Finding Space, Finding Voice: The Racial, Ethnic, and Spiritual Identity

of African American Students in the Urban Southwest

by

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I examined how African American students in a church youth group constructed ethnic and spiritual identities as they engaged with community literacy practices. Arizona's small, scattered population of African Americans is reflected within participants' multi-ethnic schools where they describe feelings of being almost invisible to school agents and peers. Listening to students, I came to deeply understand how they struggled with cultural isolation and racial discrimination. The growing tensions with state immigration reform only magnified those feelings as participants perceived the ban on ethnic studies to be another attempt to exclude them from school curriculums. By using utilizing four identity types, I gained greater insights into participants' negotiation of ethnicity and spirituality. Drawing from critical race theory, I utilized counter-storytelling to not only recapture participants' experiences with social injustice, but also to illustrate how the youth group empowers the students to become activists. Resisting the paralyzing effects of racial stereotypes, participants emerged as essayists, artists, orators, and spoken word poets.

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I owe so much to the Mt. Olive youth who served as participants in my study. Thank you for allowing me to "hang out" with you all in the back of the fellowship hall. To the students I call Teresa, Douglas, Sean, Aimeé, and Carlos, you have all been an inspiration to me. Your ideas have transformed my outlook on teaching. Because of each of you, my life has become richer. I am so excited about the futures that lay before you.

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i am accused of tending to the past
as if i made it,
as if i sculpted it
with my own hands. i did not.
this past was waiting for me
when i came,
a monstrous unnamed baby,
and i with my mother's itch
took it to breast
and named it
History.
she is more human now,
learning languages everyday,
remembering faces, names and dates.
when she is strong enough to travel
on her own, beware, she will.

— Lucille Clifton (1991), *i am accused of tending to the past*

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Exploring the plight of African Americans has intrigued social scientists

even before W. E. B. DuBois' seminal ethnographic study that became known as

The Philadelphia Negro. With the legacy of enslavement, Jim Crow, and

segregation, the indictment of "race as ideological justification for power, control,

and economic exploitation" (Stanfield, 1999, p. 418) continues to function as a

barrier between African Americans and the dominant culture over a hundred years

since DuBois' work. Such an ideology reoccurs in practice within societal

structures. Institutions like school become laden with these negative beliefs and

practices that continue to resurface in curriculum and pedagogy, leaving students

with feelings of inadequacy (Delpit, 2002; Hilliard, 1997). These students

become victims of a sociological undercurrent that predates them. Steele's (1997)

research further examines this "stereotype threat" and illustrates how African

Americans are reduced to these low expectations before any evidence of their

academic ability is provided.

The harsh realities of marginalization are omnipresent in the lives of

African American students. However, there are voices that respond to the

stereotypes and structural obstacles. Aware of the external forces that seek to

diminish cultural celebration by stigmatizing race and ethnic identities, I have

come to know African American students who flourish in spaces that are often

ignored by school agents like teachers, administrators, and support staff.

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Study Background

My journey with five students in a church youth program provided the setting for this study. My aim was to understand the relationship between identity construction and literacy practices. Since language is always present, I sought to understand how it becomes essential to this relationship. This study captures discussions and observations that reveal students' perceptions of racial, ethnic, and spiritual identities. Conversations within these various discourses exposed challenges and victories. I sought to understand how voices that often become silenced by societal structures become unleashed in other spaces. My goal was to expand the ways we utilize our students' lived experiences in literacy and language instruction.

A main component of this study was the location. Following my volunteer work with a youth group in a downtown Phoenix church from 2008-2009, I identified the African American church as the appropriate site for my study. During my volunteer experiences, I began to notice how the church could empower youth to succeed academically. Ministry activities continuously encouraged students to move beyond the limited expectations place on them by school agents. According to political scientist Nancy Fraser (1993), "marginals" benefit from crafting "counterpublics," a space that resists stereotypes, while at the same time generating power allowing them to alter "identities, interests and works" (p. 25). In this space of their own, African American students have a place that provides positive reinforcement. Upon completing my volunteer commitment, I moved to a second church to conduct my research. Within this

study site, I found additional support to view church as a counterpublic that allows youth to become empowered, which I will further discuss in upcoming chapters.

For the past year, I have listened to Pastor T. W. Jones of the Mt. Olive Fellowship Church[1] rally the congregation as dozens of children exited the sanctuary and reported to their age-specific groups in the church fellowship halls. "Church," Pastor Jones would announce before beginning his sermon, "let's dismiss our future doctors, teachers, engineers, and lawyers to church school! Come on, help me celebrate our children. They are the future of this church; the future of this country." Each Sunday morning and Wednesday night, he spoke the same words from the pulpit. Without fail, the entire congregation stood and saluted every child from age 3 to 20 as they left their seats and walked down the aisle toward their classes. The church musicians played an upbeat gospel tune as the processional headed to the door. It was an atmosphere filled with positive energy. Many of these students told me that it was the only place outside of their homes where they were encouraged to believe that success is a tangible goal. In this church, they were in the majority as it is predominantly African American, but that was not the reality for most of these students outside of the church doors.

Known as the Valley of the Sun, Phoenix is the fifth largest city in the United States with nearly 1.5 million people. However, its population of African Americans is amongst the smallest. Unlike Houston and Philadelphia, cities with similar total populations, only 5.2% of Phoenix's population is African American.

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[1] The names of the students and places are pseudonyms.

Mt. Olive Fellowship Church is nestled in what is known as the southeastern valley. Unlike downtown Phoenix, the population of African Americans drops to 4.6% in this part of the valley. There are few places of worship within the valley that are not racially integrated, yet Mt. Olive's parishioners choose to attend a predominantly African American church. With a small scattered population of African Americans, many of the school districts reflect similar percentages. In the Phoenix-metro area, African American students may account for two to three students per high school class.[2] This minority representation makes it rather easy for teachers and school agents to support directives that ignore inclusive pedagogical practices such as the state's recent ban on ethnic studies.

Arizona's policy climate adds additional considerations when studying African American students. As the authors of SB 1070, a law that proposes to reform immigration, the state's legislation passed an additional law to stop the teaching of ethnic studies. The rationale behind the law was that courses in ethnic studies were divisive because they provide instruction in a particular cultural history. Past State Superintendent of Public Education, Tom Horne, explained, "The job of the public schools is to develop the students' identity as Americans and as strong individuals" (Kossan, 2009, p. B1). This perspective assumes that there is a singular *American identity* shared by all students. It diminishes the fact that students have multiple identities and ignores the influence

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[2] There are districts within the Phoenix-metro area that are predominantly Latino. In several of those districts, African American students are larger in population. White students, however, make-up less than 10% of the total school population.

of race and ethnicity on student identities[3]. Though Horne is no longer the

Superintendent of Public Education, he currently serves as the state's Attorney

General, and his statements leave a legacy of problems for students from all

ethnic groups. The law's resistance to cultural celebration is a detriment for

students, forcing them to remain voiceless within institutional structures like

school. African American students may not have been the target of such

legislation, but they, too, must endure the effects of laws created to target Latino

populations.

Heath and Street (2008) suggested an alternative to doing ethnographic

studies in school settings. Much can be learned from a "focus on the

interdependence of reading, writing, and uses of multimodal literacies in

adolescents' range of learning environments (such as peer groups, special interest

groups, or community organizations)" (p. 97). In search of this knowledge, I

became a volunteer for Mt. Olive Fellowship Church's youth ministry. While

observing students for this study, I learned what it means to be a "faithful

worker." Pastor Jones believed my desire to conduct a study among his

congregation was a "divine appointment." Reflecting on the experience, I believe

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[3] In this study, ethnicity and race are two distinct terms. Stanfield (2007) explained that
ethnicity "is ancestry that culturally determines the identity of a population as manifested through
the intergenerational passing down of verbal and nonverbal language, customs that dictate routine
and extraordinary daily principles of human conduct, values such as moral codes and creeds,
beliefs about the unknown, subsistence strategies and traditions, and definitions of self and
others…Race is a political and an economic means to justify the mass exploitations and suffering
of a population that has been enslaved, conquered, and in other ways oppressed and dehumanized"
(p. 280).

he may have been correct. My life has become richer for the personal time that I spent with the students and their families.

During this study, I worked with several students who participated in Mt. Olive's youth ministry. However, for my dissertation I selected 5 students who I call Douglas, Aimeé, Sean, Carlos, Teresa. While I met each of these students within the church setting, our time together reached beyond the fellowship hall. I became a part of Douglas's senior class presidency speech and Aimeé's junior high art class. As I learned from these students, I also learned from their families. Sean's grandmother invited me into their home, and Carlos' grandfather wrote me emails on a regular basis. Teresa and I walked the aisles of the local Wal-Mart while thinking through her college aspirations. My talks and shared experiences with these students and their family members allowed me to focus on my study's research questions and prompted me to ask new questions as we spent time together.

Overview of Chapters

The view of the African American church as a counterpublic that allows students to use literacy as a social practice sets the stage for this work. The following chapters provide additional information for a richer understanding of how the negotiation and construction of racial, ethnic, and spiritual identities includes language and how it is perceived by societal structures like family, home, and school. In chapter 2, I explained the methodology used in my research study. By providing detailed accounts of the students' discourse and experiences, I shared specific information to give meaning to how the research process evolved

from a variety of data sources. In the second chapter, I credited the students, families, and members of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church for adding substance to my research ideas.

In chapter 3, I described the theoretical framework by explaining what led me to employ the selected theories. I utilized these theories to support my view of the church as a *chronotopic counterpublic*. As location was significant to my study, I offered historical and empirical accounts that substantiate my perspective. Referenced in those accounts are the study participants. The history is significant to their culture as African Americans, so I provided an initial lens to conceptualize their experiences. In concluding the third chapter, I discussed how the *chronotopic counterpublic* functions as a space for African American students to build identities that challenge stereotypes and deficits.

In chapters 4 and 5, I presented the findings that emerged from the formal data coding process. I organized the chapters according to two topics: Chapter 4 focuses on institutionalized mores, and chapter 5 is focused on race and resistance. Each chapter incorporates student perceptions and actions that led me to understand a relationship between identity formation and literacy practices. I incorporated previous research findings into these chapters as a means of including the current conversations that already existed.

Chapter 4 begins with an explanation of how the institutional mores become significant as the students forged their identities. Just as school is an institution with norms and practices, I view family and church as institutions with expectations and requirements that participants must also negotiate. To further

conceptualize these institutions, I added the identity that participants assigned to them (e.g., racial, ethnic, or spiritual). Along with an analysis of the students' experiences and interactions with family and church members, I provided examples of the literacy social practices that existed. Participant perspectives of school literacy practices are interwoven throughout their experiences. Finally, I provided examples of ways that students import and export literacy practices between family, church, and school settings.

In chapter 5, I focused on the subjects of race and resistance. By employing critical race theory, I utilized storytelling to recapture participants' voices. I then presented a conceptualization for resistance literacy. I provided students' narratives as a means of retelling their experiences with race and the effects of racism during identity negotiation. Examples from the students' works are presented, which illustrate their resistance to racism's paralysis that normally comes in the aftermath of such trauma. I concluded this chapter by examining participants as they embraced new identities as activist through sermons, spoken word poetry, artwork, and essays by incorporating ethnicity and spirituality[4].

I concluded the study in chapter 6 by drawing from the findings to recommend revisions in language and literacy instruction for marginalized students. By suggesting implications for curricula development, I discussed how the study findings on student identities and self-representation can be used by literacy and language teachers. Additionally, I explained how the concept of

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[4] In this dissertation, I use spirituality to describe one's belief and practice of Christian principles supported in the Bible.

resistance literacy provides additional understanding of how students' lived

experiences can be utilized when making curriculum decisions. Chapter 6

concludes with suggestions for incorporating other *chronotopic counterpublics* as

resources for planning literacy instruction.

Chapter 2

MORE THAN A PSEUDONYM: RESEARCH DESIGN AND

METHODOLOGY

November 12, 2010 Text Message Exchange with Douglas

7:08 p.m.
Cynthia: Happy Birthday to a fantastic young man! We hope your day has
             been wonderful!
7:42 p.m.
Douglas: Thank you very much. I will be emailing you my revised
             application essay. Is there any way possible I could receive it no
             later than noon tomorrow. I apologized for the late notice.
7:44 p.m.
Cynthia: If I get it in the next hour, I can do it tonight. I have a presentation
             next week that I am planning for, so I only have time tonight.
11:02 p.m.
Douglas: [*Note.* Message included attachment of college entrance essay.]
             The maximum amount of words is 500. Is there any way I could
             chop it down a little?

From Observer to Participant Observer

My study took on a life of its own. Initially, I made a conscious decision

to restrict my involvement to that of an observer. Yet, communications with the

students, such as the above text message exchange with Douglas exemplifies, had

the effect of altering my role to that of a participant observer who volunteered,

tutored, and befriended the students.

When I sent Douglas a happy birthday text, I was not seeking any

response other than his usual, "Thks![5]" In fact, I did not expect he would write

complete sentences in the text message because it was not his normal practice

when we corresponded via text or email. Yet, I discovered that as I showed

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[5] This is known as "Thanks" in texting language.

interest in the students as people, not just study participants, my role shifted from volunteer to tutor.

At the beginning of his senior year, Douglas asked me to review his college entrance essays. After receiving my feedback on the first essay, Douglas began applying what he learned to all his written communications with me. In my initial feedback, I offered a few suggestions for how he could enhance his writing; as a result, in the ensuing months he began to use complete sentences in text and email messages as well as journal entries. The above text message was referred to the fourth college essay that Douglas sent me to edit. From his first electronic request to the fourth request, I noticed an improvement in his writing simply because he chose to do something. There was no grade to reward his efforts; his motivation was more intrinsic in nature—the sense of accomplishment for taking control of his use of written language.

Douglas did not send his essay to me within the hour as I had requested, but while reading his message and essay the next morning, I began to reflect on how research performed with genuine care can be beneficial to the participants and their families. Although my initial decision was to limit my role to that of an observer, I soon found myself becoming involved with the students as people, not just pseudonyms in my data. I began to see my work as a way to advocate for marginalized students whose narratives provide a response to the stereotypes of deficiency. Key to this new perspective of my role in the research process is my positionality as the researcher.

Researcher Positionality

This study is qualitative in nature; therefore, it is appropriate to consider my positionality as the researcher. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) recognized that behind the various phases of the qualitative research process is the "biographically situated researcher" (p. 21). When discussing the interpretive nature of all research, they explained that "it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (p. 22). Furthermore, the literature on qualitative research describes the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). When considering grounded theory and racial/ethnic diversity, which apply to this study, O'Neil Green, Creswell, Shope, and Plano Clark (2010) explained how the researcher's "self-awareness, knowledge of the subject under investigation, and skills to discern and be sensitive to salient but subtle aspects of the data are vital to qualitative inquiry, especially grounded theory" (p. 479). Maxwell (2005) reasoned that researchers ought to make their positionality known to readers in order to impart an understanding of how "a particular researcher's values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study" (emphasis in original; p. 108). In keeping with the literature on qualitative methodology, I present my researcher positionality, which is an important aspect of this study.

As a married, African American mother of two who has practiced Christianity since childhood, I began this research study with a mixture of emotions. Pastor Jones, the pastor of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church (the study

site), claimed that my presence at his church was a "divine appointment." I have reflected on his words many times over this past year. I now believe that my coming to know the members of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church served a bigger purpose than just the outcomes of this research. This study required personal interaction with the student study participants and members of their families. At times this was quite challenging because it required me to deal with uncomfortable experiences in my own life.

During a youth group session, Minister Ben asked that everyone share their earliest memories of church. As I listened to the students, I could hear bits and pieces of my own story as a youth in church. When I was 10 years old, my parents moved from New York to South Carolina. The change was drastic. The cement steps and street lights of my early childhood were replaced by a screened in back porch and lightening bugs. With nothing else to do in my new rural neighborhood, church became the center of my family's new small town activities.

Minister Ben insisted that I share early church memories—my testimony—with the Mt. Olive youth as part of the group session. I, therefore, explained to the youth how our family's move was an attempt to flee the city lifestyle and my father's heroine addiction. Church became an outlet for me, too. It provided me with an alternate reality from being the daughter of an addict and HIV father. Among my new church friends, I found another lived experience. Aside from wearing dresses all the time, I enjoyed everything from singing in the choir to gift wrapping Christmas gifts at the mall. I shared with the Mt. Olive

students how a younger me thrived in the busyness that came with being part of my church's youth ministry.

Throughout this research study, my experiences allowed me to empathize with the students. Memories from the pain of my parents' separation and divorce enabled me to be very sensitive to the family struggles that the students encountered. In fact, I remember the feelings of shame and betrayal that I felt when church members ostracized my mother for choosing not to "pray for her husband's addiction." Divorce was highly frowned upon by the traditional African American church of my childhood that supported the doctrine of marriage until death. The fact that my father was HIV positive was looked upon by parishioners as God's judgment upon my family. My own disappointments from past church experiences resurfaced as I came to know my research participants.

As I openly shared my childhood with the Mt. Olive youth, students began trusting me with their personal struggles. I listened to stories of divorcing parents, drug-addicted loved ones, and economic hardships; these stories sounded like those from my own childhood. Although my time with the Mt. Olive youth was only a snap-shot in time, I have gained a different perspective from my interactions with them as they learned to cope with their difficult situations. I realize now that the various identities of my life were necessary to complete this study, which was designed as grounded theory ethnography.

Grounded Theory Ethnography

As grounded theory ethnography, this study investigated the empirical worlds of five African American youth who voluntarily participated in a church

youth program. Over the course of a year, these students negotiated racial, ethnic, and spiritual identities. Literacy practices were at work as they constructed these identities, and language became a tool within this process. While African American student literacy has been studied by social science and education researchers, this project focused on students from a socio-cultural perspective in a geographic area where they represent less than 5% of the total population. For these students, factors like family and church are significant to how they perceive the world in which they live. In the absence of large numbers, it becomes rather easy for these students to become invisible in their multiethnic high schools. Communities where African Americans represent small numbers of the population are understudied, and there are even fewer studies that represent literacy practices in non-school spaces. However, there is an educational and societal need to understand the experiences of marginalized students in various places and spaces if we are going to reinforce culturally inclusive pedagogy and curriculum.

According to Charmaz (2006), "Grounded theory methods preserve an open-ended approach to studying the empirical world yet add rigor to ethnographic research by building systematic checks in both data collection and analysis…you return to the field to gather further data and to refine emerging theoretical framework" (p. 23). In this chapter, I delve into the process of this study from beginning to end. I expand upon my previous description of the setting. Prior to introducing the participants, I provide further information about the process of gaining access to do the study. As the researcher, I discuss my own

subjectivities during the study. The section on data collection includes

descriptions of both elicited and extant texts[6]. Since grounded theory calls for

analysis of data throughout the study, I discuss initial coding as a process that led

to more focused coding and theoretical sampling. This chapter ends with a

justification for the use of grounded theory and explanation of how it's procedure

helped to ensure dependability and consistency of data.

The Move to Mt. Olive Fellowship Church

A friend from my previous downtown Phoenix church suggested that I

visit Mt Olive Fellowship Church. He described Mt. Olive's pastor as

progressive and *unorthodox*. I immediately thought, "He's a rebel!" Oftentimes,

pastors come with a prescriptive nature that only includes church or anything that

benefits the church[7]. To introduce a study to a pastor who could not understand

the nature of my work would be a total disaster. Learning that Mt. Olive's pastor

was different gave me hope that he would allow me to work with the youth in his

church.

With heightened enthusiasm, I persuaded my family – husband, daughter,

and son–to visit Mt. Olive Fellowship Church with me. Prior to our first visit to

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[6] According to the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium's (InTASC), text is defined as "any segment of language or symbol that creates a unit of meaning. Texts include print material like stories, poems, essays, books, newspaper and magazine articles; spoken representations of meaning like oral stories, discussions, or speeches; dramatizations, like live enactments, films, television; visual representations of meaning like paintings, cartoons, sculpture, graphics, and holography; tactile representations like Braille; and even lived experiences like a day in the park, a conversation with a loved one, or an observation about some social situation" (Quoted in Mahari, 2004, p. 7)

[7] I base this reference to pastors on first-hand knowledge from my spouse who spent 30 years as pastor. It is a generalization at best, but it is necessary to highlight how Mt. Olive's pastor was very different from others with whom I'd worked in the past.

the church, it suddenly dawned on me the time commitment that would be required to become involved with a new congregation. I began to play through my mind several scenarios that all ended with me having to explain my reasons for wanting to conduct a study with church youth. Anxiety began to replace my enthusiasm. *What if I couldn't get access to the kids?*

First Sunday Morning at Mt. Olive

Finally, Sunday morning came. We chose to visit the early service, which began at 7:30 am. The drive was less than 10 miles from my family's home, but it seemed as if time stood still during our travel. Perhaps, my familiarity with the highway had stolen from me the aesthetic value of our morning drive. Arizona's mountain ranges are breath-taking. Appearing like props upholding a hazy blue sky, the majestic views leave one with a sense of calm. Surrounded by mountains on every side, I felt protected as if something greater than me was at work—as if the drive was my destiny[8].

Arriving at the church, we took the first available visitor's parking space. As we walked to the church doors, we were immediately welcomed by two cheerful women who greeted us as if we were relatives returning home after a long journey. They directed us to another woman in the center aisle who assisted us to our seats. The service had already begun with praise and worship. In most Christian churches, this is the time at the beginning of a service when congregants, who are also referred to as worshippers, sing songs of thanksgiving

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[8] My reference here uses spiritual language that is fitting to a study in the Christian church.

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that express their belief in God as the sovereign creator. There is usually a small group of five to six singers, known as the worship team, who lead the congregation in a ritual that dates back to slavery. In the tradition of their ancestors, African American churches believe that this portion of the service includes everyone – the old and the young. Participation may include standing, clapping, and singing along – anything that makes a joyful noise. There is always a leader whose melodious voice invites fellow worshippers to join in the praise and worship experience. With technological advancement, the lyrics or words to each song are now frequently displayed over the pulpit by a projector. Dominated by strong vocals, gospel music is complimented by an upbeat tempo. The four-part band, including keyboard, organ, drums and guitar, add to the liveliness of the atmosphere.

This scene captures my first impressions of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church. Together, children, teenagers, young adults, adults and seniors participated in praise and worship. Scanning the congregation, there were very few persons who were not involved in this experience. Singing songs as they read words from a screen, family members utilize text that includes themes of suffering and joy, love and longsuffering, or thanksgiving and mercy. Yet, common for this congregation is the power of words to uplift and revive. Words brought comfort in times of sorrow and pain. The same words express joy and sorrow at times in the same song. It is a shared experience that binds the congregation together as a church body in one faith.

Gaining Access to Mt. Olive Youth

Initially, I met each student participant at the church, but our time together happened in several places on and off the church grounds. My goal was to submerge myself into their lived experiences. According to Heath & Street (2008), "Ethnography focuses us to think consciously about ways to enter into the life of the individual" (p. 31). I conducted interviews at church in the fellowship hall, parking lot, or empty classrooms. To learn more about the students, I visited the schools of Aimeé, Douglas, and Teresa. Sean's grandmother went out of her way to invite me to their home. Carlos' grandfather invited me and my husband to join him and his wife for dinner to just talk about education and the kids.

