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# A Collaborative Autoethnographic Search for Authenticity Amidst the "Fake Real"

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### **Abstract**

This manuscript explores the importance of "authenticity" for the maintenance self-identity for social justice educators in higher education. A collaborative dialogue between two female faculty authors of different ethnicities explores and interprets how to balance one's own situated understanding of themselves, shared discourse community, and a social justice paradigm. The authors systematically juxtapose their reflections on their experiences as educators in higher education to examine points of similarity and difference. By sharing and interrogating their individual experiences in higher education, the authors argue that the relationship between authenticity, identity, and social justice is complex and multifaceted. The authors conclude by conceptualizing authenticity as a work strategy which plays a vital part in one's search of her/his individual identity.

### **Keywords**

Authenticity, Identity, Social Education, Collaborative Autoethnography

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## A Collaborative Autoethnographic Search for Authenticity Amidst the “Fake Real”

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*This manuscript explores the importance of "authenticity" for the maintenance self-identity for social justice educators in higher education. A collaborative dialogue between two female faculty authors of different ethnicities explores and interprets how to balance one's own situated understanding of themselves, shared discourse community, and a social justice paradigm. The authors systematically juxtapose their reflections on their experiences as educators in higher education to examine points of similarity and difference. By sharing and interrogating their individual experiences in higher education, the authors argue that the relationship between authenticity, identity, and social justice is complex and multifaceted. The authors conclude by conceptualizing authenticity as a work strategy which plays a vital part in one's search of her/his individual identity. Keywords: Authenticity, Identity, Social Education, Collaborative Autoethnography*

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### Introduction

In the summer of 2007, Trenia taught for the first time, *Diversity in Schools and Society*, a required course at my university for the Bachelor of Arts in Education (which included a K-8 teaching credential). The class had a total of 48 students in the class, 47 female students and 1 male. In the course of the semester the students noted that in addition to virtually no gender diversity, there was also no racial or ethnic diversity in the class. Without these “obvious” diversities (which they based almost solely on skin color, first language, and country of origin) to work from, identifying cultural diversity was a bit more of a challenge for them. In fact it required more thinking work than most of them were willing to do as evidenced by their course performances. Perhaps it was because it was a six-week long summer class, or perhaps it was because I looked too much like them to convince them of the importance of “thinking about” diversity. Maybe they had a point. For years Trenia had been teaching students in my Elementary Social Studies Teaching Methods classes to avoid “multicultural” children’s literature if it was written by white female authors. I would tell them that these books were “inauthentic.” However, if they were inauthentic in their presentations of characters and stories, then Trenia, as an instructor in a Diversity class, must also be. Trenia was also an outsider trying to tell the stories of “others.”

This realization brought up a question that I, as a self-professed transformative social educator, had been struggling several years to answer: what does it mean to be authentic? Is authenticity a birthright? Is it automatically granted based on how you identify (or are identified)? Does it require any additional action? Can a person who is not born into authenticity, earn it? Should authenticity, which reifies difference, even be a goal or should we really privilege neutrality and the resultant states of color-blindness, gender-blindness, culture-blindness, and so on? These are Trenia’s questions, the questions of a white, late-middle-aged, mid-middle class, early-mid-career academic. Are these unique to me, those in my demographic? How might a person of color perceive authenticity, how might she describe her own experiences in trying to define it, and how would she interpret my experiences and I interpret hers? Trenia asked Colette, an African American, early-middle-

aged, upper-middle-class, late-early-career faculty colleague these questions. This article identifies and describes their shared journey and dialogic engagement with each other; here they ask their individual questions, consider each other's answers, and tell their stories in a collaborative autoethnography as they search for the meaning of/in authenticity.

