions about what information the reading public would need to know to understand the story. I use my writing skills to write grants to fund publication of stories, scholarships, and eyeglasses. I also act as a secretary to the writers, typing up handwritten drafts or taking dictation while a writer talks to me, telling her or his story.

At the Project UNLOC symposium, James Phelan remarked that the CultureWise Project places a great deal of faith in narrative. His words struck me because I worry about this often: do I really think the world might change because a few homeless writers tell and publish their stories? If the 'public,' the 'comfortable' ones, really understood someone else's daily economic struggle, would it lead to more than just economic relations? Sadly, I think not. Or certainly, not alone. Yet stories help build our culture; narrative plays a key role in maintaining or changing culture. Some people might think differently after reading a story. A few might be moved to action. And a few more might be moved to tell their own story, and to connect their story to ones they've heard. Ernst Bloch characterizes the key and contradictory roles that narratives play: "Stage and story can be either a protective park or a laboratory; sometimes they console and appease, sometimes they incite; they can be a flight from or a prefiguring of the future" (68). This CultureWise Project and the work of the writers at *StreetWise* could be described, using Bloch's metaphors, as a few people's efforts to create a laboratory of words to incite a few other people out of their protective narrative parks.

Erec Smith

I am attracted to the CultureWise Project because it focuses on the cause and effect of moving from one culture to another. Furthermore, I believe that the story I have to share not only exemplifies culture crossing, but questions the concept of culture altogether. What my experience has taught me is that there is no singular right way to be. The key to success, and to the alleviation of culture shock, is to become a prominent member of *many* communities; to not have one way but many ways. Specifically, the construction of 'blackness' is what I will assess and critique below, and the results of that task may not be what many people want to hear. However, this is one topic in dire need of exploration, even if it means the disquieting of many people, friends and strangers

alike, as well as my further alienation from that nebulous entity known as ethnic identity.

Irony is the impetus for this exploration of race construction. What I mean is that, for the most part, I am initially dismissed by non-blacks who, after getting to know me, eventually accept me, and I am initially accepted by blacks who, after getting to know me, eventually dismiss me. I attribute this condition to the environment that raised and conditioned me.

From the age of four, my neighborhood was predominantly white. The ethnic make-up of my neighborhood did not phase me at the time because I was blanketed by my family. I was being raised amidst a regular lexicon consisting of what is known by many as African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). I enjoyed and loved the predominantly black music we listened to as well as the predominantly black food we consumed, some of us without even knowing that it was considered distinctly 'black.' All was well with life.

Eventually, I had to venture outside the shelter of my family and attend school at the local public elementary. It was here where I realized that I was different. As uncomfortable as my social milieu was, it was here where I obviously began to construct an identity for myself. A 'black' identity. Such an activity is actually quite normal for an elementary school-aged child, but what is specific about my case is the social context that served as the background and material for my burgeoning black identity. According to William A. Foley, identity is born from social collaborations and structural couplings within a particular environment (261-62). I was consistently the only black male in my grade (others came and went) and my sense of black ethnicity was acquired by default. I 'represented' black.

My ethnic identity was reinforced by the 'blackness' projected onto me by my environment, and inadvertently, mass media. I was the reflection of rap, gheri curls (although I didn't have one and never wanted one), basketball, Bill Cosby, etc. I was even belligerently ordered by my fourth grade teacher to "walk like Richard Pryor" since I was the closest thing to the comedian in class. Emmanuel Levinas, in his essay "Meaning and Sense," lends some insight to this situation: "The gathering of being which illuminates objects and makes them meaningful is not just an accumulation of objects . . . . The functioning of the 'object as work or cultural gesture' is to collect into a whole, that is, to express, that is, to make meaning possible" (40). Against the backdrop of the 'gathering of being' I was situated in, my way of being, especially my way of

looking, was given a meaning separate from who I was as a person. I was 'transformed' to fit the expectations of my environment.

