Kelly Sassi and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas

Walking the Talk: Examining Privilege and Race in a Ninth-Grade Classroom

Kelly Sassi and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas describe their struggles and eventual success with students in constructing a "counternarrative to colormuteness and colorblindness"—the self-imposed student segregation and silencing of voice. Because of discussions during a Native American unit and student participation in a classroom intervention activity, interpersonal dynamics openly shifted for the better.

lthough Samuel Callahan owned slaves, he opposed slavery . . ."

"*Stop!*" As Allie's voice trailed off, the silence in the classroom was palpably tense. Today was the first day that Ebony's ninth graders were reading S. Alice Callahan's *Wynema: A Child of the Forest,* the first novel published in the United States by a Native American woman. Together, the class was discussing the introduction. Any member of the group could "stop" at any point in the text they found confusing, surprising, or odd. Allie's stop would prove to be the trigger for a discussion in class that became combative and racially loaded.

What happened in this discussion of a Native American novel is representative of larger trends regarding the role of race in classroom interaction. While all multicultural literature has the potential to bring out tension, research shows that particular kinds of tension, confusion, and anger are associated with Native American literatures.[1] It is also typical of the kind of tension and confusion that surrounds the teaching of Native American literatures (Burlingame; McLaughlin). Ebony wondered if she should expose herself and her students to the ensuing storm or remain silent. What was the right thing to do?

The Challenge

During her seventh year as a language arts teacher, Ebony began to consider issues of race and class much more critically when she accepted an assignment at a new school. Initially, she was astounded by the heterogeneity of Rainfield High School.[2] In her three ninth-grade English classes, there were students from many different faiths and from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including multiracial families. Socioeconomic backgrounds ranged from upper middle class to poverty. Nearly one-quarter of students were identified as having special learning needs. A few were English language learners, and many spoke different dialects of English. The challenge for Ebony was to find a way to turn her diverse classroom into a cohesive learning community. How could she best meet the needs of her students as individuals, and yet at the same time encourage them to find common ground on the social justice issues that the literature would foreground?

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In the fall of 2005, racial tensions were flaring at a variety of levels—internationally, Paris was exploding with race uprisings; nationally, there was the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and the death of civil rights movement pioneer Rosa Parks. Adolescents were acutely aware of conversations about these events, which extended into popular culture (e.g., hip-hop icon Kanye West's charge that "George Bush doesn't care about Black people"). At the state level, there was a ballot

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initiative to end affirmative action. At the local level, the school district was scrambling to close the racial achievement gap between African American students and their White counterparts on test scores. Within the school, there were increasing interracial tensions between staff members and among students.

There were tensions within Ebony's classroom as well. An African American female student came to her in tears after a class when a White male classmate had read a section about Crooks in *Of Mice and Men* mimicking an African American Vernacular English dialect. In turn, several White male students voiced their displeasure with having to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* because of the gender of the protagonist and the nature of the Tom Robinson trial. Research in secondary English classroom interaction reveals that many teachers attempt to establish through discourse what Australian language and literacy educator Frances Christie terms "a shared reader position . . . a very strong requirement that students and teachers achieve consensus about [a] novel and its themes as a basis for proceeding further" (161). Ebony soon learned that establishing any shared reader position when it came to understanding race relations in literature and in society was difficult.

By the start of the second semester, Ebony, as an African American, female teacher, felt a responsibility to introduce her students to more multicultural literature in the classroom. Kelly, a White, female, beginning researcher and former high school English teacher, was looking for a classroom teacher to pilot a unit on Native American literatures. Ebony felt that Kelly's research would provide an opportunity to reflect on the challenges of this class where students self-segregated for group and whole-class instruction according to race and gender. Most notably, the African American female students sat together at the back of the room and generally did not speak in class discussions. And she couldn't help but wonder, Why are all the Black kids sitting together, not just in the cafeteria [as Beverly Daniel Tatum questions] but in my classroom?

The objective of the privilege walk is to help students understand the nature of privilege. Students line up across the middle of the room, the facilitator reads a series of statements, and students take steps forward or backward depending on whether the statement applies to them.

All of these tensions were present in the silence after Allie said, "Stop." Then the powder keg exploded. Several White male students asserted that slavery benefited African Americans and was not "evil" like other human tragedies such as the Holocaust. According to them, slavery was a purely economic decision on the part of the Southern planters. The other students in the classroom were silent. After the period was over, two of the White male students told Ebony that they did not appreciate talking about such matters, although they had done most of the talking. One of her students, Ratsa, a blond female student of Mexican heritage, gave Ebony a long handwritten letter after the tense period was over, stating firmly that "the class was going in the wrong direction." Ebony was crushed. The next day, as she processed the incident, she wrote to Kelly in an email message, "Put simply, although I have power and authority over my students as an African American female teacher, the fact remains that my students' remarks come from a place of White male privilege."