### Collaborative Autoethnography

There seems to be no easy or empirical answer to the question, what is authenticity? Indeed the very nature and value of authenticity has been explained by associating it with individual personal identity and one's ability to be true to oneself. A search for the answer to the question of authenticity is further complicated by the fact that authenticity has different meanings to different people; it can even mean different things to one person *at the same time*. These differences result from the lived experiences of people. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) explain that "everything we experience grows out of prior experience and enters into new experience" (p. 318). Narrative, according to Chase (2005), is a way of understanding experience. Dillow (2009) claims that, "narratives form a structure within which to think about our daily lives and about the magic and mess of human possibilities" (p. 1344). Narratives are stories that we tell to make sense of our lives. Dillow (2009) says that using these stories in "research writing can help to evoke drama, urgency, and intense emotion in a way that traditional research reports do not" (p. 1345).

There are several categories of storytelling, for the purposes of this investigation; Colette and Trenia tell their personal stories in a collaborative autoethnography. Like Phillips and her coauthors (2009), Trenia and Colette reflected and wrote individually (as autoethnography) and are collaborative "because we have come to learn that individually written autobiographies are illusionary" (p. 1456). The intent of autoethnography is to link the personal self to the cultural self. Autoethnographies are "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Autoethnography "lets you use yourself to get to culture" (Pelias, 2003, p. 372). Ellis (2004) writes that autoethnography is an "autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness" (p. 37). Dillow (2009) explains that "autoethnography is autobiography that is aware of its position in the world. It shows this awareness by reflexivity" (p. 1345). For Holman Jones (2005) autoethnography reveals "how our personal accounts count" (p. 746).

According to Ellis and Bochner (2006) autoethnography is a research method that uses "stories to do the work of analysis and theorizing" (p. 436). Holman Jones (2005) writes that autoethnography is "setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation . . . and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives" (p. 765). For Dillow (2009), "autoethnography concentrates on the author self as a site for study . . . it creates knowledge by recognizing the links between individuals and cultures and by examining and highlighting those links. It works powerfully on readers because it engenders intimate involvement with people and lives" (p. 1346).

Collaborative autoethnography seemed to come closest in a "goodness of fit test" to determine an appropriate research methodology. As autoethnographers, we grapple with experiences as a practice to "collect the already said, to reassemble that which one could hear or read, and this to an end which is nothing less than the constitution of oneself" (Foucault, 1983, p. 247). A collaborative autoethnography allowed us to consider our stories together to provide a context by which to gain perspective on our search for the meaning of authentic, if not necessarily THE answer, to what is or is not authentic.

## Social Education, Identity, and Performativity in the Simulacrum<sup>1</sup>

A goal of twenty-first century democratic social education is to reconcile the individual as a part of and apart from society. According to Kincheloe (2001), democracy requires a critical consciousness, or understanding of the world, to deconstruct the national(ist) meta-narrative. This meta-narrative is problematic because the central story of both individuals and society in the U.S. is that of western European Christian males. This has marginalized the stories of the “others.” Transformative social educators must work to deconstruct the meta-narrative and begin to construct smaller local narratives to accommodate the stories of everyone, including the “others” (Kincheloe, 2001).

As a K-12 social studies educator and now in higher education, social education has been my goal. In my social studies methods classes, Trenia introduces pre-service teachers to the idea of “others” who exist in the margins, if included at all, of history and culture. One way to link these stories to classroom practice, especially with those who want to teach at the elementary school level, is through children’s literature. Trenia introduces many books in my class, especially those that may be considered multicultural and/or global in nature. As a result, students often ask how to select books for their own classrooms, and Trenia tells them that authenticity should be their primary concern. Of course the inevitable question would ensue: what is authentic children’s literature? Yes, a great question. The response was generally, authentic literature is simply literature written by an authentic author. As an instructor, Trenia was okay if students wrote that down and moved on; however if student asked additional questions, she struggled. Trenia became trapped in the logical fallacy of circular reasoning, conclusion was premise.