Racial slurs were plenty and daily. Teachers unsympathetically did nothing to curb the obvious racial abuse I was going through. I feel these facts were important to the construction of race and ethnicity I was building at the time. To be black was to be marginalized, not good enough, wrong. To cope with my situation, and the internalization of this inferior notion of Blackness, I had to *act* the fool, as well. I recall dealing with this by using African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) for entertainment purposes mostly, to create a self-imposed caricature of blackness in an attempt to alleviate the embarrassment of having such a role forced upon me by my surroundings. Rossina Lippi-Green states, "The day-to-day pressure to give up the home language is something that most non-AAVE speakers cannot imagine" (186). Apparently, I was pressured into trivializing AAVE.

It perplexed me that the black girls in my class did not have this problem; they never associated with the white kids at all. For me, however, to not associate with the white kids was to not associate with any boys my age at all; I had to assimilate, climb into my given roles of blackness, and serve as the whipping boy (pun intended) of sorts.

What all this boiled down to was a need for escape. I felt that in high school, I could find sanctuary with other black kids like me and finally feel somewhat comfortable in a social environment.

When I arrived at Rancocas Valley Regional high school, my outlook on ethnicity was altered forever. There I found fellow black freshmen, hung out, sat with them at lunch, and quickly became just as much of an outcast, if not more of one, than I was amongst my former, predominantly white, student body. To my African-American peers, I was not really black, but what was known as an oreo (derived from the popular cookie, which is black on the outside and white on the inside). To them, I portrayed an image of *whiteness* that they considered foreign; all we had in common was skin color and racial descent. This condition is exemplified in a passage in Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent,* in which black students who speak white are treated with skepticism and distrust (191-92). My afrocentricity was the white, middle-class role of black that I was coerced into playing, and which I subconsciously accepted as my black identity. As I said earlier, I was someone who was black by default, suddenly among students who were black by a sense of ethnicity. I realized at this time of my life that I had no niche.

So, my quest for a self-empowering ethnic identity was painfully thwarted. Physical, verbal, and mental abuse exposed issues tantamount to an attempt at emasculation; I was constantly, and purposely interrupted, an action echoed in Foley's research in linguistic dominance. According to Foley, in cross-sex dyads, men produced 96 percent of the interruptions to the women's 4 percent, and also 100 percent of the overlaps! (294). The way I spoke gave them even more reason to come down on me, for my 'proper' speech seemed, for some reason, to make me some sort of phony male. Foley lends a bit of insight to this phenomenon when speaking of William Labov's research in male linguistic dominance, in which it was discovered that in urban settings, standard pronunciation is associated with women more than men, making formal English a gender marker for women (301).

Despite all this, what perplexed me the most was the overall internalization of the misconception of black inferiority. Like my trivialization of AAVE mentioned earlier, racial self-degradation was a typical way of passing the time. What was confounding was that this was done amidst fellow African-Americans, and not amidst whites, as a pathetic attempt to fit in. A very popular insult was to comment on how *African* one's physical features were, or how dark one's complexion was. The telling of these jokes every so often would have been one thing, but their frequency was blatant testimony to their tellers' inherent lack of racial pride. I did not fit in with my African-American peers because I wasn't 'black' enough, yet one's racial characteristics could summon cruel insults I had only previously heard from white people, and not nearly as frequently.

Soon after, I came to realize that any prideful attempt to collectively assert afrocentricity in school was tainted with internal falsity as well as a shunning of who I was as a person. At one time, I was passing through the cafeteria, where Black Pride meetings were held frequently. Upon passing, I noticed the presence of most of the boys who would treat me like an outcast and degrade black racial qualities for laughs. They did not belong in a group supporting black pride, but I, refusing to be a member of a group riddled with blatantly unworthy characters, was the virtually excommunicated one. Around this time, I realized that I did not really want something as arbitrary as ethnicity.

