Journal of Classroom Interaction, ISSN 0749-4025. © 2007, Vol 41.2, Vol 42.1, pages 42 - 54

"Reading All that White Crazy Stuff:" Black Young Women Unpacking Whiteness in a High School British Literature Classroom

Stephanie Power Carter
DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION, INDIANA UNIVERSITY, BLOOMINGTON, IN, USA

ABSTRACT

The article uses sociolinguistic and ethnographic methods and Black feminist theory to explore the classroom interactions of Pam and Natonya, two Black young females, during one event in a required high school British literature classroom. The event is presented as a telling case to explore gendered and racial complexities facing young Black female students in a British literature class, dominated by literature written from a Eurocentric perspective, primarily by White males. The telling case was analyzed to explore how Whiteness functioned within the British literature curriculum and classroom interactions and how the two Black young women were negatively positioned as a result of classroom interactions around the curriculum. The analysis made visible how Pam and Natonya were constantly negotiating whiteness within the British Literature curriculum. Their experiences are important as they afford educators and educational researchers the opportunity to see some of the challenges faced by historically underrepresented students who may have been marginalized by Whiteness within the curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Today, schools are inundated with reforms in curriculum, each designed to increase the performance of underperforming students and students with diverse cultural, racial, linguistic and social backgrounds. While the focus of these reforms has been on increasing standards and bringing rigorous curriculum to these students, as this study will make visible, there is an unexamined factor that has consequences for student learning and student sense of identity within the schooling process. This invisible dimension of the curriculum facing diverse students is reflected in the continuing requirement that these students take courses such as British literature, generally from the 18th, 19th, and 20th Centuries; while African American and other forms of multicultural and feminist literature, if present, are found in electives.

Recently English Educators and researchers have begun to examine the curriculum challenges facing Black students (Foster, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Areas that have been explored include: how the selection of literature impacts the inclusion of African American literature (Harris, 1990), how students view their own language (Ball, 1999; Lee, 2001; Smitherman, 1977; Williams, 2006; Bloome et al 2005), and how the use of culturally relevant literature impacts student learning (Ladson Billings, 1994; Willis, 2002). One of the primary arguments grounding this work is for the inclusion of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy (Foster, 1992; Howard, 2006, among others). In other words, the arguments about curriculum, particularly the English curriculum, focus on what counts as English and whose literature counts.

Although these arguments abound among educational scholars, in many high schools the question of what literature to require and whose literature counts remains opaque. Moreover, how young Black students achieve in such courses and what impact literature from required courses, such as British literature, has on their sense of identity as

Black women, in particular, remains relatively unexamined. The importance of examining the impact of Eurocentric curriculum on Black students' achievement has been raised by theorists who identify themselves as Black feminists over the past decade (Henry, 1994). This article extends their work by examining the influence of Eurocentric curriculum on Black students' identity and potential academic success in British literature classes with regards to race and schooling.

Drawing on Black feminist theory and the scholarship of Maher & Tetreault (1997), I explore the patterns of classroom interaction through the theoretical argument that notions of Whiteness[1] influence how people construct knowledge and learn (Maher & Tetreault, 1997). They argue that "*Whiteness* is the often silent and invisible basis against which other racial and cultural identities are named as 'other' and are measured and marginalized" (p. 324). In this study, I use this argument as a way of understanding the patterns of interaction in the classroom and the narratives about classroom practices that two young Black female students made during interviews about classroom interactions. Central to the analysis in this study is the argument that Whiteness is a socially and historically constructed racial identity that depends on evolving relations of gender, class, sexuality, and nationality. The construction, reproduction, and interpretation of Whiteness is informed by "historical moments," "region," "political climate," and "racial identity" (Babb, 1998; Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1998; Roediger, 1994). By examining the images of race, beauty and identity inscribed in the British literature curriculum dialogues between a White teacher and her White and Black students, particularly two young Black female students, I explore how the concept of Whiteness provides a means of uncovering invisible privilege and power relations that present a particular view of the world in the British literature class: a world that privileges the experiences of White people through curriculum content and classroom interactions. In exploring these issues, I make visible why it is important to re-examine current curriculum and the impact such curriculum content has on the performance of Black students.

THE SCHOOL AND CLASS: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Grounded in the above argument, this study used a Black feminist (Collins, 2000; Giddings, 1984; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Lorde, 1984) and sociolinguistic ethnographic approach (Green & Wallat, 1981; Hymes, 1974), which will be addressed in more detail later in the paper. The research described here is part of a larger ethnographic study on Black female cultural identity and silence (Carter, 2001) conducted in a required British literature classroom. The course was part of the English curriculum in a comprehensive high school located in the southeastern region of the United States. The school population consisted of approximately 1862 students: 56.1% of the students were White, 39.7% Black, 2.8% Hispanic, 1.1% Asian, and .3% Native American.