It took me a month after arriving at the church to gain access as a volunteer into the Teenager Bible Study Class where the participants met on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. After a few brief conversations with Pastor Jones about my work with youth in other churches, he and his wife paid my family a visit. I remember the Monday night that my husband got the call that they were in the neighborhood and wanted to stop by our home. This practice is not totally uncommon in African American churches. In an effort to keep in touch with visitors, church officials usually follow up with guests by accessing information visitors provide on cards distributed and collected during the worship service.

Before Pastor and Mrs. Jones arrived, I ran to my computer to print off the participant consent forms just seconds before the doorbell rang. Meeting the couple at our front door, my husband welcomed them into our home and ushered

them into the family room where we sat together. Although Pastor and Mrs. Jones were cordial, I couldn't help but feel like I was the person who was being studied. Answering an array of questions that ranged from our move to Arizona and my doctoral studies to my confession of faith as a Christian, our conversation ended with Pastor Jones granting me permission to do my study at Mt. Olive. As he signed the papers, he quoted a passage of scripture from the book of 1 John 4:1 in the Bible, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (New International Version [NIV]). Pastor Jones then asserted that my coming to Mt. Olive was a divine appointment.

Fellow Laborers

After meeting with Pastor Jones and receiving permission to use the church for my study site, the next Wednesday night, before Bible study, I met Minister Ben, the youth pastor. I was introduced as a fellow laborer in Christ who wanted to volunteer with the youth. For the purpose of field work, this meant that I would gain permission to become a participant observer, "an insider who observes and records some aspects of life around them" (Bernard, 2006, p. 347). Prior to our formal introduction by Pastor Jones, I had listened to Minister Ben address the congregation during a Sunday church service. As the choir sang the sermonic selection, Minister Ben enhanced the traditional tune by dropping lines from an original rap. The youth cheered as his words effortlessly flowed. Hip-hop music is usually forbidden in most traditional churches, but at Mt. Olive the rhythmic beats that gained popularity among disc jockeys in the 1980s appear to

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be encouraged as long as the words celebrate the Christian faith. Meeting

Minister Ben was like talking to an old friend who could relate to popular culture

and scripture in the same sentence. He was very receptive to having me sit in his

youth sessions. In fact, it was Minister Ben who allowed me to introduce my

study to youth between the ages of 13 and 20 during a Sunday morning teen Bible

study class in lieu of his teaching lesson. Leading by example, Minister Ben took

one of my consent forms and signed it in front of the youth group.

Since each of the 25 students who regularly attend the youth group could

be a possible research participant, it was necessary to have a screening process for

selecting respondents. I chose to gather descriptive data to aid with developing

criteria for candidate selection (Yin, 2009). First, I collected information about

each student from the church archives. The church database included information

on each student's age, grade level, baptismal, family information (parents,

siblings, and contribution statements), church activity attendance, and length of

time in the youth program. Taking into consideration that ethnography is

conducted because something is already known about the population sample

(Heath and Street, 2008), I began to think about how marginalized students are

more likely to be classified as *at-risk*[9] in public schools. Often times the factors

that lead to that classification were directly related to socio-economic status. In

getting to know the students, I learned about families who receive public

assistance as well as families who own vacation homes. Although socio-

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[9] The definition of "at-risk" is argued by educational practitioners and
researchers. Various factors can contribute to a student's lack of academic
success. For the sake of this study, I will focus on socio-economic factors.

economic status often becomes the main emphasis of studies in African American communities, for my study it became an additional layer as I focused on race, ethnicity, and spirituality (see Footnote 4).

Purposive sampling entails choosing informants who will be representative of the study's criteria, yet understanding as a researcher that at times "you take what you can get" (Bernard, 2006). Though all the students in the church population were African American, they represented various beliefs and practices. My observations focused on student interactions, specifically student-volunteer interactions and student-family interactions. I talked with students, parents, grandparents, youth volunteers, and church members for the purpose of learning more about the students and the church from a variety of perspectives. Each participant signed a consent form approved by Institutional Review Board.

My study began in the spring semester of the 2009-2010 school year and continued through the summer and the fall semester of the following school year. I concluded the study during the spring semester of the second school year, 2010-2011. Therefore, when I initially met the participants, they were in one grade, but through the summer they advanced to the next grade. Over the course of the year, I learned that each student was a church leader in their own right. They each held responsibilities that served the larger church congregation regardless of their various socio-economic statuses.

Teresa was in her first year at community college when she became a study participant. Her aspirations were to become an entertainment lawyer. Our

first meeting was held in the church fellowship hall. She normally sat up front in worship services. When we first met, her hair was in a natural afro tied back with a silk scarf. This is her signature look, as she can always be found wearing a scarf to compliment her outfit. Raised in a single-family home, Teresa and her mother have no relatives who live in Arizona. The Mt. Olive members served as their surrogate family. Teresa was a leader in the drama ministry. She worked with younger children to compose and perform Christian plays.

Douglas began the study as a high school junior. As a leader and class helper, he always assisted Minister Ben during Bible study class by writing the scriptural text and lesson subject on the white board. During the summer, he spent six weeks with family friends who lived near Georgetown University. Upon his return, he ran for the office of senior class president at his school. Douglas's first political victory set into motion his aspiration to become a politician. Reared in a large blended family with southern roots, he is the last of six children. Douglas chairs the Youth Community Service Project at Mt. Olive Church.

Carlos began the study as a sophomore in high school. Our first encounter was during a Wednesday night Bible study class at which he was leading a discussion on fighting in school and the impact of racial tension. His career aspiration is to become a military officer. Carlos is the eldest of two children raised by a single-mother. During the study, his mother was severely injured in an automobile accident. He was learning to balance the role of care-taker to his mother and father-figure for his younger sister. Carlos is the third generation in

his family to attend Mt. Olive Church. His grandfather serves as a lead mentor for the Boys to Men[10] program, and Carlos assists twice a month with the younger boys at the church.

Sean was a sophomore when he joined the study. We met after he presented an original poem to the church congregation during a youth Sunday that occurs every fifth Sunday. Raised by his grandparents, he was born and raised in California. Arizona is his grandmother's home, so they returned after her retirement. Sean aspires to be a company CEO, but he thoroughly enjoys the "spoken word" poetry scene. At the time of the study, he was serving on the church newsletter staff. Of all the study participants, Sean was the most vocal about his Christian faith.

Aimeé began the study as a seventh-grade junior high student. I immediately became drawn to her after she challenged Minister Ben's opinion on prayer during a Wednesday night Bible study session. While her career aspirations were undecided at the time of this study, she enjoyed drawing. Over the course of the study, Aimeé shared several of her sketches with the youth group. Her parents divorced when she was five years old, and they had since both remarried. According to her, she has two moms and two dads, more than most children. Aimeé was the copy editor for the church newspaper. Her love for grammar was uncanny.

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[10] Boys to Men is a mentorship program that is ran by the Mt. Olive Men's Department. They meet bi-weekly with school-aged boys in grades 1 through 12. In chapter 5, I provide more details about the impact of this program.

Researcher Subjectivities

During my time with the participants, their families, and the Mt. Olive Church family, I often reflected on my various identities and subjectivities. I am an African American woman who has vast experience with the church. I share the spiritual beliefs that have been taught during Mt. Olive's Bible studies and imparted through Pastor Jones's sermons. Yet, I have thought earnestly about my role as the study's researcher. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) worked to rearticulate research methodology in feminist studies to include U. S. Black feminist thought and emphasized the need to explore crucial tenets to approach studies among African American women. She wrote, "Traditionally, the suppression of Black women's ideas with White-male-controlled social institutions led African American women to use music, literature, daily conversations, and every day behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness" (Black Feminist Epistemology, para. 2). Although Collins focused on women, I would extend that mothers and care givers influence children's perception of the world. All study participants have a mother or grandmother who played a significant role in their lives. The same techniques used by Collins to learn from Black women's experiences are suitable and even necessary to learn more about adolescents' experiences. Within this dissertation, I use the same criteria for assessing truth that are widely accepted by African American women. This alternative epistemology as an approach to research is based on lived experiences as a criterion of meaning (Collins, 2000). As I talked to participants and their families, I learned from our conversations, but most essential to my role as

researcher was my personal accountability to them as a fellow sister African American who cared about what happened in their community and families.

The journey of becoming acquainted with fellow Christians during the study was filled with joy and sadness. Joy was present as I observed things that were productive and fulfilling within the youth ministry. Yet, sadness resonated when situations within the church happened that were not in the best interest of my study participants. In addition to presenting my findings in this dissertation, I have made a commitment to share them with the leadership of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church so they, too, can learn from my role as researcher.

Data Collection and Analysis

In an attempt to gather rich data, I conducted interviews, compiled field notes and research memos, journaled observations, and collected church artifacts and student work (i.e., student journal entries, artwork, and poetry). I used a three-inch binder to organize the various forms of data, using dividers to tab each section: (a) church artifacts, (b) observations, (c) research memos, (d) Teresa, (e) Douglas, (f) Carlos, (g) Sean, (h) Aimeé, and (i) volunteers/parishioners.

Church artifacts included bulletins, Bible study lesson plans, membership records, song books, and church advertisements, including those posted on the church website. Study participants were a part of a larger group of students. During Bible study time, they read aloud scriptural texts and responded to questions posed by Minster Ben or other volunteers. Written responses to Bible study lessons were written in student journals, which were stored at the church. Because one of my volunteer responsibilities was to distribute materials, I

received permission from participants to access and utilize their journal entries, original poetry, or any written work for this study. I collected items that provided evidence of literacy at work in the church setting.

Over the course of the study, I spent a minimum of six hours per week at Mt. Olive Fellowship Church. My role was as a volunteer in the teen Bible study class that met every Sunday morning during the 10:30 am worship hour and on Wednesday evenings. Like H. Bernard Russell (2006), I came to understand that "hanging out builds trust or rapport, and trust results in ordinary conversation and ordinary behavior in your presence" (p. 368). I assumed the duties of an aide by passing out materials for Minister Ben's lessons, which included Bibles, handouts, craft materials, and other materials. If students were placed in groups and given an assignment to complete, I worked with them to stay on task. In preparation for the upcoming Bible bowl competition, I coached students by asking them trivia questions. Yet, there were times when I just sat in the back of the room observing student interactions. Each time I participated with the youth, I documented my observations in a composition notebook that I kept in my purse. I transcribed these observations on a weekly basis. Recorded by date and time, each entry in my observational log included the number of participants as well as details from that session.

I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each of the five study participants. Planned interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. To assist with this process, I used a small tape-recorder, so I could review the interviews after they were over (Bernard, 2006). All recorded interviews were transcribed

and placed in the section of my notebook for the respective participant. Additionally, I took field notes during the interviews, noting facial expressions, pauses in conversations, and body language. These nonverbal signs of communication assisted in my understanding of intended meanings within the discourse. The questions used during the first interview began with the sample interview protocols. I began with the planned questions, but there were several times when I followed cues from participant responses to ask additional questions or to just make the communication more natural.

The second interview was conducted with each participant in order to follow up on my observations during student interactions in the youth Bible study sessions. For example, one night Teresa spoke about the new Hip Hop Bible[11] that was created for African American youth to better understand the scriptures. After researching the Bible's origin, I later asked her questions about it during our second interview. I also used the second interview as an opportunity to clarify my understanding of questions that surfaced during the students' first interviews or subsequent observations during youth gatherings.

Over time, I realized that valuable information came from unplanned, unstructured interviews. One Wednesday night before Minister Ben began the lesson, Sean ran up to me and began talking about an altercation that he had in school. During a previous interview, we had talked about his thoughts on race, at

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[11] Published in January 2010 by Zondervan, *The Heritage and Faith Holy Bible for African-American Teens* in the New International Version assists teens with understanding their cultural heritage. This is what the students referred to as the *Hip-Hop Bible*.

which time he struggled with giving examples of what he was feeling. But after this school altercation, Sean remembered our conversation about race and picked up from where he left off in our previous interview as he approached me prior to the Wednesday night Bible study gathering. Other informal interviews of this sort happened while the teens were hanging-out in the church parking lot or patio. In order to document what transpired during these exchanges, I often walked away to a place where the students could not see me and then wrote down notes. This documenting of informal conversations became the most challenging part of the study because I had to recall the discourse as it actually happened, which was made more difficult when there was not an immediate opportunity to write up field notes.

Early analysis of data is at the heart of grounded theory research methods. As I collected observations and interviews, I began to code them as a "means to categorize segments of the data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 43). In order to make these analytic interpretations, I formatted all interviews and observations into a two-column table. Leaving the left column blank, I later returned to the document to name each line of my written data (Glaser, 1978), also known as line-by-line coding. I credit this process for allowing me to analyze data in the early phases of my study. Coding also helped me realize when there was not enough data to flesh out a category. In some cases, I returned to the field to gain more data to solidify that hunch. In other cases, there was not enough data to formulate a claim at all.

Research memos allowed me to reflect upon observations and interviews. Each week, I would analyze my emerging data. By recording what I saw happening in the data, I could explore codes (Charmaz, 2008). This was my space to compare participants, subcategories, and analysis. Through this process of exploration, I began to make sense of initial codes that helped me to cluster data into categories. For example, initial coding revealed themes of "duality" and "multiple identities." Duality became a part of my theoretical framework because it provided structure for building my study. On the other hand, the theme "multiple identities" had to be further refined. It was too broad. I needed more data to conceptualize which identities were truly at work within the lives of the participants. Writing consistent research memos allowed for a deeper understanding of the data.

After writing several research memos, I returned to initial codes to make decisions about which ones to keep (Charmaz, 2008). Known as focused coding, this process allowed me to sift through categories from early observations. While sorting and synthesizing data, I could continuously return to the field to gain clarity of a particular code. This helped to alleviate underdeveloped categories because my attention throughout the study was drawn to the data and what it actually yielded.

The analysis of data was quite rigorous because coding is a two-step process. It requires initial coding and then a more focused coding that is ascertained from line-by line-coding in the search for theoretical accounts (Glaser, 1978). The only way to manage this process was to continually update data. By

incorporating grounded theory methods for data collection, management, and analysis, I was able to navigate a plan to assure that evidence collected in the field was used properly. I believe the procedures outlined in this chapter allowed me to learn from the participants' empirical worlds.

To ensure reliability of data coding, I followed a strict systematic data management process. After participant interviews were collected, they were coded first for initial findings. Then, the observations within the same setting and time frame were also transcribed and coded. Additional interviews were conducted with volunteers who interacted with the participants, including parents or grandparents. These additional interviews were also coded. Work produced by participants—journal entries, letters, poetry, drawings, and email messages—was also coded. By triangulated data from various sources, I was able to conduct a cross examination to verify findings (Denzin, 1978). This process became the topic of most research memos as well as documentation of the codes that served as the basis for categories included in this dissertation.

Chapter 3

CHRONOTOPIC COUNTERPUBLICS: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on a framework derived from the theoretical

contributions of Nancy Fraser (1992), M. M. Bakhtin (1981), W. E. B. DuBois

(1996 [1903]), James Gee (2001) and Derek Bell (1980). The research

participants were joined together by their membership in Mt. Olive Fellowship

Church. In this space, known historically for spiritual teachings, they shared race

and ethnicity as African Americans. While the extent to which each person

negotiated racial and ethnic identities may have differed, these identities existed

in very real ways for all of them.

Explaining her theory, Fraser (1992) described the parallel discursive

arenas referred to as counterpublics, "where members of subordinated social

groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to

formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and

needs…[they] emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they

help expand discursive space" (p. 67).   In order to clearly understand how the

church was a counterpublic for the students in this study, it is necessary to

historicize the African American church.

Dating back to slavery and Jim Crow, the African American church[12], has

been a pillar of strength within segregated communities. It is "the only institution

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[12] When referring to the African American church, I am making a
generalization of several denominations that each served as a place for African
Americans to worship during slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement.
It is not my intention to minimize the African American church's history.

over which black Americans have had complete independence, autonomy, and control" (Blackwell, 1991, p. 198). With beginnings that include missionaries who claimed to convert the enslaved from heathen lifestyles, the church evolved into a space where African Americans learned to respond to the long history of exclusion. In 1779, George Liel and Andrew Bryan established a Black Baptist church in Savannah, Georgia (Blackwell, 1991, p. 200). Even with the threats of whipping and lynching, religious leaders preached messages that proclaimed freedom and equality, not in the world to come, but here on earth. This spirit of resistance and emancipation continued to be a hallmark of the African American church well into the Civil Rights Movement and beyond.

Considering the church's legacy in African American culture as an institution, it has sustained both time and space. While M. M. Bakhtin (1981) wrote of *chronotopes* as a unit of analysis to study time and space in narratives (p. 425), linguistic anthropologist, Keith Basso (1988) extended the concept by applying it to geographical reminders in stories of the Western Apache. He explained:

> Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time and history and the enduring character of a people...Chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members' images of themselves. (pp. 44-45)

Within African American culture, the church has been a consistent presence. For many, it represents a monument that provides a place of acceptance and understanding from vices of segregation and marginalization. In later chapters, I

discuss how the church is an institution, and I will elaborate on its effects in shaping the study participants' identities.

Combining Fraser's (1992, 1993) counterpublic and Bakhtin's (1981) chronotope, I view the African American church as a chronotopic counterpublic. It has a discourse of its own that has transformed the way the student participants view the world. Literacy practices are at work within this chronotopic counterpublic, thus giving power to language that exists at all times. In my analysis of church events and conversation, I have found that student interactions involve the past, present, and future. By this I mean that the effects of African American history were ever present, as the students attempted to put in perspective how their present identities would take a part in leading them to a future with hope and success.

The presence of duality or what DuBois (1903) calls "twoness" was ever present for each of the participants in this study. At the turn of the 20th century, DuBois addressed America as the "gentle reader" who needed to focus on the nation's true problem of the color line (xi). Of African Americans, DuBois wrote:

> A sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his *twoness*—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts. (p. 46)

DuBois envisioned a veil that forges a double-consciousness within African Americans, thus creating a barrier between them and the dominant society. Now, more than a century later, DuBois's awareness of two realities still exists for

marginalized Americans who strive to maintain their cultural heritage and linguistic practices while also gaining access to dominant culture and language.

DuBois's(1903) double-consciousness was applicable not only to the study participants' racial and ethnic identities but also to their spiritual identity. According to the scriptural teachings that serve as the basis of Christian faith, there is both a carnal and spiritual self at work within each person. The writings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament book of Romans 7:21 (NIV) read, "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me." These apostolic words present an additional barrier for the study participants, who claimed to fulfill practices that represent Christian principles while negotiating those principles that distract from such Christian teachings. Several students told me that their belief in God as creator of the universe provided a spiritual connection that bound them together as members of the youth group or family. It is this relational connection that created a sense of belonging for them. On the contrary, most of these students did not share with me any feelings of attachment to their school communities. In fact, words like "outsider" continually surfaced as they described their feelings in schools where their representative numbers were so small.

Duality presents additional complexities for negotiating identities. This study illustrates how "acting" or "speaking" become significant to how others perceive one's race, ethnicity, and spirituality. There was a veiling that continued as participants negotiated a perpetual state of "twoness". Attending schools where they represented very small percentages of the total population, most

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students were submerged in districts that lacked culturally diverse curriculum while furthering stereotypes that depicted the students as deficient. Realizing that their success in school depended on learning how to survive in two worlds, the students in my study encountered, in multiple ways, two worlds that often did not relate to each other.

As the theories of Fraser (1992, 1993), Bakhtin (1981), and W. E. B. DuBois (1996 [1903]) helped to conceptualize the realities of space and self for the African American students I worked with in the church youth group, Gee's (2001) identity theory and Bell's[13] (1980) critical race theory provided the necessary lenses for further analysis of how various factors or benefits are negotiated and perceived. Along with acknowledging the "veil" or "double consciousness" at work within marginalized students, it is imperative to learn how this phenomenon contributes to their negotiation of identities. Race is ever-present as the participants construct identities; however, participants learn how to respond to race during identity negotiations.

Research in the area of adolescent identity is rather expansive. There are a variety of factors that contribute to the perception of identity that students claim to embody. Employing Gee's (2001) definition for identity, my investigation embraced the recognition of African American students as a "certain kind of person, in a given context" (p. 99). His recognition of four ways to view identity

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[13] Derek Bell is considered by most as the founder of critical race theory (CRT); however, the advancement of CRT as tool within legal scholarship includes the contributions of many others. Several other contributing scholars will be mentioned in the chapter.

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is detailed in Table 1. Gee's explanation for each identity allows for the

construction of multiple identities that can be used to learn more about the

students. This illustration of various contexts that coexist as children negotiate

identities refutes the monolithic ideology that identity can be viewed as a one-

size-fits-all discourse.

Table 1

Gee's Four Ways to View Identity

Process	Power	Source of power
1. Nature-identity: a state	developed from forces	in nature
2. Institution-identity: a position	authorized by authorities	within the institution
3. Discourse-identity: an individual trait	recognized in the discourse	of/with "rational" individuals
4. Affinity-identity: experiences	shared in the practice	of "affinity groups"

Note. Adapted from "Identity as an Analytic Lens for Research in Education" by
J. P. Gee, 2001, *Review of Research in Education, 25,* p. 100.

Utilizing critical race theory (CRT) in the mid-1970s, legal scholars

Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado addressed civil rights issues in

the United States (Delgado, 1995). With the ineffectiveness of its predecessor

critical legal studies (CLS), to include racism when questioning legal scholarship,

CRT provided a systematic approach for adding race to such investigations

(Ladson-Billing, 1995). Objectively, CRT's purpose is to bring about social

justice reform (Delgado, 1995). Derrick Bell (1992), in *Faces at the Bottom of*

the Well: The Permanence of Race, argued for the need to better understand the

"dire forces that are literally destroying"(p. 146) racially marginalized groups as systematic to taking action for social justice. Critical race theory's five tenets include (a) counter-storytelling, (b) permanence of racism, (c) Whiteness as property, (d) interest convergence, and (e) critique of liberalism (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw; 1988, Delgado, 1995; Matsuda, 1995).

The theories of Fraser (1992, 1993) and Bakhtin (1981) work together to create a space that permits students to gain multiple benefits. I view the church as a chronotopic counterpublic that provides a space where students forge and construct racial, ethnic, and spiritual identities through literacy practices at work. I observed as research participants dealt with their own double-consciousness and negotiate their identities, African American students who share a spiritual connection benefit from a space that allows them to formulate identities and interests that celebrate their cultural heritage. Within this space, the theories of Gee (2001) and Bell (1992) served as lenses to learn from the research participants' construction of identities that celebrated them beyond deficient stereotypes. For example, Gee's (2001) N-identity provided me with an initial understanding into phenotypic features, while Bell's (1992) CRT allowed me to analyze how those same features became the basis for racial injustice. Mt. Olive's youth ministry plays an intricate role in student development, and findings within this counterpublic can have implications for the language arts classroom. By observing students enacting in the context of this chronotopic counterpublic, my goal in this study was to identify implications that can be used in the classroom.

Chapter 4

INSTITUTIONALIZED MORES

Erikson's 1968 work *Identity: Youth and Crisis* laid the foundation of understanding that adolescent identity develops in various cultural contexts. Through this study, I investigated how African American students negotiated their own identities as members of one of Arizona's smallest populations. Although the state's legislature promotes an "American identity," there is always a cultural heritage that is at work in the lives of marginalized students. Gee's (2001) "institution" or "I-identities" were developed from the context that authorities of institutions validate a person's identities (p. 102).