Researchers also seem split on how to define authenticity in children’s literature. Some think that lived experiences, that is, spending a great deal of time within a culture, provides an author with a context from which to construct an authentic portrayal of that culture. Sims (1982), who wrote about authenticity in African American children’s literature, describes this as being “culturally conscious.” Culturally conscious literature requires sensitivity on the part of the author to aspects of African American culture and “consciously seeks to depict a fictional Afro-American life experience” (p. 49). Higgins (2002) delineates these life experiences: “characters are African American, it is set in an African American community or home, the story is told from their perspective, and the text describes the ethnicity of the characters in some way” (para. 5). According to Higgins (2002), Sims’ research indicated that differences in the way culture was represented by African American and non-African American authors existed even in culturally conscious books: “the culturally conscious books written by non-African American authors emphasized different aspects of African American life than did African American authors, and the authentic detail in story and illustration was often lacking in those written by non-African Americans” (Higgins, 2002, para. 5).

Concerns remain over authenticity in children’s literature, even those books identified as culturally conscious, if written by an outsider. This has led many researchers to believe that authentic cultural literature must be written by an insider, a member of a group about that same group (Loh, 2006; Gray, 2009; Reese, 2008). Gray (2009) conducted a study of literature selection criteria used by fifth grade students in an urban elementary school. She found that students did notice the ethnicity of characters in books and that was a factor in their literature selection. She also discovered that students thought that there was not much African American literature available because there are few African American writers. She

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<sup>1</sup> From Latin meaning *likeness* or *similarity*. Baudrillard (1994) explains that the real world is no longer understandable as real because reality no longer exists. Determining authenticity in the simulacrum is difficult if not impossible because the concept of authenticity requires a comparison to reality.

includes a journal entry by Antawan, an African American student who participated in the study: "Black people want to get into basketball or football not no writing books. If they want to write books they can but they don't. I'm thinking about being a basketball or football player too. I guess it's just in our blood or something. White people probably want to be a writer. I guess that's in their blood too. That's why there are not many black people today writing" (Gray, 2009, p. 480). Gray (2009) uses the statements by Antawan and other African American students in her study as evidence to make the point that teachers must make "African American literature, especially literature written by African American authors, more prominent in their classroom libraries" (p. 480).

Loh (2006) and Reese (2008) both raised the same authenticity issues that Gray (2009) did about Asian and Native American author ethnicities. Loh (2006) argues the need for cultural authenticity in Asian American children's literature, stating that while Asian Americans share issues with other ethnic groups, their overall experience is unique and must be validated. According to Loh (2006), the topics most books related to the Asian American experience center on the topics of Chinese New Year, the California Gold Rush, or the transcontinental railroad. In fiction, Dowd (1992) writes that Asian characters are often stereotypes. Men are portrayed as smiling and polite, proficient in martial arts, wise and all-knowing, or devious. Asian women are either dolls or Dragon Ladies. For Loh (2006) these stereotyped portrayals lead to a misconception that Asian Americans are always "foreigners." An authentic portrayal of Asian American experience, Loh (2006) writes, requires an insider's perspective, "for how can one produce a recognizable text and not be a member?" (Loh, 2006, p. 46).

Reese (2008b) expresses concerns about stereotyped portrayals among Native Americans: "Native children's self-esteem is far too often insulted . . . when teachers or librarians uncritically share books with images of Indians as primitive savages or with other historical or cultural misinformation" (p. 61). This stereotyped imagery is found in many places. Perhaps the strongest support that remains today is from sports fans whose teams are represented by an Indian mascot. The use of these images continues despite a call from the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2005 and the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 2007 to end the practice. Both the APA (2005) and the ASA (2007) cited studies that showed the use of Indian mascots were harmful to the self-esteem of Native children while creating a sense of superiority in non-native children. One way to combat the impact of these images, according to Reese (2008a), is to teach all children to recognize and critique those stereotypes. She goes on to say that children must be exposed to literature written by Native writers that offers realistic Indian characters. This will benefit all children and be especially helpful raising the self-esteem of Native children: "it is good for children to learn that Native people write books" (Reese, 2008a, para. 3).