Data were collected during Spring 2001[2] in which I served as participant observer for 90-minute class sessions approximately 2 to 3 days per week for 5 months. Data collected for each session included videotape and audio records, fieldnotes, and student work. Formal and informal interviews were collected of the teacher and students. This British Literature classroom was selected because the teacher volunteered to participate in the study and understood that the purpose of the study was to examine Black female cultural identity. A second reason for selecting the class was that it had only two Black females. The class consisted of 19 student participants, 8 white males, 6 black males, 1 bi-racial male, 2Black females, 2 white females, and one White female teacher.

Although the impact of the course on the two white females is not the focus of this study, the fact that the number of white females to Black is the same supports the focus on the language of the curriculum texts. Additionally, when asked during formal and informal interviews, none of the white students reported being negatively positioned by the curriculum. In contrast, the responses of the Black students both male and female indicated that they felt negatively positioned by the British literature curriculum (Carter, 2001). Interview data from students further supported my decision to engage in the current study, and its focus on Black females perceptions of beauty in a British literature classroom.

THE FOCUS OF THE STUDY: CONSTRUCTING A TELLING CASE

The current study is designed to examine closely how texts of a required British literature course facilitated a standard of beauty that privileged Eurocentric images both in the text and in the talk about the text undertaken by the teacher and students. As part of the analysis of classroom interactions, I examine how this discourse inscribed Whiteness and marginalized culturally different views of beauty, thus impacting the cultural identities of young Black women and

[1] I capitalize white and whiteness throughout this article to foreground what is often invisible conceptually and to frame the concept theoretically in the analysis that follows.

[2] Although I was able to observe the class during Fall 2001 and build rapport with students and teacher, data collection did not begin until Spring 2001 due to district's concern about how my study dealt with race. This was resolved when the principal spoke on my behalf.

naturalizing British or White European views as the ones to value. This study examines the classroom interactions of Pam and Natonya (pseudonyms), two Black young women during one event in a High School British literature class: *My Mistress' Eyes.* In electing to focus on the experiences, interactions, and interpretations of these two young Black women, I present a *telling case*, one in which, as Mitchell (1984) argues, particular circumstances serve to make "previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent" (p. 239). Specifically, the telling case was undertaken to explore gendered and racial complexities facing young Black female students in a British literature class, dominated by literature written from a Eurocentric perspective, primarily by White males.

To examine the ways in which the young women engaged with, responded to, and negotiated the British literature curriculum, I problematize *Whiteness* and the related concept of *fixedness of* race (Ladson-Billings, 1996). To make visible the relationships between Whiteness, fixedness of race, and the British literature curriculum, I brought together two research perspectives: Black feminist theory (the focus on Whiteness, fixedness of race, patriarchy, and gender) and sociolinguistic ethnography (the focus on interaction and enacted curriculum). The combining of these two perspectives is designed to make visible dimensions of the official and enacted curriculum of British literature class that led to the students' struggles and to uncovering of the ways in which this curriculum shaped teacher and students' views of race, achievement, and identity. One overarching question guided the study: *How did the British literature curriculum and classroom interactions position the young Black females in the classroom?*

To address this question, I explore two sub-questions:

1. How does enacted curriculum position students and teachers in relationship to the Whiteness in the British literature curriculum?
2. How do the young Black women perceive the British literature curriculum with regards to Whiteness and fixedness of race?

Through these questions, I examine the impact of the curriculum on the only two Black female students in the class, who struggled with, and attempted to persevere through the unacknowledged Whiteness and fixedness of race in the British literature curriculum.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework guiding this study was generated by bringing together theories about the fixedness of race and Black feminist theory, with a sociolinguistic ethnographic approach to the study of classroom interactions. This framework provides a rationale for and conceptual approach to the exploration of the experiences of the two Black female students in the British literature class. Specifically, the approach permits exploration of the ways in which the uses of language in the classroom constructed those experiences. Through this approach, I problematize the ways in which the language of the British literature curriculum was consequential for students and led to student struggles of identity and academic work. Furthermore, as part of this analysis, I examine how issues of fixedness of race and Whiteness were visible in the language of the classroom interactions and how race, ability, and interpretations were socially constructed and reconstructed in the classrooms across times and events of the British literature curriculum.

Language, Race and Classroom Interactions

The concept of the *fixedness of race* is central to the study of classroom interactions. Ladson-Billings (1996) argues that the concept of race has become fixed and is now embedded in a coded language, one in which constructions of racial denotations are submerged and hidden in ways that are offensive without directly identifying the actors by racial category. This language represents more than stereotypes. Such language does not directly refer to racial groups but rather describes particular actors associated with negative attributes, e.g., talk about " 'gang members,' 'welfare cheats,' 'rappers,' 'basketball players,' and 'drug dealers'." She argues that such language represents a "coded language of the threat of Blackness." (p. 248). From this perspective, Ladson-Billings argues that race becomes an attribute of the person, a sense of fixedness or sense of permanence, as if it were not a socially constructed category of identity (e.g., hooks, 1995; Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Lewis, 1999; Tatum, 1992).