Ebony believed that she had done the right thing by choosing to teach *Wynema* and learn along with her students about the group that is arguably the most marginalized in the American literary canon. But how could she expand students' notions of diversity to include Native American issues while also dealing with the layers of interracial tension already present in her classroom?

An Intervention: The Privilege Walk

After the "powder keg" day, Ebony and Kelly talked about risks in intervening but agreed that before continuing with the unit some kind of intervention was necessary. To that end, they decided to take a risk and have students participate in an intervention activity that they would not facilitate. Instead, they brought in a diversity consultant from the university to engage students in a privilege walk. In this activity, space is used to visually represent the racial, gender, sexual, and socioeconomic differences among the students in the class. The objective of the privilege walk is to help students understand the nature of privilege. Students line up across the middle of the room, the facilitator reads a

series of statements, and students take steps forward or backward depending on whether the statement applies to them. Sample statements include, "If you were ever discouraged from academics or jobs because of race, class, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, take one step back" and "If your family ever inherited money or property, take one step forward."

When the facilitator read the first statement, the students eagerly began moving forward or backward. As students responded physically and visibly to each of the facilitator's statements, their eagerness subsided, and a new spatial arrangement of the classroom appeared. The attachment of discourse to spatial patterns ("If your ancestors were forced to come to the United States not by choice, take one step backward") makes those patterns visible, and thus, less easy to ignore.

At the end of the walk, the White male students were at the front of the room, having run out of space to take any more steps forward, and the female African American students were at the back of the classroom, having run out of space to move backward. During the activity, the students were unusually quiet. When the facilitator invited students to discuss their reactions, there were no responses until the following:

> **Facilitator:** What do you observe and what do you think happened?
>
> **Student:** A lot of discrimination.
>
> **Facilitator:** A lot of discrimination by . . . ?
>
> **Student:** Because of color or race.
>
> **Facilitator:** Because of color or race. OK, anybody else to add to that? What happened? What do you think happened? And how did this exercise make you feel? It's an open-ended question. How did it make you feel?
>
> **Ratsa:** Kind of sickened.
>
> **Facilitator:** Why?
>
> **Ratsa:** Because everyone says that like the White male is upper in society and obviously from this, it looks like this, because they're all up front, and uh, yeah . . . .

Ratsa usually had no problem expressing views counter to the majority of the group, but her reluctance to speak was palpable, as she ended her statement with "uh" and "yeah." Students seemed unwilling to acknowledge who was at the front of the walk (the White male students). When the facilitator made a leading comment—"A lot of discrimination *by . . .*"—another student sidestepped the question; instead of naming *who* might be doing the discriminating, the student instead said *how* there could be discrimination—"because of color or race"—which continued to avoid assigning agency.

The facilitator commented on the silence: "You're a very quiet class." When Kelly said that was "unusual" for this group, the facilitator followed up on that until finally, Allie, a White female, suggested that it might be unusual because it was an "awkward" situation.

> **Facilitator:** Why is it an awkward situation?
>
> **Allie:** Because it visually shows . . . now don't take any offense . . . it visually shows us the racial differences in our classroom. Usually it's not like that. We're all sitting down and we all kind of contribute. It's not any . . . like . . . and this shows us the racial divide in the classroom. But it's an awkward situation and knowing . . . and every time someone took a step backward you knew that they were. It was like a worse-off situation or that they had been through something else that you haven't experienced.

Tatum writes that it is easier not to notice that Black students are sitting together in the cafeteria (or to attribute it to other reasons) because to do so would mean one would have to acknowledge the racism that shapes this seating arrangement.

Allie's assertion that the privilege walk "visually shows us the racial differences in our classroom" is an interesting one because in the customary seating arrangement prior to this day, racial differences were quite visual—all of the African American girls sat together at the back of the classroom. Perhaps because this seating arrangement was both voluntary and expected, given the racial climate of the school, the phenomenon was not visible to students. Tatum writes that it is easier not to notice that Black students are sitting together in the cafeteria (or to attribute it to other reasons) because to do so would mean one would have to acknowledge the racism that shapes this seating arrangement.

Another notable part of Allie's response is the phrase "we all kind of contribute." In her field notes, Kelly recorded that this was not the case during multiple class sessions. Prior to the privilege walk, the African American girls spoke more to each other privately than to their classmates in whole-class discussions. Who is the "we" in Allie's response? If she is speaking for all of the class, her statement is not accurate. Is the "we" just the White students in class? Allie's qualification, the "kind of" in "we all *kind of* contribute," changes her statement and suggests that perhaps Allie herself recognizes almost subconsciously that not everyone has been equally contributing to class discussion.

