Methodological Dilemmas in Social Justice Research in the U. S. South

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Abstract: In this article, we discuss the methodological tensions of social justice curriculum inquiry for ourselves working in a predominantly White rural institution and our students working in schools, communities, and neighborhoods in the U. S. South. We begin this discussion by positioning ourselves and our inquiries within the context of social justice research. We then describe the dilemmas we have experienced as we teach and work with our doctoral students, a group of multiethnic practitioner researchers, educators, and scholars, who engage in social justice inquiries. Since our own curriculum theorizing and inquiries pose challenges to traditional understandings of research, the methodologies that we co-construct with our students often clash with other traditional methods of inquiry they have been taught. We use the dissertation work from Katrana Seay, one of our doctoral students and our colleague now, to illuminate the complexities and dilemmas of engaging such social justice research. We theorize methodological tensions that our students have experienced when they, as racialized, classed, and gendered bodies, engage in educational inquiries that seek to unmask and challenge all forms of oppressions in the U. S. South. We end this article with hope by discussing possibilities and responsibilities of social justice research.

Key Words: Methodological Dilemmas, Social Justice Research, South

Encountering Methodological Dilemmas in Social Justice Research

In this Inaugural Issue of the *International Journal of Curriculum, Equity & Social Justice* on *Schooling Racialized Bodies: Curriculums at the Intersection of Visibility and Absence* edited by Boni Wozolek, we continue the dialogues on methodological dilemmas in social justice research (Delgado, 1998; Dillard, 2000; Twine & Warren, 2000; Tyson, 1998). We focus on methodological dilemmas inherent in forms of inquiry in the U. S. South that purposefully attend to and work against racialized, gendered, classed, and other intersected oppressions that continue to influence, and be influenced by, life in the South (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991). Contexts of rampant oppression and suppression that persist in the U. S. South necessitate forms of curriculum inquiry that trouble accepted notions of what counts as educational research and that interrogate traditional understandings of research goals and outcomes. Our purpose in this article is to highlight the methodological tensions that arise when social justice inquiries are purposefully taught and engaged in the U. S. South.

Our understanding of connections between language and power (Collins, 2000) and of the need to interrogate and destabilize traditional educational research languages, goals, and assumptions that undermine work for social justice is exemplified in the work of Cynthia Dillard (2000), who creates "endarkened feminist epistemology." This lens is historically grounded and culturally derived, so that it upholds the idea of "*research as a responsibility*, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry" (p. 663).

Although Dillard identifies her *endarkened feminist epistemology* within the purview of Black women, we view her ideas about the need to unsettle educational research assumptions and her insistence on use of historically and culturally derived knowledge claims as applicable to our own social justice efforts. These ideas provide ways to protest against the white supremacy that

"legitimizes," objectifies, rationalizes, and neutralizes research while ignoring and dismissing the emotional, spiritual, creative, and humane aspects of social justice research.

The white supremacy inherent in traditional research becomes a property (Harris, 1993) that protects the privilege of some researchers while suppressing and exploiting grass root *protest thought* (Watkins, 2005) of others. Dillard's *endarkened feminist epistemology* reminds us that research is a racialized, gendered, and classed space and researchers are racialized, gendered, and classed bodies, that could reproduce and perpetuate *damage centered research* (Tuck, 2009) on, and racism, sexism, classism, and other discriminations against, underrepresented and misrepresented individuals and groups. Racialized, gendered, and classed researchers could embody or disembody, politicize or neutralize, and humanize or dehumanize the experience of people, spaces, and places under study. Our efforts to embody, to politicize, to humanize, and to understand educational research as a responsibility (Dillard, 2000) to the schools, neighborhoods, and community within which we live and work creates methodological tensions.

In this article, we discuss the methodological tensions of social justice curriculum inquiry for ourselves working in a predominantly White rural institution and for our students working in schools, communities, and neighborhoods in the U. S. South. We begin this discussion by positioning ourselves and our inquiries within the context of social justice research. We then describe the dilemmas we have experienced as we teach and work with our doctoral students, a group of multiethnic practitioner researchers, educators, and scholars, who engage in social justice inquiries. Since our own curriculum theorizing and inquiries pose challenges to traditional understandings of research, the methodologies that we co-construct with our students often clash with other traditional methods of inquiry they have been taught.