The question of authenticity is not limited to print text authors of children's books. About film, Ruby (1991) writes: "Who can represent someone else, with what intention, in what 'language,' and in what environment is a conundrum that characterizes the postmodern era" (p. 50). Often films, especially documentaries, are intended to give voice to the voiceless, giving the impression of a social service or political act (Ruby, 1991, p. 51). Filmmakers had the vision and presumably the credibility to tell the stories of the "victims" who appeared in their films. Ruby (1991) suggests that victims, as well as society as a whole, supported this approach because it was thought to be the only way to gain attention to the problems. Recently many people from all sides have started to question the validity of this. Ruby (1991) states that the "right to represent is assumed to be the right to control one's cultural identity in the world arena. Some people, traditionally film subjects, are demanding that filmmakers share the authority and, in some cases, relinquish it all together" (p. 51). Cultural identity may be a secondary concern for production companies given the

longstanding belief that viewers generally want to watch actors rather than real people. There is a noticeable absence of “real” people who look like real people portrayed in the media (Buchanan, 2007; Hiemstra, 1983).

Cultural identity is an important issue when considering the concept of authenticity. Cultural communities may seek to address concerns by creating “wider indigenous and transnational alliances that can challenge the status quo” (Warren, 2005, p. 223). Warren (2005) writes that “Indigenous social movements use self-essentializing forms of identity – such as ‘tradition’ and indigenous’ in addition to gender constructions – to politically mobilize their people” (p. 223). Researchers, such as Butler (1990), argue against the notion of conceptualizing self as an essentialized identity. Her primary concern was the universal subordination caused by an essentialized gender identity; however, all essential identities would be static, unaffected by social, cultural, or political change, and without cause. Reflection and experience would be meaningless. According to the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) (2010) identity is not essential, rather it is performed: “performativity describes the theatricalised reactualisation of socio-symbolic systems which render cultures visible to themselves and to others” (para. 1). Identity is based on doing rather than being. As Ruby (1991) stated, “What people have to say about themselves are data to be interpreted, not the truth” (p. 54).

This seems to go against the ideas about authenticity in children’s literature – that an author’s identity as a member of the racial or ethnic group he or she was writing about was the key factor. Perhaps it is only gender and sexual orientation that are performative rather than essential identities. Stories by non-natives are clearly told and sold, some with a good deal of acclaim. In 2005, for example, Ang Lee (a straight Taiwanese American) directed a film in which two straight actors, Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, played gay cowboys in a love story originally written by Annie Proulx (a straight 60+ year old female). The film earned a great deal of money and received a great deal of critical acclaim, including three Academy Awards (Cockcroft, 2008). Proulx did not write the screenplay for the film, Larry McMurtry, a straight male author did, winning a Golden Globe Award and an Academy Award in 2006 for his efforts. Nevertheless, Proulx revealed in an interview with Robert Hughes of the *Wall Street Journal* (2008) that she often receives “rewrites” from fans who want to help her “fix” her story. While not totally accepted by everyone, especially it seems some *natives*; the film was accepted by a majority of the ticket-buying public suggesting that “others” can construct an authentic discourse community around identities of gender and sexual orientation.

A search for the meaning of authenticity is made more complicated due to the Disneyfied, or hyperreal culture in which individuals currently living in the United States (Baudrillard, 1994). Glenn (2000) refers this as “fake authenticity,” explaining that there is no such thing as authenticity. The use of the word “authenticity” proves that we are already in a hyperreal world of the fake in which “real” is no longer possible: “there is no such thing as an authentic past, an authentic outdoors, nor an authentic non-white/middle-class style of life” (np). Clearly many acknowledge the egress into the Simulacrum with the acceptance and popularity of the fake gay in *Brokeback Mountain*. There is little to compare this to in terms of performativity and fake race. The only example that comes to mind in terms of faking race is “Blackface performances.” These have been widely vilified for nearly a century in the United States.

Is it the case that authenticity varies based on the issue: identity - race and ethnicity; performativity – gender and sexual orientation? What does all of this mean for social education and classroom practice? Whose books should I tell my students to use in their classrooms? Which documentaries should they use? What stories in popular film and television should they reify for/with their students? Is there a “real” authenticity?

