Picturing Obama: Race, High School Students and a Critical Methodology of the Visual

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Abstract

I draw on methodological findings from a case study on how high school students of color make sense of dominant narratives of race and politics in the Obama American Era. Incorporating literature from critical race theory, visual research methods, and the writings of cultural scholar Stuart Hall, I draw conclusions from this inquiry project as a means for offering a practical instantiation of critical race research through the use of visuals and a new avenue for considering Foucault's notion of parrhesia in qualitative inquiry.

Objectives

I draw on methodological findings from a case study on how high school students of color make sense of dominant narratives of race and politics in the Obama American Era. Incorporating literature from critical race theory, visual research methods, and the writings of cultural scholar Stuart Hall, I draw conclusions from this inquiry project as a means for offering a practical instantiation of critical race research through the use of visuals and a new avenue for considering Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* in qualitative inquiry.

Context

In 2013**,** *New York* magazine published a photograph of President Obama standing in a doorway at the infamous House of Slaves on Goreé Island in Senegal, gazing across the Atlantic (Amira, 2013). This photograph ran beneath the headline, "Photo of President Obama Perfectly Encapsulates Two Centuries of Racial Progress." Such an image, I would argue, exemplifies the prevalent narratives of racial progress and post-racialism that surrounded Obama and the 2008 election. In the months leading up to that election, and in the plethora of analyses after, public discourse on President Obama often centered on the historic nature of his election and the possibility of a resulting post-racial American age (Adjei & Gill, 2013; Bell, 2009; Tesler & Sears, 2010). Bobo (2011) described this post-racial ethos as one in which American society has "genuinely moved beyond race, so much so that we as a nation are now ready to transcend the disabling racial divisions of the past. From this perspective, nothing symbolizes better the moment of transcendence than Obama's election as president" (p. 14). For many, Barack Obama's election came

to represent a tale in which an exceptional individual heroically carried the nation beyond the ugly racial divisions of its past (Nelson, 2009; Vaughn & Mercieca, 2014).

An interesting corollary to the heroic undertones to the Obama campaign and early presidency was the role of visuals in aiding, and at times critiquing, that narrative. Beginning with Shepard Fairey's iconic red and blue image of Obama that came to symbolize hope and change for the Obama campaign (Forman, 2010), the American public was inundated with images of Obama to a degree likely unparalleled in U.S. presidential history. Barack Obama picture books (Nel, 2010), comics (Weiner & Barba, 2012; Yanes, 2012), album covers (Forman, 2010), and graffiti street art (Schneider, 2012) helped define Barack Obama as what Kellner (2009) called "a master of the spectacle and global celebrity of the first rank" (p. 717), a celebrity status which his political opponents also sought to use against him (Heileman & Halperin, 2010). This saturation of media and popular culture with Obama's likeness contributed to a mythology around his significance and symbolic importance for the nation.

Critical Race Theory

These intersecting notions of racialization and representation, colorblindness and racial progress in the post-Civil-Rights Era all touch on various aspects of a broad critical race paradigm in the social sciences (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Deriving from legal studies, critical race theory (CRT) centers race and ethnicity as constructs for examining a range of social phenomena and has been used widely to examine the centrality of race in ordering educational opportunities for students in schools (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998).[1] Concerned with the slow pace of racial progress in the U.S. in the mid-1970s, legal scholars like Derek Bell and Alan Freeman began to develop an approach to legal work that eschewed traditional approaches, preferring more pointed, radical critiques (Ladson-Billings, 1999). From this early work, a small cadre of legal scholars developed CRT as a method for centering race in research on legal studies (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993). As originally defined by these authors, six elements characterize the CRT framework:

1. CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. CRT expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy.
3. CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law.
4. CRT insists on the recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color …
5. CRT is interdisciplinary and eclectic.
6. CRT works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

While others have presented variations on these tenets of CRT, such as in Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) naming a social justice commitment as a central theme, or Allen's (2006) inclusion of greater emphasis on White supremacy and global contexts, the literature on CRT has broadly ascribed to Matsuda et al.'s (1993) original call for new methodologies and new priorities to work toward eliminating racism in the post-Civil-Rights Era. And while the theory had primarily been