One consequence of "fixedness" is that the *in situ* processes of the social construction and reconstruction of race, Blackness and Whiteness are not explicitly foregrounded in research. Instead, for many research traditions, race is treated as an independent variable and defined as an attribute of the individual. Studies based on these assumptions have focused on measuring outcomes such as gaps in achievement and disparities in test scores. Such research ignores the content of the curriculum, the outcomes of local classroom interactions on students' sense of identity and classroom performance, and the cultural resources and interpretations that students bring to and take away from Whiteness in curriculum. Moreover, this work has often led to characterizations of Black students as underachieving and less intellectual than students from European descent.

A related body of work that examines the impact of the language arising from outcome-based studies has shown that this

language has negative consequences for Black students' academic achievement and identities (see Ball, 1999; Delpit, 1998; Lomotey, 1990; Richardson, 2003; Smitherman, 1977; Taylor, 1995; Williams, 2006). This work suggests that the readily available conceptions of race fail to provide a heuristic for exploring the racialized experiences of students in schools. Furthermore, studies examining classroom interactions of Black students and their teachers in high schools, or how these students act and react to curricula, are often obscured or missing. Focusing on the experiences of Black students as they encounter curriculum, such as British literature, as well as the students' interpretations of those experiences, and outcomes provides an opportunity for researchers to make visible how Whiteness or Blackness function within curriculum and how race is constructed in classrooms.

Black Feminist Theory

Black feminist theory provides an additional perspective to better understand that the ways in which Black females engage in classroom activities is not just a simple matter of completing assignments and tasks, but rather involves looking at how these students use their cultured ways of knowing and engaging in social relationships to understand curriculum activities and tasks. In particular, by focusing on the ways in which Black females use their racial and gendered identities to frame and understand what happens in their classrooms, Black feminist theory helps provide a rich portrait of Black young women's academic experiences. Black feminist theory suggests that Black females have a distinct view of the contradictions between dominant groups' actions and ideologies and their own experiences (Collins, 2000). Harrison (1997) argues, "Schools are not tolerant of females who do not conform to societal expectations of them being quiet" (p. 52). Consequently, often their actions are interpreted as defiance.

Further, Black feminist theory helps show how Black female students are positioned by Whiteness in their classroom. That is, it frames how Black female identity responds to Whiteness and patriarchy. Part of what Black feminist theory provides is a critique of Whiteness. Black feminist theory seeks to dismantle the coded privileges of White norms by providing a lens that makes more visible the ways in which patriarchy and Whiteness collude Black female agency. Some Black feminist theorists argue that notions of Whiteness and male superiority have historically "silenced" Black women by characterizing them as "mammies," "matriarchs," "welfare mothers," and "sexually exotic women" (Collins, 2000; Giddings, 1984; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Lorde, 1984). This language, which has silenced Black females, includes terms referenced by Ladson- Billings (1996) as coded language. Fordham (1993) suggests that this coded language used to describe Black young women in classrooms has consequences for their identity and educational success.

Black feminist theory was integral in understanding and analyzing the data of this research because it provided a lens that critiqued fixedness of race and Whiteness in the classroom. It also helped to illustrate how experiences relating to issues of beauty and Black and White divisions influenced the two focal students in their British literature classroom, in which class discussions and texts did not mention Afrocentric representations of women. It also suggests that Black young women like Pam and Natonya are continually bombarded in class discussions by definitions of beauty that do not include Afrocentric images and representations (Collins, 2000; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; hooks, 1995). Moreover, Black feminist theory helped me focus on the importance of exploring the types of struggles that the girls had with the language and inscriptions of beauty in the British literature curriculum as constructed through teacher and student discussions, and how in turn, the interactions led to the sense of isolation that Pam and Natonya reported in their narratives about classroom life.

Sociolinguistic Ethnography

A sociolinguistic ethnographic approach builds on ethnography of communication (cf. Green, 1983; Green & Bloome, 1998; Gumperz, 1986; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Hymes, 1974) and complements a Black feminist lens. Sociolinguistic ethnography is particularly suited for classroom research, since it pays detailed attention to the particular ways that students and teachers use language to construct social relationships, social identities, social events, and both academic and other types of knowledge. A sociolinguistic ethnographic approach also focuses attention on how broader social and historical contexts (in this case the historical experiences of the students in school, the experiences of Black and Black young women in America) affect how, when, where, and with whom people use language to accomplish various *in situ* goals, such as how students or others perceive curriculum as oppressive and as marginalizing their perspectives.