I resolved, then, as I do now, to perpetuate a selfhood of my own and dismiss any sense of personhood forced upon me by someone else. Ethnicity is not natural, but a manmade construct. To be real to the utmost is to be as neotonal as the coyote of Native American

trickster mythology, for "[h]aving no way, trickster can have many ways" (Hyde 45). Freedom is not having a way (read 'ethnicity'), and adopting a particular way for every given situation. If one is to understand me, or feel more comfortable around me if I comply to a certain ideology of being, so be it. There is no deception here. The only deception is to think that ethnicity is a rigid, natural, and vital truth. Indeed, ethnicity, even one constructed for the proposed uplifting of a people, can be just as blind, limiting, and robbing of freedom.

I truly believe that technology, ironically the source of many of the projected roles I had to deal with as a youngster, can help relay this message to those who might be going through similar experiences. The CultureWise Project Web site, for example, with its near limitless space, can house an unabridged version of my narrative as well as other narratives focusing on culture crossing. I expect to utilize my access to a variety of technologies (printed text *and* hypertext) to reach a wider audience.

James Sosnoski

Several years ago, Erec Smith took a course from me on postmodernism. Soon afterward, Erec finished his MA work. I wrote him several letters of recommendation. In the meanwhile, our Director of Graduate Studies, Tom Bestul, pushed hard to bring minority students into the program and succeeded. This led to a problem—we had at that time very few minority faculty.

One day, Erec called to say that he had to inform Temple University whether or not he would accept their offer of a Teaching Assistantship. We had lunch to talk about his situation. Erec wanted to know what advantages there would be to staying at UIC. I mentioned our efforts to recruit minority students into our graduate program. In the end, I persuaded Erec to enter our rhetoric program on the grounds that he could pursue his interests in issues related to African-Americans.

I don't remember exactly how it evolved but in the middle of that summer Erec and Vershawn, who was just entering our program, came over to the apartment where Patty Harkin and I live. We talked about the kind of projects on which they might work the following year. Over many beers and glasses of wine, out of that conversation came the idea of 'culture hopping': the experience of leaving a neighborhood culture and 'hopping' over to a nearby culture only moments away. Though she couldn't come that evening, Bridget Harris Tsemo, who had taken a course in Electronic

Pedagogy from me, indicated subsequently to Vershawn that she wanted to be a part of the group. Shortly afterward, Paula and Jennifer, both of whom had been in my cultural studies course, joined the project. A few weeks later, we decided to apply for a grant.

When the time to write the grant proposal arrived, I began to doubt that I could come through on the promise I had made. I knew very little of the research on cross cultural communication; I had no experience in this area of study; I had no training as an ethnographer; so, I could not justify myself academically. But I had promised to direct this project.

After an academic version of a 'dark night of soul' experience, I put aside my academic qualms because I felt that narratives of culture hopping from streets and neighborhoods to schools could be gathered as a collection of stories and offered to persons who were new to academic culture. UIC has a serious retention problem and I felt that such narratives could be helpful to students who were in the process of deciding whether to stay at or leave UIC. This did not require ethnography or a background in cross-cultural communication. It only required recording stories as they were told by the persons whose stories they were

Then along came the Project UNLOC symposium and someone, Paula or Jennifer I think, suggested that we tell the stories of our CultureWise research as a way of being honest about it. This made sense to me because, in a number of respects, I was culture hopping from an academic context to the ethnic contexts in which my students had grown up. This reminded me, too, that long ago I had taken a bus every day for four years from a coal mining town in which you could still smell the sulfur from the column dumps when it rained to go to Scranton Preparatory School, which made me, like them, a cultural exile.