I found that Mt. Olive's youth were members of multiple institutions that each required them to function in distinct ways. Adolescents become familiar with "family networks and [the] Black community institution," before they are ever enrolled in school (Collins, 2000, Safe Spaces and Coming to Voice, para. 1). Hegemonic representations create barriers that separate most African Americans from penetrating mainstream society's institutions (i.e., schools, print and broadcast media, and government agencies). Since most African American children are nurtured by African American women who gravitate to family networks and church as a safe space, these children become familiar with how each institution functions (Collins, 2000).

Heath and Street (2008) asserted that institutions exist "to meet the lasting needs of their societies…affecting the lives of human beings…Though dissent, fragmentation, and dissolution of one kind or another take place within the

institutions, they remain" (p.5). Study findings presented in this chapter provide a deeper understanding of how institutions imposed intentions and expectations upon the student participants. During my year of being embedded as a researcher at Mt. Olive Fellowship Church, an awareness of identity negotiations within multiple institutions became vital to my understanding of participants' lived experiences. The basis of participants' cultural heritage began in these spaces/institutions where "safe discourse" reinforced their spiritual and ethnic identities (Collins, 2000).

The focus of this chapter is the two institutions of family and church because research participants mentioned them most often during interviews and field observations. Each institution—family and church—has an authority (Gee, 2001) that governs the parameters and rules of engagement. For both the family and church, the first line of authority involves an African American woman who dictates participants' involvement. Douglas' mother made sure he had an adopted/extended family. She is the same person who required him to attend church. Her views about these institutions formed the foundation of her son's perspectives. Whether or not this is ever articulated, participants like Douglas become familiar with hierarchal structures that dictate how behaviors are perceived.

Common knowledge of certain epistemologies is required for participation in these institutions. Mt. Olive youth learn that in the family there are certain rules of language. Aimeé discussed her mother's frustration when she answered her elders with, "what?" Her mother instructed her to give adults the respect they

deserved by answering with, "Yes" or "Yes Ma'am/Sir." Carlos recalled being

punished for calling someone a "fool" in front of his grandfather. His

grandfather's rationale for the punishment was that according to the scriptures, no

one is ever to be called a "fool."

Understanding the rules of language is imperative to participation in each

institution. Bahktin (1981) provided additional clarity about how language is

perceived: "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into

the private property of the speaker's intentions: it is populated–overpopulated–

with the intentions of others" (p. 294). Moving beyond communication and

expression, language represents the person who speaks it. While reprimanding

Douglas for using unfamiliar vocabulary during a group discussion at Wednesday

night Bible study, Carlos yelled, "Man! Make your big words clear!" This theme

of "big words" or vocabulary became evident in family institutions as well.

Aimeé admitted to using "big words" when she wanted to impress her parents for

the purpose of getting something like new shoes or movie tickets. James Baldwin

(1979) discussed how language impacts private and communal identities:

> It [language] reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or
> divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have
> been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could
> be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in
> such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. (p.
> 1-2)

While Baldwin's discourse was in defense of Black English[14], he elaborated on

the power of language in determining one's identity. Within the communal

institutions of family and church, participants must understand and practice the

language accepted within both discourse communities. Likewise, if they are

allowed to participate in literacy practices within these institutions, they must

understand language's intentions and functions. If not, they risk being

reprimanded, rejected, or silenced by institutional authorities who hold the power.

As noted by Street (1984), "the central role of power relations in literacy

practices" must be considered if one is to understand the infrastructure for

institutions like family and church.

Most educators believe that literacy denotes one's ability to read, write,

and speak. African American children have been marginalized and labeled as

illiterate because their literacy practices are not accepted within the dominant

culture (Heath, 1983). African Americans are only one group among many who

have been marginalized due to deficient literacy practices. Aware of mainstream

society's intentions, Lankshear and Lawler (1987) added, "Literacies are social

constructions forged in the process of humans pursing values, goals and interests,

under conditions where some groups have greater access to structural power than

others" (p. 79). Building on Lankshear and Lawler's view of literacy, family

networks and church communities within the African American community have

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[14] Black English is also referred to as Black Dialect, Ebonics, or African American Language (AAL). According to Smitherman (1977), it is "an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage…it is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture" (p. 2).

always had literacies that were meaningful among its members. Devaluing those literacy practices is an additional ploy to mark African Americans as inferior to the dominant culture, many of whom have historically and continue to believe that such practices are unsuitable for intelligent persons (Heath, 1983; Moss, 2003).

In this chapter, I analyzed the institutions of family and church as they affected the lives of five African American students who were members of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church's youth department. Family literacy and church literacy played a significant role as these youth forged and negotiated ethnic and spiritual identities. As school was a significant part of these students' lives, perspectives on the role that school plays in their lives surfaced within the family and church. During interviews and field observations, I listened to participants assign ethnic and spiritual identities to these institutions. Initially, it appeared that each institution operated under a certain identity, but that would have made examining this concept rather neat and simple. By further listening to students' interactions within family and church structures, I learned that it was not possible to separate these three institutions—school, family, and church—or their literacy practices. Over time, I began to see how the lines had become quite blurred–crossing the boundaries between institutional identities when convenient or necessary. In addition to importing and exporting identities between institutions, the students were also altering literacy practices between and across institutions of school, family, and church. For example, Teresa's mother frequently used church rhetoric when communicating with her daughter. "When my mom is

reprimanding me, if I am silent, she will say, 'Can I get a witness? Somebody

ought to say, Amen!'" This was Teresa's mother's way of saying that her

daughter was expected to agree with what the authority figure had to say. Sean's

grandmother required that he prayed aloud at home over meals. By reiterating the

need to offer thanks, she implemented a spiritual practice at home in the form of

open prayer.

In the early stages of this study, I investigated how the participants,

volunteers, and family members used language and what counted as literacy in the

family and church structures. Within both institutions, various texts contributed

to the literacy event[15]. I began to understand who authored texts and for what

audience and purpose. Observing interactions within these institutions as students

constructed identities, I began to question how family and church literacy

practices, along with their texts, could enhance literacy instruction across multiple

school-related content areas. Smitherman (1977) and others scholar whose work

informs my own, too, questioned why the literacy and language skills in African

American communities were viewed as deficient.

Within this dissertation, I use terms that allow contribute to an

understanding of student identities. First, I examined the term used for this

chapter's title, "institutionalized mores," to contextualize how participants

adapted to the worlds in which they lived. Next, I examined each institution.

Within those subheadings, I historicized each institution prior to revealing the

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[15] Heath (1982) defined a literacy event as "any action sequence involving
one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print play
a role" (p. 92).

findings that led to my conceptualization of institutionalized mores. Lastly, I

examined the literacy practices that existed within each institution as well as the

purposes the distinctive practices fulfilled in various discourses.

Defining Institutionalized Mores

Within the institutions of family and church, students are subjected to

ideologies that cannot be ignored or denied. Each of these institutions created a

community for Mt. Olive study participants that was central in the construction of

each student's identities. This was particularly true because the institutions

provided regulations by which the students' identities came into being while

setting the criteria for judging the extent to which certain characteristics were

deemed appropriate for the respective institutions. According to the online

Collins English Dictionary (2011) mores are defined as "the customs and

conventions embodying the fundamental values of a group or society."

Moreover, MacIver (n. d.) defined the functions of mores:

> They both compel behavior and forbid it. They are forever molding and
> restraining the tendency of every individual. In other words, they are the
> instruments of control…By conforming to the mores, the individual gains
> identification with his fellows and maintains those social bonds which are
> essential for satisfactory living. (para. 1)

The students who participated in the study are members of institutions governed

by mores. Learning to survive means the students need an understanding of how

certain mores work to reinforce the institution's intentions.

Living life as the "other" can be overwhelming, especially for African

American students who find themselves negotiating identities in places where

they are often viewed as abnormal or deviant. On the other hand, institutions that

reaffirm participants' cultural practices allow students to feel included, as if they belong. Basically, research in adolescent psychology explains that when adolescents are connected to people who serve as mentors or role models, they are more likely to seek academic success (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Noam, 1999). To take this a step further, if those mentors or role models share the same race and ethnicity, students are able to visualize someone successful whom they resemble in appearance. Therefore, the characterization of negative racial images are less likely to impact the child's confidence (Noguera, 2008), and students who are traditionally marginalized develop a sense of cultural pride. Prior research suggests that students of color learn best in environments where their cultural practices are respected and valued (Hooks, 2003; Ladson-Billing, 1995; Lee, 2001). However, the methodologies used to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students must shift toward an inclusive pedagogy if adolescents are to ever feel validated as human beings (Hilliard, 1995; Paris & Ball, 2009).

In the Beginning: The Mt. Olive Perspective

Leadership meetings at Mt. Olive Fellowship Church included clergy, deacons, and auxiliary leaders who served in different capacities within the ministry. Bi-weekly meetings allowed this group of 10-12 men and women to come together with Pastor Jones to discuss the upcoming events of the church. My admittance into this esteemed group was only permitted because of my volunteer work with Minister Ben and the youth department. On a particular Saturday morning, the team of leaders met in the church sanctuary. Routine items

like the church calendar, monthly budget, and visitation lists were all presented.

Each leader gave a report, both oral and written, on their respective auxiliaries.

To conclude the meeting, Pastor Jones provided a few verses of scripture and an

exhortation to encourage the leaders to continue their work within the ministry.

He began by referring to Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God created the heaven

and the earth…" and then added to the verse, "In the beginning, God saw the need

for the church." Sitting behind me was an elderly gentleman who served as an ex-

officio member of the leadership team. Elder Tommy Daniels didn't say much

during these meetings, but when he did everyone took notice and listened. His

role of wise counsel or elder was earned after many years of serving in ministry.

In a rather soft spoken voice, Elder Daniels responded to Pastor Jones, "You

know, in the beginning God created the family. Adam was first and then there

was Eve. God made family an institution before there was a church. The church

came after the day of Pentecost." After a brief pause, Pastor Jones replied,

"You're right, sir. If we help the family, the church will be fine."

That particular leadership meeting was a catalyst for my thinking about

the family as an institution within the lives of the Mt. Olive youth. In addition to

the church providing worship services, there were also a number of programs that

supported the family unit. Most notably was Joseph's Pantry[16]. Through

partnerships with the local food bank, Mt. Olive fellowship serves as a food

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[16] Joseph's Pantry is named for the Old Testament figure who was sold into slavery by his brothers. Through divine intervention, Joseph, a Hebrew, became the second most powerful leader in Egypt (second only to Pharaoh) who ultimately saved his people—the Israelites—during a catastrophic famine.

distribution site for community members in need. The hours of operation for

Joseph's Pantry correspond to the church's scheduled weekly services.

Immediately following the Wednesday evening and Sunday morning fellowships,

members and community residents were allowed to bag and box food to feed their

families. There was no limit on how much a person could gather. The food items

changed from week to week, but there was always bread, fresh vegetables and

fruit, canned goods, and pastry. Structured outreach programs like Joseph's

Pantry exemplified Elder Daniels's notion that family was central to Mt. Olive

members.

If the traditional family includes a biological mother and father as well as

children from that union, none of my study participants' families fit that

description. Aimeé's family nucleus included a divorced mother and father who

had each remarried, providing her with two mothers and two fathers. During my

year-long research, Aimeé told me of how "lucky" she was to have a group of

parents – mother, step-father, father, and step-mother – who all cared about her

and her and her younger brother. Living a totally different family scenario was

Teresa whose mother had raised her alone with the support of extended family.

Theresa had never known her father, yet she believed that she and her siblings (a

brother and sister) turned out alright. Then, there was Douglas whose parents

were once married to other people and had children with previous spouses. As a

member of a blended family of five, Douglas was the only child birthed from his

parents' union. Both Carlos and Sean had grandparents who fulfilled the roles of

parents in their lives. Carlos' maternal grandfather assisted his mother in raising

him and his younger sister. Sean lived with his maternal grandparents and great-grandmother, while his sister and mother lived in California. Neither Carlos nor Sean ever spoke of a biological father or a step-father who actively participated in their life. The family unit differed for each study participant, yet, they all referenced expectations and characteristics that indicated that family was a powerful institution within each of their lives.

Analyses of the African American family often compare it to the Euro-American families, relating the findings on the "pathological rather than on the strong family (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993, p. 460)." From CNN's Soledad O'Brien's documentary entitled "Black in America: The Woman and Family" to PBS's "Slavery and the Making of America" written by Dr. Jennifer Hallam (2004), the origin, strengths, and struggles of the African American family continue to reappear as journalistic themes and educational documentaries within popular culture. For Mt. Olive participants, the family was the first school of learning. Their first exposure to speaking, listening, reading, and writing occurred within the home. As literacy practices develop, students are most influenced by the priorities or intentions of the family structure.

What children learn about themselves at home lays the foundation for how future identities are negotiated and constructed. First, Gee's (2001) "nature perspectives" or "N-identities" compel us to evaluate the family because genetics contributes to phenotypic characteristics. The Mt. Olive youth referenced kinship ties as initial responses to questions like "Why do I look this way or "Who did I

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get my nose from?" Family members' responses to such inquiries provided students with their first impressions of themselves.

An additional factor to consider when examining the role of family in shaping the study participants' identities was "family history" or "ancestry." For most African Americans, ancestry includes a history of enslavement in the United States. The plight to maintain kinship units dates back to slavery. With slaves being sold from their family units, the struggle to keep a sense of togetherness seemed almost impossible. Therefore, creating new or extended families became the norm. By no means is this an attempt to generalize the dynamics within all African American families; instead, I seek to provide a foundation for family strengths by incorporating tenets from Littlejohn-Blake and Darling (1993) research as they relate to the lives of the Mt. Olive study participants.

Prior to realizing family strengths, participants were most engaged in noting physical appearance. One would say that this initial behavior is common given the age range of participants. However, over time I witnessed comments about phenotypic characteristics that repeatedly surfaced in the students' discourse. When planning my dissertation proposal, I refrained from using Gee's (2001) terms "nature perspectives" or "N-identities." As a dark-skinned African American female, my own bouts with skin complexion forced me to shield that part of my identity because of negative past experiences. Childhood memories of always being described as the "dark girl" remained buried in my own subconscious. Hearing comments like "Oh, she's such a pretty little dark girl" always triggered in my mind that being a certain skin complexion was bad. In an

attempt to acknowledge my own subjectivity and move beyond it, I began to notice various states of being (i.e., skin color, hair type, body proportion, and other physical characteristics) controlled by nature, *not society*, that deeply affected students' self-represented identities (Gee, 2001).   Although these are controlled by nature, interpretation of such phenotypic features is a cultural and social construction.

The relationship between N-identities and family is based on genetics. Accepting this as a biological phenomenon, I have come to understand the power that rests within the family structure to explain phenotypic features, both within my own life and within the lives of the study participants. Teresa's struggle with "going natural"[17] or having hair free of chemical processing was contested by her mother. During several of our monthly outings to our favorite eatery, *Wing and Things,* for the bottomless honey-barbecue wings and home-cut fries, Teresa would talk of her mother's perspective as a bi-racial Mexican and Black woman who preferred straighter, longer hair, which are descriptors for good hair. Through the process of going natural, Teresa began to make sense of her family identities as they related to N-identities, frequently highlighted by her mother:

> Every day you have kids that hate themselves in subtle ways. My hair is natural. My mom is always saying, "Do something with your hair!" But I don't care; I like my hair. It makes me who I am, Black. I think dark skinned people are beautiful, especially when you look like deep rich chocolate that someone melted and poured all over you! Going natural

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[17] The process of straightening the hair allows African American women to replicate the straight hair of Euro American women by using chemicals like lye. In an effort to return to one's original hair texture, the process of "going natural" requires cutting off the relaxed hair as a woman's kinky or curly hair grows. To relax hair is also known as to perm.

helps me to realize true beauty…I never noticed it before. I wanted to ask my mom, why would you have ever put a perm in my hair. (personal communication, December, 1, 2010)

In light of Teresa's claim that kids "hate themselves in subtle ways," my earlier reflections on DuBois's (1903) "double-consciousness" contributes to an understanding of this love-hate that some African American young people have for themselves. Learning to love her hair texture was important to Teresa because of the pressure she felt from her mother and others (i.e., media, society, marketplace influences) to "do something with her hair," or to fix it. These messages implied that something was wrong with her hair in its natural state. The "twoness" that Teresa experienced produced opposing viewpoints. She questioned, "Should I listen to my mother, who supports society's view of my hair, or should I listen to myself, embracing my hair's true texture?" Would Teresa be more American with straighter hair or does her kinky hair mean she can only be un-American? Aware of the two realities, Teresa experienced how the decision to embrace her ethnic identity would be scrutinized because it did not represent the norms of the dominant culture.

As Teresa constructed and negotiated her identities, which included being a female with light-skin complexion and kinky hair, her mother's perspective, though counterproductive, provoked a response that forced her to begin defining what it meant to be Black. She even made references to dark-skin complexion as being "beautiful" to her. Celebrating this part of her ethnicity was rewarding for Teresa because it allowed her to forge her own identities. My discussions with

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Teresa illustrated how family or institutionalized mores dictate how one is to

behave. Gee (2001) explained,

> natural identities can only become identities because they are recognized, by others, as meaningful…N-Identities must always gain their force as identities through the work of institutions, discourse and dialogue, or affinity groups, that is, the very forces that constitute our other perspectives on identity. (p. 102)

Table 2

Teresa's Hair Documentary

Teresa's Facebook Posts	**Mobile Photo Uploads**
"Gonna take out these kinky twist and let my head breath for a day & deep condition my hair. It's a shame i've only had them in for less than 2 weeks and they are starting to look a bit rough hahaha. That's how you know i either sleep too hard or get tired of hair styles fast" (personal communication, December 9, 2010).	
[*Note.* Written two hours later.] "Love my teeny weenie afro hahaha. It's not even fully blown out (just took out my kinky twist) IT'S SO SOFT" (personal communication, December 9, 2010).	
[*Note.* Written one month later.] "i look preeeetty good hahaha. My hair after i took the braids out… I like this look" (personal communication, January 11, 2011).	

The week following her discussion with me about her hair, Teresa made several posts to her Facebook page about taking out her twisted hair extensions. Table 2 contains her posts and a picture documentary of the process of going from twisted hair to all natural. Teresa's Facebook posts and photos function as text that documents her discovery and comfort with N-identities related to having natural hair. She shared her experiences with trying new styles befitting her kinky hair texture. The process of letting her hair "breath from the extensions" included not just washing her natural hair, but washing away an image that society places on African Americans. No longer suffocated by family mores, Teresa felt like she could "breathe in" her newfound acceptance. She no longer felt like she needed to add artificial products to make her hair longer; instead, her "teeny weenie afro" gave her ethnic pride. The cropped photographs from Facebook show the transition of this new style that she described as "so soft." Referring to her hair as "so soft" countered the myth that African American hair is hard, brittle, and nappy. When constructing identities with phenotypic features unique to being Black, Teresa used self-taken photographic profile images to enhance her claims. Despite her mother's remarks or displeasure, she responded by writing and photographing her "going natural" journey.

Learning how to think about one's hair may seem insignificant for many, but African Americans have struggled with this issue for years. In his research on African American hair, Lester (2000) described his personal struggles as a college professor who decided to grow dreadlocks:

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These occurrences now, however, signify for me continuing racial and gender biases about head hair both within and outside black cultural perceptions. Competing mythologies around something as deceptively insignificant as hair still haunt and complicate African Americans' self-identities and their ideals of beauty, thus revealing broad and complex social, historical, and political realities. The implications and consequences of the seemingly radical split between European standards of beauty and black people's hair become ways of building or crushing a black person's self-esteem, all based on the straightness or nappiness of an individual's hair. (p. 203)

Confronting the politics of hair continues to be an issue for African American girls as dominant cultural norms continues to perpetuate straight Euro American hair as beautiful. For many African American women with kinky hair, the absence of straight hair creates a sort of internalized shame that leaves many feeling isolated. Teresa's use of social media created a discourse for "going natural" among her 579 friends on Facebook. Utilizing a social network as her platform, Teresa used literacy to move into a discovery of agency as she makes meaning of identities by writing in a space that would not criticize her decision.

A Grandmother's Teachings

Over time, I learned of Teresa's grandmother, Mrs. Cooper, who spent time reading and writing with her at home. Now deceased, Mrs. Cooper, who also was a bi-racial White and Black woman married to a Mexican American, proudly proclaimed her African American heritage. Teresa recalled lessons she learned from her grandmother who often said, "They're not going to tell you your history…so you need to learn it here"

For Mrs. Cooper, "they" represented the dominant society or any institution (i.e., school) influencing their norms. Often chronicled in school textbooks is a vague depiction of African American slavery, a legacy of

oppression and exclusion. What Mrs. Cooper feared would not be taught in

school is the history of perseverance in the midst of those struggles. Despite the

fact that it was forbidden to teach slaves to read and write, there are written

biographies of former slaves who learned to read in secrecy. Initially listening to

Teresa, I thought she only meant knowing of African Americans like Frederick

Douglass or Phillis Wheatley who defied such odds. However, that was just the

beginning. She added, "My grandma wanted me to see the value in the education.

No one can take away from me what I learn; what's in my head is mine" (personal

communication, October, 26, 2010). Teresa believed her grandmother wanted her

to not only know the history of the people, but more importantly, she wanted her

to know why literacy was withheld from slaves. By understanding the

circumstances surrounding literacy acquisition for African Americans, Teresa

would, her grandmother hoped, learn to value it even more.

      Listening to Teresa's stories about her grandmother, Mrs. Cooper, brought

back memories of my own grandfather. The scene shown in a photograph from

the summer of 1972 immediately came to mind. Taken during a cook-out in my

grandparents' backyard, the photo was of my grandfather wearing a blue, gold,

and green dashiki with his hair in a "teeny weenie" afro. My father would

jokingly refer to the picture as his dad's moment in the Black Power Movement.

Born in 1928, my grandfather knew very well the struggle of racial oppression

that was still alive in this country for African Americans. I can remember hearing

James Brown's 1968 anthem, "Say It Loud–I'm Black and I'm Proud." Like

Teresa's grandmother, Mrs. Cooper, my grandfather warned, "Power would not

be legislated for you and delivered in a neat government package." Later, I

learned that power meant[18] education and knowing your history.

Teresa, too, was beginning to find out that her grandmother's prophetic

utterance was not without merit. Reflecting upon her time in high school, she

defined herself as a mediocre student. As a first-year student in the local

community college, Teresa described her struggle with the "black and white" of

American college life:

> What I have come to realize since I've been in college is that America tries to make everything black and white. I remember learning history when I was in high school, like we learned about our forefathers, and we always had this one little section about Black people. One little tiny section, one week worth of history that kind of projected in a negative way because it was never all the good things we did. I mean they would talk about Martin Luther King, but most of the time it would focus on slavery and the effects of it. And then we went back to this war or that war, but forgetting the fact that Black people fought in the wars, too. America likes to make things Black and White. (personal communication, January 30, 2010)

Several things need to be noted in this account. First, it began with Teresa's

grandmother warning her that school would not teach her African American

history. The reality of this actually happening took Teresa by surprise, and in her

own description caused her to withdraw from learning, thus becoming as she says,

"a mediocre student." Second, I had to consider the text. In schools, much of

what counts as knowledge is derived from textbooks. Publishers are responsible

for content, but school districts have the choice which textbooks to adopt.