Their curriculum work reveals much about processes of unlearning dominant research paradigms and perspectives, which intensifies the methodological tensions that we experience with them when emancipatory theories and methodologies are used to understand and challenge "unproblematized ... goals, purposes, and practice in educational research" (Dillard, 2000, p. 662) and the status quo within rigid and inequitable educational systems. We use the dissertation work from Katrana Seay, one of our doctoral students and now our colleague, to illuminate the complexities and dilemmas of engaging such social justice research. We theorize methodological tensions that our students have experienced when they, as racialized, classed, and gendered bodies, engage in educational inquiries that seek to unmask and challenge all forms of oppressions in the U. S. South. We end this article with hope by discussing possibilities and responsibilities of social justice research.

Positioning Ourselves and Our Social Justice Inquiry
Personal~ Passionate~ Participatory Qualities of Social Justice Research

Those who engage in social justice forms of curriculum inquiry have benefited from a broader conception of what counts as inquiry. As Elliot Eisner (1993) stated:

> One of the most significant shifts occurring in the educational research community is the broadening of its conception of what counts as educational research. This increased breadth is not a license for 'anything goes,' but a recognition that the roads to understanding are many and that a narrow view of method is likely to lead to limited understanding of how schools work…. (p. 11)

Along with this paradigm shift there is an increasing need for social justice forms of inquiry that exhibit three particular qualities: *personal~ passionate~ participatory* (He & Phillion, 2008).

> [This] research is personal, compelled by values and experiences each researcher brings to the work. The research is passionate, grounded in a commitment to social justice concerns of people and places under consideration. The research is participatory, built on long term, heart felt engagement, and shared efforts. Self, others, and inquiry become interrelated in complex and dialogical relationships over time and place as researchers develop and refine questions, perspectives, and methods by drawing upon their own passions and commitments. Researchers are not detached observers, nor putatively objective recorders, but active participants in schools, families, and communities. As they become immersed in lives and take on the concerns of the people they work with, they continuously search for ways to act upon those concerns and what the known demands. Researchers have an explicit research agenda focused on equity, equality, and social justice. Rather than aiming solely at traditional academic outcomes, positive social and educational change was the focal outcome of inquiry. (p. 1-2)

For our doctoral students, engaging in *personal~passionate~participatory* research in their dissertation work requires that they "[connect] the personal with the political, the theoretical with the practical, and research with social and educational change" (He & Phillion, 2008, p. 1). Thus, in contrast to traditional methods of educational research where the knower is detached from the known (Dillard, 2000), in *personal~passionate~participatory* curriculum inquiry for social justice "…the researcher is not separate from the sociopolitical and cultural phenomena of the inquiry, the [stories] collected, [findings/awakenings], interpretations, or writing" (He & Phillion, 2008, p.1).

Critical Race Epistemology and Critical Race Methodology

In addition to these three distinct qualities, social justice research thrives with critical race methodology which embodies a critical race epistemology for understanding "how and why particular methods are chosen," and "how [and why] systems of inequality, disparity, and inequity continue to function" (Cook, 2013, p. 183) with particular attention to centering the counter narratives of lived experiences of marginalized or disadvantaged people under study (Gutiérrez-Jones, 2001; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999). According to

Daniella Ann Cook (2013), critical race epistemology entails the following five distinct components to critical race methodology:

> (1) recognizing the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); (2) confronting dominant ideology, thus intentionally deconstructing the notions of objectivity and neutrality in research (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw et al, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2000); (3) acknowledging the various ways that oppression is resisted (Delgado, 1989, 1993); (4) exposing deficit-based research by centering the lived, everyday experiences of people of color (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), and (5) drawing from multiple disciplines to analyze race and racism within particular historical and contemporary contexts (Pillow, 2003; Solórzano, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000, 2001; Tate, 2008). (p. 183)

Critical race methodology "generates knowledge by looking into those who have been epistemologically marginalized, silenced, and disempowered" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 142). Social justice research advocates choosing methods that hold *personal~passionate~participatory* qualities (He & Phillion, 2008) and the five components of critical race methodology (Cook, 2013).

The Significance of Counter Narratives

Like Dillard (2000), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), and Cook (2013), we and many of our doctoral students ground our social justice curriculum inquiry in historically and culturally derived scholarship that emphasizes the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and power illuminated in critical race theories (e.g., Lynn & Dixson, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2005); forms of Black feminist (e.g. Collins, 2000; James & Sharpley-Whiting, 2000/2001; Smith, 1983/2000) and Womanist thought (Maparyan, 2012; Phillips, 2006; Ross, 2007, 2015; Walker, 1967/1983); Black (female) literary imagination and activism (Morrison, 1990, 1992, 2008; Walker; 1997); Indigenous storywork (e.g., Archibald, 2008) epistemologies (e.g., Grande,

2004) and methodologies (e.g., Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008); and decolonizing methodologies (e.g., Tuhiwai Smith, 1999/2005).