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1. I generally refer only to critical race theory and omit references to other group-specific critical theories like LatCrit and AsianCrit in an effort to maintain a more general approach to how race operates in the lives of a racially diverse group of students.

applied to research involving the experiences of African Americans, recent decades have seen an expansion of the use of CRT beyond the Black-White racial binary. A range of critical theories has arisen to address the particular experiences of other traditionally-marginalized populations, including AsianCrit (Teranishi, 2002), Native American-centered TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), and LatCrit (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

In all cases, a central feature of CRT research is the notion of counterstorytelling, whereby those from traditionally marginalized groups offer personal narratives that aim to subvert harmful stories held by the majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The majoritarian narratives in the U.S., such as meritocracy and post-racialism, act as powerful discursive tools for maintaining the superiority of the dominant racial group (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), in part by portraying racial hierarchies as natural or as a product of cultural deficiencies among those in the "outgroup" (Delgado, 1989).

As a final, methodological note on this framework, CRT and other race critical theories do not prescribe a defined set of research methods (Sandlin, 2002); they orient the researcher to work that empowers the participants toward awareness, voice, and resistance of racism and oppression (Dunbar, 2008; Fernández, 2002; Smith-Maddux & Solórzano, 2002). As I argue below, the use of visuals provided a practical method for employing CRT towards this goal of participant empowerment and Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). A critical visual research methodology, I contend, creates space for participant truth-telling, despite the inherent dangers of such discourse in the context of their predominantly White high school.

Stuart Hall

The work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, though generally not associated with CRT per se, nonetheless provides an apt conceptual addendum to a CRT study of race, politics, and youth. As Hall (1997) notes, events are given meaning only through (re)presentation, with the visual image serving as "the saturating medium of mankind." For Hall (1997), visuals have no inherent meaning but rather reflect the ways in which people and society integrate those images into everyday life. He writes, "Representation is conceived as entering in the very constitution of things; and thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or 'constitutive' process…not merely a reflection of the world after the event" (p. 5-6). With the postmodern turn in social science research came this critique of the image and its narrative as socially constructed, with the production and interpretation of images working in concert to affix meanings (Spencer, 2011).

Hall was particularly concerned with the ways in which images and meanings connected to notions of power and difference. As Spencer (2011) argues, images have historically been associated with maintaining institutionalized hierarchies, with social science research playing a significant role in using visuals to establish categories and hierarchies of racial groups. Consider, for example, Gould's (1996) work on Morton's *Crania Americana* and the associated drawings of "Negro" skulls. In more contemporary contexts, Hall argues that images of marginalized groups, such as racial minorities, often portray binaries of representation—good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/attractive and exotic. These binaries, he argues, contribute to a system of imagery that defines difference and otherness, a system Hall terms a "regime of representation" (p. 232).

Despite the use of these "racial regimes of representation" (p. 249) as tools for oppression and marginalization, Hall's writings offer a glimmer of hope precisely in the constructed nature of images and their connection to power. Drawing on Foucault, Hall suggests that having a powerful claim to truth can be constitutive, can make itself true. Thus, reimagining Truth may lie in the infusion of counter-images—just like counternarratives—that offer substantially new meanings of

marginalized groups. Hall offers three mechanisms for such counterstorytelling, including images that reverse stereotypes (what he calls "revenge images"), images that substitute positive representations for negative ones, and finally acts that call into question the limits of visual representation in general. Responding to harmful "regimes of representation," then, lies in the visual itself and the mutability of its meanings.

To return to the introduction, images such as the photo of President Obama on Goreé Island have no fixed meaning, Hall would contend, beyond those meanings that are negotiated through political and ideological power. Obama's election represented, at the very least, a momentous occasion that necessitates the re-thinking of majoritarian narratives (Delgado, 1989) of race and racial politics in the U.S. (Glaude, 2010, Powell, 2009), with the visual playing a powerful role in shaping the meaning of race and the "endless process of being constantly re-signified" (Hall, 1997, p. 8). Drawing on both the power of images as a cultural and sociological force (Hall, 1997), as well as the importance of imagery to Obama's own campaign and presidency (Schneider, 2012), I employed the visual as a methodological component in my inquiry into Obama's significance for young people of color in the U.S.