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[18] The quote rehearsed by my grandfather was actually taken from Dr. Martin Luther King's 1967 writing entitled, "Black Power Defined." The statement actually reads, "Power is not the white man's birthright; it will not be legislated for us and delivered in neat government packages."

According to Teresa, her Arizona high school district chose a text that regulated the history of an entire people to one week worth of instruction. Hilliard (1995) explained, "the survival of a group's identity is directly proportional to the degree to which it can replenish its identity through education, ritual, and role taking" (p. 74). Resistance to cultural inclusion is evident by the filtered literacy represented in textbooks. African American students are often forced to remain voiceless within social structures (like school) that negate identity development because knowledge is rationed by a combination of structures, individuals, and textbooks that leave their histories out.

Teresa's grandmother re-told stories of African American inventors and pioneers so that her granddaughter would know her history. Printed texts were not always available as Mrs. Cooper taught Teresa history lessons. However, she referenced readings from collections of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine articles during the Civil Rights movement. Teresa had never seen the July 23, 1964 issue of *Jet* with photographs of 15-year-old Emmett Till's distorted remains. Yet, she knew the story of how a boy visiting family for the summer was accused of whistling at a White woman. With a lynch mob as a jury and judge, Till was drowned in a river and his mother held services with an open coffin so the world could see what racism did to her child. Mrs. Cooper scripts what I refer to as "countertext,"[19] stories to make her granddaughter aware of ethnicity and race.[20] Teresa learns

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[19] As with counter-story telling in critical race theory, I use the term "countertext" to reference a variety of text created to oppose negative portrayals of African American history and culture.

[20] See Footnote 3.

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what it meant to be Black in America. Her grandmother does not tell only a celebratory ethnic history, but Mrs. Cooper wants Teresa to be aware of the racial injustices suffered among African Americans.

Like with Street's (1984) "maktab" literacy, Teresa's family's literacy practices were not isolated, but instead, "interacted in complex ways with oral modes of communication, with folk traditions of story-telling" (p. 144). Over the years, Teresa could remember how certain incidents would cause her grandmother to reference a particular event from history or even a passage of scripture, thus adding these to the countertext, making it relevant for identity construction. Even her grandmother's warning of not being able to access this kind of knowledge any place except within the family structure, especially in a place like school, served as a rationale for listening to the stories of her people. Family literacy functions within the socio-cultural context of preserving one's heritage.

Heath (1983) described how school can be a place that supports "the goal of changing people's values, skills, and knowledge bases (p. 367)." Teresa's preparation for school attendance began with a planned defense in response to anticipated rejection—a plan put in place to safeguard her ethnic identities. Teachers must be aware that even before they meet students, there may be family beliefs about school that will create tensions between them and their students. Realizing why such tensions may exist is the first step to handling them. It is not impossible to diffuse these tensions if pedagogy affirms and values students' ethnicities, instead of seeking to transform students into what others perceive is proper and right.

Strong Black Families

> Your background is always important in life. Knowing where you came from is important wherever you go. And me, kind of being around people who are the same skin color as me helps me remember that if I am put in situations where Whites are the majority, or Hispanics are the majority, or Asians are the majority, I know how to conduct myself. Because I know where I come from, and I know that although people do not have the same skin color as me, we can all be on the same playing field. (Douglas, personal communication, September, 13, 2010)

During our first interview, Douglas made the above comments about family background and related them to how he constructs his identities. The youngest of five children born in a blended family, he attributed this strength of knowing yourself to a family that keeps him grounded. Douglas believed this knowing gives him power on the playing field of life. According to Littlejohn-Blake and Darling (1993), Douglas's "relationship patterns, interpersonal competencies, and social and psychological characteristics" are tenets of family strengths "that create a sense of positive family identity" (p. 461).

Unique relationship patterns among African American families date back to a history of enslavement. As slaves were sold away from family members, extended or adopted family members became a part of the unit (Blackwell, 1991; Hallam, 2004). By reconfiguring the family in this way, support was provided to family members left behind to ensure they survived despite stifling obstacles. In my introduction to this section, I referenced the various family structures among the study participants' families. By historicizing the effects of slavery, I position the families represented in this study as diverse and not deficient as they have been portrayed in study comparisons with Euro American families.

Because Douglas is at least 10 years younger than his closest sibling, his parents realized the importance of an extended family to provide their youngest son with siblings of the same age who share his ethnicity and race. Attending an all African American private school, Douglas's mother referenced the students and their families as his adopted family. "We did everything together. School, fieldtrips, weekends, sports, church, you name it we did it together in one of our mini-vans" (Mrs. Alexander, personal communication, June 10, 2010). Relationships among the families permitted roles to be transferred among members. With each outing there was a different mother, normally the person who owned the vehicle was the mother of the day. Along with getting additional siblings, Douglas gained cousins, aunts, uncles, second-mothers, and second fathers. Holidays even included visits to each other's homes. This adopted family added security; one member became strong because of the others. In my work with Douglas and his family, they embedded what Littlejohn-Blake and Darling (1993) reference as "a strong sense of self is an important characteristic in the African American family. Building positive self-esteem along with the development of ethnic awareness…these families [joining together] demonstrate pride, self-esteem, and generally a 'have' rather than a 'have-not' mentality" (emphasis added; p. 463).

Creating experiences with other African Americans became constitutive as Douglas's parents intentionally constructed identities that would later shape the kind of person they wanted their son to become. According to Gee (2001), an "affinity group" or "A-identity" entails a group coming together to "engage in a

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set of practices around a given issue or cause through which they come to affiliate and identify with other people with whom they share these practices" (p. 107). The family, or in this case Douglas's parents, actively chose to join with other parents who desired that their children learn about their African American ancestry. Proudly, they shared with me how Douglas learned Swahili in first grade. His early literacy development included texts that highlighted his African roots, thus engaging him with definition of Black as powerful and purposeful.

Moving to Arizona from Texas during his ninth-grade year, Douglas left behind his adopted family when his father's promotion at work caused them to relocate. He commented how, during his four years at an Arizona high school where African Americans only represented 4.2% of the school's population, he grew closer to his parents. In early August, I made an appointment to visit Douglas at his school. Douglas set aside time for me to interview him for this study between his sixth-period class and drama club rehearsal, but my efforts to arrive early were hindered by a traffic backup caused by an accident. As I parked in a visitor's space in his school's parking lot, my phone buzzed. It was Douglas.

1:15 p.m.

Douglas: Where r u?

Me: In the parking lot?

Douglas: K B rt out.

Me: K (personal communication, August 12, 2010).

This was the first of many text messages between Douglas and me. As the senior class president, he carried himself like a career politician. There was

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always an agenda and a schedule. Douglas was fitting in our interview in

between an early release day at school and drama rehearsal. I met him in front of

the school's library. While Douglas was not upset by my delay, his text message

suggested that my being 15 minutes late to our appointment may have caused him

a bit of frustration. He greeted me at the front door of the library with a big hug

and the smile he now flashed often after having a three-year relationship with

braces. He looked me in square in the eyes, flashed that smile and said, "Good to

see you, Ms. Cynthia!"

As I looked around the library, though filled with students, I noticed that

we were the only African Americans there. However, Douglas waived and spoke

to several fellow students of various ethnicities as I set-up for our interview. I

was amazed by his charisma and personal touch with each person. I began to

wonder if he was only 16 years old. We sat near the wall of windows with a view

of the mountains. Our conversation led to him sharing how family has made an

impact on his life.

> With my parents involved there was a different southern upbringing. It is
> just not the same anywhere in the United States. There are fundamentals
> in life. There is background. There're stories. It's just different, because
> my parents grew up there, and their parents grew up there. That
> knowledge has just been passed down. They passed that tradition of the
> upbringing from the south down to me. (personal communication, August
> 12, 2010)

What Douglas referred to as a "southern upbringing" included a legacy of slavery,

Jim Crow, and segregation present in Texas and many other southern and

northern states. Remembering this history, he could not ignore the values of

respect, kindness, and hard work that have been instilled by his family.

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"Fundamentals," as Douglas referred to them, are putting those values to work in one's life. To instill the values and fundamentals, Douglas's parents shared stories of grandparents, aunts, and uncles, who in the face of racial adversity, still persevered and made a life for their families. While most of the family stories were oral, Douglas also mentioned having to read about African Americans like Muhammad Ali or Thurgood Marshall at home and at school. Thus, his family and at time his school constructed a countertext that illustrated for Douglas a positive Black image. As he constructed his identities, the theme of "making a life" was the intended goal. The countertext was filled with exemplars and reminders to focus on this theme.

Of all the participants' families, Douglas's parents were the most involved in my study. His mother, Mrs. Alexander, (or Sista Paula as she is affectionately called at church) met me in the parking lot after a October Sunday worship service and said, "I believe you can help me!" Startled by her affirmation, we briefly chatted and made plans to meet the following week. Our meeting at Starbucks led to conversations about her son's college entrance essays. Concerned that he was not getting the support that he needed in school to write or edit his application packets, Mrs. Alexander asked if I would work with Douglas. Our initial meeting over coffee led to months of exchanging emails with Douglas for the purpose of editing and revising entrance essays for several universities. Each university's essay prompt asked applicants to explore an issue of importance to them. Reading Douglas's essays, I began to see a common theme much like the one that his parents had impressed upon him. He routinely wrote about "a

people overcoming." If one is to make a life, this truth would be most crucial. While Douglas's essays referenced external conflicts, the assumption that one overcomes internal conflicts was implied as well. The following excerpts are from first drafts of two essays to different universities:

Douglas's Essay Excerpt: University 1

> Our country's educational system is under great attack. The adversary has willingly risked the knowledge of our nation's children for the sake of balancing an out of control budget. Have our elected officials and politicians forgotten the value of an education?…I will not step aside and watch education dwindle before its capability could be harnessed to help children worldwide strive and achieve their wildest dreams. The solution is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our political system by striving to master the understanding of our governing body…We can correct it to better serve our children yearning for an education and so much more. (Douglas, personal communication, October 24, 2010)

Douglas's Essay Excerpt: University 2

> Our ordained right to voice our opinion epitomizes an equal and just society. Ignoring this right would reject mankind's freedom of choice. History records moments where these ordained rights were revoke[d] and destroyed (e. g., genocide in Sudan, enslavement and forced migrations of Africans dating back to the 17th century). Yet, mankind's resilience drove populations to find hope, even in the face of greater adversity…the determination of a people forces them to make strides towards a better future for generations to come…As a graduate of The University of Facts Honor's College, and even during my enrollment, I will aid the push to protect and guard basic rights for all humans and establish an effective system that will not perish but strive for many generations to come. (Douglas personal communication, November 9, 2010)

Douglas generated, in the above essay excerpts, a language of hope and optimism that inspires one to make a life of which one can be proud. The essays become countertext, reflective of the familial mores of survival that challenged the negative portrayals of African American families as dysfunctional. Though the audiences were college admissions committee members, the message was

consistent in both essays. Douglas did not see himself as a good writer, but he

believed writing was an effective tool for informing audiences about reform or

change. His view of writing as a tool to reach or speak to others may well be

quite useful as he pursues a planned career in political science. Yet, what became

quite evident was Douglas's voice as an activist who pleaded for the rights of

others.

Thinking back to our first meeting at Mt. Olive Fellowship Church in

April of 2010, Douglas stood up during the youth meeting and responded to

statistics that Minister Ben had read aloud. The statistics included those related to

African American high school dropout rates, teen pregnancy, and juvenile

incarceration for felonies like drug trafficking. Douglas boldly yelled, "We're not

all on drugs! We are trying to strive to do something. Some of us are striving to

do something with our lives!" (personal communication, April 21, 2010) Noting

his courage to speak out, I wanted to know what "pushed his button" enough to

respond in such a manner. In our first interview at his school, I questioned him

about the previous outburst about stereotypes.

> Cynthia: Can negative stereotypes penetrate the church community?
>
> Douglas: It seems like stereotypes are omnipresent. Even though they are not an accurate representation of all individuals, it seems like they are almost everywhere, omnipresent. Because they come from somewhere and where they come from seems to be the norm...then they are over-generalized…even though there is fallacy in them. (personal communication, August 13, 2010)
>
> Douglas was quite aware of mainstream society's characterization of

African American young men. Collins (2004) explained, "Historically, African

American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and

natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of

promiscuity and violence" (Athletes and Criminals: Images of Working-class

Black Men, para. 2). Dealing with this negative perception of the Black man's

body, Douglas soon realized what DuBois's (1903) termed "double-

consciousness" or "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of

others, measuring ones soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused

contempt and pity (p. 46)." However, Douglas challenged the statistics in an

attempt to give voice to African American young men who have not fallen prey to

the wiles of life.

As a young child Douglas was submerged in African American culture.

While his parents believed that this was best for him, I questioned him as to

whether or not his feelings differed from his parents' beliefs. Race and ethnicity

were hot topics in Mt. Olive's Teenager Bible Study. After a few months of

hearing discussions about the terms, during another interview I brought up race.

> Cynthia: Would you say that race becomes a part of constructing Douglas
> Alexander?
>
> Douglas: Umh, yes, yes, without a doubt! 'Cause as much as you want to
> ignore that fact, it's kind of there. As much as you want to ignore the fact
> that race may not play a part in things, it does. So knowing that…that
> kind of dictates who you are.
>
> Cynthia: Why?
>
> Douglas: I get along with everyone…People expect you to be a certain
> way, but I know that I have to be careful in my position. A negative point
> of people being a certain color is that you have, uh, you have a certain
> label placed on you because you are in those groups. That label is usually
> stereotype. So you have to be careful about where you place yourself in
> the environment, because you are liable to have stereotypes or labels
> placed on you because of that. (personal communication, January 26,
> 2011)

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Like Teresa, Douglas learned to positively embrace the N-identity and to combat dominant perceptions of that N-identity. He mentioned wanting to deny how race is perceived by others, but he cannot. The relationship between skin color and stereotypes is not new for Douglas. Based on my conversations with Mrs. Alexander, she feared that her son would view his dark-skinned complexion as negative. So she and her husband provided books that included pictures of African American children. Mrs. Alexander admitted, "I knew Douglas would already have to confront a world that would not accept, so I didn't want him to not accept himself" (personal communication, November, 14, 2010). Adding to Douglas's home literacy practices, his parents purchased books with illustrations of children who looked like him. They wanted him to know that Black children could be in books, even if there weren't any in the more popular-read childhood classics. As Douglas learned to become familiar with positive images for being Black, the countertext also included family photographs, art work, and magazines that confirmed the presence of his ethnicity as something to cherish instead of hate.

Concluding Thoughts on Family Mores and Literacies

Family mores forced Teresa and Douglas to negotiate identities very similar to those of Heath's (1983) townspeople's children who, unlike the rural African American children, learned that "socially determined habits and values created for them an ideology in which all that they do makes sense of their current identity and their preparation for the achievements which will frame their future." (p. 368). Essential to both students' preparation are the knowledge of African

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American history and the understanding of how the world perceives them. Mrs. Cooper took it upon herself to facilitate Teresa's learning because school had traditionally been ineffective in this area. Likewise, the Alexander's decision to send their son to an African American private elementary school was in response to their belief that cultural pride would not be taught in public school. I include the private African American school in the family section of my study because of its role, not as an institution of formal learning, but instead because it is viewed by Douglas as his adoptive family–the extension of brothers and sisters that he did not have at home. Within these kinship ties, he learned to negotiate positive identities that were cultivated through ethnic pride, while becoming aware of common values shared by most people, even those who may view him as inferior.

For all families there is a system of beliefs and practices that regulate how they function and interact with others. As children grow and develop, there is an authority who constructs some type of text. Whether they agree or disagree with these power structures (e.g., parents, grandparents, or elders), the Cooper and Alexander families strategically responded to the crisis of negative or nonexistent African American identity by allowing a countertext to emerge, reflecting their racial discomforts and ethnic beliefs. They each built a defense mechanism to confront possible "exploitation and suffering" that has traditionally been endured by African American students in school, which is normally the first contact that children have with the outside world. Teresa's family provided ethnic awareness at home, while Douglas's family joined forces with a private school that became his adopted family. At the core of family mores is the purpose of maintaining

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solidarity, and this happens when the basic needs of members are met within the group.

In this section, I have illustrated the relationship between identity and literacy within the families of Teresa and Douglas. As they became increasingly aware of familial mores, they experienced how literacies assisted in shaping their image of being Black. Embedded in their minds were incidents, both positive and negative, that occurred as they negotiated and forged identities. Race became a deconstructive descriptor that only allowed others to see them as deficient because of phenotypic features. Ethnic awareness is celebrated and allows both students to embrace familial beliefs and customs.

Literacy practices such as FaceBook posts and college entrance essays served as one conduit by which Teresa and Douglas came to construct identities for themselves. In attempts to protect familial intentions, family members intentionally selected texts for specific purposes. For the Cooper and Alexander families, their construction of a countertext enforced ethnic pride[21]. Various texts were added as needed to defy notions of inferiority or incompetence often assigned to African Americans. In this process, Teresa and Douglas were trained to guard and defend themselves against antagonistic beliefs and stereotypes about African Americans. Even, selective scripture readings were permitted if they validated the students' lived experiences. Any reading or ideology that detracted from this purpose was attacked. Therefore, school readings intended to provide

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[21] I do understand that these countertexts resist norms within the dominant culture, but they do not always surpass the gate-keeping power of the dominant school texts.

them with an awareness of the world around them may be perceived as antagonistic, especially if the text primarily focuses on dehumanizing traditions like slavery that reinforced second-class citizenship. Unlike the assumptions that African American students do not experience literacy outside of school, Teresa and Douglas illustrated that literacy practices not only occur outside the school, but they reinforce family mores. Rethinking how to include these experiences in classroom instruction becomes imperative as educators seek to reach marginalized populations.

Becoming Attached to the Institutional Mores of Mt. Olive

Mrs. Wade: Sean gave me some paper from you about doing some school work.

Cynthia: Yes, Ma'am, I am a student at ASU and I am looking to learn from the youth what they think about their school work.

Mrs. Wade: Well, Sean needs help with his school work. Since everyone has been telling him that he is smart, he failed three classes last year. He needs all the help that he can get. I need another one of them papers, so I can sign it.

Cynthia: Okay, I will bring you one on Friday night. Will you be here for the Bible Bowl?

Mrs. Wade: Yes, we'll be here.

Cynthia: Okay! See you then! (personal communication, August 28, 2010)

Five months had gone by since I began my study with the Mt. Olive Fellowship Church youth ministry. Pastor Jones and Minster Ben, the youth pastor, had both affirmed my presence in the teen Bible study classes. Outside of my being a student at Arizona State University and a former high school English teacher, I initially spoke very little about myself.

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In an attempt to become more acquainted with church members, I attended the monthly women's auxiliary meeting where Mrs. Wade, Sean's grandmother, served as the treasurer. Annually, the auxiliary hosts a women's conference held during the last weekend in August. During the August monthly meeting, the chairperson entertained discussions from the floor about possible activities. Several women raised their hands, were recognized, and offered ideas for the event. A new member who had joined the church about the same time I began my study raised her hand. I listened and watched as she attempted to offer suggestions from activities at her previous church. "You see at my other church, we had a rainbow tea, and the women…." As she went further into her description of the rainbow tea, there were no responses to this suggestion. In fact, there appeared to be a hush over the room. Immediately, I realized that the belief for new members to "pay dues" was at work. Smitherman (2006) defined this as something "one has to do to achieve success in any endeavor" (p. 39). I understood that in order for me to learn anything from Mt. Olive youth, I had to show their guardians, parents and grandparents, that I was willing to work and pay my dues. This meant assisting students in ways that were meaningful to parents. Mrs. Wade's request to help Sean with his school work became my new task. I soon learned that being a participant observer meant what I call "doing while observing."

Mores like paying dues assisted with my contextualization of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church as an institution. Here, African Americans come together in a community for a common purpose. Moss (2003) wrote, "the African American

church is a body of people with a common history of, among other factors, slavery oppression, faith, perseverance, and literacy" (p. 20). It is the other factors within Moss' conceptualization of the African American church that have unfolded during my study at Mt. Olive. Understanding how those factors influenced students' negotiated identities became quite meaningful as I began to think about institutionalized mores within the context of the church.

Despite the changing face of urban America, specifically in the southwest where there are small African American communities, the church has been consistent in upholding its image as a non-threatening place for persons of African descent. The African American church, regardless of denomination, has an infrastructure that dictates the rules of membership and participation. It is a social institution "that in days gone by was the vanguard in demanding a racist USA to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Swain, 2008, p. 401). I believe there is significance in viewing the church as an institution because of the historical impact that it has had on members and the community. According to Swain (2008), the church maintains its position to "instill[s] civic skills that are transferrable to secular institutions, and the social networks formed in churches, facilitate recruitment into other forms of community and social involvement" (p. 403). Consistent with the understanding of the church's power to instill and facilitate values and beliefs into its members' lives, my study with Mt. Olive's youth ministry allowed me to do an ethnography in a space where African American students come together outside of school.

Over the last three decades, researchers have identified the church as a vital part of African American culture and community. Studies have been done that emphasize various literary traditions, including sermonic call and response, rhetorical questions, improvisations, and adlib all incorporating African American literacy (AAL) that lifts the congregation's spirits (Blackwell, 1991; Heath, 1983; Moss, 2003; Rickford &Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 1977). However, the focus of this study is on the youth who attend Mt. Olive Fellowship Church. As these youth interact with each other, they come together in a space that is separated from the sanctuary of their families. The fellowship hall is the students' place of meeting. While the doctrinal beliefs of the church dictate the youth ministry's goals, the process by which the goals are achieved differs from the traditional African American church. Mt. Olive youth and their families do share some activities, but I have come to see the space within the youth ministry as a chronotopic counterspace where participants are often encouraged to participate in literacies that extend beyond the traditional church. In the following section, I take up how this chronotopic counterpublic operates as a space where literacy practices flourish.

The Impact Center

There are three doors near the back pews through which to exit the main sanctuary of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church. The door to the left leads to the restrooms. The center door at the very rear of the sanctuary leads to the outside parking lot. But, the door to the right leads down a hall to double French doors with glass panes that open to the fellowship hall or what Pastor Jones refers to as

"The Impact Center." He believed that as youth entered the room, their lives would be impacted by God through teachings from His word. Each week, Mt. Olive youth between the ages of 13 and 20 met here on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings to participate in a Bible study. Dismissed after the praise and worship service in the main sanctuary, youth entered the room that resembled a multi-purpose room. There were rows of chairs arranged with a center and side aisles. The podium and white board were at the front of the room. A 52-inch flat screen television hung overhead with a DVD player mounted below it. The pictures on the wall were reminiscent of a walk of fame as they depicted stories of church events and outings. Sprinkled throughout the framed photographs were young people who I had come to know in that very room.

As the youth entered the room, they were greeted by Minister Ben, who could be seen "givin dap to the young brothas and sistas"[22] as they made it to their chairs. Reared in southern California, Minister Ben often referred to his childhood of poverty growing up in public housing. Telling his story or testifyin[23] seemed to come quite naturally for the young man who recounted experiences that included his mother's drug addiction, his father's absence, and his grandmother's spirituality[24]. The first time I heard him teach in March 2010, Minister Ben shared how his grandmother made him go to Sunday School every week, even

[22] Throughout this section, the AAL and Hip-Hop vernacular spoken by Minister Ben and the youth is used. As I describe events, I use their language where it applies.