Historically and culturally derived bodies of knowledge speak truth to the power of oppression and counter dominant narratives. Historically and culturally derived counter narratives serve as powerful tools for social justice research because they "…contest the official or meta narrative that often portrays disenfranchised individuals and groups as deficient and inferior" (He & Ross, 2012, p. 2). The counter narratives of socially marginalized individuals and groups serve as sources of survival and resistance (Delgado, 1989; also Bamberg, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). They challenge master narratives of race, gender, class, and other intersectional markers of identities that perpetuate stereotypical and deficit-oriented representations of people of color (Delgado, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Most of all, counter narratives can be understood as a form of "talking back" (hooks, 1989; also Brayboy, 2008)—a means by which marginalized individuals and groups can transgress (hooks, 1994) and protest against the supremacy and move from silence and marginalization to "talking back" and liberation (hooks, 1989).

Counter narratives enable social justice researchers to use "grounded everyday experiences of marginalized people coupled with actual data in contextualized social situations as a way to generate knowledge by looking to the bottom, thus epistemologically centering those often rendered invisible and silent in research" (Cook, 2013, p. 186). Counter narratives, as theories and methods (Cooks, 2013), make unjust and dehumanizing ideas, policies, and practices visible and present as they negatively affect racialized, gendered, and classed bodies under study. Nevertheless, collecting, composing, and theorizing counter narratives create methodological tensions.

The Significance of Southern Place

Social justice curriculum inquiry engaged in the U.S. South must take seriously the socio-historical contexts (Cooper, 1988) and implications of Southern place (e.g., Casemore, 2008; Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991; Reynolds, 2013; Whitlock, 2007, 2013) because thinking spatially can lead to new insights about social justice (Helfenbein, 2010; Soja, 2008) and "the spatiality of (in)justice and the (in)justice of spatiality" (Soja, 2010, p. 13). As Edward Soja (2008) argues, "Thinking spatially about justice not only enriches our theoretical understanding, it can uncover significant new insights that extend our practical knowledge into more effective actions to achieve greater justice and democracy..." (p. 1). Soja (2008) considers that

> critical spatial thinking...hinges around three principles: (a) The ontological spatiality of being (we are all spatial as well as social and temporal beings); (b) The social production of spatiality (space is socially produced and can therefore be socially changed). (c) The socio-spatial dialectic (the spatial shapes the social as much as the social shapes the spatial)." (p .2)

Drawing upon Soja's ideas of *spatial justice*, we consider research in the U. S. South as a racialized, gendered, and classed space where we could embody, politicize, and empower the invisible and silenced people in neglected and marginalized spaces and places under study.

Soja's ideas of *spatial justice* inspires us to pay attention to the significance of the Southern place and to explore "the history, literature, and sociology of the South...[and]...the southern mind--a southern epistemology" (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p. 10; see also Casemore, 2008; Ng-A-Fook, 2007; Reynolds, 2013; Reynolds & Webber, 2009; Whitlock, 2007, 2013). It is in the exploration of this Southern place, we recognize that, "denial and repression of Southern racial history continues to negatively influence race, class, and gender relationships among people of the contemporary U. S. South" (He & Ross, 2012, p. 3).

Counter narratives, as theories and methods, enable us to create a research space of justice where we are able to hear and,

> to articulate those hidden, repressed, denied, silenced, and misunderstood stories of ... repressions, suppressions, and subjugations that challenge stereotypes of Southern women, Blacks, and other disenfranchised individuals and groups and encourage examination of the forces of slavery, racism, sexism, classism, religious repression, and other forms of oppression and suppression on life and curriculum in schools, neighborhoods, and communities in the South." (He & Ross, 2012, p. 3)

Nevertheless, striving for spatial justice creates more methodological tensions.

Social Justice in Action

The methodological tensions could be elevated as the social justice researchers turn their research into actions. Ayers believes that the core of educational inquiries "must be human knowledge and human freedom, both enlightenment and emancipation" (Ayers, 2006, p. 87). As Ayers reminds us, social justice inquirers must "recognize the necessity of opening spaces 'to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them)…" (Saïd as cited in Ayers, 2006, p. 85). What we strive for is "research for social justice, research to resist harm and redress grievances, research with explicit goals of promoting a more balanced, fair, and equitable social order" (p. 88). Social justice researchers must ask the following questions suggested by Ayers (2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) as we engage in social justice inquiries:

1. What are the issues that marginalized or disadvantaged people speak of with excitement, anger, fear, or hope?
2. How can I enter a dialogue in which I will learn from a specific community itself about problems and obstacles they face?
3. What endogenous experiences do people already have that can point the way toward solutions?
4. What is missing from the "official story" that will make the problems of the oppressed more understandable?
5. What current proposed policies serve the privileged and the powerful, and how are they made to appear inevitable?