Bridget Harris Tsemo

In 1994, I was at a true academic crossroads. At that time, I did not know that I was in the midst of making such a big decision in my life. I was a junior high school teacher in an all-black, Christian school and I was seriously contemplating my future. I was sure that I would not stay in my present position but I had limited my options to those of being an elementary teacher or a high school teacher for the rest of my life. Make no mistake, my respect for such noble positions is undeniable considering that teaching at one of these levels had been my lifelong dream and that three of my favorite,

older cousins were educators. While teaching at this Christian school, I was also fortunate enough to work with people who, I was convinced, were put on this earth to teach seeing as they did such a phenomenal job at it everyday. However, I was not 'reaching my full potential' (a phrase often heard in elementary school) by being solely in the classroom; I was not making the difference that I felt I wanted to make.

The decision of continuing my education was presented to me by a former professor who saw that 'potential' and who made sure I had all the appropriate paperwork turned in to the graduate program at the University of Illinois at Chicago right before the deadline. I am grateful to him because he made me realize that there is not limit to what I can be and to what impact I can make on society. He made me understand that one can come from a family where the highest academic degree is a bachelor's and obtain a doctoral degree. I am also grateful because without this encouragement from my professor, I would not be a participant in a project that is worthwhile, timely, and will make the kind of impact that I now know is possible.

The CultureWise Project is important because it is a vehicle for change. I will be collecting stories from successful college students who have had varied experiences in their backgrounds that have encouraged them to not only achieve their college degrees but to also seek even higher degrees. My material will come from African-American and Latino students who participate in the Summer Research Opportunity Program (SROP) at UIC. Although they are at UIC to participate in this program, these students come from many different universities and colleges, some traditionally black, some traditionally white, and some solely liberal arts colleges. While collecting data, I hope that the students I interview will come to forge academic and personal relationships with each other. I hope to facilitate this by encouraging the students to post updates of their academic development on a monthly basis on the World Wide Web and by creating a listserv where the students can discuss various issues about themselves with each other. By doing this, I hope that both the students and outsiders become aware of the students' potential through ongoing technological communication.

I hope that my own personal narrative serves as some kind of inspiration and an attestation of perseverance.

My Story—A Journey

I have always had a strong interest in what people have had to say about their lives. I remember when I was in the eighth grade at Nathaniel Public Elementary School (located on the west side of Chicago) and I discovered the genres of biography and autobiography. I was a library assistant, which meant that I was to place all returned books on the appropriate shelves in the library. This job enabled me to really know the areas of the library. When I had nothing else to do, I would peruse the shelves for stories that would hold my interest. I spent some time near the science fiction shelves, then I moved over to the fiction section (where the infamous *Charlotte's Web* resided). Finally, I found myself in the 'true stories' section and I was hooked. I began by reading a story written about Louis Pasteur, best known for pasteurizing milk, and I was fascinated by his childhood. I then moved on to reading about Marion Anderson, the first black female opera singer, and I was intrigued by her 'diva' (presently known as being immensely talented but difficult to work with) attitude and how that gave her some problems in white, 'cultured' America. I ran into an abridged version of Malcolm X's autobiography and I devoured it. By the time my tenure was up, I had read almost all the books in that section.

When I went to high school, my quest for knowing about the lives of others picked up to full speed. In my freshman English class, the students had to do a full-fledged research project on any topic that had to do with the Shakespearean era of literature. Although I was fascinated by Shakespeare's poetry and plays, I was more interested in finding out about the function of 'rag' papers at the time (the granddaddies of such contemporary magazines as the *Star* and the *Enquirer*). What interested me the most about these papers was that people's lives were being talked about and, although it was gossip, this gave a glimpse of the people behind the public work.

In my senior year of high school my interest stayed the same but my focus began to shift. I was still interested in people's personal narratives but now I began to focus on those people who had been marginalized throughout history. In my last high school English class, the students had the opportunity to do a research paper on any literary figure from the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries. Up until this point, teachers had rarely talked about any women or people of color in any of my English classes. For this project, I went through great pains to find a woman of color to ful-

fill the assignment; that was the year that I discovered Phyllis Wheatley. Although my project discussed her work, I found that I had more to say about Wheatley's peripheral position among more mainstream writers. I talked about her journey from Africa to America; I wrote about her childhood and the subversive writing she presented that revealed her desire to be free. I was so excited when I learned about Wheatley that I devoted the rest of my academic life to hearing those voices that have been historically muted.