[23] Black Church term for verbally acknowledging and affirming the power of God (Smitherman, 2006, p. 45)

[24] See Footnote 4.

after hanging out all Saturday night. His transparency seemed to allow the youth

to identify with him as he made God tangible for them. In organized religion,

spirituality is often an adult concept. While young people are made to adhere to

the rules of scriptural teaching, they can often become disenchanted as God

becomes a list of do's and don'ts. Perhaps, it is Minister Ben's professed love for

the beats and rhymes of early rap often used in his teachings that enticed Mt.

Olive youth to hear what he was saying about God. Admitting his admiration for

Eric B and Rakim and Big Daddy Kane, Minister Ben acknowledged that he was

more consumed by them than the traditional hymns of the church. At the age of

19, he became a Christian and by 21, he had accepted his call as a minister.

However, instead of giving up his love for beats and rhymes, Minister Ben felt

compelled to use it as a tool to reach young people for God. His biography

included a section on his decision to use rap music in church[25]:

> At such a young age he looked around and saw his peers still attached to
> the culture of Hip Hop, with little to none attending church services. This
> became a burden on his heart. He recalls driving in the car and listening to
> the radio and realizing every song on the radio was glitz, glamour, and
> lies, coming to a revelation, he hears, "You rapped before you were
> saved….now rap to save." Not long after accepting his call, he began to
> Rap for the Lord, and he has touched many lives through his music. Today
> [he] is still committed to reaching souls, in the name of Christ.

The relationship between rap music and the Christian church has

increasingly gained popularity and attention in the academy and the church. In

'*Believe me, this pimp game is very religious': Toward a religious history of hip*

hop, Josef Sorett (2009) chronicled the religious journey of famous MC and hip

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[25] As a member of the Mt. Olive's clergy, Minister Ben has a printed
biography for use on church published programs.

hop theorist KRS-ONE whose image transformed from albums inspired by the militancy of Malcolm X in *By All Means Necessary* to a confession of faith in his 2002 *Spiritual Minded* album. Sorett (2009) writes, "In the case of KRS-ONE, his shifting religious rhetorics [from Islam to Christianity] evinced his commitment to hip hop serving as a consciousness-raising resource, which he call 'edutainment', as he voices various criticisms of American society." (p. 13) Striving for the same goal of "edutainment," Minister Ben offers Mt. Olive youth the freedom[26] to use their voice as a weapon against injustices they face as Christians and African Americans. On several occasions, he dropped a few lines from pieces that he's working on in attempts to model for youth how using their voices to reach others brings glory to God. During his time with students, Minister Ben used scriptural text to focus on issues that students faced in their daily lives. Formatting his teaching much like a "rap session[27]," students were free to respond within the context of various subjects. In addition to weekly gatherings, Minister Ben encouraged and persuaded the youth to chronicle their spiritual journey in narratives, spoken word, rap, and art. With the aid of other adults who served as youth volunteers, students were given the opportunity to talk about their original works. This practice led to presentations before the church congregation on Youth Sunday, performances during the annual *Bring the Noise*

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[26] I word freedom quite sparingly, because that it is constrained by the Christian virtues that these students must adhere to within the church community.

[27] In conversations with Minister Ben, I asked, how he perceived his teaching with the youth. He replied, "It's like a rap session where we just try to handle issues the youth are dealing with." Borrowing from Smitherman (2006), rap is "a term for strong, aggressive, powerful talk in general."

conference, and/or publication in the church newsletter, which was written and produced by the Mt. Olive youth.

After assuring Mrs. Wade that I would talk to her grandson about his grades, I met with Sean for an interview to learn more about the young man who tackled topics like racism and homelessness in his spoken word poetry but, at the time, was failing junior English. Sean was the first young person who I asked about Mt. Olive Fellowship Church in June 2010.

> I think it's great! Like, I like this church sooooo much. It gives you everything you need. Like, we have our youth pastor which is Minister Ben. He teaches us and he teaches us well. And ummh, we have the little personalities in our class that make it fun. It seems like you are not even learning, but you really are. And then we also have Pastor and Lady Jones. And the youth thing all together is really great. You have to learn how to get up in front of people and really speak. Like you have to do that in mostly all careers, so if you do it now, it prepares you for later. And plus, you are learning about God. (personal communication, September 12, 2010)

Sean's ability to make connections between church and his career helped me understand the value that he and the other participants placed on this space. In most cases, such a comparison is made between school and careers, but for Sean the training received in the youth ministry exposed him to skills that would make him marketable in a job. His use of the terminology "really speak" emphasized rhetorical principles of knowing how to persuade an audience. Aristotle's rhetorical appeals accentuated three tenets necessary to create convincing arguments. Although Aristotle's terms "logos," "pathos," and "ethos" were not directly mentioned by Sean, throughout the spiritual rhetoric at Mt. Olive that

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aims to lead people to conversion[28], the elements of each are at work within text prepared for and by the youth participants.

Impressed by Sean's enthusiasm about the church, as expressed during the interview, I checked back periodically in casual conversations with him to make sure that his feelings had not changed. At times he would shake his head and say, "You don't get it…I really like it here." I was not seeking to change Sean's opinion of his church family; rather, I wanted to check if he really felt that way about the ministry. Realizing that family mores influence students' ideas, I asked other participants how they felt about the youth ministry. For example, I referenced specific incidents that happened to question the students about the church. Through this process, I became increasingly aware of the student participants' allegiance and solidarity to the youth ministry. I came to view the youth ministry as an affinity group (Gee, 2001) where A-identities formed a network for Mt. Olive youth to confide in others who shared their ethnicity and spirituality.

Spiritual Language within the Faith Community

Throughout this chapter, I have referenced Pastor Jones's sayings about the youth. For example, every Wednesday night and Sunday morning he dismissed the youth from the sanctuary to go to their classes by calling them future doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals. He always referred to the fellowship hall as "The Impact Center." After Youth Service on Sunday,

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[28] Conversion is a term that means rebirth or becoming saved. I elaborate more on this later in the chapter.

October 31, 2010, I asked Pastor Jones about speaking affirmations. He replied

by quoting the scripture in Romans 4:16-17 (KJV):

> Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise
> might be sure to all the seed…before him whom he believed, even God,
> who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though
> they were.

From this conversation with Pastor Jones, I learned more about his position on the

power of positive speaking. Reflecting on this later, I realized that for him faith is

understood to believe in something that is not yet evident. Pastor Jones'

interpretation of the scripture he quoted is that as children of God, Christians have

the authority to "calleth those things which be not though they were." This does

not give them the power to speak just anything, but only things that are of God

according to other scriptural readings. I later came across one of Pastor Jones'

recorded audio sermons from April 2010. He referenced the teachings of Jesus in

Mark 11:22-23 (KJV) as the Christ instructs believers to act. "Have faith in

God…For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be

thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt…but shall

believe…he shall have whatsoever he saith." Again, I could see the connection to

faith. For Christians, to have faith in God, one must take into account and

practice His example of speaking. It is the action that proceeds manifestation of

what one believes for. If one does not say what she believes, it will not come to

past. With foundations in scriptures believed to be the words of God inspired

through man, persons who practice such mores are members of a faith community

and are identified by others as spiritual. Paraphrasing Gee (2001), the source of

this spiritual trait—the "power" that determines it or to which a person is

"subject"—is the discourse or dialogue of others familiar with the faith community. Because others interact and communicate with Mt. Olive youth as spiritual persons, they are provided a rationale for being perceived as such, thus cultivating for them what Gee (2001) calls a discursive perspective or D-identity – traits like language recognized among members or affiliates of the discourse community. Understanding the D-identity among Mt. Olive participants requires focusing not only on what they say, but why they say it. Contextualization of language's purpose is indeed necessary in the faith community in order to analyze church literacy practices.

I am interested here in mapping out the trajectory of constructing D-identities for Mt. Olive youth. An additional guiding principle noted in the D-identity of Mt. Olive's youth faith community was the ongoing struggle between the flesh and the spirit. One's conversion is noted as being "born again." Also, an act of speaking and believing entails a person's acknowledgment that she or he is a sinner and believes that the remission of her or his sins is accomplished through a confession to God. The next step in the D-identity construction of Mt. Olive's youth community is to pray for forgiveness and ask to be saved from sin, thus experiencing a rebirth. As this entire process is spiritual and governed by one's belief that rebirth has occurred, a person's daily activities are still done within their human bodies or flesh. Romans 7:21 (NIV) acknowledges this conflict, "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me." By emphasizing that the conflict is a law, there is no relief of change; it is a continual struggle that members of the faith community must endure.

Revisiting DuBois' (1903) "double consciousness," I conceptualized this struggle between spirit and flesh as an additional "twoness" that Mt. Olive youth learned as they negotiated not only racial identities, but also spiritual identities. Despite the existing church mores that are rooted in scriptural text, participants managed to use the youth ministry as a chronotopic counterpublic. In this space, participants were allowed to forge various identities through literacy practices that unveiled voices once even hidden to themselves. The final section of this chapter illustrates how Mt. Olive participants became empowered to construct multiple identities – racial, spiritual, and literate – as members of the youth ministry.

A Self-Awareness Emerges

The Barna Group[29] (2009), a leading research group in church practices, published a study entitled *Christianity is No Longer Americans' Default Faith,* which reported a loss of faith in religious institutions across the nation. The research group claimed that Americans have come to observe faith as an individual journey, rather than an integral part of the church as an institution.

> The Christian faith is less of a life perspective that challenges the supremacy of individualism as it is a faith being defined through individualism…Faith, of whatever variety, is increasingly viral rather than pedagogical. With people spending less time reading the Bible, and becoming less engaged in activities that deepen their biblical literacy, faith views are more often adopted on the basis of dialogue, self-reflection, and observation than teaching. Feelings and emotions now play a significant role in the development of people's faith views—in many cases, much more significant than information-based exercises such as listening to preaching and participating in Bible study. (Barna Group, 2009, p. 2)

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[29] The Barna Group is a research firm that focuses on the intersection of church and culture. I used them as a source because Pastor Jones and several of Mt. Olives' leaders referenced their reports when discussing church growth.

Comparisons of faith as viral rather than pedagogical negate the fact that congregations do gather weekly to listen to a sermon or, in the case of the Mt. Olive youth, have a rap session that is based in scriptural teachings. Taking into consideration the above church research findings, I first questioned who they polled for their survey. On the other hand, if the population who completed the survey was truly an accurate representation of the state of organized faith, I questioned why African American families in Arizona choose to attend Mt. Olive Fellowship Church. What do people gain by physically coming together in churches to engage in activities that deepen their biblical literacy? Could it be possible that dialogue, self-reflection, and observation aid in the teaching of the scriptures, instead of replacing them? Is there a place for feelings and emotions in the faith community?

Exposed to the grim realities of marginalization and Arizona's policy climate, I learned from parents like Mrs. Alexander how Mt. Olive's youth ministry reinforced their family mores of self-awareness, hope, and optimism. Even for younger students like Aimeé who were just learning to articulate their personal struggles with ethnicity and spirituality, the youth ministry was a space for them to negotiate their identities. Instead of opposing the interferences of church, as reported by the Barna Group, students and their families relied on the church as an influential part of their lives. The Mt. Olive youth calendar was filled with activities that deepened and expanded biblical literacy for the purpose of increasing spirituality. During Minister Ben's rap sessions, he shared with the youth examples of his own rap lyrics, used them as topics of discussion, and

challenged the youth to use their talents to express their thoughts. To cultivate those talents, Minister Ben provided each student with a journal to take notes or to simply free write while they were at church. He encouraged students to think about their message to the world. This ongoing assignment reinforced student voice by affirming that each of them had something to say to an audience. The students' task was to figure out who the audience should be and what mode of communication would be used to transmit that message. For some students, the audience was their church family. Yet, for others their audience transcended beyond the four walls of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church. Regardless of audience, a sense of self-awareness emerged as the participants became familiar with the sounds of their own voices. The following extended field notes from Sunday, August 1, 2010 captured a Sunday morning observation that led to my conceptualization of church literacy practices.

> Instead of dismissing youth to their classes, Pastor Jones requested that they sit in the main sanctuary. As most of them had started back to school, he encouraged them in this new academic year to get the most out of life. Today, he gives them the task to listen closely to his sermon. He preaches on "Being Transformed"—the scripture reference is Romans and it focuses on how the "world has desires and influences" that Christians cannot follow. (To be ye transformed is to change–so how does this apply to these students?)

> I am sitting in the back of the sanctuary where several of my participants often sit prior to be released for teen Bible study. On the church bulletin, there is a place for notes. I never noticed that before today. (So, it doesn't look out of place for me to write in my pad…)

> Pastor Jones challenges ministry leaders to assist in transforming the lives of people…Seeing beyond where they are today…at this moment. "Cast your cares on the Lord for He cares…."

> Pastor Jones says, "You have the pen to write the ending of your own story."

Aimeé is sitting directly behind me. She leans forward and says in my ear, "I am going to use that…he's right, I can write my own story…my life can be whatever I want it to be. I don't have to let the things that happen to me run my life."

(Such a response by a student in 8th grade is something I should think about…she gained from this sermon or talk that the world was hers…she did not have to depend on what others did…her life was in her control….)

Additional nuggets of wisdom from the Pastor to the youth and congregation…

"Stop praying for stuff that God is calling you to do."

"The reigns of your life are in your hands."

The sermon offers several points that encourage students to reach for their potential. A sense of HOPE penetrates throughout the message…

Reflecting on this field note, I began to understand how research participants responded to sermons. Aimeé listened to the Pastor Jones and took phrases and words that would be useful to her. She admitted to me that she was going to use a particular phrase, but I had no idea what she meant. How would a 14-year old use a statement from her pastor's message?

Pastor Jones sermon unfolded over the next few months as a series on transformation. Like President Roosevelt's fireside chats, he appealed to ministry leaders to push his major points. Instead of preaching, he used this time to talk to the membership like a leader briefing troops before battle. While the normal responses like "Amen, Pastor" or "That's right, tell it" echoed from the audience, Pastor Jones did not allow them to persuade his demeanor. His sense of urgency was evident. With hopeful optimism, he challenged the audience to put action to what they believed.

Later the same evening that Aimeé whispered to me in church, I noticed that she had taken seriously several points from Pastor Jones talk on "Being Transformed." Her Facebook page had been updated to read, "You have the pen to write the ending of your own story." I clicked "Like" to affirm her decision to use a line from her Pastor's sermon. Only a few months earlier, I'd just begun to use the social network to keep in touch with relatives back home. The Mt. Olive youth were the first minors that I had allowed to be my Facebook friends. I soon learned that one of Facebook's features is to alert you every time someone responds to a post of which you had previously responded. By maintaining a conversation between people on the same post or topic, the network notifies you to read what others post even if you don't know them. There were several people who, like me, clicked the "Like" icon affirming Aimeé for voicing her post. However, there were others who actually posted comments. Not knowing that I could change the features on Facebook to not alert me when comments were made on posts, I received more than 10 alerts from this one post over a three-day period. Frustrated at the time, I now credit those alerts with making me think about the impact of this message on my study participants.

Over the next few months, I made observations and posed questions about the Mt. Olive students and various parts of Pastor Jones' original message. How did the students relate to the idea of being transformed? How had students understood their role in writing the ending of their story? I related these observations and questions to Minister Ben's ongoing challenge to encourage the youth to think about their message to the world. Mt. Olive participants embraced

identities that went beyond their ethnicity and spirituality. Emerging from this group, I witnessed young people taking on roles as scholars, mentors, politicians, public servants, preachers, artists, and writers as they created original essays, sermons, spoken word poetry and sketches. Under the guidance of Minister Ben and other youth volunteers, students were encouraged to boldly share their voices with others. In Chapter 5, I return to these original student works.

While observing Mt. Olive participants' journey toward self-awareness, I began to think more about Maxine Greene's (1982) position on literacy. She explained, "Literacy ought to be conceived as an opening, a becoming, never a fixed end" (p. 326). Conceptualizing the dynamics that infiltrate a group's literacy practices, I have come to realize that there is always an opening or start, a becoming or process, and an end or goal. Like Greene, I believe there can never be a fixed end. We must understand that the process will vary, just as people differ in their interests and desires. For the purpose of my study, I have found that analyzing processes can produce greater understandings about how we perceive literacy, particularly among African American youth.

The opening or start begins with the institution's purpose. The church's opening or start for literacy practices is knowledge of the Bible. Whether people read the Bible or hear it, in order to participate within this institution, they must be aware that it is the basis for most church mores. Members at Mt. Olive read the Bible together during congregational meetings. If they do not have a copy, one is provided for them to use during the service. Several youth have even downloaded the Bible to their cell phones. Objectively, in order to function in

this institution, one must acknowledge the Bible as the start by sharing it with others, which leads to the becoming or process.

The becoming or process for church literacy practices is where my study was situated. As participants explored both Pastor Jones and Minster Ben's challenges using various modes of communication, they negotiated their ethnic and spiritual identities while confronting issues as they began writing their own stories. Their end or goals have not yet been reached, but they have begun preparations.

Literacy Practices to Transform Lives

If there is a practical joke to be planned and executed, Carlos can be found as the master mind behind it. He is one of the group "personalities" that Sean referenced in his interview with me. Carlos began attending Mt. Olive Fellowship Church with his grandfather who serves as a mentor for the Boys to Men mentorship program ran by the men's auxiliary. The purpose of this program was to provide mentorship and academic support to males between the ages of 6 and 18. Younger boys are matched with older boys in an attempt to create mentors while mentoring. This relationship was especially significant during church programs, like the Annual Bible Bowl Competition where students worked with a partner.

To prepare youth for the event, Pastor Jones asked parents and auxiliary members to review the list of more than 200 questions that covered the span of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, through Revelation, the last book of the Bible. He said that this would be a time for the young and the old to come together and

learn something new. Most of the answers were names or places that were

relevant in biblical times. Carlos and 11 other students made up the six teams of

two members each. Within a five-week time frame, students and church members

challenged themselves to learn the answers to the over 200 questions. In order for

competing teams to receive credit for an answer, names and places had to be

pronounced correctly. This meant learning to pronounce Hebrew and Aramaic

names and places. Most of the students prided themselves in saying names like

Melchizedek or knowing that Torah is the first five books of the Bible. Some of

the same students who use slang, Hip Hop vernacular, and AAL were bickering

over how to correctly pronounce names and places in the Bible. Mt. Olive

members who had never worked with teenagers directly got involved to test their

knowledge as well. During this time, adults just randomly volunteered in the

teenager Bible study to prepare for the competition.

Carlos' love for words was obvious. He practiced with his partner, a

sixth-grade boy named Derrick, during the mentorship program. The few times

that we practiced during youth ministry, I observed students as they worked in

groups to read questions from the study packet. Carlos paired up with another

young person just to practice.

Reynard: Who is the oldest person in the Bible?

Carlos: Ummm! Like his name is long. *Ma –THIS-s –law.*

Reynard: I'ma gi you dat, but dat ain't how you say his name[30].

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[30] I represent this conversation with AAL features and phonology in order
to show a comparison between when students used it versus when they used
Dominant American English.

Carlos: It starts wif an *M* and it got four syllables. (He holds up four fingers.)

Reynard: Yeah, but it's *Me-thu-se-lah*, not *Ma-this-sa-law*. If you don't say it right, you don't get points.

Carlos: Aright! *Me-thu-se-lah. Me-thu-se-lah. Me-thu-se-lah.* I got it now…gib me 'nother one. (Tapping his lap with his hand, Carlos repeated the name and tapped out all four syllables). (personal communication, July 10, 2010)

Over the next half-hour, I checked off questions like "What city was called the city of the Palm trees? (Jericho)" and "Name the only witch in the Bible (The witch of Endor)." I marveled as the students answered questions about material I had never seen in the Bible. In that short time while moving from group to group, I circled at least a dozen questions that I did not know the answers to before receiving the study packet.

During the "whole language[31]" era, very few students learned decoding with syllables as a strategy for discovering new words. Watching Carlos tap out the syllables for Methuselah, I realized that his use of counting the syllables in the name helped him to comprehend the word as he said it aloud. Archer, Gleason, and Vachon (2003) argued that an "emphasis on multisyllabic word reading is critical because of the number of novel words introduced in intermediate and secondary textbooks and the potential for failing to learn from material if the words cannot be read" (p. 90). Carlos' awareness of his own cognitive process in learning unfamiliar multisyllabic words was evident as he tapped on his leg in a decoding manner. I previously noted Carlos's methods for reciting song lyrics,

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[31] Whole language is a philosophy for teaching early literacy by utilizing meaning and strategy instruction, instead of phonics-based instruction.

one of which became ingrained in my memory. His use of song lyrics, beats, and

syllables is a skill that is often taught to students who struggle with reading

comprehension. Yet, independently, without any scaffolding, Carlos had allowed

these skills to become a part of his literacy resources.   This became important to

my analysis because it challenged the notions of illiteracy assigned to African

American males whose literacy practices challenge the dominant cultural norms

(Kirkland, 2008).

Outside of the Bible Bowl Competition questions read by Reynard from

the study packet, neither young man spoke in Dominant American English

(DAE)[32] I should note that this observation is not an attempt to evaluate the

sociolinguistic content but instead to point out that both boys used English

varieties as they spoke to each other. However, it was obvious that Carlos over-

pronounced the /th/ in Methuselah, but pronounced /th/ as /f/ in the word with. As

Ball (1996) explained, students will "demonstrate an ability to skillfully

manipulate and interchangeably use AAL, mainstream, and academic English

during discussions–style switching with ease depending on their degree of

personal engagement in the conversation" (p. 28). When Carlos wanted to get the

pronunciation correct, he could enunciate each syllable as needed. In our

conversations, Carlos rarely used AAL or slang. Standing around in the parking

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[32] Within school and the market place, a person's language proficiency is
governed by the norms and standards of Dominant American English (DAE).
While I agree that knowledge and mastery of English is imperative for students
and adults, during this study I have gained a better understanding of how student
learning suffers when their home language is perceived as deficient (Delpit, 2002;
Kinloch, 2005).

lot a few weeks later, I asked him why he didn't speak to me like he spoke to his

friends. He replied, "You're old enough to be my momma, that's why." I

responded, "So, you're calling me old!" However, I understood that this was his

way of being respectful to me as an adult.

My reflecting on the students' question-answer sessions while preparing

for the competition caused me think of Carlos' frequent outbursts about language

and big words. I recalled times during the teen Bible study gathering when Carlos

and Douglas would argue about Douglas's use of big words. Although they are

good friends, this healthy competition has gotten quite heated, especially when

Carlos accused Douglas of "acting White." During our second interview, I

questioned Carlos about race.

> Cynthia: You always talk about White kids. Why do you give them such a hard time?
>
> Carlos: They mess with a lot of kids at my school.
>
> Cynthia: Do they mess with you?
>
> Carlos: No, they don't mess with loud Black kids. If you talk and stick up for yourself, they leave you alone.
>
> Cynthia: Do you have White friends?
>
> Carlos: NO, I hang out with Mexicans…my friend is mixed Mexican and Black, but his cousins are Mexican. So we go down to Alta Vista to be with more of his friends. But we all been stereotyped. They say that we act wild, so we make them feel that way. They don' kno' we got book smarts, too. They don' look at our personality. (personal communication, September 29, 2010)

Carlos's accusing Douglas of "acting White" was partially due to the racism that

he faced at school. Since Carlos attributes a certain language to the dominant

White culture, any young African American who remotely speaks like them is

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given the label. His friend's bi-racial status allows Carlos to have a closer

relationship with Mexicans who, according to him, are also tired of dealing with

the racism. As he defends his choice of friends, Carlos also defends their

intelligence (Noguera, 2008; Kirkland, 2008).