6. How can the public space for discussion, problem posing, and problem solving be expanded? (Ayers, 2006, p.88)

Methodological tensions arise when we keep asking these questions. Tensions arise when we feel the "excitement, anger, fear, or hope" of our participants and build our inquiries on the issues named by our participants and the problems and obstacles they face without adhering to the research objectives and purposes legitimized by the mainstream research. Tensions arise when we try to observe with passion and compassion and work with our participants to find solutions to their problems and obstacles rather than impose our solutions on them. Tensions arise when we transgress the dominant theoretical traditions and push methodological and representational boundaries. Tensions arise when we collect counterstories to challenge the official stories and demand just and equitable living conditions for the people in the plight under study.

Experiencing and Theorizing Methodological Tensions: Making Racialized, Gendered, and Classed Oppressions Visible in the U. S. South

The historically and culturally derived and responsible inquiries that we encourage our students to pursue clash with traditional research methodologies they have learned that are legitimized for objectivity, rationality, and neutrality. We have been teaching and engaged in social justice inquiries in an Ed. D. in Curriculum Studies program in rural Georgia for the last six (Ross) and fifteen (He) years. One of the biggest challenges in engaging in the social justice forms of curriculum inquiry is that when we begin to work closely with our students on their dissertations, we have to help them to unlearn what they have learned in some of the required methodology courses. Our students are constantly questioned about the "rigor" and "validity" of the research they passionately choose to engage in their dissertation work. In the traditional methodology classes, the ways they are taught to think about,

engage in, and write about their research disempower them from the knowledge and passion they hold for the people and communities under study.

We have been working with our doctoral students to explore ways to dive into life and write into contradiction in schools, families, and communities in the U. S. South (e.g., Carlyle, 2010; Faulkner, 2012; Haynes, 2008, 2015; Janis, 2012, 2015; Mabray, 2012; Mitchell, 2009; Mikell, 2011, 2012, 2015; Pantin, 2012; Scott-Simmons, 2008, 2012; Tennial, 2008). We experience methodological tensions as we explore multiple forms of dissertation inquiry and diverse representations with a particular focus on cultural, linguistic, and political aspects of personal, community, and historical narrative. These tensions become intensified as we encourage our students to ground their inquiries into their culturally congruent intellectual traditions that enable them to challenge *damage centered research* (Tuck, 2009) that often portrays the lives of underrepresented, misrepresented, and marginalized individuals and groups as deficient, inferior, and/or invisible. In the following section, we feature Katrana Seay's dissertation work to illustrate how these tensions are manifested, resolved, and continued as our students engage in social justice research and writing; tell counter narratives; and critically reflect upon their backgrounds, experiences, and values and the ways in which their personal histories, languages, cultures, identities. These experiences affect who they are as curriculum workers and researchers, how they interact with others, and how they live their lives in the South.

Spaces of Racial Injustice:
Illuminating the Schooling Experiences of Young Urban Black Males

When Katrana Seay began working as an Early Intervention Program reading teacher, there was a noticeable pattern. Most of the students in her fourth and fifth grade classes were Black males. These students expressed

dislike for reading and were labeled as being "…unmotivated, disruptive, and disrespectful" (Seay, 2013, p. 18). Even though most of them could read, their test scores indicated that they were reading below grade level.

Determined to find an explanation for what others labeled as a "problem," Seay looked to quantitative methods. She explains her chosen methods as follows: "At the time, I believed motivation affected [Black males'] lack of achievement. I decided to conduct a correlational research study within my school with third and fifth grade males to determine if I was correct" (Seay, 2013, p. 19). As she reviewed literature, Seay was shocked and dismayed to discover that Black males represent the majority of students in remedial reading and special education and 50% of Black males in inner cities drop out of high school. According to the research, many of these students dropped out because they were reading below grade level, felt alienated, helpless, or discouraged in schools.

The quantitative methods Seay employed to confirm her hypothesis of urban Black males' low motivation fit squarely within the domain of scientific knowledge represented in the mainstream research literature. Within the more traditional methods of quantitative research that Seay learned, scientific knowledge was considered to be objective, accurate, and true. She used the "truth" of her quantitative findings to develop culturally engaging reading interventions. While these interventions allowed the Black males in her class to temporarily experience increased reading scores and test scores, the scores dropped again after two months. Though efficient, her quantitative methods were incapable of identifying answers to the questions she ultimately sought. While her questions remained unanswered, Black males who were constantly framed as lacking through her methodology continued to populate her remedial reading classes.