## Authenticity of self

### Trenia

It is 1987, and I am an undergraduate student in English. As part of my degree plan, I took several courses in African American Literature, all taught by African American professors I should add. During one of those classes, Amiri Baraka, who was on campus to participate in a university distinguished speaker series, came to talk to my class. Following his talk I had the chance to ask him something that I had been thinking about for a while and that was, do you think that white people can teach African American literature? I do not really know what I expected him to say, and to this day I am still amazed that I had the nerve to ask a famous poet and playwright this question. Maybe his *Poem for HalfWhite College Students* which began: *Who are you, listening to me, who are you listening to yourself? Are you white or black, or does that have anything to do with it?* (Baraka, 1991) empowered me. For whatever reason I asked, his answer was short and very matter of fact, “sure, why not.” His answer, which initially legitimized me, now adds to my confusion as I work toward defining authenticity. Thinking back, at the same time I was working under the belief that I could credibly teach African American literature and also history (a notion I was more quickly disabused of by an African American professor in the history department), I openly contested a male instructor who was scheduled to teach a course on feminism in the women’s studies department. He self-identified as a “radical feminist,” an identity that I could neither understand nor acknowledge since he was a biological-male (and male-identified). Why was it okay for me to speak for others without regard to racial and ethnic identity, but not for a man to speak for women? These are all constructed referents: race, ethnicity, and gender and yet I pretended and protected gender as inviolable. Perhaps this was merely hypocrisy on my part, a double-standard performance – okay for me, but not others. Or could gender be somehow sacrosanct?

### Colette

After attending an all-girls Catholic high school where I was one of four African American girls enrolled, I became an undergraduate student in Psychology in 1988. As part of my degree plan, I took several courses in African American Literature and History as my electives, all taught by African American professors. I enjoyed them. Until I had the encounter a course called ‘Racism and African American Literature.’

The first day of class, the professor wrote the following quote, “*Nobody really knows us. So institutionalized is the ignorance of our history, our culture, our everyday existence that, often, we do not even know ourselves—Itabari Njeri (1990).* Interesting I thought, until we got the final course assignment: “write a 15 page paper about yourself, explaining your history and your cultural identity.” Easy enough. What did I know about myself? Well, I knew that I was somewhat cute, smart, a dancer, and I had moved a lot. I knew most of my family was from Texas, my grandfather was a farmer who used to tell me not to trust white people, and that my parents hated Texas. I knew that my father enlisted in the Navy when he was young to make sure he could provide a good life for my mother.

I was amazed when I received my paper back. Although I received a passing grade, my professor wrote a few comments which changed me forever: *Colette, who are you? Are you a white woman stuck in a black body or you a black woman stuck in a white world? You need to read ‘A Colored Woman in a White World’ by Terrell (1940b).*

Thinking back, I could not believe this high-profile almost retired, African-American professor at a predominately white institution would say that to a young aspiring African



American student enrolled in his African American History course. Was he supposed to support me no matter what? He was not supposed to question my blackness. What did I not know? Turns out, not much.

Wilson (1999) writes, “To be African American is to experience a complex, even disjointed, subjectivity. Black self-consciousness is a hybrid of self-knowledge and social knowledge, influenced by personal perception as well as communal beliefs about race . . . Black subjectivity is shaped by social forces and institutions” (p. 206). It was not until this professor questioned my identity that my search for an authentic self began. I began to question my own identity, my own being in this world. Not surprisingly, this was an uncomfortable process and discovery did not seem to come naturally to me. Mercer (1994) explains that “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (p. 503).

As far back as I can remember I was not like my fellow classmates, neighbors or cousins. I never put much thought to it. I played basketball well, I danced well, but I also excelled academically. I thought of myself as woman who happened to be African American. Other African Americans, like my friends and cousins, had always told me that I do not act or sound black. That I am an *Oreo*, white on the inside, black on the outside. But it was not until this experience that I really thought much about this stereotype.