Initial studies in sociolinguistic ethnography investigated language and interaction in classrooms as a means to understand how children from culturally different linguistic backgrounds might be disadvantaged in schools that used a Eurocentric middle class framework. The early work of Heath (1983), Kochman (1972), Labov (1972) and Smitherman (1977) raised questions about how language and context might influence the academic success of Black children (e.g., Mehan 1979; Cazden 1988). Further, these studies argued that when studying classrooms, it is important to not just focus on the individual and what is inside the individual, but also look at how the individual interacts in a given context and what those interactions mean. A sociolinguistic approach is of particular significance in classroom research because similar to Black feminist theory, it explores how interactions reflect

certain ideological stances such as Whiteness within a social context, as well as how social, political, and historical ideologies that exist in society become manifest in a classroom.

My Mistress' Eyes: An Analysis of the Discursive Construction of Whiteness

An event I call *My Mistress' Eyes* presents a telling case of curriculum construction and the positioning of Whiteness in text and talk. I present the analysis of this event to explore how Whiteness functioned within the British literature curriculum and classroom interactions and how the two Black young women were negatively positioned as a result of classroom interactions around the curriculum. The *My Mistress' Eyes* event is presented through a transcript of a discussion on Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130*. During this curricular activity, students were divided into groups and given an assignment to explicate poems written by Shakespeare, Browning, and other British poets for a poetry unit. The transcript begins as the class has completed discussing Browning's *My Last Duchess* and starts explicating Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130 My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun.*

The transcript is presented as a continuous text and the analyses and interpretation of the developing discourse of race (or lack of visibility of race) and Whiteness are presented in the right-hand column of the transcript at points where race become visible. In this way, I place the analysis within the text of the classroom interactions, rather than breaking the transcript into segments and discussing what is being constructed bit-by-bit. This approach is purposeful, in that it permits the reader to gain a sense of the continuous construction of race, Whiteness, and ultimately identity. Following the presentation of this transcript, I explore the developing themes in more depth, drawing on the analyses represented in the transcript.

Transcript 2: Turn by Turn Transcript of My Mistress' Eyes Discussion: 3/6/01

Participant Key: Ms. Y: Teacher (White female), Nancy (White female student), Josh (White male student), P: Pam (Black female), Cean (Black male), SS: Signals more than one student in the class responding. S: Signals one student in the class responding.

Line	Speaker	Utterances	Analysis of Whiteness and race
1	Ms. Y	What	
2		What are we hearing?	
3		With this um	
4		"My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing like the Sun"	
5		What's the main idea?	
6	Nancy	My mistress' eyes are ugly	Nancy constructs the images described in the book as ugly. What is beauty? And what is ugly becomes the issue.
7	Ms. Y	Okay she's ugly	The teacher re-states Nancy's point but does not ask her to expand her answer.
8		Josh	Josh begins to problematize Nancy's suggestion that the mistress in the poem is ugly. He states "then" to reference a particular time period.
9	Josh	Beauty in the eye of the beholder kind of idea	
10		It's that she's not	Also uses the term "ideal" which contrast the description of the women in the poem to an invisible standard of beauty. Further, Josh's begins to make visible a hidden premise in the poem which is **who** gets to decide who is beautiful. Race is absent from the conversation.
11		She's not what the-	
12		The uh ideal of a beautiful woman looked at then	
13		She's	
14		Unintelligible	
15	Ms. Y	All right	
16		Okay	
17		That's good	
18		Because she-he's not saying anywhere that she's ugly is he	Although race has not been discussed in this segment, at this point several important questions have been raised: What/who is ugly? What is beauty and who gets to decide? These positionings are important as they are bound by dominant notions from "then" (the past) that suggest a standard of beauty that does not include Black young women.
19		Although the images	
20	S	He's given her the characteristics of all	
21	Ms. Y	All right	
22		And what um	
23		What he's saying too	