A number of traumatic personal and professional experiences jarred Seay back into pursuit of strategies to increase academic achievement for

Black males. Personally, several young Black males in her family and one former Black male student, all of whom had struggled in or dropped out of school, were murdered within a short frame of time. These tragic losses heightened Seay's awareness of the excessive school discipline imposed on Black males and the school to prison pipeline (Casella, 2003; Howard, 2007) that disproportionately affected their success in school and life. Professionally, Seay witnessed the detainment and arrest of three young Black males for fighting. She describes the shocking event as follows: "I remember stopping and putting my hands up to my chest, and gasping. My heart was racing and I started shaking. I kept saying "oh my God…oh my God" because I had never seen a child in handcuffs" (Seay, 2013, p. 24). These incidents raised Seay's sense of personal and professional responsibility and compelled her to investigate the root cause of the plight of Black males.

Unlearning White Supremacist Thought

> When I conducted research for my master's research project, I reviewed the literature, stated the facts and reported my findings based on the results of the surveys in an objective manner. Yet, neither my perspective nor my experiences working with the Black males were included in the research…it had to be "objective"…based on the quantitative data. (Seay, 2013, pp. 163 – 164)

The above passage reveals Seay's previously-held belief about connections between quantitative research and objectivity. "Objective" quantitative research distanced Seay from the Black males she wanted to help and did not allow consideration of her personal perspective or experiences; this distancing of knower and known (Dillard, 2000) is perceived as a strength of scientific research. Michael Crotty (1998) discusses the common perception of quantitative research as objective as well as commonly perceived differences between scientific (i.e., quantitative) research and ways of knowing based on opinions and feelings in the following passage:

> This supreme confidence in science stems from a conviction that scientific knowledge is both accurate and certain. In this respect scientific knowledge contrasts sharply with opinions, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions that we gain in non-scientific ways. The principal point of difference is the alleged objectivity of scientific knowledge… (Crotty, 1998, p. 27).

Seay ventured into our doctoral studies where she was introduced to a group of social justice scholars such as Ayers (2006), Collins (2000), Cook (2006), Dillard (2000), Solórzano and Yosso (2002), and Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) who challenge the presumed neutrality and superiority of scientific research. Seay's awakening occurred when she recognized the validity and value of personal perceptions and experiences that scientific research excluded. However, her embrace of personal and cultural experiences as valid sources of knowledge construction (Collins, 2000) necessitated that she unlearn the White supremacist knowledge and values by which she had been miseducated (Woodson, 1919, 1933).

During this unlearning process in her doctoral studies, Seay was introduced to a wide array of culturally congruent intellectual traditions such as critical race theory (Bell 1980, 1992; Delgado, 1995; Dixson, & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2003, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso 2000, 2001, 2002, 2009; Yosso, 2006), culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995), critical pedagogy (Friere, 1970, 1974; Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren, 1998; Wink, 2005), education of Blacks in the South (Anderson, 1988; Dubois, 1903/1994; Fairclough, 2000; Franklin & Moss, 2004; Spivey, 1978; Watkins, 2001; Woodson, 1919, 1933), race, class, tracking, and social justice (Oakes, 1985; Oakes et al, 1990), education of Black males (hooks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Noguera, 2008), and critical literacy (Finn, 1999; Tatum, 2005, 2009, 2013).

Diving into these culturally congruent intellectual traditions helped Seay to locate a culturally relevant theoretical framework, research methodology, and

form of representation for her dissertation work. Seay was encouraged to bring her personal experience into inquiry, ground her inquiry into social justice concerns of the people and places under study, develop and refine research questions, perspectives, and methods based upon her own passions and commitments. She was similarly encouraged to develop an explicit research agenda that aimed for equity, equality, and social justice. Through these processes, Seay was supported to recognizes the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of oppression; to question dominant research ideology that emphasizes objectivity, neutrality, and rationality in research; to use counterstories of everyday experiences of the people in her schools, families, communities, and neighborhoods to challenge the official stories about Black males; and to question how the racism, classism, and other forms of oppression operated in schools and societies and killed the dreams and hopes of Black males' success in school and life. Inspired by her involvement with and knowledge of the schooling experiences of young Black males, Seay's dissertation, "And Then the Wall Rose: Counter Narratives of Black Males' Experience of Elementary Schooling in Urban Georgia" is a striking departure from her previous quantitative research methods.