Visual Research Methods

As part of a broad case study (Yin, 2014) into how high school students of color make sense of these shifting (or not) racial tides in U.S. society, I incorporated elements of visual research methods into the counterstorytelling process (Harper, 2002) of critical race research. In following the lead of other prominent researchers concerned with how students construct personal and historical narratives (Epstein, 2009; Schmidt, 2013; Wineburg, 2001), I included visuals in the process of data collection, akin to what Harper (2002) describes as *visual sociology*. The participants—Ella (African American female), Adam (Palestinian American male), Ana and Yareli (Latina), and Ronald (African American male)—were all high school seniors at the time of data collection.[2] Despite living in low-income areas of the mid-sized Texas city where the study took place, the students attended Winston High School, a predominantly White institution in a suburban area of this urban district. As I describe in *The School Environment* section below, my participants' experiences at this predominantly White institution mirrored the writings about other students of color in similar settings, including stories of social and academic marginalization, racial microaggressions, and a pronounced silence on direct conversation about race-related issues at school (Chapman, 2013; Diamond, 2006; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Lewis, 2003).

During one of my interviews with each participant, I used a strategy called *photo elicitation* to spur students' thinking and discussion on these topics of race and Obama (Banks, 2001; Spencer, 2011). Prosser and Schwartz (1998) describe photo elicitation as the use of "a single or sets of photographs assembled by the researcher on the basis of prior analysis and selected with the assumption that the chosen images will have some significance for interviewees." These authors also note that such images can be strategically chosen by the researcher/educator with the hope of inspiring responses or particular feelings. They write that this approach "does not draw on the ambiguous nature of an image but is purposefully provocative and disruptive and is intended to elicit suppressed views" (p. 124).

Visual research also aims to upend some of the researcher-participant hierarchies present in traditional social science research (Banks, 1998; Chilisa, 2012) by placing greater control into the hands of the storyteller/participants. As Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) write,

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2. All names are pseudonyms.

 Research subjects are not treated (or refuse to act) merely as containers of information that is extracted by the research investigator and then analyzed and assembled elsewhere. Rather, the introduction of photographs effectively exercise agency, causing people to do and think things they had forgotten, or to see things they had always known in a new way. (p. 93)

Thomas and O'Kane (1998) similarly argue that a number of the ethical concerns with conducting research with children can be mitigated through the use of hands-on, participatory methods, including production and analysis of data. Waldron (2006), writes, "Acknowledging children's capacity to generate worthwhile and meaningful data through participative research methodologies is, perhaps, the least challenging and most generally accepted aspect of democratizing research with children" (p. 90). While my participants may dispute the "children" label, Cannella and Lincoln (2007) discuss the historical commonality of experiences as researched "Others" among women, children, people of color, and other formerly colonized and marginalized communities. Thus, while a number of scholars within social science have argued that visuals hold the potential for unlocking otherwise withheld opinions and beliefs (Barton, 2015, Prosser & Schwartz, 1998), here I seek to demonstrate this possibility empirically and offer the method as an avenue for conducting critical race research with students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds.

Study Design

As part of this case study into public racial narratives in the Obama American Era, I introduced an element of photo elicitation into the inquiry process with student participants. Specifically, I gathered a collection of 35 images of Barack Obama, representing a diverse set of time periods, contexts, perspectives and media. The images ranged from portraits of a young Barack with his family members to President Obama alongside heads of state. The list included more candid photos, such as one of then-candidate Obama playing basketball, and cartoon drawings, like the famed *New Yorker* cover portraying Barack in Arab Muslim garb and Michelle Obama as a militant Black Power fighter. There were also more laudatory images, as with *Jet Magazine's* cover photo of a dark-sunglasses-wearing President Obama emerging from a limousine under the title, "Black Cool: The 25 Coolest Brothers of All Time." Finally, I included in the roster a sampling of the many artist-manipulated images to be found online, such as a drawing that melded the portraits of Barack Obama and Abraham Lincoln to create a single face with characteristics of each man.