Once I got to college, it was clear to me that I had to learn more about how people's lives shaped society and, in turn, how society shaped the lives of its inhabitants. I thought that I would be able to do this by becoming a literature major. In my mind, I would read about people of the past whom others had dismissed up until that point; I would read about them and bring them back to the forefront of literature. As a result, each of my papers in my undergraduate years focused on the lives and work of African-American men and women who, in my opinion, deserved to tell their stories through me. In all honesty, my approach to literature was a very personal one and I felt it was my duty to tell these stories. Unfortunately, many of my professor in literature were much more interested in the literary works and not the people behind the works and so many times I had to renegotiate my focus.

Midway through my degree, I decided that I could not learn literature for literature's sake and that I must share my knowledge with others, so I decided to pursue a certificate in Secondary English Education. This shift really gave me new ways of thinking about my interest in narratives. While I was taking classes about theories in this area, I learned that Secondary English Education was not limited to teaching. I could also do some very important research that might well change the face of teaching. The more classes I took, the more my interest in narratives took on a meaningful form for me. I discovered that I could learn about the lives of marginalized people who were still living and that my research had the potential to positively impact the people whom I wanted to have a voice.

Around this time, I also met and developed a relationship with a professor by the name of Grace Holt who became my mentor. Grace was, at the time, the director of what was then the Black Studies Program (and is now the African-American Studies Department). She had done the bulk of her work in the Communication department prior to heading this program, and she had done some significant work on the linguistic practices of African-American people in the city of Chicago. When I met her

in 1990, I had no idea that people were interested in how language was intricately connected to experience for black people, so Grace's knowledge just blew me away. It was in her Hyde Park, Chicago, apartment one day that I decided that I would devote my life to learning and presenting the stories of African-American people when Grace said to me: "Black people are tired of being researched about by others; tired of being guinea pigs. We must research the lives of our people and tell their stories right." Although there are legitimate arguments both in support and against this kind of statement, it really convinced me that if I wanted to contribute something meaningful while staying true to my interests, I must be responsible. This talk with Grace would actually prove to be much more helpful to me many years later than it was at that precise moment. However, between that time and 1995, I did a lot to prepare myself for my desire to present narratives. I worked very actively against all injustices waged toward people of color at UIC between 1991-1992. I spoke against these injustices as much as possible and I made sure that the administration recognized that people of color had a voice on UIC's campus. I then went on to teach elementary school from 1992-1995 where I was constantly conducting research involving students that would make my institution one that was more sensitive to the 100% African-American students who attended the school (all the other teachers were white).

In 1995, I came back to UIC to get a Master's degree and in this program, I interviewed many UIC teacher's assistants in composition and I conducted a survey among some students to find out how their writing made meaning for them in their everyday lives.

Now that I am in the UIC Ph.D. program for Language, Literacy, and Rhetoric and a participant in the CultureWise Project, I am finally able to combine my interests to serve a larger good. In conducting research with students of the Summer Research Opportunity Program, I want to know not only what makes the students stay in school, but also what makes them do scholarly work above and beyond what classes dictate they do. Because higher academia does not necessarily provide a comfortable atmosphere for people of color (only 10% of UIC's population has been African-American for the past thirty years), I am interested in knowing what makes these students beat the odds and what makes them, as W.E.B. DuBois would call them, part of the 'talented tenth.' Because this program also has a large percentage of Latinos, I will collect their stories as well in order to present additional imperatives for change. Hopefully this data will alert all universities about

issues of gender and race that still exist in academia and it will serve as important information for people who are entering the university. In addition, I hope that it will fulfill my desire to responsibly present the stories of people of color, as Grace Holt would have desired.