Seay's *personal~passionate~participatory* curriculum inquiry is full of ideas, feelings, and beliefs, but it captures nuances of the life experiences of young urban Black males that her quantitative research methods often misrepresent. While her quantitative methods of research fit within deficit-oriented paradigms that characterize Black males as socially and academically deviant problems (Howard, 2008), Seay's *personal~passionate~participatory* curriculum inquiry illuminates the complexities of the lives and aspirations of this group.

Significantly, these two strikingly different renderings of young urban Black males have divergent implications for their futures trajectories. Deficit-oriented research paradigms identify strategies to *fix* Black males while alternative research paradigms, such as those employed in Seay's dissertation,

disrupt the "pathological identities" that plague Black males (Howard, Flennaugh, & Terry, Sr., 2012) and seek to rectify the socio-historical, economic, and political contexts that prevent Black males from reaching their fullest potential (Howard, 2008).

As Seay's reflections on her social justice curriculum inquiry reveal, Black males are not the problem; the problem is specific forms of gendered and classed racism Black males experience in schools and the teachers, administrators, and policymakers who fail to act on this injustice. She reflects:

> When I began this journey, I was in search of the reason for the lack of motivation and underachievement of Black males at my school. However, after I delved into the research and began reflecting on the action research I conducted with fourth grade males in 2006, I realized the students were not the problem. We were the problem. We changed the learning environment in the classroom for one hour in order for males to engage in meaningful reading. For the rest of the day, the instruction as well as the structure of the classroom, the perception of the teachers and administrators did not change. We did not change our mindset. (Seay, 2013, pp. 157 – 158)

Methodological Tensions of Using Fiction and Composite Characters

In her dissertation, Seay combines fiction with the rich storytelling tradition of her family to develop counter narratives of young Black males in her family and in the schools in which she was employed. The "wall" referred to in her dissertation title is metaphorical--a barrier that blocks the hopes and educational attainment of young Black males in the South.

Engaging in *personal~passionate~participatory curriculum inquiry for social justice* (He & Phillion, 2008) is emotionally taxing. In the following, Seay discusses the difficulty of developing the counter narratives for her dissertation.

> Writing this narrative proved to be very challenging for me because I had a difficult time trying to figure out what to reveal and what not to reveal. I had to relive several incidents that I would have preferred not to relive, but I felt the story had to be told. I consulted with family

> members, used data from previous research, existing literature, a reflective journal, as well as conversations with friends, and colleagues to help me recollect many of these experiences from the past. (Seay, 2013, p. 97)

Many people believe that Black male students enter the educational setting with deficiencies and thus blame cultural issues, social issues, Black males and their home environment for their failures. Living with these Black males in her families, neighborhoods, communities, and schools, Seay felt that schools and societies play a role in the demise of these students. On the one hand, Seay had a strong desire to tell the counterstories of the Black males to reveal how mainstream schooling "subtracted" (Valenzuela, 1999) their cultural and linguistic experience. She wanted the reader "to be able to hear the voices of these students, hear their frustrations and understand the daily struggles and stereotypes they encounter in school and see how schools contribute to their plight" (p. 103). On the other hand, Seay felt strongly that it was her responsibility to protect those young Black males as she revealed how hegemonic ways of knowing about race, class, and gender were perpetuated in daily school functions and how racism, sexism, and classism hinder the academic achievement of these Black males.

To confront the dominant traditional research ideology that legitimizes "objective" facts, numbers, outcomes, and other "scientific" methods and considers storytelling as "unscientific and subjective," Seay was encouraged to turn to the works of counter-storytelling (Bell, 1990; Delgado, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2009; Jacobs, 1861/2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nettles, 2012) and fiction (Avi, 2010; Doll, 2000; Ellison, 1947/1994; He, 2003; Hurston, 1937/1965/2000; Morrison, 1970; Walker, 1982; Wright, 1944/1989) "to integrate lived experience with racial realism" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. vi-vii). As she dived into this body of literature, Seay realized that storytelling is a rich tradition in her family.