This experience with this professor made me realize that I had to overcome racial prejudice from my own race by connecting with those who understand that being black is not a certain appearance or way of speaking. My own “people” hold onto an “ideal” black identity. And according to this particular professor, I was not black enough for him. Ironically, this was counter to everything he was trying to teach the white people enrolled in the class. Most of our class lectures ended up discussing how American society was dominated by white, middle-class ideology and how racist that was. What I really learned, that despite all the posturing, his age and experience, this particular professor did not know what it meant to “be black.”

## Shared Discourse Community of Educators

### Trenia

I joined the discourse community of historians in 1988 when I began a graduate program to study U.S. History and minor in Latin American History. I chose to take two historiography courses, six credit hours, in Latin American History which constituted a minor (required for the Master of Arts in History degree) not because I wanted to speak for *others* but because friends told me that the historiography courses in Latin American History were *easier* than the historiography courses/professors in European History.

As historians, we tell the stories of those who lived in the past. Given the preponderance of males in most historical accounts, I, as a female, must often tell the stories of those who are not of my gender. Does this matter if we are considering people from the past and not the present? How do I square my responsibility of speaking of people in the past with questions of authenticity, that is, who can speak *for* whom? Or, who can speak *as* whom?

I struggle to have others in the discourse community of historians recognize my place among them. The fact that I mainly teach teachers now in an education college, threatens my status as an *authentic* historian. In 2008 I asked the chair of the history department at my university if there might be an opportunity for me to teach a survey course in U.S. History. She and I had worked together on a Teaching American History grant and so she was well

aware of my academic background (M.A. and also ABD in U.S. History) and my postsecondary history teaching experiences (six years as an adjunct instructor at a community college and two years at my graduate university as a doctoral student). Despite my education credentials and my teaching background that were clearly delineated on my curriculum vitae, I had to provide a statement that explained how I was qualified to teach a U.S. History survey course at the university. Even though I eventually got to teach the class, I am not sure if every faculty member in the History Department believed that I was truly qualified.

Clearly those I consider to be my peers in history consider me to be a part of the history education discourse community which is a very different membership. I resist membership in the history education community for the same reason historians want to label me as such. It places me in a group where many merely pretend to practice the work of historians. While history teachers may lack content knowledge and often have no special training as historians, it is even worse in the area of history teacher education. In higher education, instructors are often assigned to teach methods classes, especially in history and/or the social studies, based on reasons other than content expertise. The two biggest reasons for this are, someone needs a class to teach in order to make their course load that semester or a qualified instructor (based on expertise in a content area) is not available. Highly qualified teachers in every classroom, a fundamental rule under No Child Left Behind, ironically does not guide course staffing decisions in colleges of education. It is tough to explain to students in history/social studies methods courses why instructors in their classes are not competent in the content. A quick internet search turned up over two dozen social studies methods courses being taught by "outfielders" (those with training in some area other than history or social studies). This was not the case in content areas such as science and math. In those subjects, instructors would have been considered highly qualified under federal guidelines. How are the discourse communities of science and math different from that of history? History teaching is the only subject I can think of in which wishing to teach it makes you qualified to do so. If they are not wholly unqualified, they are certainly under-qualified. Members of this group do not (or cannot) join the discourse community of historians and thereby create a unique discourse community as [with]outfield history teachers.

### **Colette**

I joined the higher education field after graduating in May 1994 with my master's degree in student personnel in higher education. Since then much of my professional life I worked at predominately white institutions such as Wake Forest University, University of Florida, and Middle Tennessee State University. At each school, I made valuable contributions not only to the institution, but to the students I served as one of the few African American staff members who could and would advocate for students of color.

Since my undergraduate days, I knew being a Black woman in higher education that there was an unwritten expectation that I would shoulder multiple roles and responsibilities. The "double whammy" of gender and race creates problems on both the professional and personal levels. Many researchers on this topic report that Black women in academics must contend with the professional pressures associated with working in a historically White, upper middle-class, male-dominated profession, while also attempting to balance the demands of life outside the professional domain. There was not a day that went by that I was reminded of the words of Mary Church Terrell (1940a), the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, wrote, "Not only are colored women . . . handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women" (p. 292).