Vershawn Young

"Your Average Nigga": The Need for Narrative Research on Black Men and College

It is from a purely personal, purely experiential sense of what it means to be a Black man in predominantly white settings that I conduct my research for the CultureWise Project, which examines intersections and connections between narrative and technology. My project will assist in this endeavor by providing a theoretical lens through which the value of narrative research and technology can be viewed and conducted. Narratives will be collected, analyzed, and posted on the World Wide Web, thus making this knowledge more readily accessible to readers from more eclectic backgrounds. The task for our readers will be to take the information back to their classrooms, form partnerships with students, and use our stories as springboards for their own memories and stories. This can help cultivate the self-reflective frame of reference needed to be successful teachers of Black students. The following narrative can give you some insight on why I desired to be involved in the CultureWise Project.

On 28 September 1998, I left classroom #314 feeling exhilarated and excited. I had just taught my first morning section of Composition I, as a new full-time lecturer at Columbia College, a private, open admissions, arts and communications school located in downtown Chicago. I had interviewed for the position, competing against other highly qualified candidates, some who had their doctoral degrees in hand, some who had published articles in major journals, and another who had worked collaboratively on a textbook and was diligently preparing the second edition for publication.

As I strolled down the hall, heading toward classroom #305 where I was scheduled to teach a second section of Composition I, I questioned why I had been chosen for this job. Was it because I was enrolled in the English Ph.D. program at the University of Illinois at Chicago, with an emphasis in Language, Literacy, and Rhetoric, as we call it? Was it because I was an articulate, young

25-year-old Black man, who was refined in my demeanor during the interview, and thought to be a rare commodity? Was it because the hiring committee had read Thomas Fox's call "to redouble our efforts to attract African-American writing teachers, teachers who learned through their own experience the connection between literacy and African-American culture" (301), and they thought I was the ideal fit?

I was still contemplating answers to these questions as I entered the classroom. I saw eagerness on the faces of some students and impatience on others. I scanned the room, looking for the number of Black students that I would have to teach. I counted five Black women and three Black men who all seemed academically inclined. My earlier questions concerning why I had been chosen for the teaching position were now replaced with questions about the students: how was I justly and fairly going to represent the academic culture to these students whom I thought were more disadvantaged than their white peers?

I began class by asking the students to recall the lyrics to their favorite song. I did this because I wanted the students to feel free and comfortable to bring aspects of their home culture into the classroom. After several minutes, I decided it was time to start class and called on a student named Jennifer. As her lips began to move, the classroom door was flung open. In walked a tall, Black man seemingly in his early twenties, wearing baggy jeans, gym shoes, and a bright yellow, designer jacket that hung low. He had on Nike sneakers, and was bobbing his head to music that pumped from his headphones. I was close enough to him to smell the fresh scent of marijuana.

I tried to remain calm, but I was terrified on the inside. I did not fear this student would harm me, nor was I overly concerned about the effects the marijuana might have on this student in class. I was afraid because this student represented all the notions of Blackness that I had worked against while growing up. I could see an arrogance and pride in his demeanor that I loved and loathed at once. I was afraid because I had to teach him, and I did not know whether or not the racist ideas that coalesce and operate as a voice in my head would surface during class. In fact, various voices in my mind competed to be mouthed at this time. Since I did not want to do or say the wrong thing, I tried to do my best and quickest Bahktinian analysis to choose the right one. I asked the student for his name and he replied Sil. I explained the assignment I had just given to the class and that we were just about to begin the reports. "Cool," he casually responded while taking paper from his bag.

Jennifer started her report. I saw her lips moving, but I could not make out what she was saying. Sil's entrance into the classroom had so preoccupied me that to this day I cannot remember who said what or how class ended. I know that I somehow managed to pass out the syllabus, but that was it.