Storytelling is a rich tradition for people of color. My family members are storytellers and stories have always been an integral part of my life growing up. I grew up listening to them tell stories about the "ole days". Uncle Hank always had a story to tell. Whenever he said, "Oh, I remember" or "That reminds me" we knew he was about to tell a story and we were going to be sitting for hours and we dared not move. During these gatherings, my father and his brothers would often tell stories about their experiences during Jim Crow Laws and sharecropping days. We would hear stories about them working in the field from dawn to dusk and at the end of a harvest and how my grandfather would sometimes only get a sack of flour and a sack of sugar as pay. Most times, he would be in debt according to the landlord, though my family insisted my grandfather was being cheated. In one particular story that I asked my father to retell when I began writing my dissertation he described how they would go "into town" to the store and had to wait until all the white people were waited on before they could receive any service. (p. 91)

Through those family stories, Seay learned about the corrupt sharecropping system, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and the reasons why so many Black migrated to the north. However, Seay realized that she had "received the majoritarian whitewashed version of these events [about Blacks in the U. S. South] in [her] high school American History class" (p. 93). Seay similarly came to understand that the lived experiences of her family produced numerous unheard counter-stories (Seay, 2013, p. 93) that helped her to develop strategies of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance (Solórzano &Yosso, 2009). Seay affirmed:

The counter-stories of survival and resistance of my family are numerous. They tell their experiences of racism through the use of narratives and these stories expose and challenge the stories told by the dominant group (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). These stories are not based on the dominant group version of what happened to them. The dominant group has considerable control over what knowledge is accepted as truth and more often than not, they have written and interpreted the experiences of Black people. My father refuses to watch movies about slavery, Jim Crow days or the Civil Right Movement. He says he lived it every day and he does not need others to define his

reality for him because he knows what occurred and how it affected his family and him. (p. 96)

In some ways, Seay felt the same as her father. She had been an educator for eighteen years and she knew what happened to black male students who did not conform or were not measured up to the standards executed in schools. As she dived into culturally congruent theoretical traditions and methodologies, she viewed herself as a "connected knower" (Collins, 2009) of the politics and injustices that operated in her schools every day. As someone who had lived through these experiences, Seay felt that her perspective could more credible than someone who had not lived through them (Collins, 2009). Thus, she decided to use counter-storytelling to challenge "the majoritarian whitewashed version of these events" to articulate her lived experiences working with Black males and to illustrate ways schools hindered their academic achievement and contributed to their plight (pp. 96-97).

Nevertheless, Seay realized that using pseudonyms was insufficient to protect the identities of those Black males who shared their untold and silenced stories. To resolve this dilemma, Seay was invited to read some exemplary counterstory telling texts (e.g., Bell, 1990; Delgado, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2009; Jacobs, 1861/2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nettles, 2012) and fictions (Avi, 2010; Doll, 2000; Ellison, 1947/1994; He, 2003; Hurston, 1937/1965/2000; Morrison, 1970; Walker, 1982; Wright, 1944/1989) with the intent to study the complicated and creative ways of counterstory telling. Seay created five composite characters and fictionalized settings, events, time, and places based on her lived experiences with Black males in families, communities, neighborhoods, and schools. Creating composite characters and fictionizing settings, events, time, and places enabled Black males to tell their silenced counterstories that challenge the official or meta-narrative or majoritarian stories and empower them to understand the sources of racism,

discrimination, inequality, inequity, and injustice within racialized, commodified, and politicalized schools and societies (Kozol, 1992).

Turning Social Justice Curriculum Inquiry into Actions

Looking through the lens of critical race theory, Seay is able to recognize the intersectionality of institutional racism and obstacles with other forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) that hinder Black males' academic achievement and push them further to the margins. She is able to challenge deficit discourse (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mcwhorter, 2001; Ogbu, 1990, Ogbu & Simons, 1998) to illustrate how public schools and policies perpetuate the underachievement of Black males by denying their access to critical literacy and equitable opportunities. Seay is able to see public schools as racialized spaces that reproduce power structures and perpetuate inequalities that negatively affect Black males' academic achievement. She recognizes that historically Black males have been denied access to literacy and equitable opportunities and burdened by hardships, disadvantages, and vulnerabilities. She also recognizes how racism poisons every aspect of lives of these Black males in schools, communities and neighborhoods and how *the permanence of racism* (Bell, 1992) perpetrates suppressive stereotypes, prejudice, meritocracy, white privilege, testing, tracking, deficit theories, and discipline policies that imprison Black males' minds and bodies and sabotage hopes and dreams for their success in learning and life.

Seay's personal~passionate~participatory inquiry inspires her to develop critical pedagogy (Friere, 2000; Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren, 1998; Wink, 2005) that helps raise critical race consciousness (hooks, 2010) within Black males and empowers them to understand their locations and responsibilities in schools and societies and to develop strategies to fight against injustices. Her social justice inquiry provokes her to develop a

culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995) of caring and justice where educators cultivate critical race consciousness within themselves and others; where educators strategically and creatively educate policy makers and work with students, parents, and other members of school communities to fight against all forms of oppression, suppression, and repression and to create hopes, dreams, and equal opportunities for all to reach their highest human potential (Siddle-Walker, 1996). Instead of disciplining their bodies and imprisoning their minds, Seay calls for educators to create an environment where Black males and many others are motivated, organized, and liberated to become active participants and positive changing agents in cultivating invigorating and equitable human conditions in an unjust world.