I selected these images to provide a wide range of available visual portrayals of Obama with the hope of capturing as many elements of his identity as possible. Some images, such as the Obama-Lincoln mash-up and *New Yorker* cover cartoon, were chosen to be "purposefully provocative and disruptive" (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998, p. 124) for my student participants. As an example of this last point, after showing one student, Ella, the *New Yorker* cover image depicting the Obamas as militant figures, she reacted with, "That's awful! I've never seen that before. I don't know what to think about it" (personal communication, 4/16/15). Another student responded to the same image by asking, "Wasn't there a point where, like, is he American?" (Yareli, personal communication, 4/2/15). Both responses demonstrate the provocative nature of the image. Ella had an immediate, emotional reaction to the cartoon and struggled to make sense of what it signified. The second response similarly provoked an association for the participant—a lingering question about Barack Obama's American-ness—that may otherwise not have surfaced had she not seen

this cartoon image of the president in Arab Muslim garb. In this way, the image allowed for a starting point for deeper conversations about race and identity.

During the image-selection process, I had the sense that certain images would have this "provocative" effect, such as with the *New Yorker* cartoon. However, some images failed to lead to much substantive conversation despite my expectations, as was the case with an artistic mash-up depicting Barack Obama wearing a sideways-tilted San Francisco Giants baseball cap. Others, however, sparked unforeseen reactions. When shown an image of a young Barack standing along-side his mother, most of the participants reacted as Ana did, "It's not his mom…She's White!" (personal communication 4/2/14). This image allowed for a discussion of Obama's mixed racial identity, something most participants had previously not known but were eager to discuss. As a researcher, I was unable to plan with certainty which images would cause particular participant responses, though I ultimately embraced this unexpectedness as an opening for unforeseen areas of conversation.

Practically speaking, I showed the students these images one by one, allowing time in between for the students to ask and answer questions and to make judgments about representation (Clark-Ibañez, 2007). We viewed the images slowly and methodically, pausing when participants had observations or comments, and toggling back and forth between the photos as needed. As I describe in more depth below, photo elicitation provided a common text through which students may have felt more comfortable discussing and attaching personal anecdotes or reflections. As such, I considered the dialogue around the images less in terms of the students' specific interpretations of particular images and more towards sparking discussion and bringing to the fore subtler or suppressed opinions. In other words, my analyses did not focus on whether or not students "correctly" identified the message behind a political cartoon of Obama, for example, but rather on the stories and insights that the cartoon elicited. In each of these image-viewing sessions, after looking at and discussing each image in turn, I then asked the students to choose one of the images that best represented their own, personal impression or image of Barack Obama. I recount the responses to this exercise, as well as our other image-based discussions, in the *Arguments/Findings* section.

The School Environment

It became clear almost immediately that the setting for the study, Winston High School, offered an unwelcoming, and at times inhospitable, environment for students of color and those outside the White, upper-middle-class norm. My questions about times that the students had discussed issues of race and politics in their social studies courses were generally met with blank stares. Ronald summed up the nature of his social studies course content as, "It's all just old politics and Texas history." One African American student, Ella, noted how the subject of race was "not really stressed a whole lot," and the only times race did come up in class were when a teacher asked her to provide insight on the subject. She said, "I don't want to say I'm offended, but I don't feel too comfortable with the fact that they expect me to just know all this Black history, and I'm only 17" (personal communication, 2/28/15). From a curricular standpoint, students came to internalize the school's silence on race-related issues and were at times placed in the potentially risky position of speaking on behalf of their racial group, as Ella described.

One experience suggested that the teachers' silence on race may have resulted from the school culture itself more so than individual teacher decisions. While waiting for an interview with

a student participant, I spent time with a handful of teachers who were eating lunch in the classroom. Unrelated to my own project, the teachers talked about race and their courses, specifically venting about the challenge of addressing race issues with their majority-White student population. The three teachers present agreed that they curbed some of their curricula regarding the Civil Rights Movement and issues like affirmative action for fear of the backlash they would face from resistant White students. These students' collective unwillingness to accept the notion of White privilege also came up frequently in that conversation, further evidence to the teachers that race was a subject that had to be addressed delicately, if at all, at Winston (research journal, 4/30/14).

Despite the absence of race in formal curricular settings, the participants all recounted the myriad ways in which they felt excluded or marginalized by the Winston High School community. Adam, the half-Palestinian student who self-identified as a minority (his term), pointed out what became a common refrain among the conversations with participants: the heightened sense of racial otherness in advanced and AP courses.