After Allie's comment, the students opened up more. Keanna, an African American girl, spoke, but in a barely audible tone of voice: "I thought it was just me. This shows me that other students have had a hard time just like I have." Another African American girl, Tasleem, said, "Just because no one talks about it doesn't mean it's not going on," echoing the words of a female African American teacher at a staff meeting: "We have to talk about it because it is going on." The "it" in both of these statements refers, of course, to race. The majority of those who spoke were at the back of the privilege walk, and typically, most of those students rarely spoke in the class. Another teacher who was observing the activity said in a later interview:

> The thing that was most striking to me seemed to be the African American students' gladness at being able to share some of these hard parts of their lives, claim them because they didn't have to say this happened to me. Someone else put forth, "Have you ever had this happen in your family?" and they would be considered bad things, hard things to deal with and yet, the African Americans, especially the girls as I'm recalling, that were right over by me, they were just claiming those. And it felt to me like they were relieved to be able to just declare this in a situation that was as safe as it was.

The unusual silence of the students was a *listening* kind of silence in the rhetorical sense. Rhetorical listening involves "a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture" (Ratcliffe 17; italics in original). Its purpose is to cultivate conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication, especially but not solely cross-culturally (17). Students seemed to be taking a stance of openness—would this activity bring the class together or, as a student wrote, would it draw it apart?

The written reflections gave students an opportunity to process what they had just experienced. The prompt was simple: write "a response" to the experience of participating in the privilege walk. Kelly analyzed the student responses using Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's 6-facet model of understanding, which includes explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge (84; see fig. 1).

The most common kinds of understanding that appeared in the students' written responses were those of empathy and self-knowledge. Arthur

FIGURE 1. Types of Understanding

Facet of understanding	Wiggins and McTighe's definitions
explanation	"sophisticated and apt theories and illustrations, which provide knowledgeable and justified accounts of events, actions, and ideas" (85)
interpretation	"interpretations, narratives, and translations that provide meaning" (88)
application	"ability to use knowledge effectively in new situations and diverse, realistic contexts" (92)
perspective	"critical and insightful points of view" (95)
empathy	"the ability to get inside another person's feelings and worldview" (98)
self-knowledge	"the wisdom to know one's ignorance and how one's patterns of thought and action inform as well as prejudice understanding" (100)

wrote, "I learned that some are affected in life more than others because of their race, ethnicity, and gender, some who are not male suffer more and have more difficult experiences in life, just like those of a different background." Another White male, Zeb, wrote, "The privilege walk was very interesting, and it really made me realize that there are some people that are not as privileged, and they have to go through a lot more than I thought."

Examples of self-knowledge show varying kinds of understanding. For example, while a White male student, Greg, said, "To me, it was surprising how many were in the back," two African American students were not at all surprised. Lyric said, "I thought that the privilege walk was not at all shocking," and Tasleem stated, "I wasn't surprised when I saw that most of the white kids were in the front of the class and the black students were way in the back. If somebody would have made me predict, I would have gotten everything correct." Tasleem's comment is an example of how the oppressed always know more about the oppressor than vice versa, or as Ratcliffe paraphrases Nikki Giovanni: "listening is not as necessary in U.S. culture for white people as it is for non-whites" (21). The privilege walk gave the White students in class an explicit opportunity to listen, and it gave the African American students a chance to be heard and seen, disrupting what Mica Pollock calls "colormuteness," or personal and political efforts to delete race talk from schools.

Other examples of student understanding that exemplified self-knowledge showed an acknowledgment of race issues as complex. For example, Keanna pointed out, "I've been discriminated against by my own race before." Zeb acknowledged that the activity made visible what is usually hidden: "You may think there is no racism left, but it goes to show that there is still a lot of it, you just can't see most of it in your everyday life." Arthur also demonstrated understanding of the invisibility of race issues in their lives: "This shows that racism still lives, not in the open, but in other ways." Because the activity did raise students' consciousness about race (and class and gender and sexual orientation issues), some students began to reflect on what they could do. Carl wrote, "I think discrimination usually goes away with generations, but sometimes more action is necessary." These students finally seemed to be ready to meet the teacher partway in her social justice agenda.