24			Is that um what	
25			What we're	The teacher begins to use the pronoun "we" to suggest that everyone will read the poem in the same way or that there is a standard of beauty. Using the "we" also begins to construct a collective sense of identity.
26			What we can read into it	
27			Most of the sonnets before this	The teacher begins to discuss beauty as described in the sonnets referencing time ("before this). She also begins to answers the question of Who and What? White males of European descent get to define "universal beauty" and she provides a list of characteristics from the sonnet. She also provides based on the sonnets a definition of ugly—anything that did not fit the description in the sonnets. The images privilege a Eurocentric view of beauty, which is bound by Whiteness and marginalizes other images. Because it is not problematized, the standard of beauty from the past begins to represent the standard of beauty for the present. Some of these images are still prevalent today and have been used by some groups to represent superiority and dominance of White people and the inferiority of other groups (i.e., Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, Jewish descent, women etc…).
28			Had this most beautiful woman always being	
29			Tall	
30			Long blonde hair	
31			Pretty big blue eyes	
32			And that was the universal beauty	
33			And that was Dante's beauty	
34			From the Italians	
35			So you had to be tall	
36			Slender	
37			Long blonde hair	
38			Pretty blue eyes	
39			Rosy cheeks	
40			Uh so if you weren't that	The pronoun change and verb shift are important. There are only three girls in the class Pam and Natonya and the other young woman who is White and already possess many qualities in the poem. The White female comes to represent the standard. Again re-inscribing Whiteness and positioning Pam and Natonya as "nothing." Black female images never surface in the conversation.
41			You were not	
42			Not attractive	
43			Ugly	
44			So if you're a-a tall brunette	
45			With brown eyes	
46			You're still ugly	
47			According to the sonneteers	
48			You're still not attractive- you're nothing.	
49			So his perfect lady didn't have eyes like the sun	The teacher then refers back to the sonnet to try and problematize the standard of beauty that had been discussed by asking students to really think about meanings associated with beauty.
50			If she did- had eyes-If she had eyes like the sun.	
51			What -what would it be like to look at her? What would happen to you?	
52			Yes, what would happen to you?	
53	S		Be blinded (unintelligible)	
54	Ms. Y		T-You'd be blinded, okay	
55			If um-- okay. Some of us are supposed to be White right uh okay	the teacher then shifts the conversation to race. In doing so, what has been invisible in the conversation race is now manifest as only an attribute of some of the people in the class. The conversation continues to privilege White. It has moved from the poem to students in the class, further marginalizing students who do not have the characteristic of White skin.
56			Are we really White?	Teacher still trying to problematize images of beauty by problematizing White.
57	S		No, Peach	
58	Ms. Y		Peach? (Laughs)	
59	SS		SS: Laugh	
60	Ms. Y		Okay all right-- how much difference really do you see (Ms. Y places her hand beside an Pam an African-American girls' hand.)	Introducing a more human element the teacher continues to try and problematize images of beauty by addressing what is White by introducing difference. She compares her hand to Pam's hand. However, Pam rejects Whiteness and asserts her Blackness. Pam rejects the teacher's notion of difference suggesting that she does not want to be closer to White. This also suggests that Pam has not been reading the conversation about beauty in the same way as her teacher.
61	Pam		Use Manny's hand. My hand is Black.	

62	Ms.Y	Okay um- let's see, if we were truly White one of my little foster dogs now is an Albino.	
63		And so he has little pink nose, little pink eyes, little pink toes, toe nails because he's an albino-um and he jus and he's no she um she's kind of strange to look at because she looks a little different with pink-all that pink.	The teacher then moves to what is familiar to her (she loves pets) to problematize the earlier idea of beauty.
64		So if- if she really were White what would she be like? If a person is truly White?	The conversation has moved away from the earlier conversation problematizing past images to what a White person would truly look like.
65	S	P: Like that right there. (Student points to paper on her desk)	
66		Okay right. She's probably go- gone be sick or an Albino or something.	Teacher suggests that White people do not look White. In doing so, other cultural groups have been left out of the conversation, in particular Black girls.
67		Okay so she's not that and um there are lots of beautiful perfumes.	The teacher references a line in the poem.
68		Most people like perfumes and probably there are people who have breaths that smell pretty good, but most people's breathes is not as- is not as nice smelling as perfume is it?	Teacher again attempts to problematize ideas of beauty by using the poem—
69	Cean	(Unintelligible) Johnny is terrible, just talk to Johnny (mumbles)	
70	Ms. Y	His is always not perfume? Okay- all right so -so a lot of these things that he's saying.	
71		He's not saying that she's not beautiful, but um he's just saying that she's not that token beauty that people have written about in the past. And um what we hear a lot from Shakespeare is he liked the um the brunettes.	The teacher returns to the topic of beauty and ends by suggesting Shakespeare liked the brunettes.

Black Femaleness as Ugly: Excluding the Social and Cultural Content of Black Experiences

The analysis of *My Mistress' Eyes* event represented in the transcript above raised issues about how Black students, in particular, Black young women were being positioned in the British literature curriculum and how Whiteness was functioning. A Black feminist frame provided an interpretation of the classroom event that led to the identification of patterns related to invisibility of race and how aspects of the British literature curriculum do not affirm Pam and Natonya's identity. One pattern that can be seen throughout the course of the interactions in the transcript above is the absence of Black female images in the literature and/or in the discussions in the class; rather, what becomes evident across the developing discussion is how the concept of beauty was positioned in the fixedness of Whiteness within the curricular discussion.

To make visible how Whiteness became a focus of the discussion, I examine in depth the developing patterns represented in the transcript above. In line 5, the teacher begins the instructional conversation by posing a question about the main idea of the sonnet. In line 6, Nancy responds, suggesting that the woman in the poemis "ugly." In doing so she raises questions about who/what is beauty? And what is ugly? In line 7, the teacher affirms her answer and does not ask Nancy to problematize what she means. In line 9, Josh attempts to problematize her answer by saying that she's not the "ideal women looked at then." Josh acknowledges that there is an ideal image for women "then." He uses *then* to represents time period but also raises the question of who gets to decide who/what is beautiful? Although race has not explicitly surfaced in the class discussion, implicitly it has, as subtle questions of who and/or what is beautifull and who gets to define beauty. This discussion began to represent a coded language (Ladson-Billings, 1996) that does not directly say who or what is ugly or beautiful but that suggests there is an ideal of beauty that existed from the past, the description of beauty inscribed in canonical literature, the only literature available in this class.