> In my IB History class, it's me, you [points at another student], and that's about the only minority you can see. Like that's about it. It's actually quite sad if you think about it: one of us in each corner. (personal communication, 3/28/14)

Along these lines of racial othering at the hands (or mouths) of teachers, students also recounted stories, both personal and from their peer groups, of receiving "level change" forms from teachers, a less-than-subtle suggestion that the students should drop down from their honors or AP course to the "on-level" course. Students at Winston did not need teacher permission to take advanced courses, but receiving a level change form conveyed a powerful message to the students about the teachers' expectations for their success in the advanced course. Adam recalled a more extreme experience of receiving such a level change form in which the teacher added a direct message: "She said, yeah, 'You're not going to amount to anything…if you keep acting like this, keep talking.' I mean, it was the first day of school and we were freshmen!" (personal communication, 4/17/14). In another case, a teacher responded to a White student's outright racist comment to Yareli and a friend by saying, "Guys, calm down," but failed to further address the racist remark (personal communication, 4/2/2014). Adam noted at one point how the school's recently published list of exceptional "Who's Who" seniors did not contain a single student of color, as had also been the case with the Senior Prom Court. Each of these instances—both the overt racist acts and subtler instances of turning a blind eye to racial hierarchies—contributed to a climate of racial exclusion, particularly in the context of academic achievement.

In addition to adverse interactions with school faculty, acts of marginalization stemmed from interactions with other students as well. As part of a written reflection on her experiences at Winston, Yareli wrote:

> Coming from a family with a low economic status and who isn't able to have all the nice things most of the kids at [Winston] have made me feel like my self-worth meant nothing compared to the White kids I'd share the halls with. I never considered myself being smart nor capable of going to college. (written communication, 2/11/14)

Similarly, Ronald reflected,

> Being a minority at [Winston] probably means automatically at first glance your [sic] not a 3.0 student or something in that manner, or the whole you don't act black thing, or "you're not a true Mexican" and things like that sometimes are said. (written communication, 2/11/14)

The students generally did not share stories of outright racism involving their White peers, but they all felt a pronounced sense of subsisting at the bottom of an unspoken racial, socio-economic, and academic hierarchy. This fraught school environment, characterized by both racial silence and racial marginalization, formed the backdrop of my study and provided the opportunities for students to share their views on race in the Obama American Era, discussed in detail below.

Arguments/Findings

As a research technique, photo elicitation, and the use of visuals in general, created powerful opportunities for critical race research in three ways. Below, I describe those three findings and provide illustrative examples for each.

Common Text

First, the examination of visuals provided a common text through which students felt more comfortable discussing and attaching personal anecdotes or reflections. The Obama images facilitated a safe environment in which to broach the subjects of race and racism, topics that had been tacitly constructed as taboo in the students' predominantly White high school. In a previously mentioned example, I showed the students a photo of a young-adult Barack standing with his mother, Ann Dunham. This photo, and the information that Obama had a White mother, led to a number of different reactions from students. Their responses to the image ranged from the confirming, "I knew one of his parents were African American," (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14) to the surprised, "She's White!" (Ana, personal communication, 4/2/14) to the incredulous, "I thought he was just straight Black" (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14).

In each case, though, the image allowed for a starting point for deeper examinations of race and race politics. Ella, for example, said of the photo of Barack and his mother, "I kinda figured that his mom would be the one who is White, just because in most interracial Black-and-White relationships, it's usually the chick that's White and the dude that's Black. That's just kind of how that goes" (personal communication, 4/16/14). In this case, the use of a common image allowed for a discussion of Ella's views on interracial relationships that likely would have otherwise remained hidden or suppressed (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). My interview protocol did not include questions on how the students made sense of interracial marriage, but in this case, the image of Barack Obama and Ann Dunham facilitated that conversation. Ella later shared her own challenges in having social and romantic relationships at Winston High School, a theme she attributed to the unspoken racial divisions in the school that proscribed students' social lives.

Lived Experience

Second, visuals drew upon the student-participants' own lived experiences, as all demonstrated significant prior experience interacting with Obama-related images, particularly in online spaces. For instance, in conversations with Adam, the Palestinian American student, the images I

introduced allowed him to recall other, similar visuals he had come across online. I showed Adam an artist's rendering which depicted the president's face with a slightly askew San Francisco Giants baseball cap on top of his head. Adam had not seen the image before, but he did recall coming across other, similar images on the Internet. "I've seen one where they dress him up in like a Nazi uniform and you see him, oh, he's a Nazi. Stuff like that. Like, they really dress him up in different things" (personal communication, 4/17/14).