After being just as unprepared for the next day of class, I gave myself a good talking to, re-read articles on minority education, and tried to get in touch with my own sense of Blackness. I think this worked—somewhat. Sil came to the next class, participated in the discussion, and, even though every other word out his mouth was 'shit,' 'damn,' or 'hell,' I appreciated his integrity and insight into the nature of culture, which was the topic of the day. His close reading and active participation in the drama exercises made him more favorable to me. I could not wait to read the draft of his first paper. When I received it, however, I immediately realized that I was not prepared for the experience.

It did not surprise me that Sil and other students used coarse or otherwise indecent language to describe their experiences. In fact, I expected it—for two closely connected reasons: (1) my first assignment was a narrative essay involving the recollection of a personally significant event that has had special meaning for a student's life; and (2) many of the students are a part of cultures whose rhetorical practices are vastly different, if not incompatible, with the academic language and culture of which they are now a part (Blitz and Hurlbert; Harris). However, I did not expect nor was I ready to confront what I read in Sil's paper. His words resounded again and again in my mind, sending sound waves resonating deeply through me, since they also applied to me. Sil wrote: "Your average nigga in the ghetto is given 5 words at birth. These 5 words get him or her through every problem they face. These words are I don't give a fuck."

It was immediately clear to me why he chose those words: (1) No other words could represent his experience with the force and verve needed; and (2) he was describing the cognitive fortress he constructs to reduce the dissonant pressures that result from being a Black college student in a predominantly white institution. An institution that he says "will chew you up and spit you out still alive."

Despite this fact, Sil chose to come to college. Why? I wondered. Why would anyone come here knowing the hardships that awaited him? Even Sil's friends realized how racist white America is. Sil wrote about the counsel they gave him:

> My 'friends' feel I am stupid for trying to get my money from books.   I was told by one of these so-called friends, only book I need, is a pocketbook, preferably stolen.   He told me white America does not care how smart I am, as long as I was black I wasn't going nowhere.

What Sil meant was apparent to me because I, too, am from the ghetto.   As a Black male member of the academy, I find it necessary to employ mental strategies that help safeguard against psychological and emotional assaults that result from that membership.   These mental strategies, Sil vividly points out, are acquired and made a part of the existing repertoire of innate survival tactics of Black men of the academy.   This made Sil's decision to enroll in college intrigue me.   I did not consciously understand his position until the last segment of his essay, which spoke for him, me, and many other 'niggas':

> When I come to school, I see a whole generation of scholars getting ready to take the new challenges of the world.   Then I come home and I know there are no scholars here.   The only scholars in the streets are dead.   The only thing you are taught in the streets is pain.   How to give it, how to take it, and if you're lucky, how to avoid it . . . .   This way of thinking kept me alive in these streets.   This way of thinking has took me to different levels in my life.   But most important, this way of thinking, separates those who play the game, from those who stand on the sidelines and hope.

Though I did not want to, I identified with Sil.   He made me realize what I did and do to survive in the academy.   We both understand what it means to be a real nigga in a white institution, in a white world.   By saying this, I in no way mean to suggest that these words frame the students or my complete attitude about life.   Yet language and culture are two inextricable contexts of the academy that contribute in producing dissonant situations which people of color have to contend and deal with in difficult ways (Harris 102).

The fact that Sil, other Black students, and I make this choice is quite astonishing to me.   I can both understand and "respect the truth behind [the] massive rejection of schooling by students from poor and oppressed communities" (Kohl 16) when those students are forced to go.   But neither Sil nor I were forced to go, nor did

we reject schooling. What complicates this acceptance of education, though, are the academic and personal dissonances that accompany it. Herbert Kohl offers an interesting perspective on appropriation when he reports "that learning what others [want] you to learn can sometimes destroy you" (1).

It is this academic dissonance, its causes as they relate to language learning and culture, and the subsequent efforts put forth to reduce it that motivate me to investigate the reasons why Black males move in and out of school. This desire to investigate these issues is both informed and molded by my own experiences.