In line 26, the teacher begins to create a collective sense of identity suggesting that everyone in the class will read similarly. This assumption is problematic given that not all of her students are from the same backgrounds and thus might read the text differently. In lines 27-29, the teacher begins to list physical character-

istics of women from European descent as being beautiful and/or ugly, but at no point during the discussion does the topic of women of African descent or a concept of beauty including women of African descent surface. The images privilege a Eurocentric view of female beauty that marginalizes the Black females in the class.

Furthermore, in lines 40-48, there is a tense shift during the discussion from past to present. The pronoun change (you) and the verb tense shift (are) become important in this particular classroom context because there are only three girls in the classroom on this particular day. Nancy is of European descent and possesses many of the qualities of beauty in the poem, while Pam and Natonya do not possess any of these qualities. Whiteness is reinforced and Blackness is marginalized. Also, images of beauty discussed in the class conversation and in the text (e.g. blonde hair, blue eyes) are still prevalent today. Some groups and individuals (e.g., Ku Klux Klan) have used attributes such as: White skin, blonde hair and blue eyes to argue superiority of Whites and the inferiority of Blacks (Grant, 1916).

Although race is never explicitly mentioned in the first part of the transcript (lines 1-54), in line 55, the teacher brings up race by stating that "some of us are supposed to be White." In doing so, what has been invisible in the conversation is now made visible. The teacher suggests that White skin is only an attribute, no different than the other characteristics described earlier (blue eyes, long blonde hair etc...). She also indicates that some of the students in the class possess this attribute. The teacher's use of "supposed" could also suggest that she is attempting to problematize race, but interactions obscure this opportunity. In line 56, although the teacher is attempting to problematize the attributes in the poem, she is also creating tension as "White" is layered with meaning in this context. Not only have the young women been marginalized due to the lack of Black images in the sonnet, but also their Black identity continues to be marginalized as they are not part of the "some" in class who are White and are now being asked to engage in a conversation about what is White. This discussion about what counts as White still excludes the Black identity of Pam and Natonya.

In line 60, the teacher tries to engage Pam, one of the Black young women in the conversation, by trying to use the idea of difference to suggest that there is not a lot of difference between her skin tone and Pam's skin tone. However in Line 61, Pam states: *Use Manny's hand. My hand is Black.* Pam rejects this comparison that her skin is similar to White, suggesting that as a Black young woman she views White skin in more complex ways.

Pam's interaction with the teacher also begins to make visible an unspoken tension and that she is not reading the class discussion in the same way as her teacher. In line 62, we see the teacher still trying to problematize images of beauty in the text, by introducing her albino pet. The teacher then references Sonnet 130 and the idea of beauty by stating that Shakespeare liked brunettes (line 67). The teacher is unaware of how White images and knowledge have been privileged in the discussion as she has re-inscribed a particular historical view of beauty embedded in the literature that is bound by Whiteness and marginalizes other images and/or definitions of beauty.

Exploring their Struggles: Interview Conversations with Pam and Natonya

During this discussion Pam's rejection signaled a tension and led me to look for instances of how Pam and Natonya perceived the British literature curriculum with regards to Whiteness and fixedness of race. This led me to interview/conversation data where Pam and Natonya talked about their interpretation of the *My Mistress' Eyes* event and the British literature curriculum. Although Pam and Natonya were not vocal in this segment of the class discussion and said very few words during the larger segment of the classroom discussion, they articulated some of the hidden tensions that they were negotiating during the class lesson and in the context of their classroom during interview/conversations.

The following two excerpts from Pam and Natonya's interview/conversation data help to explore their interpretation of the class discussion, which demonstrates their perceptions of how Whiteness functions and how the exclusion of Black cultural content influences their interactions in the British literature curriculum. During the following interview/conversation the girls discuss their interpretations of poems (*My Last Duchess* and Sonnet 130) that they read during class and the class discussion about the poems. They both begin to challenge the ways that women are characterized.

The following transcript was purposefully constructed to capture Black women's interactional styles and interactive response as they engage in conversation on transcription as theory (e.g., Green, Franquiz & Dixon, 1997; Mishler 1991; Ochs, 1979) This transcript represents two co-occurring conversations that make one coordinated conversation an extension of the others. Thus, comments are not linear and do not represent disagreement. A Black feminist lens helps to understand better how the young women work together to critique, propose, and contest how they are positioned in the British literature curriculum.