Despite my education credentials and my teaching background that were clearly delineated on my resume, I had to explain how I was qualified to supervise areas that were outside of “multicultural” affairs. Having deliberately chosen not to work in multicultural affairs units, I still found myself being “forced” to both speak for and to students of color, just because I was of color, not because I legitimately might have been qualified to do so. Like many of my students, I was often one of the only African American administrators in student affairs. Multiple experiences and feelings of isolation forced me to begin to study racial identity theory (Asante, 1980; Baldwin & Bell, 1985; Thompson Sanders, 1991, 1995, 1999) and reshape myself into the “anti-racist educator.”

Upon reflection, I think it is important that African American women are able to state clearly, “here are my credentials,” knowing that those credentials will be doubly reviewed. I have to prove my competence, realizing that my competence must exceed the level of expectations for my White female and male counterparts. Is it the same for my other colleagues in higher education? Do other members of this community have to develop not only their job competencies as well as their ethnic identity?

## **Social Education Paradigm**

### **Trenia**

At the core of an autoethnography is reconciling the self as part of society. This is also the goal of social education (Kincheloe, 2001). Both autoethnographies and social education require a *critical consciousness*, a holistic approach to being in the world “complete with agency and empowerment” (Mustakova-Possardt, 2003, xvii). This is complicated for some, like me, who can and do choose to keep a part of themselves secret – a secret consciousness. Is it possible to claim consciousness and/or identity if you do not outwardly reveal the evidence on which you base a claim of authenticity? Is authenticity judged primarily by who you see in front of you? Is identity a performance or does authenticity come from thinking or believing you are authentic in some way? Can critical consciousness be strictly internal or does it require an outward expression?

I have always been hesitant to put a “safe space” sticker on my office door because I am worried that everyone will assume that I am gay. After all, I make that assumption. Further, I have said to many of these people, clearly violating any tacit “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that may exist, “so, tell me about this sticker.” Every single person I have ever asked, all women now that I think about it, has said something like, “well I had this friend in high school and he was gay . . .” and then went on to explain some tough time or tragedy that had befallen this gay [male] friend. The “moral” of every one of these stories was, “if only I can help one person not have to go through what my friend went through.” I had not thought of this before but all of these women had gay male friends and wanted now to help other gay men. None of them told stories about gay women friends in their past and of a desire to be there for the lesbians. Another thing I noticed is that none of these “safe space” former friends of a gay were ever male. I heard no stories from men about their gay male or lesbian BFF’s from high school. No male academic advisor or male professor in my department now, or the three prior to this one, proclaims their office to be a “safe space.” I asked an openly gay male associate professor in my current department if he wanted a “safe space” sticker, which turned into a conversation about why he did not have one in the first place. He said that lesbian students would talk to straight women faculty members before talking to him and that it was too risky for him to be too open with gay male students. Male colleagues, straight and gay, have told me that they are concerned about interacting outside class with

students of either gender. Based on the sexual harassment training videos that I have had to watch over the past 10 years, I understand their concern.

### **Colette**

James Baldwin's (1955) words come to mind as I consider the questions of critical consciousness, obviousness, and authenticity:

One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. (p. 7)

The effectiveness of the social justice educator depends on their personal search for authenticity and critical consciousness. Self-reflection and the transformation of attitudes and beliefs about my experience have helped me understand my authentic self in several ways. There is institutional culture; there's societal culture; and there is my own cultural background. These three elements, mediated by both the positive and negative aspects of shaped my own experience as an African American woman that has lived in predominantly White communities her entire life. Throughout my life, I had first-hand experience that people do not look or act black. People ARE black. When I meet people who tell me I do not act black enough, I tell them I may be different, but Black is who I am, not what I think I am. Jean-Paul Sartre claims in his work *Being and Nothingness* that humans are "radically free" no matter what their situation is sometimes interpreted as the view that every dimension of our identity is chosen. In that same work, Sartre depicts a fundamentally non-voluntary dimension of the self which is imposed by "the look" of others. The look refers to the fact that who I am (my self-identity) is not just a matter of how I see myself. Other people's perspectives and values shape and constitute my identity.