Since our second interview, Carlos and I have had many conversations

about occurrences with some of his friends who faced deportation to Mexico. He

would often reference SB1070, the proposed anti-immigration law, as "their law."

Learning to negotiate his ethnic identities was rather challenging, yet Carlos

believed that all people of color needed to fight for what is right. It was hard for

me not to admit that I agreed with him, which I did not want to do because I knew

that, for Carlos, this could mean actually fighting physically, as well. Normally,

I'd simply respond by saying, "Don't get yourself into any trouble!"

In concluding this section on transformative literacy practices, I am

reminded of how the topic of transformation was central to most of the teen Bible

study lessons, Minister Ben asked students to free write about their future. He

said that if students wrote about their futures, they would come true. Instead of

using their journals during a Sunday session, Minister Ben passed out oversized

post-it notes. He wrote three questions on the white board.

1. What do you want to do when you graduate from high school?

2. What is your greatest life goal?

3. Who has been your greatest inspiration? (personal communication,

   November 15, 2010)

As students wrote the answers to the questions, he asked them not to write their names on the paper. After they finished writing, Minister Ben randomly posted their responses on the white board and asked students to come forward and read each other's responses. There were a few comments and chuckles as the teenagers read aloud some of the answers. When the students returned to their seats, Minister Ben asked, "What did you see?" A few students mumbled out responses. "Someone wants to get married and have twins." "I read about someone being a pathologist." Intently listening to the comments, Minister Ben asked, "Well, who did you see?" There wasn't a single response among the 26 students present that Sunday morning. He replied, "People may not remember *who* you are, but they will remember *what* you did. What is it that you want others to remember about you?" After the lesson, I asked Minister Ben if I could have the students' sticky notes. I searched for Carlos's sticky note reply by matching the handwriting to his journals. His answers were as follows:

1. What do you want to do when you graduate from high school?

   Response: I see myself in the military having a perfect family when I get out.

2. What is your greatest life goal?

   Response: My greatest goal is to accomplish a military career.

3. Who has been your greatest inspiration?

   Response: My parents. (personal communication, November 15, 2010)

Up until this point, Carlos had only written his name and a few scriptures in his journal. Like Pastor Jones had requested, Carlos' decision on a military career meant that he was taking "the pen to write the ending of his own story.[33]"

The *becoming* or process for church literacy practices involved Carlos mentoring younger boys, learning Hebrew names like Methuselah, associating language with culture, serving as an advocate for Mexican friends, and writing his careers goals on a 4x6 post-it note. Yet, Carlos recited rap lyrics when in the mood, tapped out multi-syllabic words, used slang or AAL at random, and found humor in almost anything. Would his behaviors and communications cause him be labeled in school as illiterate before ever writing a sentence? Would his language usage betray his intelligence? Would his association with undocumented citizens mean an additional stereotype would be assigned to his already brown skin?

In many cases, the answer to these questions would be "yes." When pedagogy solely relies on methodology without taking into consideration that students are people, education is reduced to a stagnant, uncaring process (Bartolomé, 1994; Kozol, 1991; Prillaman & Eaker, 1994). Carlos found empowerment in the youth ministry because the leaders reaffirmed his ethnic and spiritual identities while encouraging him to impact the world. His learning styles were not labeled as deficient. Instead, he was allowed to differentiate the learning process as long as participation was apparent.

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[33] I am aware that there are many issues at stake for young men of color and early entry into the military, but that is not the focus of my analysis.

Understanding that there is power in language, Carlos assigned a certain label to the use of DAE by young African Americans, even though his own practices betrayed him. Lisa Delpit (2006) discussed the power related to language choices:

> While linguists have long proclaimed that no language variety is intrinsically "better" than another, in a stratified society such as ours, language choices are not neutral. The language associated with the power structure–"Standard English"–is the language of economic success, and all students have the right to schooling that gives them access to that language. (p. 57)

Carlos's ability to switch in and out of various versions of English illustrated his understanding of when using a particular language was appropriate for all contexts. Nevertheless, he still relived incidents from negative interpretations of his physical appearance and uses of certain linguistic practices to justify his identities. His ill feelings toward school were evident as he had been identified as one of the "loud Black kids." For the sake of avoiding confrontations, Carlos played the role in order to protect himself.

Today, students are still marginalized because their linguistic practices do not mirror the expectations predetermined by DAE norms. Pressure to assimilate requires that students dismiss what Smitherman (1977) called "cultural distinctiveness," referring to anything that resembles being African American, especially use of what is viewed as sub-standard language (p. 203). When students are made to feel inferior, they literally shut down from learning. Viewed by many as a form of resistance, this shutting down behavior ultimately has dire consequences for the student, not the teacher. Sealey-Ruiz (2005) argued that a "teacher's rejection of Black English and the children who speak it engenders

learning problems" (p. 40). In Chapter 5, I will elaborate further on resistance literacy practices observed in the study participants.

Carlos is fortunate because he has a space that allows him to thrive. The Mt. Olive youth ministry, though upholding the church mores that constrain[34] some identities, permits his racial identities, interests, and needs to emerge in response to exclusions within the dominant culture. His familiarity with the D-identities gained him access within this affinity group. In this chronotopic counterpublic, students like Carlos experience the becoming of literacy and feel empowered to write life goals.

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[34] I will take up some of these constraints in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5

RACE AND RESISTANCE

Cynthia: What are your earliest memories of reading?

Aimeé: Reading was hard…in elementary school, I had a teacher who set
levels for us [Black kids], and didn't expect or let us go higher than those
levels. I didn't want to do what she said…it made me want to fight the
little box she put me in and go beyond what she said I should or could do.
So when I got to the next grade, I was reading several grade levels ahead.
I wasn't going to let her take my power, my mind, my intelligence. That's
what I have, and you can't take it from me. Only I can put a limit on that,
you can't put a limit on that. I started getting reading awards. Give me a
book! (personal communication, October 13, 2010)

Aimeé's account of her reading instruction began my conversations with

Mt. Olive participants about social injustices faced in school. My initial purpose

of this study was to observe school literacy practices among African American

students in a church youth program. In chapter 4, I highlighted how countertexts

permitted African American students to view their history without the negative

stereotypes illustrated by the dominant society, which impacted how Teresa,

Douglas, and Carlos constructed ethnic and spiritual identities. As I continued

interviews and conversations with participants, like Aimeé, I began to understand

more deeply race's impact in school literacy instruction. While coding the

interviews, Teresa's reference to school curriculum provided evidence of the

purpose behind family literacy. However, Aimeé's interview responses redirected

my attention to racism and the effects it has had on how the participants perceived

school.

Aimeé's awareness of certain expectations for African American students

was an example of the limitation placed on children in school literacy instruction.

Without any evidence of reading ability or interest, the teacher in Aimeé's story assumed that she was incapable of reading at grade level or above. This indictment of African American students as underachievers is not uncommon (Hillard, 1997; Noguera, 2008), but neither should it continue. However, what I found most intriguing was Aimeé's decision to prove the teacher wrong.

Instead of becoming a victim of the circumstance, she decided "to fight the little box she [the teacher] put me in." Her resistance, the act of refusing to accept limitations, contradicted the myth that African American adolescents lack determination and drive. Aimeé's act of distancing herself from diluted expectations can be characterized as what Luthans et al (2007) defines as resiliency – "when beset by problems and adversity, [she survived by] sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond to attain success" (p. 3). I am fully aware that both resistance and resiliency are filled with complexities. However, this interview with Aimeé led me to question how Mt. Olive participants responded to the effects of race and racism[35].

Like Aimeé, several youth retold accounts of "othering" based, at least in part, on perceptions related to phenotypic features (i.e., skin complexion, body shape, or hair texture), experiences that left them feeling excluded or isolated based on identifiers beyond their control. With the overwhelming disparity between the number of White and African American students who attend schools

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[35] There has been significant work on the achievement as resistance among African American students. For more on this subject see Dorinda J. Carter Andrews' (2009) "The Construction of Black High Achiever Identities in a Predominantly White High School" in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly,* 40(3), pp. 297-317.

in the Phoenix-metro area, Mt. Olive participants were culturally isolated because, in most classes, they were ethnically alone. Therefore, the burden of confronting misconceptions about African Americans from students and school agents has become the norm. In other words, participants had begun to expect the misconceptions as a by-product of attending predominantly White schools. While coding the participants' accounts, I found themes of resistance and resiliency in student responses to racism, as evidenced in group discussions and student work (i.e., narratives, spoken word poetry, sermons, artwork).

Audre Lorde (1992) asserted that racism is the "belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (p. 146). As participant's retold their stories, there were various responses to this right to dominance afforded to their fellow classmates and teachers. For example, Teresa remarked on the exclusion of Blacks and Mexicans from her high school history curriculum. According to her, the implementation of exclusionary textbooks is purposed to filter American history as the celebration of White achievement. Later, as the speaker for a Youth Day service, she encouraged Mt. Olive youth to "resist the dehumanization of slavery by taking advantage of reading and doing your homework." Henry Giroux (1983a, 1983b) asserted that resistance is evidenced when adolescents critique social oppression and become motivated by a desire for social justice. More specifically, for African American females, resistance is freedom from hegemonic representations. According to Robinson and Ward (1991), liberation resistance is "resistance in which Black girls and women are encouraged to acknowledge the problems of, and to demand

change in, an environment that oppresses them" (p. 89). Reflecting on the student-produced works, I noticed an intersection between their recognition of racism and various actions to speak against it. This is what I call resistance literacy, because students used writing and reading to oppose othering and racial injustice. Critical race theory (CRT) justifies the necessity of exploring the ideology of race at work in current U. S. culture. In this chapter, I use counter-storytelling, a necessary tenet of CRT to examine Mt. Olive participants' struggles with racism, incorporating samples of their writings and/or artwork.

Understanding that race permeates public schools, just as it does other societal institutions, Ladson-Billing and Tate (1995) brought the issue to educational research.

> [Critical Race Theorist] argued that race continues to be salient in American society, that the nation was premised on property rights rather than human rights, and that the intersection of race and property could serve as a powerful analytical tool for explaining social and educational inequalities (Ladson-Billing, 1999, p. 215).

Mt. Olive participants' struggles are not all together new. However, I question whether the reoccurrence of racism, either subliminal or overt, has made school agents desensitized to how it affects students. Arizona's ratification of the ban on ethnic studies in public schools expunges teaching cultural history that promotes the overthrow of the U.S. government or resentment towards a race or class of people. Critical race theory requires that we question the intentions behind this Arizona law. Who decides what is considered a threat to the government or resentment against Whites? Why does the law seek to alter a history of White supremacy found among marginalized groups? How can the same law that bans

teaching cultural history, support grouping students according to academic

performance? For many Arizonians, the ban on ethnic studies is just an additional

mark on the long list of social injustices targeting the Latino/a population residing

in Arizona. However, the rippling effect of discrimination does not know

ethnicity. This law affects all children of color who may have benefited from

such culturally grounded instruction.

For the remainder of this chapter, I employ counter-storytelling to share

participant narratives exposing racism while humanizing them (Delgado, 1989).

The founder of CRT, Derrick Bell (1992) in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The*

Permanence of Race argued how race continues to dominate society:

> I truly believe that analysis of legal developments through fiction,
> personal experience, and the stories of people on the bottom illustrate how
> race and racism continue to dominate our society…this writing is not
> some idle vogue. Nor are we willfully confrontational. Rather, we feel
> we must understand so as better to oppose the dire forces that are literally
> destroying the many people who share our racial heritage. (pp. 144-146)

Counter-storytelling uses stories to reveal people "whose voice and perspective–

whose consciousness–has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized"

(Delgado, 1989). Spending time within the church youth group community, I

became more aware of how participants benefited from the chronotopic

counterpublic as a place for them to build a "counter-reality" (Delgado, 1989).

Within this space, they discussed and responded to various master narratives

depicting them as deficient. My study findings reveal how African American

students respond to assigned racial identities while striving to construct identities

that celebrate their heritage. The church youth group has provided Mt. Olive

participants a space to become familiar with a voice that has been hidden, even to some of them.

"Fighting the Little Box": Resistance Literacy

While conducting an ethnographic study among any group of people for any given amount of time, a participant observer becomes familiar with the group's language. Within the church discourse community, one must be able to apply symbolic representations of faith to everyday life. While I am familiar with African American church linguistic vernacular from my personal participation in other churches, this study required an application of spiritual epistemologies, ways of knowing and validating knowledge in the context of the faith community. Applying an alternative epistemology to study African-American women, Collins (2000) affirmed "experience as a criterion of meaning" (Lived Experience as a Criterion of Meaning section, para. 5).

Prior to my study, I examined numerous church bulletins, especially the ornate ones printed on holidays to attract lost souls who attended as CME[36] members. Printed on the cover of Mt. Olive's December 2010 Advent church bulletin was the statement "A child shall lead them." Highlighted in italics, this statement was placed under the manger scene of the Christ as a babe wrapped in swaddling clothing accompanied by his parents and the wise men. The statement relates to the divine power of a child, or the Christ, to lead believers to something greater. The words and illustration helped me contextualize how I was being led

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[36] CME members are parishioners who attend church only during the seasons of Christmas, Mother's Day, and Easter. This label is a way to point out their irregular attendance practices.

by an eighth-grade child. I had reread Aimeé's words that described her reading experiences at least a hundred times. I had even listened to that section of our recorded interview over and over again. My continued review of her comments was indicative of my assumption that I would learn something from Mt. Olive participants that would assist with literacy instruction. However, I never expected to have four words—"fighting the little box"—play such a significant role in my research.

Aimeé's articulation of "fighting the little box" reminded me of other participants who must fight obstacles of race that attempt to distract, discredit, demonize, and devalue them as people. That little box was different for each participant. Nevertheless, the intentions were the same. The box, according to Aimeé, was little—too small to include her ethnic and spiritual identities—so it refers only to racial stereotypes. I cannot ignore or minimize the setbacks faced by Aimeé and the other participants prior to realizing their literacy potential. For some, this was a slow and painful process. Instead, I captured how participants' literacy practices developed in the process of learning to make sense of racial identities.

Taking up Minister Ben's challenge to use their voices as weapons against injustice, the youth responded by forging identities as artists, writers, orators, and spoken-word artists. He helped participants make sense of their own realities by asking them to share their experiences and views with the group and larger congregation during youth-led events. Minister Ben never told students what to write about; instead, he encouraged them to use previously harbored hurt, pain,

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and resentment to speak. I term the works in this section "resistance literacy"

because they are expressions of language inspired by youth struggles with race

that lead to them to become activists. As members of a faith community,

participants are taught to find methods to deal with antagonism nonviolently.

Therefore, impulses to retaliate are redirected to creative expressions, especially

as youth learn to deal with anger and frustration. In the following counter-stories,

youth scripts provide a snapshot of the students' identities as activists who shared

their experiences for the purpose of helping others. Like Aimeé, each participant

learned to resist little boxes that contribute to the walls of social complacency,

thus legitimizing racism within our society. I view the stories as countertext

because they are used to teach youth something about themselves as well as the

world in which they live.

Teresa's Story: The Little Box of Filtered History and Iconic Beauty

Teresa's grandmother had not missed the mark. Her prophetic utterance

that school would not teach her granddaughter African American history was

correct. While it appeared in some ways that Teresa had learned to compensate

for this, she often alluded to it in our conversations. She lamented about

awakening to race after moving to Arizona from Maryland. Completing her last

two years of high school in the southwest was a very different experience for her.

From the perspective of a first-year college student, Teresa was troubled by

Arizona's laws. As a child of bi-racial heritage, Teresa had learned to accept her

African American and Mexican heritages and celebrate her Blackness with her

hair. I quote Teresa at length in the following interview excerpt because her

experiences represent the interrelationship between marginalized students and the

present conditions in many Arizona public schools.

> It wasn't until I moved to Arizona that I went to a school that you had to be Black, White, or Mexican. I have gone to schools with so many more cultures. I felt culture shocked when I came to Arizona because I felt like that I could only see those three faces. Church helped a little bit because you get to know people who attend. You get to learn about other people and their culture without being judgmental. Church does that for the youth because you get to know people without worrying about their skin color or how poor or rich they are. And you just get to learn about them in a safe environment...Like I have had people ask me about my hair because it's not straight, but I didn't mind. I love being natural. It makes me feel beautiful. I don't have to put stuff in it to make it straight. My hair is good the way it is. Even some Black people don't understand that, but it's okay. But the laws here are crazy…you can carry a gun in public and that's okay, but you want to run people home that have been here since birth….I am angry by SB1070 and the law to stop teaching kids their culture in school. Most of the history we learn is about Caucasian people, so you don't even know where your roots started, unless you learn it outside of school, because it is not given to you in school. You don't learn this as a kid in elementary school or anywhere. One thing I learned in the Langston Hughes project is that we are not being rooted in our culture. No one is sitting down and teaching us and saying this is what happened in the past. This is why you should take a stand for who you are as a person. I think this is how SB1070 came about—no one knows their culture. Hispanic people have done a lot for this country, just as other cultures that have contributed to what America is today. But no one wants them to know that. It seems like their work keeps getting turned for the bad, and it becomes a White thing, as if White Americans are the only people who built up this country. People that you made slaves and the people that you are trying to send out of this country are the ones who built it up. It makes me angry. (personal communication, January 15, 2010)

Teresa's culture shock with race in the Phoenix-metro area is not

uncommon. According to historian, Matthew C. Whitaker (2003), most

newcomers rely on the "celebrated Western poetry, novels, and films" as

indications that living in Phoenix will allow them "to enjoy freedom from racial

tensions and antagonisms of more densely populated cities" (p. 135). On the

contrary, Teresa remembered how school agents highlighted race as a descriptor

since one had to be "Black, White or Mexican," thus illustrating the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992). Her remarks of being aware of three faces may in some way indict public schools in the southwest for perpetuating a racial hierarchal structure with White on the top and Brown or Black on the bottom, depending upon the situation. This, too, is problematic because it excludes other ethnicities as members of the larger society.

By referencing the church as a place that "helped a bit," Teresa validated its usefulness in her life. She did not reference it as just a faith community, but rather as a "safe environment," permitting all races to come together. While Mt. Olive is predominantly African American, one cannot assume that everyone shares the same cultural practices. For example, Teresa mentioned her view about hair. In Chapter 4, I detailed the tensions between Teresa and her mother related to the "going natural" process with her hair. Her mother's view about hair was shared by other women who attended Mt. Olive church. This reinforces the notion of processed straight hair as an acceptable image of female beauty. Media attention to African American women's hair texture hit mainstream after comments of syndicated talk show host, Don Imus called the Rutgers women's basketball players "nappy-headed hos" (Faber, 2007). Within the last year, Sesame Street writer, Joey Mazzarino dedicated a song to his adopted Ethiopian daughter. Her desire for long, blonde hair inspired Mazzarino to create a brown Muppet singing, "I really, really, really love my hair" (Davis & Hopper, 2010). Nevertheless, within the church community predominantly attended by African American women, Teresa has been questioned about her decision to go natural

with her hair. For African American women, major facets of beauty are associated with the texture of one's hair, denoting an essential element in "constructing hierarchies of femininity" (Collins, 2004, Women and Hegemonic Femininity, para. 5). Ideas about "good hair" and "bad hair" have plagued the "psyche of African American women" for centuries (Banks as cited in Collins, 2004). The distinction for good hair is interpreted as long and straight, while bad hair is short and kinky. This validation of hair has grown to iconic proportions as the current marketplace industry for African American hair care products, including relaxers and weave extensions, grosses billions of dollars annually (Walker, 2008).

Teresa's quest to not be objectified as the image of beauty celebrated by many African American women was a lonely one. Yet, she maintained that her choice was to be natural. A desire to love her own hair, instead of the chemically-treated hair of most Mt. Olive parishioners, exemplifies Teresa's resistance of the little box of iconic beauty. By making a conscious choice to resist the norms in an African American church, Teresa chose a path to embrace her own identities. I am not suggesting that she is alone in this journey, as I witnessed younger girls inquiring about her hair because they were interested in following Teresa's example.

All of Teresa's emotional responses about race contribute to an expression of anger toward Arizona's laws. First, she critiqued the social oppression that is instituted by public schools. Examining her response to a filtered American history, I noted the "subordination of people of color" as demonstrated by

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educators' minimal attempts to teach the history of marginalized groups in comparison to that of the dominant culture (Crensha, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Teresa believed the absence of history for Mexicans and Blacks is the reason discriminatory laws can be passed. For her, excluding the marginalized groups' contributions as significant to building this country means upholding a White only presence in American history.

Teresa's comments referenced the ideology of racism evidenced in the master narrative. Carmen Montecinos (1995) asserted:

> A master narrative essentializes and wipes out the complexities and richness of a groups culture…A monovocal account will engender not only stereotyping but also curricular choices that result in representation in which fellow members of a group cannot recognize themselves. (p. 293)

The curricular choices in Teresa's account perpetuated the ideology of racism present in the larger society. Whiteness remained a category of privilege as it is the only history that Teresa encountered in school. By filtering out the complexities and richness of Blacks and Latinos, students are left with a diluted American history that does not equally represent the contributions of all Americans.

Two weeks after my interview with Teresa, Minister Ben sent me a text message asking for her phone number. Before I sent it to him, I replied, "What's up?" He responded by asking if I thought she would be a good speaker for the upcoming Youth Sunday. I replied, "Yes, of course!" and I sent her phone number. Speaking for the Youth Sunday service required that Teresa write out a sermon manuscript. Using her journal from youth group make this an easy task. She copied several scriptures from Minister Ben's lesson as a part of her self-

reflections while preparing for her audience—the entire church congregation,

including the youth from her teenager Bible study class. This speaking

opportunity was to be her first time in the pulpit, a place within Mt. Olive that is

designated for clergy.

Held only on fifth Sundays, all church members meet in the main

sanctuary for Youth Sunday. The service is led by young people in an effort to

train them in how to conduct church worship. Minister Ben introduces each

young person prior to his or her part on the program. As the time for the sermon

approached, Pastor Jones decided to introduce Teresa. He remarked about her

dedication and commitment to the youth ministry. As she walked to the podium,

the audience stood and clapped welcoming Teresa to the pulpit. Standing there,

she placed her notebook down and began to read her manuscript.

As is customary with preaching in the African American church, members

responded to Teresa with comments. Traditionally, call and response is a method

to include the audience as partakers in the sermon.[37] Her confidence appeared to

soar as the congregation affirmed her message, which was entitled, "God Catches

Our Grenades of Sin." Teresa focused her comments on how God's love is

triumph in all situations. She made the point that even life's unpleasant

circumstances are used for our good. Providing listeners with an example, she

commented on slavery and education.

> Teresa: Now, I am taking a course in African American literatures, and we
> are talking about slavery. And because we are human, and we make

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[37] To learn more about the history of call and response in the African
American church, see Smitherman's (1977) *Talkin and Testifyin.*

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mistakes, we can be very ignorant at times. We forget that knowledge is power!

The Congregation: Alright, alright. Amen. Speak.

Teresa: I'm speaking to the young people. When you go to school and you get homework, do it. Learn all you can. And if *they* don't teach you what you want to know look for it on your own [emphasis added].

The Congregation: Amen, yes, ma'am!