Segment 2 Interview/Conversation Transcript Key: 3/16/01.
P: Pam (Student, young Black woman), T: Natonya (Student, young Black woman), S: Stephanie (Researcher, Black woman), /: Signals overlapping conversation

Natonya	**Stephanie Carter**	**Pam**
31. T: Blonde hair, red lips, and pink cheeks		32. P: Yea -all that ugly stuff-that's ugly!
	33. S: So like you know –when you were sitting there, and it was being described that way what were you thinking?	
34. T: What I just said.	35. S: Were you agreeing?	
36. /T: I was thinking on the inside. No because beauty is not all about what color hair you got or the shape of your lips the color of you lips		37. /P: I didn't agree.
38. /T: And stuff like that I definitely didn't agree.		39. /P: Cause she [the teacher] was basically saying beauty is White girls with blonde hair- and I know some ugly White girls with some ugly blonde hair.
40. T: (laughing)	41. S: So (smiling)- so is that what you were thinking?	42. P: Yes, cause she[the teacher] don't do nothing but base the class on White people, and y'all know don't she be basing the class on White people? (Tonya laughs) Reading all that White crazy stuff. We don't read. We don't do stuff like that. We don't kill each other [referencing Browning's My last Duchess, which they also read] cause we-we think "I think you so beautiful I am mo kill you." Black people don't do that! Get for real.
	43. /S: but okay-I mean –an-and-I guess the other point is you know when you are sitting there and someone is describing beauty as-	44. /P: A White person
	45. /S: blonde hair, okay Pam says "a White person," (smiling) how does it make you feel as a Black woman?	
46. T: It feels- It feel man	47.	48. P: It make me feel like she trynna say I am ugly, but I know I look good.
49. /T: Right it- it makes you feel like okay- are they- she making it be seeming like they're the only people that are beautiful --you got blonde hair.		50. /P: Mhuh

Although Pam's and Natonya's interview/conversations suggests that they have clear views about beauty, their interpretation of the class discussion indicates that it did not affirm their identity. In line 31, Natonya suggests that a White female image was being privileged within the class discussion and the text. Natonya stated: *Blonde hair, red lips, and pink cheeks.* However, they not only acknowledged the characteristics of beauty that had been privileged, they problematized and critiqued beauty, suggesting that beauty can be defined in other ways (lines 36-42).

In line 36, Natonya begins to critique the description of beauty that is given during the class discussion by asserting that beauty is not all about hair color or lip color. In doing so she suggests that beauty is not solely about the physical characteristics of a person. In line 37 and 38, Both Pam and Natonya reject the image of beauty that is discussed in the classroom and in Sonnet 130. In line 38, Pam further rejects the description of beauty given in class by calling the features described "ugly." In line 39 of the interview/conversation, Pam attempts to support her stance by rejecting the hidden ideology that privileges White girls with blonde hair by drawing on her own knowledge base. She stated: *I know some ugly White girls with some ugly blonde hair*. In line 42, Pam asserts that her British literature class is about White people.

Pam also references how crazy she thinks the readings are as she references Browning's poem *My Last Duchess* where the main character kills a woman because of her beauty. She uses the texts to emphasize how her British literature class is not about Black people. In line 43, I begin to ask Pam and Natonya about "how it feels when beauty is described as," and Pam finished my sentence: "a White person." Pam finishing my sentence illustrates how she believes beauty is described in her class. What is problematic, is that in lines 47-49, Pam and Natonya both state that they believe that because the only beauty referenced in the class contains Eurocentric features of women, they, as women of color, are being called ugly.

When asked why they did not respond, Pam and Natonya said that they felt they would get in trouble or would be misunderstood. During the second interview/conversation segment, Pam and Natonya continue to discuss their interpretation of Whiteness and their interactions in their British literature classroom.

In line 196 of segment two, Pam and Natonya suggested that their English class is filled with tension and that, because of how their teachers perceive them as having an attitude, they have to monitor how they act (e.g., Gilmore, 1985). Although Pam and Natonya believed that they should not care what others think about them, in line 198, Pam acknowledged that they have to *work harder at making a good first impression* because some White teachers viewed Black young women as having an *attitude*.

In line 200, Natonya agrees and states that because she wants to graduate, as a Black young woman she has to be cautious about what and how she expresses. The theme of not speaking up in their class because they did not want to be misunderstood with regards to how they felt about the curriculum came up other times, creating a repeated pat-

Segment 2, Interview/Conversation Key 3/16/01
P: Pam, T: Natonya, S: Stephanie, /: Signals interrupting a conversation