As an a woman of color working at predominately white higher education institutions, more often than not I am asked to be the "representative" voice of students and colleagues who happen to be African-American. This forces me to attempt to conform to an image that in no way reflects the reality of who I am putting me in a cultural limbo; I do not want to be "the ideal black" and I cannot be white and so I am often stuck somewhere in between. Being stuck in the middle has left me with feelings of ambiguity and true lack of self-understanding.

Knowing that concepts of ethnicity and ethnic identity grew out of 1960s social introspection, in moments of ambiguity, I reflect upon the "black power" movement when blacks asserted their distinctiveness, and were reminded that "black is beautiful." During this time, African-Americans were urged to be themselves, rather than to try to conform to majority white society. I have taken it a step further and I have become comfortable with my own identity which I consider "multicultural and diverse." I chose to hold onto my own authentic identity. This identity shapes how I lead and teach today. As a woman of color, I am conscious of the fact that those are the first two things people notice about me. By realizing that, accepting it, and moving on, I have been able to be "myself," not what others have perceived me to be.

### **Conclusions**

Charles Taylor (1991) said, "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am

also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own” (pp. 28-29). The formal recording of our journey through the simulacra in search of the meaning of authenticity ends here; however the journey will undoubtedly continue. We began this trip with an understanding that we may never be able to define authenticity. Nonetheless, the experience has been cathartic, allowing us to loosen the grip of our logic circles (and sleep a little better at night) to understand the meaning of “being true to myself.”

Our exploration was well-served by the methodology of collaborative autoethnography, a fusion of collaborative ethnography and autoethnography. According to May and Patillo-McCoy (2000), this method of inquiry allows each person to gather data concerning some social phenomenon (authenticity) from different perspectives. Autoethnography provided an opportunity for us to use ourselves as the subjects of our study (Dillow, 2009; Ellis & Bocher, 2006; Holman Jones, 2005). The medium is the message in this collaborative autoethnography, a way of understanding suggested by the medium itself.

Our inquiry on authenticity employed three lenses: self, shared discourse community, and a social education paradigm. First we considered an authenticity of self. For Trenia, the issues of race and ethnicity turned out to be fair game; gender was not. Colette’s experiences rendered gender neutral while an authentic racial performance was far more crucial.

Next we examined notions of authenticity through our shared discourse communities. Colette’s membership in a “multicultural affairs” discourse community was imposed on her. Racial and ethnic essentialism did not allow her to refuse membership. This was true for both the gatekeepers of the discourse community and the gatekeepers for the higher education community. Conversely, Trenia found that essentialism was not a factor for membership in the discourse community of historians. While she technically met the qualifications for membership, gatekeepers prevented a full acceptance based on her membership in another discourse community (education).

The lens of critical consciousness was the most difficult to use in this authenticity inquiry. Trenia’s denial of an essentialism could have been a manifestation of critical consciousness. However, the result was a loss of agency and empowerment rather than a gain. Colette on the other hand embraced the essentialism that she had originally denied and as a result gained agency and empowerment.

Glenn (2000) suggests that a search for authenticity in a hyperreal world may be a waste of time, that there is nothing we can know as authentic. While we have called our investigation a search for authenticity, perhaps it may be more accurately described as an attempt to study a “fake authentic” (Glenn, 2000). However, given that the “real” is the new “fake,” we were satisfied to conflate those terms in this exploration.

So, now back to the *a-ha* moment that started this project, what do we tell students seeking elementary level teacher certification about choosing “authentic” books for children? Trenia, counter to her original advice to these pre-service teachers, now teaches that performance rather than essentialism may be the most important factor in judging the authentic nature of a children’s book. Colette, through her own search for her authentic self, now incorporates classroom assignments to help her students develop critical consciousness, the ability to assess their own experiences in context and separate their own responses from societal expectations to embrace the prescribed essentialism. Without this recognition and validation of self-identity, then one’s search for authentic is counterfeit.

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