Teresa: My teacher had us go Langston Hughes project. I wish I could have taken everyone in this room! We have got be more grounded in our roots, our history. Know who you are! That is why masters didn't want the slaves to read. Fearing that they would figure out what was being done to them. We have got to read!

The Congregation [clapping and standing]: Alright, alright Amen! That's it Teresa! Go 'head girl! (personal communication, January 31, 2011)

Taking on the role of an activist, Teresa encouraged the congregation to learn their history as African Americans. Insisting that "knowledge is power," she challenged young people to read. As African Americans can now attend schools with Whites, the threat is no longer on access, but rather equity. Bell (1980) argued that the decision behind *Brown v. Board of Education* was made without "altering the status" of Whites (p. 522). Now that students are in the same school and classroom, what goes into curriculum decisions? Who decides what works to include? Teresa attested to a history curriculum that includes African Americans as subordinates enslaved by Whites. Bell (1980) claimed, "The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (p. 523). Known in CRT as "interest convergence," this tenet speaks to issues of a curriculum written only in the interest of White students. Students of color, in this case African Americans,

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remain culturally voiceless in such classrooms. The implied "they" describe

school agents of the dominant race who are responsible for upholding this form of

racism. By recalling the history of slavery and the legacy of illiteracy that kept

the enslaved from learning to read and write, Teresa believed that it is critical for

students to become rooted in their history.

Sean's Story: The Little Box of Racial Rhetoric

Sean's confession of his love of writing became the beginning of our

many conversations. His journal was filled with lines of poetry devoted to topics

on salvation, love, anger, and race. Sean served as the feature editor for the

church newsletter. Along with another young lady, he wrote a column entitled,

"Highlighting Mt. Olive." Sean focused on monthly stories highlighting

members' accomplishments and church events. The newsletter committee met

three times a month after the Sunday teen Bible study. They gathered in an annex

building across from the main parking lot. Their advisor, Deaconess Victoria,

was an advanced placement language teacher at one of the local high schools. At

work in their copy room, you could find young people using laptop computers to

write articles and complete layouts in order to meet their monthly deadlines.

During my first interview with Sean, he expressed a great deal of

enthusiasm for his church family. Over the year, I found that to be a true. He was

an active participant in Minister Ben's rap sessions. Sean admitted to loving the

entire debate process, and he would often play the "devil's advocate" to spice up

youth discussions.

Born in California, Sean moved to Arizona in fifth grade. He mentioned his experience with gifted and talented curriculum.

Cynthia: So how did you like the transition from one state to another?

Sean: Well, I was kinda like really younger so it didn't make me a difference, but the transition was kinda hard. The education system here is really different.

Cynthia: What do you mean when you say different?

Sean: I've always been in gifted, like higher education classes. When I moved here to fifth grade, it was like even more up higher. It was different even though I was in accelerating classes.

Cynthia: In the accelerating classes here, were you the only African American or student of color?

Sean: Mostly yes.

Cynthia: So what was that like?

Sean: I really didn't notice it as much because it was elementary and junior high, I didn't have any problems with it. And then maybe like freshmen year that's when it started to be a problem.

Cynthia: What did you see was the problem?

Sean: They were like saying stuff like, "I've never see a Black person that read so much and stuff like that." And they were like, "You shouldn't be reading all the time and worried about your education." (personal communication, November 10, 2010)

Sean appeared to be uncomfortable with our conversation. His body language changed and he seemed a bit tense, almost as if talking about this experience was a bit hard for him. Since he was in 11th grade, I redirected the interview with questions about his plans after high school.

About a month later, Sean ran up to me at the start of the Wednesday night fellowship and said, "I have got something to tell you!" He shared a story from a class exchange between him and another student. A fellow classmate had walked

into the room, and he was wearing the same shirt as Sean. Jokingly, Sean said, "I hate when someone wears the same shirt as me! I am going to go home and burn this up!" Another male student heard Sean's comments and interjected, "See that's why you all should still be enslaved. We shouldn't have let you out. It's our fault you are free." As Sean repeated these words he appeared to not be bothered. When I asked him what he did, Sean replied, "I just walked away. But that's what we have to put up with" (personal communication, December 15, 2010). At that very moment, Minister Ben asked everyone in the youth group to take their seats in order to begin the Bible study class. Sitting in my normal back row seat, I was mesmerized by the blatant racist rhetoric that Sean encountered at school. How was it that students still spoke like this in the 21st century? I wondered if Sean's apparent frustration with school contributed to the low performance that worried his grandmother.

As a gifted and talented student, Sean began his academic journey in classes designated for accelerated course work. Moving to Arizona, he encountered what he terms as "even more up higher" classes. I cannot address the degree of rigor within the curriculum that was beyond the scope of this study. However, I observed the pressure Sean experienced in feeling unaccepted in high school accelerated classes. Several issues were present. He experienced being a representative for all African Americans. Bearing the weight of the other who defies perceived stereotypes is a burden. His classmates' limited exposure to Black persons meant that their knowledge of African American culture could originate from multiple sources. Additional contributors to the pressure Sean felt

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were evidenced in other verbal exchanges with his classmates. By telling him that he "shouldn't be reading all the time and worried about your [his] education," classmates were minimizing Sean's efforts to further his education, as if he did not need one since he was African American.

Critical race theory consistently articulates the concept of Whiteness as a privilege and property (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Students of the dominant culture expect to be the beneficiaries of accelerated education and academic pursuits. Educational research studies reveal that African American students are not given the same rights to property of knowledge acquisition (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995). When Sean encountered responses from classmates, he was directly confronted by this knowledge acquisition limitation. How can racially marginalized students respond to the position of "other"? Crenshaw (1988) discussed strategies:

> The challenge for Blacks may be to pursue strategies that confront the beliefs held about them by whites. For Blacks, such strategies may take the form of reinforcing some aspects of the dominant ideology in attempts to become participants in the dominant discourse rather than outsiders defined, objectified, and reified by that discourse. (p. 1377)

Crenshaw articulated a challenge that still persists for African American students in this country. Sean's presence in accelerated classes resists the dominant ideology; however, the indirect discriminatory comments cause him pain. He did not remain in the classes beyond his freshmen year of high school. Sean did not have anyone to encourage him to continue the struggle.

The second incident Sean encountered took the form of direct racial rhetoric targeted at him. One of his classmates openly admitted that ending

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slavery was a "fault." Instead of responding, Sean said nothing. How does a

student feel justified to unleash comments sanctioning slavery in 2010? Calmore

(1992) provided an explanation for Whites perceptions of superiority over Blacks:

> As many whites experience competitive advantage and relative prosperity
> over blacks, they are encouraged to believe in an imagined cultural
> superiority that, in turn, reinforces their conviction–like that of nineteenth-
> century missionaries–that our blackness is a condition from which we
> must be liberated. (p. 2131)

The permanence of race was illuminated as Sean seemed to feel helpless against a

student who did not respect him as an equal. He found himself in a situation

wherein not only his race was disrespected, but his rights as a free human were, at

least in word, ignored. In light of Sean's experiences, I am compelled to revisit

the victory of civil rights legislation. What was really won, if African American

students can attend school with the dominant culture but not be respected as

people? By no means, is this an indictment of all students, and Sean's

experiences are only that of one student. Yet, his tragic experiences with White

classmates are enough to begin questioning student interactions.

 Finding faith in his identity as a spiritual being, Sean turned to writing

spoken-word poetry. During our time together, I watched Sean take bad

situations and contextualize them as "fiery trials" or "sufferings" that would only

make him stronger. He shared with me a piece that he wrote about race. He read

this to the congregation during a Youth Day service.

Degrading the Nation

Delusional Superiority, the drowning by oral speech
The racism of nation's worldwide
The sexism and prejudice that ties you down

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The intention of cruelty by mouth or actions

The Degradation of the Nation

This nation was supposedly built on the creation of equals

Everyone is so condensational

The playing of words to denounce you as a race

Why do you try to take my place?

Why can't we live in peace and tranquility?

Life is not fair, but it should be literally.

Unlawful is this deterioration

Why must you do the unacceptable?

Solidify yourself in this commodity!

Because you make this an awful distraught place

Degrading others, "You're so cool!"

Racism, sexism, you act like a mule

What is up with your ideology?

Your internal discord is like a humorless comedy

Unwilling, Am I let to pass?

Your internal battle is a dynamic last

You sadden, anger, and drive people insane

This is what I hate, insecure people

Let us compromise, see my end of the spectrum

What fuels you in this?

You need a lesson…

Relinquish control, abandon your sins

Take punishment for the violations you've done to me

"Go back to the fields," you always say

I say, "Hooray, I don't work today!"

You use sarcasm to down in your own way.

[lines omitted]

This world was not created for you to be God!

Go home learn some manners from your dad

Modify your unconventional policies

Don't dispute your punishment and penalty

Reassess your widespread discrimination

LISTEN I WILL NOT BE IGNORED!

[lines omitted]

Don't you know it will soon be your demise?

Do your work without remiss

Because of your racism you will soon be caught by the crack of a whip.

(personal communication, November 3, 2010)

The above excerpt was taken from Sean's three-page poem. With his

poet's voice, Sean questioned the antagonist's intentions behind racism. He

carefully crafted questions as means of producing an interrogation of racial

injustices. In the process, the effects of racism were revealed in the work.

Ultimately, the speaker relied on God for hope and mercy for those who are racist.

Yet, without repentance and willingness to learn the lesson, God's wrath of

vengeance will be the fate of the antagonist. Demanding to be heard, Sean's plea

is for the antagonist to change, to be human, and to listen. The final outcome for

the sin of racism is death, one that ends in an eternity with the "crack of a whip"

upon the soul of the antagonist. Sean's use of religious imagery allows the reader

to feel his disgust with discriminations. The poem appeals to the readers' sense of

consciousness to treat others as they would want to be treated, which is the most

basic Christian belief.

Sean's voice resounded in the lines of the poem. We feel his agony and

anger, even through there are glimpses of hope that are offered to the antagonist.

He resisted racist ideology by questioning it through his work. Sean realized that his position must be heard, so he read it to the congregation. Like Teresa's sermon, the congregants responded by saying, "Amen, yes, Lord!" However, there was more of a lament than a spark of excitement. Sean's reading of his poem led the congregation to pray for guidance in dealing with racism. During the alter prayer, leaders prayed that young people will find strength in this continued day of crisis.

For many, praying for divine guidance may not appear to be a solution, but in the faith community dependence upon God to intervene in such matters is crucial. Sean's action was celebrated because he chose not to retaliate with violence. He was congratulated after the service by Mt. Olive members for having the courage to hold on to his spiritual beliefs. Their affirmations presented Sean with a victory, even though he may still encounter the same racial remarks again and again.

Douglas's Story: The Little Box of Black Male Stereotypes

> [T]he new racism relies more heavily on the manipulation of ideas within mass media. These new techniques present hegemonic ideologies that claim that racism is over. They work to obscure the racism that does exist, and they undercut antiracist protest…Black youth are at risk, and in many places, they have become identified as problems to their nation, to their local environments, to Black communities, and to themselves. (Collins, 2004, Recognizing the New Racism, para. 3)

Douglas's parents have been an integral part of his knowledge of African American history. They made sure that he attended a private elementary school that celebrated his cultural heritage, while affirming that his presence in society was his privilege and right. Middle-class African American families who provide

their children with a well-rounded education may find that a new racism has replaced the Jim Crow signs of "colored" and "Whites only." Collins (2004) described this new racism as a process that delivers racist ideologies through the media. The hidden agenda remains the same as the racism that prevailed before the Civil Rights Movement. For the most part victims of this new racism are not even aware that it happens until it is too late.

In Chapter 4, I mentioned Douglas's response to Minister Ben's reading statistics on African American youth, which caused him to become very vocal during a Wednesday night session. After that incident, he and I met to talk about his responses. Douglas mentioned stereotypes and race, but appeared to have his experiences with both of them under control. He made me aware of his goal to be a public servant or politician and he even discussed the legacy of President John F. Kennedy as "America's greatest president." Over the next few months, we communicated through FaceBook and email. I helped him edit and revise a few college entrance essays.

One Sunday morning, I noticed that Douglas's neat little afro had been transformed into tiny little twists all over his head. When we got back to the fellowship hall, I pointed to his hair and asked, "What's up with that?" He smiled but did not comment. "So are we taking the dreads to D.C.," I asked. Douglas replied with an odd look, "We need to talk about that." Our exchange originated from my mere observation of his new hair style. However, after I saw the seriousness in his face when he requested that we talk, I realized that there was a story behind this move to begin dreadlocks.

The Douglas that I had previously met in his school library was confident and comfortable with everyone. Reflecting on the several college essays he wrote, I was reminded of his goal to help people who could not help themselves. Yet, the same confidence, comfort, and zeal for serving others was not present in his response to my comments about his hair before the youth group session began. I followed up by email to set up a meeting with Douglas, but he did not respond to my first message. I just waited, not wanting to pressure him into talking. A few weeks later, we met in the fellowship hall and Douglas explained that he started to reply to my email but figured he would see me at church. Early in the week, I had stopped by his parent's house for an interview.

I was greeted at the door by his father. Walking to the kitchen, Douglas and Mrs. Alexander were making some hot tea. We sat at the table across from the fire place and the Miami Heat and New York Knicks game on the television. Holding an interview with Lebron James and Amare Stoudemire within hearing distance was more of a distraction for me than him. Douglas obviously had something on his mind, so I took out my tape recorder and clicked the record button.

Cynthia: So tell me about the dreadlocks.

Douglas: I started out with the fro and then I just started twisting it. Then I researched where that style of hair came from. I kind of felt like I was connected a lot to my past and stuff like that…As it begins to grow and grow the intelligence of my past and my ancestors began to grow and grow. I really like it; it's been a fun process.

Cynthia: What do you mean by the intelligence of my past and my ancestors?

Douglas: My knowledge and what I know and learning that their hair did not include chemicals. It was natural you just twist it up and it's your hair…natural. It can grow and grow and grow. Dependence of chemicals is like dependence on the master.

Cynthia: So it seems like you think you can pull away from what others think you ought to be?

Douglas: Another thing that I [had] to come to terms with is stereotypes of individuals that do have dreaded up hair. That was a challenge for me because I am not a, I'm not going into a free flowing profession like art or kind of like that, I am going into a political science field. So I know that my days are numbered with this. It probably won't flow in government with having dreaded hair. Image is a lot and though we don't want to face the music, it is unfortunate because I can trace my hair to many different cultures like Rastafarians and Bob Marley. He has been a real inspirational person to me and in his songs there was a history. He spoke out against "the man," but he was not radical like saying you White devils. Instead, he wanted us to get to know our roots and believe in rights for our people. Knowing that we needed to face it…I just admire the fact that he knew how to bring people together through his music and it worked really effectively. He got the message out and I really admire him for that. (personal communication, December 28, 2010)

In the days following this interview with Douglas, I kept thinking about his comments. In our initial conversations, he alluded to stereotypes, but he appeared to have them under control. After this dialogue, I began to understand that despite all the attempts to build his self esteem, racist stereotypes were still piercing for him. As a child, he was always taught about his roots, but as a teenager, he has struggling to apply what he learned from his parents and extended family networks. He began to identify with Bob Marley as an activist who used his music to rally audiences into an awareness of the social injustices within their country.

Douglas realized that his future profession has an expectation for hair. He began to think about the end of his journey with ethnic pride and celebration.

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Revisiting Collin's (2004) view of new racism, I found it peculiar that Douglas knew quite well that the dominant ideology was what is acceptable in his choice of profession. If Douglas were to protest about his right to maintain his dreadlocks, his actions would be perceived as undercutting established grooming and attire standards. Therefore, society's objection to Douglas's hair would not be considered discrimination against him as an African American; instead, it would be masked under the guise of professionalism. Very few people would connect this issue to racism; even most African Americans would view standards about hair as an issue of professionalism.

Calmore (1992) described how CRT "challenges the universality of white experience/judgment as the authoritative standard that binds people of color and normatively measures, directs, controls, and regulates the terms of proper thought, expression, presentation, and behavior" (p. 2161). How many African American males are trapped in the little box of stereotypes because they refuse to assimilate dominant ideas on what is proper? This type of manipulation of ideas for expectations governs who can be employed in certain professions, thus giving additional control to Whites who set up directives for behaviors as a subliminal tactic to keep marginalized groups from obtaining employment in designated fields. Yet, African Americans have internalized the ways in which the dominant society expects them to look and act, as with hair and language. It is part of what Smitherman (1977) calls the "push-pull" dynamic. Learning to "look the part" creates a barrier for African Americans who feel that they should be accepted for

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intelligence and character, not hair and skin complexion. Douglas was at a crossroad because he was beginning to think about the entire concept of racism.

After this conversation with Douglas, I understood how his desire to be a servant of the people was his way of becoming an activist. After reflecting more on the most recent college admissions essay that he asked me to edit, I was able to make sense of what Douglas was articulating in a particular paragraph.

> In order to provide these basic human rights and ensure their survival in this generation, *individuals must rise to the challenge of being guardian and protector.* All humans on this planet have the right to make their own decisions and have their own opinions. This creates a diversified planet that *guarantees the expression and ideas of all groups and ethnicities* to ensure that people will not be omitted the right of freedom and prosperity [emphasis added]. (personal communication, January, 8, 2011)

With a willingness to rise to the challenge, Douglas recognized the responsibility of being a guardian and protector for marginalized people. He articulated an understanding that rights are not automatically granted for people. Dedication and commitment to the challenges are required. All ethnicities should have the freedom to express ideas. Douglas's plan to fight the little box of Black male stereotypes required that he first resist them. The change in his hair style was the beginning of that resistance. Douglas was willing to sacrifice his hair to win the war against dominant culture norms. He was looking down the road at the battles that must be waged for all groups and ethnicities to have equal rights.

Aimee's Story: The Little Box of Other's Expectations

I began this chapter describing Aimeé's early reading experiences. Her identity negotiation included both ethnicity and spirituality while resisting racial stereotypes. Her episode with an elementary reading teacher was just the

beginning of her journey to fight against the little box of other's expectations. As

a junior high student, Aimeé found that the attitudes of some teachers were also

held by some students. She referred to fitting in with her African American

friends, but had compassion for her bi-racial friend. With a White mother and an

African American father, Kylie must deal with "the best and the worst of both

worlds, because in one way she is a part, but in another way she is not," remarked

Aimeé (personal communication, October 14, 2010). Aimeé seemed greatly

disturbed by her friend Kylie's challenges. Unlike the other participants who

found a divide between White and African American, she began to think about the

intersectionality of race here in Arizona, as several of her friends were bi-racial.

Aimeé wrote about her concerns for Kylie:

> I wrote this piece called "Black and White Walls." It is about how you
> treat a person inside of school and how you treat them outside of school or
> just in public. There is a line that I say, "We're different, but it's not okay
> for you that we are, so I just keep walking, walking away to a new place."
> The Caucasian people give us a set of rules that if we don't comply,
> something is wrong with us, not them. We are loud to keep them out.
> I've seen Kylie get caught in the middle, like trapped between the Black
> and White Walls. Because her mother's friends have daughters who are
> not mixed that go to our school, but they don't hang out with Kylie at
> school. And she says they are her friends. The whole thing is a trip!
> (personal communication, October 15, 2010)

Aimeé's concern for her friend was sincere. Seeing how Kylie was treated

bothered her. She came to understand the difference between herself and White

students, but claimed that they can't handle it. Her reference to a set of rules

reflected the constraints of the little box of other's expectations. In some regards,

Aimeé acted like Kylie's protector, but she found this role difficult because

"Kylie says they are her friends."

Watching Aimeé interact with other participants at Mt. Olive was quite interesting. She didn't comment much during Minister Ben's rap session. While he was talking, she sketched in her journal. One Sunday, I asked her permission to look at some of the pencil drawings. She replied, "Oh this is nothing; you should see my sketchbook." At the beginning of the next Wednesday night teen Bible study, Aimeé handed her sketch pad to me. Glad that she remembered, I was amazed by the collection of nature scenes and architectural details of buildings. There were very few people images in her portfolio. However, I came across one that caught my attention (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Aimeé's Pencil Drawing

Seeing the two men in one picture, I asked Aimée what it meant. She provided a thoughtful explanation of the sketched image:

> It's like the voice inside of me. Even though I hear what people say about us, I know who I am inside. No one can change that. I don't have to sound a certain way to be Black. I am Black. This is not a show; this is the real me. (personal communication, October 27, 2010)

Attempting to penetrate the barriers of racism was a challenge for Aimeé, as it is for many other African American females who resist being reduced to other's expectations.

All of the study participants have forged identities that celebrate ethnicity, while defending it at the same time. Aimeé's sketch of twoness particularly brings DuBois's (1903) theory of double consciousness to the forefront. Before finishing junior high school, Aimeé was already aware of how some members of the dominant society may visualize her through the lens of racialized objectification. Her ability to embrace such a tough reality at a young age was remarkable. But, as I have seen with Aimeé over the past year, there are highs and lows. At times she can handle the difficult reality by referring to her inner self, as truth, a part of that *No one can change*. For most of the students, this inner self is a combined concept of their ethnicity and their spirituality. Believing in their relationship with God, students maintain faith in a higher power to remedy many of these situations. Yet, there have been times when a parent, like Aimeé's father, has asked me to talk with their daughters because they noticed that behind the tough exterior was a scared little girl who still had a lot of unresolved questions about race and gender.

During Mt. Olive's annual youth conference, there is a night called "Bring the Noise." The aim of this event is to encourage young people to introduce their original raps, skits, and spoken word poetry to an audience of youth from around the surrounding community. While some adult members of the church do attend, the event is geared toward the youth. After viewing Aimeé's sketchbook and other students' work of art, I asked Minister Ben to use the walls of the fellowship hall as an art gallery. Students will have the opportunity to display their original pieces of work after they have been matted and framed. Because of her enthusiasm about her art work, I encouraged Aimeé to lead the effort in April 2011.

Within Aimeé's work, I have found an emerging voice of resistance that needs continuous nurturing and cultivation. She is beginning to think about race in ways that can be transformative for her and the people who hear her speak through art. Her concern about Kylie is genuine. As a friend, she does not want her to be manipulated or hurt. Aimeé's insistence to fight the little box was my inspiration in writing this chapter. Listening to the narratives of each participant, I have come to think of the many voices that go unheard in our classrooms. How are students of color dealing with race? What is it that we can do as teachers to encourage racial tolerance among our students? How can we give the voiceless permission to speak?

The voices in this section are pure. Each Mt. Olive participant offered their experiences with racial injustice. As a listener, I felt privileged to witness them unraveling the hurts and frustrations that could have isolated them forever.

Instead of remaining silent, Teresa, Sean, Douglas, and Aimeé began confronting the issues that caused them pain. As they each began to recognize and resist the "little boxes" in their lives, literacy became a prescription for healing the internal scars of rejection. Through their writing and artwork, these students began to speak.

Chapter 6

FANNING THE FLAMES

When I began my study with Mt. Olive Fellowship Church, it was my intention to learn from the lived experiences of African American adolescents who attended multi-ethnic schools. My aim was to investigate how student participants forged ethnic and spiritual identities within Phoenix's small and scattered African American population. The mid-week and Sunday morning teenager Bible classes exceeded my expectations. I expected to see adolescents reading the scriptures and maybe even reciting speeches during Easter or Christmas. What I didn't expect to see were emerging activists learning to critically think and respond to social justice issues like race or gender.