Possibilities for Social Justice Inquiry

Social justice inquiries (He & Ayers, 2009; He & Phillion, 2008; He & Ross, 2012; He, Scott-Simmons, Haynes, & Tennial, 2010; He et al., 2013), such as the one engaged in by Katrana Seay, create tensions in our lives and multiply our sense of belonging (hooks, 2009) and displacement as we work with our students in predominantly white rural areas. Tensions arise when we ground our research and writing in the intersectionality of culturally congruent epistemologies, research phenomena, inquiry contexts, modes of inquiry, forms of representation, and possible educational and social changes. Tensions arise when we question whose knowledge should be considered valid and how experience should be interpreted, theorized, and represented (He & Ayers, 2009; He & Phillion, 2008; He & Ross, 2013).

Tensions arise when we search for autobiographical and cultural roots of inquiries; bring personal, professional, and cultural experience to research; let participants name research problems and define research questions; immerse ourselves in the lives of participants in various cultural milieus as we collect counterstories, oral histories, or other forms of information; and make

meaning of inquiries in relationship with participants with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Tensions arise when we draw from our culturally congruent theoretical traditions to search critical ways to look at, think about, and write about our inquiries. Tensions arise when the research methodologies chosen by our students, such as "critical race narrative inquiry" and "slave narrative," are dismissed and ridiculed for lack of objectivity, rationality, and legitimacy, and when they are taught to use systematic computerized data analyses to analyze the vulnerable counterstories they feel responsible to collect and tell with passions and heartfelt concerns for the people and places in the plight under study. Tensions arise when we confront issues of equity, equality, and social justice in our research and demand positive social and educational change.

In spite of these tensions, social justice research creates possibilities. While experiencing "the type of methodological discomfort, awkwardness, and frustration" (Alemán Jr., Bernal, & Mendoza, 2013, p. 325), social justice research could be rewarding when we see that our students are able to recognize the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of oppression and find ways to fight back with grace and energy; when we see that they are able to use their wisdoms and strategies to challenge the dominant ideology of objectivity, rationality, and neutrality in research; when we see that they are able to recognize various ways that oppression is resisted and develop creative insubordination strategies to make positive changes for the people and places under study; when we see that they are able to center the lived, everyday, experiences of disenfranchised, underrepresented, and invisible groups and individuals to expose deficit-based research; when we see that they become passionate, committed, and unfaltering advocates for disenfranchised, underrepresented, and invisible groups and individuals against all forms of adversities, injustices, and suppressions (e.g., Carlyle, 2010; Faulkner, 2012; Haynes, 2008, 2015; Janis, 2012, 2015; Mabray, 2012; Mitchell, 2009; Mikell,

2011, 2012, 2015; Pantin, 2012; Scott-Simmons, 2008, 2012; Seay, 2013; Tennial, 2008).

However, this reward takes risks and demands that we engage in social justice inquiries with our hearts and minds. Social justice research demands educational researchers to recognize that research is a racialized, gendered, and classed space and researchers are racialized, gendered, and classed bodies that could reproduce and perpetuate damage centered research (Tuck, 2009) on, and racism, sexism, classism, and other discriminations against, underrepresented and misrepresented individuals and groups. Social justice research demands educational researchers to "research with a heart" (He & Ayers, 2009), to "[disrupt and unsettle] the-taken-for-granted [research] goals and purposes" (Dillard, 2000, p. 662), to embody, politicize, and humanize the experience of people, spaces, and places under study. Social justice research demands educational researchers to advocate for individuals, groups, families, tribes, communities, and societies that are often at controversy, underrepresented, misrepresented, or excluded in the official narrative (Ayers, 2004a, b, 2006). Social justice research demands educational researchers to build solidarities with other social justice workers in schools, communities, neighborhoods, and tribes to create a culture of resistance (hooks, 2003), to build up courage, and to create spaces of radical hope, love, and justice (Schubert, 2009) in the midst of contested theories, methodologies, practices, and contexts to develop creative strategies to "transgress orthodoxies and enact educational and social change that fosters equity, equality, freedom, and social justice" (He, Scott-Simmons, Haynes, & Tennial, 2010, p. 220) and to build a participatory movement to promote a more balanced and equitable human condition through personal and political acts of teaching, inquiring, and living in an unjust world.

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