However, not all the responses were so positive. Three of the students—all White males—were evaluative in their written responses. One of the responses was positive, one was negative, and one was mixed. Greg wrote, "I felt that the privilege walk was a cool experiment." Chuck disagreed: "I felt that this activity was unnecessary because I already know about other people's status as well as mine. This just made people feel bad about how they grew up. . . . My friends and I know about the things that happen. We didn't need them to go public." Chuck's written response is an example of the colormuteness that the privilege walk sought to disrupt. Brandon's response was mixed: "This is a great lesson activity and works really well, but I have a few problems with it. I think there is a slight moral issue with teaching kids about discriminating systems by slamming a label on each and every one of them. Maybe you could hand out cards that designate your temporary race and class. Just a thought." Brandon's word choice, "slamming," conveys his sense that he has been done a violence by being labeled. His idea of handing out cards to assign a temporary race and class is an interesting idea and suggests that participating in the activity with his actual identity was uncomfortable. While Ebony valued her White male students' candid responses to their discomfort during the privilege walk, she felt that walking out the identities that they lived in everyday life was critical to the success of the activity. If they had been allowed to assume alternate identities, the power of the privilege walk would have been muted—along with the voices of the most marginalized students in the class.

Talk about race and culture continued after the privilege walk day. An interesting spatial change took place in the classroom: a desegregation. The African American girls quit sitting together at the back of the classroom and moved to the front and sides of the classroom, a change that persisted to the end of the school year. Along with spatial changes, there were discursive changes. The previously common storyline—*we don't need to talk about race*—also changed, and students, especially the African American students, talked about race

nearly every day, a move made easier by the issues of race raised in *Wynema*. Ebony made herself vulnerable to the students by revealing that she would have been at the back of the privilege walk, behind everyone else in the class. By revealing her working-class, inner-city background to her students, Ebony realigned power in the classroom by positioning all students as privileged relative to her. This in turn may have encouraged the students to open up. Students who had some experience with or thought deeply about race and culture spoke more often during the Native American unit than those who did not. As the unit progressed, both African American and White students began to reveal their Native American ancestry. This racial and cultural identity, though not especially strong, is interesting in that it offered a third space for students to perform their identities, which diverted tension from the Black/White binary in the classroom.

Conclusion

What happened in this classroom offers a counternarrative to colormuteness and colorblindness that merely perpetuate societal inequities. More than colorblindness, when it comes to Native Americans, our country has a history of treating them as invisible, for only in doing so has the movement of empire been possible. Although Ebony's first impulse was to quit teaching the Native American novel *Wynema,* instead she chose to engage students in an intervention—the privilege walk—which opened a dialogue about race. Language about cultural background—that of the Muscogee Creek author, the teacher, the students, and the community—is of great importance to students' understanding, not just during a Native American unit but also across the curriculum. In this ninth-grade class, the African American girls who were silently sitting in the back spoke up and moved forward, essentially desegregating this classroom. We felt this was healing and transformative for us and the students. When students learn to talk in a desegregated classroom, there is potential for them to desegregate their schools, their communities and, we hope, eventually our country.

Notes

1. Even naming literature by Native Americans or American Indians is problematic. In public schools, the politically correct term is *Native American literature,* but many people whose work is described by the term object to it. For example, Sherman Alexie, a Spokane Indian, describes *Native American* as a "guilty white liberal term" ("Artist," par. 1). A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff, a noted scholar in the field, agrees with Alexie and argues for pluralizing literature to highlight that the term encompasses the literatures of over four hundred distinct language and cultural groups. Shari M. Huhndorf notes that "Although this fact is frequently overlooked, Native American comprises Indians and other groups of indigenous peoples as well, including Alaskan Eskimos, Canadian Inuit, Aleuts, and Native Hawaiians (all non-Indians). 'Native' can refer to all or any one of these groups, while 'Indian' is a more specific term" (1). In her dissertation, Kelly has chosen to use both terms: *Native American/American Indian.* For this article, we have chosen *Native American* because it reflects the conventions of this journal and achieves the inclusiveness Huhndorf calls for. In addition, like Ruoff and others, we also pluralize *literature* to signal the wide range of works that fall under this label.

2. The name of the school and names of students are pseudonyms.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION **Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

Sassi and Thomas were searching for ways to incorporate multicultural literature into the classroom. "Assessing Cultural Relevance: Exploring Personal Connections to a Text" asks students to evaluate a nonfiction or realistic fiction text for its cultural relevance to themselves personally and as a group. After completing this full-class activity, students search for additional, personally relevant texts; each chooses one; and they write reviews of the texts that they chose. The texts that students analyze can be books, documentaries, television programs, and films. This lesson is an especially powerful choice for English language learners. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1003

EJ **25** Years Ago

Defend a Book for Its Morality, Not Its Literary Quality

English teachers are prone to defend a controversial book on the basis of literary merit rather than moral worth. That is like defending a prisoner on the basis of his achievements when he has been charged with murder. He may be an outstanding engineer, but it won't convince a jury he did not murder his wife. Likewise, though a book may have many character witnesses as to its literary quality, unless we address the issue of morality, we will not convince critics, judges, or the public that it should remain in the classroom.

June Edwards. "Censorship in the Schools: What's Moral about *The Catcher in the Rye*?" *EJ* 72.4 (1983): 39–42.