In this case, the exact image I put in front of Adam—Barack Obama in a Giants hat—became less salient than the prior experiences and associated beliefs it elicited. After the above statement, Adam continued on to discuss how the images in which Obama was "dress[ed] up" in different ways connected to a general trend of hate-speech and ire directed at the president online. He recalled, too, conversations he had had with his father about accusations that Obama was secretly Muslim and/or that he had ties to religious terrorist groups. Further discussing the conversations with his Palestinian father, Adam said, "And every time there's something bad, like for example, the whole Malaysian flight disappearing, whenever [my dad] found out they're Muslim, he was like, oh, here we go…" (personal communication, 4/17/14). In a similar case, the *New Yorker* cover drawing that depicted President Obama in traditional Arab Muslim garb led one participant, Yareli, to ask if Barack Obama was, in fact, American. When asked to explain her question a bit, Yareli went on to describe magazine covers she had seen in the checkout line in a grocery store that had questioned Obama's American-ness. Though Yareli had a sense that the U.S. Presidency required American citizenship, the issue had never been fully resolved for her (personal communication, 4/2/14).

In these conversations, my offering up a single image to students allowed them to associate with other experiences that they felt related. For Adam, the trajectory of his line of dialogue was clearly not linear in the way I had originally expected—from Obama-in-baseball-cap to other negative portrayals online to accusations of Obama's clandestine Muslim-ness to the general climate for U.S. Muslims. However, the visual sparked these associations for Adam, allowing him to speak out about an issue that held personal relevance for him and to offer the perspective of an American Muslim, a counterstory (Delgado, 1989), in the age of racial-religious threats against the president and others in the Muslim community. Yareli, too, had come to internalize questions of Obama's authenticity (racial, religious, national) and citizenship status through other visuals, perhaps connecting to the other conversations I had with Yareli that involved issues of immigration and citizenship status that affected her own life. Ultimately, employing this visual medium brought to the fore suppressed opinions by privileging the students' experiential knowledge and allowing them to personalize the issues at hand, issues that may have been challenging to vocalize within the racially silenced context of their high school. Rather than force a strict interpretation of the images, I generally followed along as students constructed their own meanings—even when those meanings seemed tangential at the time—and exercised agency and control as participants in the research (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015), a theme I discuss further below.

Participant Ownership

Finally, student-participants extended upon and gained ownership of the research process through the use of visuals. As mentioned previously, I asked participants to look through the Obama images and choose the one that represented their personal view of the president. Interestingly, all of the students selected the same photograph through this exercise: an action-shot of then-candidate Obama playing in a basketball scrimmage with the University of North Carolina

men's basketball team (one student, Ella, actually revised her decision later on, as I describe later). Yareli explained her choice this way: "I feel like mine's not like a he's-playing-basketball-and-black-people-play-basketball-type thing. Mine's more of a…even though he's president, he still has that same…mmm…not connection; he still does ordinary things that ordinary people do" (personal communication, 4/2/14). The other students offered similar explanations, that they saw the basketball image as representative of Obama at his most approachable, his most humane. On a deeper level, Yareli took the opportunity to dismiss race as a relevant factor in her decision, despite my clear focus on that aspect of the issue. In a sense, Yareli took ownership both through choosing for herself how she connected to the president and for denying the salience of race in making that decision. This latter decision appears even more striking for its riskiness in Foucault's sense of dangerous discourse (Foucault & Pearson, 1997) due to the implied power differential between the participant and researcher.

In some cases, the students also took ownership of the research process by seeking out Obama-related images on their own. In one example, Ella brought into school a series of photos of the Obama family that she had found online with the expressed purpose of showing me the images. In the conversation that followed, Ella shared her opinions on the portrayal of African American women in the media, her affection for the Obamas as a family unit, and the importance of seeing a female, Michelle Obama, with Ella's own skin tone in such a place of prominence as the White House. Ella collected these images as a way to better answer my question about which Obama represented her image of the president; Ella's counterstory of race and Barack Obama could not be separated from Michelle Obama and issues of gender, family, and media representation. These kinds of moments allowed me to feel that the research process was, at least at times, mutually beneficial and dialogic (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993), an opportunity for students to use their storytelling for the purpose of what Delgado (1989) calls "psychic self-preservation" (p. 238). By "owning" the visuals, participants also had the opportunity to engage in what Hall (2007) describes as a meaning-making process, wherein counter-notions of Truth and significance in an image are constituted by the participant, creating counterstories of race through counter-interpretations.