Conceptualizing the church as chronotopic counterpublic, I have come to understand adolescents' need for a safe space that reaffirms them as human beings. Each student who enters our classrooms has a story to tell. The plot for these narratives of lived experiences includes settings within their neighbors and communities. In Arizona, increasing racial tensions have recently been observed in legislation threatening to send undocumented citizens away from their homes and laws forbidding ethnic studies, based on irrational claims that such studies undermine national unity. There is much to be said about educational policies created to save funds on the backs of marginalization and discrimination. Our students live in a world that still uses race as a disclaimer for injustice. In order to prepare students to become critical thinkers in the 21st century, their knowledge

should include realities that they will confront in the community, thus validating their lived experiences.

Teachers of literacy are committed to helping students become aware of their voice and gain the tools to communicate that voice to audiences. Finding ways to assist students with making meaning of their lives begins with respecting their experiences. Encouraging them to chronicle events as writers is one way to affirm their view of the world. During my career as an educator, when preparing teaching units, I intentionally sought extra materials to enhance instruction. If there was an article or clip from a movie, I would add it to my lesson plan. Coming to know the Mt. Olive youth, I realized that I may have overlooked the camouflaged jewels of experience–my students. It is time to revise literacy instruction to include the students' lived experiences, which are often ignored when educators uphold myths that school is no place for students' home literacies. While there is a decade old movement in literacy education that supports this, (Kinloch, 2005; Fisher, 2005; Kirkland, 2008; Paris, 2010), this practice has not taken hold in Arizona. For African American students, the stakes are higher and different.

Perhaps, none of our students will write sermons like Teresa, but the purpose of writing to inspire an audience to action is always a fundamental part of literacy instruction. While many scholars have focused on non-school literacy practices, I now realize the importance of keeping the conversation going to include family and church literacy practices. As we say in the South, I am just

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"fanning the flames" by adding an additional lens to further legitimize community literacy practices as a necessity for literacy instruction.

There are several implications of my work at Mt. Olive that can enhance teacher education, pedagogy, and curriculum. Within the sections of this dissertation, I have contextualized how African American students in a church youth group learn outside of school. Based on the work of various educational researchers and theorists who have developed approaches to reach culturally and linguistically diverse students, I sought to understand students' lived experiences in an effort to bridge the gap between school literacy practices and home literacy practices (Delpit, 2002; Hilliard, 1995; Ladson-Billing, 1995). Relevant to my study were the geographical and political conditions facing African Americans as residents in Arizona. The literature that focuses on African Americans in the urban southwest is limited. Likewise, the current policy climate in Arizona is history in the making. African American students are not the focal group for current studies that involve immigration reform. However, I argue that the effects of social injustice have a rippling effect. Creating laws to ban ethnic studies may be targeted at Latino/a students, but its implementation affects all students of color who would benefit from learning their cultural heritage in school. This law gives school districts permission to exclude various cultures from the classroom instruction.

Considering the long history of discrimination endured by African Americans in this country, I have come to understand how the same institution that claims to educate *all* students has been a place of marginalization. Listening

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to participants and their families, I learned of their ambivalence toward school. Aimeé's father believed that integration was a disservice to African Americans because now schools robbed them of their cultural history. As a researcher, I was challenged in my communications with students and families because many times I felt like a mediator between school and the families. I found myself sharing stories of teachers who really care about students regardless of skin-color.

In this study, I have attempted to capture the tensions that today's African American families feel when they send their children to school. Much of the media projects negative images of African American families as uncaring about their children's education. Yet, the Alexander and Cooper families demonstrated a strong commitment to teaching ethnic heritage within the family network. Feeling that they cannot depend on school curriculum to teach African American culture, they have provided Douglas and Teresa with cultural foundations in the home. The evidence of such family literacy practices is useful to our understanding the lived experiences African American students bring to school.

While tensions do exist, I came to understand that participants just wanted to be included in the curriculum beyond the terrors of slavery and Jim Crow. Sean's battles with race in the classroom were a clear indication that by only teaching a one-sided view of African American culture normalizes the negativities. I believe teaching a one-sided view is worse than teaching no history at all. Instead of students feeling "alienated from school" (Delpit, 2002), they are labeled as inferior. If we continue to write instructional goals that are exclusive,

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ignoring marginalized populations, schools run the risk of larger numbers of unengaged students.

Teachers of literacy can no longer make assumptions that students come to school with the same or similar lived experiences. Literacy instruction will remain stagnant and ineffective if students feel unappreciated or disrespected. My childhood in the rural south is one that includes raising livestock to be sold for food. Even hunting deer was not merely a sport, but a means to provide meat for the winter. For me, having a cow or a pig as a pet was not an option. I knew from the time a piglet or calf was born, my only connection with it would be for survival. Bonding with an animal as a pet was unheard of for livestock. This was my lived experience. Reading a short story that glorifies vegetarianism would be foreign to me. To be quite honest, I did not even know what the acronym PETA[38] stood for when I moved to Virginia in the 1990s to teach. I tell this story for two purposes. First, I have numerous colleagues who would never eat an animal of any sort. They are true vegetarians. I respect them for making such a choice. However, that is a choice for them, not me. I am a carnivore. Meat is the meal. Without it, there is no need to eat. Does this mean that I am violent? Does this mean that I cannot carry on a conversation with my vegetarian colleagues?

Second, I would never invite a vegetarian colleague to lunch without knowing that the restaurant had menu choices fit for their palate. Just my respect for them as co-workers requires that I think of their needs. Why is this type of

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[38] PETA is People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

respect denied for our students and their families who celebrate cultures that differ from the majority?

Reflecting on my year among the families of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church, I have come to understand how important it is for students to feel respected by teachers. How can we teach children without respecting them? Children do not choose to be African American, Latino, White, Italian, or Hungarian, nor do they ask to be wealthy, middle-class, working-poor, or poverty-stricken. Such factors are chosen for them at conception, and they should not dictate how or whether or not we teach them.

My research findings also have specific implications for the way text is used in literacy instruction. I had never considered using older magazines like *Jet* to retell African American History. Yet, Teresa and her grandmother used it as a countertext to resist the dominant practice of ignored African American history. Most students' cultural heritage includes some form of oppression, but that alone should not be what is acknowledged or taught. How can magazine archives be used to teach our students about the world? If students do not have access to them, creating assignments that allow them to dialogue with elders in their families provide very similar information, as in the case of Teresa who never saw the 1964 *Jet* magazine. Dialogue or oral history is underused as a text in literacy instruction. However, this type of text can be obtained by teaching students how to engage in critical discussions with neighbors or relatives. Perhaps it is time to revise how we learn from our students. How can we become informed about what they know? I believe that our students come to school with lived

experiences deserving our respect and understanding, even if it is over time. Learning a new perspective causes us to leave our boxes of routine.

The research on digital literacy with respect to social networking media in the classroom is an emerging area of study.[39] Reflecting on Teresa's quest to take matters into her own hands and speak truth about power, I have come to appreciate her use of social media to chronicle the process of going natural. Facebook was a conduit that allowed her scripted voice to be accessible to at least 579 friends who instantly become her audience. For Teresa, maintaining a crown free from chemical dependency meant celebrating her ethnic identity. Mt. Olive youth have been given the opportunity to think critically about the world as they construct identities as orators, artists, and poets. The youth group validated their experiences. This type of data could infuse our teaching. Even students who are normally quiet still have something to say.

Minister Ben used the students lived experiences to infuse their writing and artwork. As participants learned to respond to racism, instead of remaining angry, they used those experiences to write. This resistance literacy became their way to speak back to the master narratives of deficiency and discrimination. Mt. Olive youth became empowered as they learned to embrace their ethnic and spiritual identities in the face of marginalization and "othering."

Table 3 lists the classroom implications derived from the study findings. This research introduces possibilities for the future in community literacy

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[39] See Christine Greehow's (2010) article, "Online Social Network and Learning" in *On the Horizon*, *19*(1).

practices – the reading and writing of various texts within students' families and communities.

Table 3

Implications for Literacy Instruction

Instructional Areas	Classroom Implications
Students Lived Experiences	Teachers must be aware of the camouflaged jewels of knowledge that sit in their classrooms, their students.
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Textbook Selections	School districts must intentionally incorporate positive aspects of all students' cultural legacy into pedagogy, curriculum and textbook selections.
Writing Pedagogy	Incorporating students lived experiences into modes of instruction will permit them to critically think about ways to use their voices as activist for social justice.
Teacher Education	We must prepare teachers to respect and utilize students lived experiences to enhance literacy instruction.

When I first began the doctoral program, my only goal was to write a dissertation that would help teachers. As a high school English teacher, I had read numerous journal articles that left me feeling more confused about what I thought I knew about education. So I wanted to write a dissertation that I could share with a fellow teacher and say, "Here, this may help." While I believe I have achieved that goal, I also gained something from this study. I don't think I can ever attend another church youth program, Girl Scouts meeting, or YMCA tutoring session

without asking, "How are adolescents practicing literacy in this space?" There is more that we can learn from non-school spaces to enhance the way we teach our students. I have only begun to scratch the surface.

Over the past year, my cluttered desk has made a home for a few new objects. It is the only section of the oak writer's table where the wood detail can be seen. A framed group picture of the Mt. Olive students is placed on the upper-right corner of my desk, next to my computer monitor. Sean's *Degrading the Nation* will forever remain in the protective sleeve slightly to the left of the computer monitor. I have even matted several of Aimeé's pencil sketches. These artifacts all serve as reminders of so many students of color who cannot articulate the effects of race and gender. Through Sean's work, they, too, now have a voice. No longer are their voices hidden in the allusion of civil rights for all. Instead, Sean's spoken word poetry alerted me and others that there is still social justice work to be done. There is still a reason to research, write, and teach.

Future Research

Through my research with the Mt. Olive study participants, I have gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of racism faced by African American adolescents in the 21st century. As Bell (1992) warned racism is permanent. Societal macrostructures perpetuate the myths of inferiority concerning African Americans that exist in our classrooms, leaving students as actors within a situated social interaction. My purpose behind this research has been to share African American student experiences as they learn to navigate and construct identities within this vortex of tensions that predate them.

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Just as Bell (1992) affirmed the permanence of racism, I believe in what I call the *permanence of counterpublics*. Understanding that the dominant society will continue to create new ways to isolate people of color, the need to identify spaces where marginalized groups can create counter-discourses will exist. These counterpublics become a necessity as African Americans search for ways to oppose and resist the dominant society's perception of them as deficient.

Within this study, I conceptualize the African American church as chronotopic counterpublic where adolescents learn to resists racism and become activists who find voice as they write about their lived experiences. For the purposes of this study, the church was a space that encouraged students to oppose the racial stereotypes perpetuated within the dominant society. However, there are limitations to using a church as a lens into adolescent lived experiences. While it allowed Mt. Olive participants to explore some identities, the same institution limits others. Conversations about sexuality, either heterosexual or homosexual, were not encouraged by youth leaders. While these identities existed within the Mt. Olive youth group, they were silenced. Adolescents had to conform to these constraints, if they wanted to participate within this space. The church mores created restraints for study participants.

In my future research, I would like to think about constraints within counterpublics that limit identity construction. Working with African American youth within a church youth group made me aware of restrictions that could be potentially harmful to adolescents in their search for agency. I believe that these

voices are essential if we are to understand and utilize our students lived experiences within these spaces.

The African American church is just one of many counterpublics utilized to "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1992, p. 67). There is a need to analyze the relationship between marginalized adolescents, counterpublics and literacy. In doing so, we can learn more about what students have to offer. While all the scenes or activities from these counterpublics may not be recreated in our classrooms, as teachers we can learn what students need to be supported as they develop tools to communicate through reading and writing.

As my study came to end, the demographics of Mt. Olive Fellowship Church began to change. Latino/a families joined the historically African American church. During a visit to the 4th and 5th grade youth bible study class, I met two girls whose parents grew up in Mexico. However, Giselle and Esmerelda were born in the United States. In February 2011, Giselle walked up to me after a Sunday morning service and handed me a note. It was a sheet of notebook paper folded up like a love letter. On the outside, she wrote, "To You – From Me." Inside the note she had drawn a picture of me and colored my face in with brown crayon. Underneath my image were the words, "Thank you for coming to *our church.*" (personal communication, emphasis added, February 2011) As the tears streamed down my face, I became emotional thinking about how great it was that Giselle called Mt. Olive "our church." For me this meant that she and her family felt as if the church belonged to them, too. Ethnicity had not stopped them from

being a part of this faith community. As I continue my research, I'd like to think more about the occupants of historically African American counterpublics. Giselle's note helped me to realize that these spaces are places where people of color can come together.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Community Center/Church

1. Tell me when you started coming to the community center/church.[40]

2. What do you like about your time at the community center/church? What do you like least?

3. Has it been easy for you to make friends here? Why or why not?

4. If you could change one thing about the community center/church what would it be?

5. Is the way you speak here at the community center different from the way you speak at home or at school? If so, give me an example.

6. Do you act differently at home or at school than you do here?

7. I notice that when you are here, you do X activity. Why does that keep your interest?

8. How does it make you feel to be around so many people who share your ethnicity here at the community center/church?

9. If there is one thing that you could take from the community center/church and plant it in your school, what would it be?

10. Does spending time here prepare you for any other area of your life or future?

Family and Home

11. Where were you born? Do you live in X? If I didn't know anything about X, how would you describe it? Has it changed? Describe your block.

12. Were your parents born here? What brought them here? Have they ever returned to X?

13. Who lives in your homes? What are some of the things you do with your family? With other families? What are some of the jobs you have at home (work, childcare, HW, etc.)?

14. Do you act differently at home than at school? With dad than with mom? Like how? Is this hard?

15. What does your family expect of you? Your father? Your mother? For your future? What do you expect of yourself? What do you think your teachers expect of you?

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[40] These questions are only a sample of the types of questions that were used in student interviews. They were revised as needed to make communication more natural. Additional protocols were developed as deemed appropriate for the study.

16. We've talked about how you speak and act different ways in school and with your friends and at home. How do you know when to do it? Is it difficult? Fun? Is it a good thing to be able to do? Why?

17. How could the community center or church/school/home/friends change to make school better for you?

18. Anything you'd like to add that we didn't cover? Do you have any questions for me?

School

19. Tell me about your school.

20. If there were a new person attending your school, what would be one good thing and one bad thing that you would say about it?

21. What are your earliest memories of reading?

22. Did you like to read in elementary school?

23. What about writing, do you like to write or your own or in school? Tell me about it.

24. How do you communicate with your teachers? What about with your friends?

25. Do you feel like there is a right way to speak or write?

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS: SECOND SET

1. Have you found that your views about the community center or church have changed from our first interview?

2. What do you think now about the way that you speak here, since we first met?

3. How would you feel if your friends said that you "talk" differently?

4. Has language usage ever made you feel empowered?

5. What goes through your mind when you here incorrect grammar here? Has text messaging added or taken away from your communication skills? What about Facebook?

6. If you could tell your teachers anything about the way your talk outside of school, what would it be?

7. Is there anything else about language and/or literacy that you'd like to tell me?

APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

To: Django Paris

From: Mark Roosa, Chair
Soc Beh IRB

Date: 02/08/2010

Committee Action: **Expedited Approval**

Approval Date: 02/08/2010

Review Type: Expedited F7

IRB Protocol #: 1002004768

Study Title: Learning Language Through Community and School

Expiration Date: 02/07/2011

The above-referenced protocol was approved following expedited review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without approval by the Institutional Review Board.

Adverse Reactions: If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Soc Beh IRB immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Soc Beh IRB. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given.

Please retain a copy of this letter with your approved protocol.

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APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXTENSION

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

To:	Django Paris
From:	Mark Roosa, Chair Soc Beh IRB
Date:	01/25/2011
Committee Action:	**Renewal**
Renewal Date:	01/25/2011
Review Type:	Expedited F7
IRB Protocol #:	1002004768
Study Title:	Learning Language Through Community and School
Expiration Date:	01/24/2012

The above-referenced protocol was given renewed approval following Expedited Review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval of ongoing research before the expiration noted above. Please allow sufficient time for reapproval. Research activity of any sort may not continue beyond the expiration date without committee approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol on the expiration date. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study termination.

This approval by the Soc Beh IRB does not replace or supersede any departmental or oversight committee review that may be required by institutional policy.

Adverse Reactions: If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Soc Beh IRB immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Soc Beh IRB. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given.

APPENDIX E

CHURCH INFORMATION LETTER

Arizona State University

Dept of English/English Education
PO Box 870302
Tempe, Arizona 85287-0302

Mt. Olive Fellowship Church
1 Church Street
Alta Vista, Arizona 00000

Dear Pastor:

I am a doctoral student in the Department of English Education in the Division of Curriculum and Instruction – Mary Lou Fulton College of Education at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to learn more about how students obtain literacy skills at home, in school, and in the community.

After spending time in your Youth Church School Class, under the direction of Minister, we began to discuss how students engage in learning. From an education stand point, I am interested how African American students relate in their multi-ethnic school environment much differently than they do community settings, like church. With the supportive pastoral role that you take in the success of Life Fellowship's children, I felt like you would be interested in having a volunteer from the higher education sector be involved with your youth. This would also be an opportunity for me to learn from them and their parents about literacy and language.

I would like to plan out weekly sessions that I can observe and work with your Youth Church School from February 10, 2010 through February 10, 2011. Their participation in this study is voluntary. Any student can choose not to participate, or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Likewise, if a child chooses not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but no child's name will be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to the participants, the possible benefit of the students' participation is to enhance instruction and curriculum in language and literacy for high school students. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to the students' participation.

My observations will be taken in the form of field notes. However, I will assign a pseudonym or false name to ensure that the child's identity is not revealed. I will conduct two interviews where I will ask them about themselves, school work and community involvement. All questions will help me gain information about how they learn and use language. To help me remember what each child says, I will

use a recording device, either audio or visual. However, I will not share the actual recording with anyone, or ever reveal their identity. The student does not have to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but the child's name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or the participation of your Youth Church School in this study, please call or email me at (602) 316-9055 or cynthia.nicholson@asu.edu.   Upon your approval, I will look to discuss dates for participation with your students.

Sincerely,

Cynthia S. Nicholson

APPENDIX F

INFORMATION LETTER: INTERVIEWS

February 2010

Dear Participant:

I am a doctoral student in the Department of English Education in the Division of Curriculum and Instruction – Mary Lou Fulton College of Education at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to learn more about how students obtain literacy skills at home, in school and in the community.

I would like you to participate in a study which will involve observations and interviews from February 10, 2010 through February 10, 2011 at Mt. Olive Fellowship Church.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation is to enhance instruction and curriculum in language and literacy for high school students. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

My observations will be taken in the form of field notes. However, since there are only a few students in the study, I will assign a pseudonym or false name to ensure that their identity and your identity are not revealed. I will conduct two interviews where I will ask you about your community involvement here at Mt. Olive Fellowship Church. All questions will help me gain information about how you learn and use language. I will use a recording device, either audio or visual. The audio and video recordings will only be used to help me write up the study. I do not intend to use them in any presentations. Please let me know if you do wish to be audio and/or video recorded. I will not share the actual recording with anyone, or ever reveal your identity. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me at cynthia.nicholson@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through

the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study.

Sincerely,

Cynthia S. Nicholson

Please sign below for each item that you grant permission.

I give permission to be video- taped during the study.

_____

I give permission to be audio-recorded during the study.

_____

APPENDIX G

PARENTAL LETTER OF PERMISSION

Dear Parent(s):

I am a doctoral student in the Department of English Education in the Division of Curriculum and Instruction – Mary Lou Fulton College of Education at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to learn more about how students obtain literacy skills at home, in school and in the community.

I am inviting your child's participation, which will involve observations and interviews from February 10, 2010 through February 10, 2011. In addition, I'd like to shadow your child at school during the 2010-2011 school year. Once they receive their schedule, I will write a letter to the principal to arrange for a visit in their classroom. The teacher and other students will only know me as a doctoral student from ASU.

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate, or to withdraw your child from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Likewise, if your child chooses not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your child's name will not be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to your child, the possible benefit of your child's participation is to enhance instruction and curriculum in language and literacy for high school students. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your child's participation.

My observations will be taken in the form of field notes. However, since there are only a few students in the study, I will assign a pseudonym or false name to ensure that your child's identity is not revealed. I will conduct two interviews where I will ask your child about themselves, school work and community involvement. All questions will help me gain information about how they learn and use language. To help me remember what you child says, I will use a recording device, either audio or visual. The audio and video recordings will only be used to help me write up the study. I do not intend to use them in any presentations. I will not share the actual recording with anyone, or ever reveal their identity. Your child does not have to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your child's name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your child's participation in this study, please call me at (602) 316-9055

Sincerely,
Cynthia S. Nicholson

By signing below, you are giving consent for your child
_____ (Child's name) to participate in the above study. (Any video or audio recordings will not be used in presentations, published or used in any way that reveals your child's identity. All participants' names will be changed to protect their identity.)

Please initial ALL that apply:

_____ My child may be video- taped during the study.

_____ My child may be audio-recorded during the study.

_____ _____
Signature   Printed Name   Date

If you have any questions about you or your child's rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you or your child have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX H

STUDENT CONSENT FORM

My name is Cynthia Nicholson. I am a doctoral student at Arizona State University.

I am asking you to take part in a research study because I am trying to learn more about how students obtain literacy skills at home, in school and in the community. I want to learn about how students determine when you use certain language concepts. Your parent(s) have given you permission to participate in this study.

If you agree, you will be asked to complete two (2) interviews with me. You will be asked questions about language that let me know how you talk in certain situations. In addition, I will ask about your experiences with instruction in language arts classes. Our interview will be much like a conversation between you and I.

To help me remember what you say, I will us recording device, either audio or visual. The audio and video recordings will only be used to help me write up the study. I do not intend to use them in any presentations. However, I will not share the actual recording with anyone, or ever reveal your identity. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

In addition, I'd like to shadow you at school during the 2010-2011 school year. Once you receive your schedule, I will write a letter to the principal to arrange for a visit in one of your classes. The teacher and other students will only know me as a doctoral student from ASU.

You do not have to be in this study. No one will be mad at you if you decide not to do this study. Even if you start the study, you can stop later if you want. You may ask questions about the study at any time.

If you decide to be in the study I will not tell anyone else how you respond or act as part of the study. Even if your parents or teachers ask, I will not tell them about what you say or do in the study.

Signing here means that you have read this form, or have had it read to you and that you are willing to be in this study.

Participant Signature _____

Participant, please initial ALL that apply:

_____ I do not mind being video- taped during the study.

_____ I do not mind being audio-recorded during the study.

Participant's printed name _____

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Signature of investigator_____

Date_____

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cynthia S. Nicholson has spent 16 years as a high school English teacher in South Carolina and Virginia. Currently, she is the English/Reading Literacy Specialist for Tempe Union High School District in Arizona.

Prior to moving to Arizona to complete her doctorate, Cynthia worked as an Assistant Professor of English and Teacher Education at Chowan University in Murfreesboro, North Carolina. There her community work continued beyond the classroom. Cynthia has been honored by the Eastern Virginia Regional AIDS Coalition for her work with support groups for persons infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. During the 2006-2007 school year, she was selected by the university student body as "Professor of the Year."

Cynthia's greatest contentment comes from spending time with her husband, Lewis Nicholson, and their children Ava, 13, and Gregory, 11