Sil's words inspired me to remember and re-embrace my own experience as a Black student in a preponderantly white college. As I reflect upon my experiences, I realize that they mirror those of other Blacks struggling to remain afloat in a community that seems sometimes inadvertently and sometimes purposefully oppressive. These aggressions make it even more difficult to keep a sense of the cultural identity that Blacks bring with them to the academy. A. Suresh Canagarajah, a Black college graduate, writes,

> I'm here and I know what it takes to make it. Things haven't changed and it's not likely that they will be soon, so instead of trying to fight the system, I'll just go along with it and perform as expected. It will make my college life a lot more peaceful and enjoyable. Suresh, imagine what kind of people and what kind of attitudes we would have if we went around holding grudges toward this university. Do you think they really care? They probably feel the fewer minorities, the better. (189)

How are students to balance these things? Perhaps a more important question to consider would be, "How are we, as teachers, to help her do it?" I see it happening only if teachers are willing to combine self-reflection with historical and contemporary knowledge, while forming critical partnerships with students. I value being a part of the CultureWise Project because it is my opportunity to use Sil's story combined with my own and those of other Black college students to promote educational, political, and social justice.

Conclusion: So Now What?

At the end of the summer in which the CultureWise Project was getting underway, Bridget Tsemo Harris, Paula Mathieu, Erec Smith,

Jennifer Cohen, Vershawn Young and Jim Sosnoski all got together for drinks and conversation about where the project was and where it would go. All members agreed that they were dealing with experiences that 'span the range of educational life,' but what benefit would collecting such experiences realistically have on students, faculty, and whoever else is closely involved with the multicultural dynamics of a major university? Upon pondering this question, the group felt it necessary to consider the hopes and fears inherent in such a project. We conclude that we

> hope that if more people are aware of the potential incongruence of their perceptions, more open-mindedness and perceptual malleability can result.
>
> hope that readers will realize that there is no one or simple story about education or about homelessness, and that all 'decisions' to leave school often aren't decisions at all.
>
> hope that people realize that the material realities of debt and family tragedy can mean the difference between a college graduate and a person struggling not to be homeless.
>
> hope that the students will realize the power of their stories and use them to accomplish goals arising from their own experiences.
>
> hope that access to these stories will help educators listen and teach in new and better ways.
>
> hope that we are able to simultaneously maintain our ability to write for our peers as well as the ability to write for the communities of people who turned out to be the folks who shared their narratives in the text.
>
> hope that Blacks, Hispanics and other minorities will have permanent positions in colleges and universities across the world.
>
> hope that the persons who might most benefit from the narratives on our Web site will have access to the technology that makes them readable.
>
> hope that their stories will enlighten teachers, administrators and policy makers and stir them to action— action in the form of change, making the academy so diverse that it will not look or function the same as we know it today.

We hope our desires for these outcomes of the CultureWise Project will be realized. It is quite apparent that from the realization of one

outcome, others may also be accomplished. However, it is the statement of one group member that resonates in all our heads:

"I hope the stories we've collected will persuade many students who are thinking of leaving UIC to stay. I fear they won't make a difference."

Notes

[1] I argue this is a recent phenomenon, brought about as computer technology prices drop dramatically and more services are offered for free, which increases access to computers among working-class families. In September, 1999, Office Depot, for example, advertised a Compaq computer, monitor, and printer for $299.97 after rebates. Circuit City offered a similar computer for $549.99 with the purchase of a 3-year Internet service contract.

[2] Thus, researchers such as sociolinguists Dell Hymes, William Labov, and Shirley Brice Heath were able to conduct groundbreaking work among African-Americans (whose culture, more than any other in the US, has been held up as educationally deficient) by paying attention to the stories they told and the way they used language to tell them.

[3] Lakoff and Johnson state that metaphors "allow us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another" but that comprehension "will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept" (10). While stories can be more complex than metaphors and may contain many systems of metaphors, their ability to highlight certain aspects of a person's life and hide others seems consistent.

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