Importance/Implications

CRT scholars offer a conceptual framework for critical methodology, including the privileging of experiential knowledge, recognition of racism as endemic to American life, and the challenging of dominant racial claims such as colorblindness and post-racialism (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993). The project described here thus offers a practicable critical methodology that embodies these precepts of CRT and offers a pathway for other researchers to engage young people in examining race, or what Hall (1997) calls the "floating signifier," in the context of perhaps the most profound racial moment in their lives: the election of the first Black president.

Though visuals have historically reified institutional racial hierarchies, possibilities exist for the use of images as a means for disrupting these hierarchies and the majoritarian narratives, like post-racialism, that perpetuate them. By exploiting the socially constructed nature of the image (Hall, 1997), participants can carve out space for their own interpretations and counterstorytelling. As I have sought to demonstrate here, visual research allowed for a common text upon which students could share personal experiences with race, racialization, and their understandings of racial politics in the Obama American Era. In this way, visuals facilitate students in combatting

dominant narratives and the "racial regimes of representation" (Hall, 1997, p. 249) through voice and ownership of interpretation.

The use of visuals in this context also rendered the participants as what Foucault would call *parrhesiastes,* or those who engage in *parrhesia* (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). According to Foucault, *parrhesia* is a form of critique, a discourse of truth-telling in which the speaker "says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth…

There is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth" (p. 14). Beyond a conviction of beliefs, the *parrhesiastes* also involve themselves in a process of risk-taking by contradicting the beliefs of the majority. For Foucault, discourse can only be considered *parrhesia* if there is inherent danger or risk to the teller. As noted elsewhere, the participants in this study occupied a decidedly inferior position in school and society: low-income students of color existing in a predominantly White space. Race held taboo status at Winston High School (Evans, Avery & Pederson, 2000) among teachers and staff, and yet students of color experienced myriad examples of racialized othering and marginalization. To return to the perspective of critical race theory, the majoritarian narratives of race operating in this environment, including colorblindness and meritocracy, only reinforced existing racial hierarchies through silence and normalization.

Consequently, the participants engaged in *parrhesia* by speaking truthfully about race despite the personal and social risks involved. As a White researcher coming from an academic setting, the students further placed themselves at risk by sharing their experiences and insights with me. As Foucault notes, "*Parrhesia* is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor" (p. 18). As someone who, at least on the surface, shares a common appearance with the White Winston faculty who tacitly maintained a racially unsafe school climate, I likely contributed to this hierarchy of power between participant and interlocutor.

My hope, however, is that the visual methodology incorporated into this inquiry mitigated some of the inherent risk to the participants. By creating a common text for discussion, allowing students to draw on personal experiences, and providing a measure of participant ownership in the process, the use of visuals acted as a tool for participant empowerment. In other words, I offer visual research as a methodological moderator of the inherent risk in truth-telling, in critiquing the dominant discourses of the majority and majoritarian racial narratives in the Obama American Era. Or more specifically, the visual methodology offers space for truth-telling that may otherwise be silenced by the taboos of the environment. When students share personal stories of being called upon to speak on African American history in class or connect images to sensitive memories of immigration, they counter the racial silence that pervades their school environment en-route to a broader truth-telling about how race is lived in America, or Hall's (1997) "racial regimes of representation" (p. 232). A critical race visual methodology, then, recognizes both the power in counterstorytelling through a visual medium as well as the danger in such action. When speakers from the racial margins choose "truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life or security" (Foucault & Pearson, p. 20), a visual methodology can promote greater safety in sharing those narratives. As I argue through this case study, a critical race visual methodology allows participants to embody Foucault's *parrhesia* through truth-telling of racial counternarratives. The visual methodology provided a text through which participants could challenge racial silences in their school environment and claim greater agency towards disrupting the researcher-researched power differential.

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