		196. /P: You know we [Black young women] have more of an attitude-see-so it's like a lot of times we have to watch- what we say- or watch how we- you know what I mean- even though we may not have an attitude but they [our teachers] view us as having an attitude so we have to watch--we
	197. /S: And when you say you have an attitude what do you mean?	198. P: They like you know- some White teachers feel like- they just come in they just feel like- all these girls gone be just straight hood rats and we gone come in -and have an attitude with her just off top for no reason. And lot of teachers- you know I mean they just stereotype us- so when we come in class- it's like we have to work harder at making a good first impression even though you feel- I feel like you shouldn't care about what somebody thinks about you.
200. T: Mhuh but at the same time this- this is concerning whether we graduate or not- so we gotta really- just even though I-we wanna say stuff a lot of times- we have to watch what we say and watch how we do things to them.		

tern. However during another interview/conversation on 3/16/01 when I asked Pam and Natonya why they shared their concerns about what they read and discussed in their British literature class with me but didn't share their in their British literature classroom, they again reiterated that they needed the English credit to graduate and said the following:

92. T: No, because you know what that's the way it is stuff- stuff comes down, where the teacher gets offended because you're offended, and you tell her about it and then- then they'll write you up, and it's like, you really can't even do anything.
93. P: and the, plus English we need this credit too.
94. T: And my point exactly, so you be trying to and not to mess up, you know.

Lines 92-94 continue to reiterate Pam and Natonya's earlier stance that they have to be cautious and selective in how they express themselves in their British literature course; otherwise, they run the risk of failing the course and not being able to graduate.

Pam and Natonya were unaware of how the teacher feels about the British literature curriculum. During an initial conversation that I had with the teacher, she noted that the British literature curriculum was problematic because many of the texts did not represent diverse perspectives and focused primarily on canonical works and European male writers from Great Britain, such as Donne, Shakespeare, and Yeats. The teacher noted that although she tried to incorporate diverse perspectives in the course, it was difficult because she had to cover certain materials for the students' high school exit exam. Ms. Y's statement shows that although teachers have some degree of agency in their classroom, agency can be constrained. Therefore, the issue with regard to Whiteness and how a curriculum affects the cultural identity of students is not simply a matter of the teacher, but needs to be seen as a curricular issue in its broadest sense as discussed earlier.

Further, during a closing interview after graduation, with the permission of Pam and Natonya, I shared with Ms. Y how the Black young women felt about the *My Mistress' Eyes* event. She was completely surprised by their interpretation. Her inability to see their predicament in her class further illustrates how illusive Whiteness and fixedness can be when left unexamined.

DISCUSSION

The telling case *My Mistress' Eyes* begins to raise questions about what makes curriculum inclusive. Analyses of classroom interactions constituting this telling case also shows how small moments of life can capture interactions that occur as students extend and make sense of curriculum. In the case of Pam and Natonya, these interactions negatively positioned them in the classroom context and informed how they engaged in curriculum. Black feminist theory and a sociolinguistic ethnographic approach helped to provide a frame to better understand the challenges that Pam and Natonya encountered in their classroom. Moreover, using a Black feminist frame helped make visible how Pam and Natonya were constantly negotiating Whiteness to survive, or in their words, to pass the course. I use the term survive to capture the intellectual and mental struggles that these young women had to endure as they believed that their identities were constantly challenged. Pam and Natonya's experiences are important because they afford us the opportunity to see some of the challenges faced by historically underrepresented students who have been marginalized by Whiteness within the curriculum.

Pam and Natonya's experiences provide an important opportunity for educators and educational researchers to reflect on our own conscious and/or unconscious participation in a cycle of fixedness and White European visions of privilege. Schools of education and educators must continue to engage ourselves, our students, and those around us more deeply in the issues of fixedness, Whiteness, invisibility and visibility. Equally important, we all must become more comfortable with tensions. It is the case that we may never know how Pam and Natonya's interpretation of their classroom experiences would have changed if there was a space in the classroom in which the tensions they felt could have been discussed and/or questions that they raised about fixedness and Whiteness during interview/conversations could have been addressed. As educators and educational researchers, we can all potentially play a role in encouraging those whom we interact with daily (students, colleagues, friends) to grapple with Whiteness and fixedness.

Through the use of Black feminist and sociolinguistic theory, the case of Pam and Natonya became a telling case in two ways. First, it made visible factors that had previously been unexamined about how particular groups of students respond to the existing British literature curriculum. This telling case suggests that research on what appears to be the ordinary and natural offerings of the high school curriculum need to be re-examined in the 21st century due to a growing range of diverse and immigrant populations from historically underrepresented communities with in the US as well as non-European countries,. Educators and educational researchers need to explore how students respond to curriculum and how required curriculum such as the aforementioned British literature can impact students' academic performance. The second area of research suggested by this telling case is the need to examine how female students respond to images of women inscribed in such curriculum (e.g., students who are overweight, non

European, not blond, lesbian etc…), and how such images impact their own self image, identity, and willingness to participate in the curriculum (c.f., Blackburn, 2005).

Furthermore, as educators and educational researchers, we need to continue to seek telling cases that make visible what has not been visible to us. We also need to continue to critique our own perspectives and frames that we use to interpret and understand the experiences of students, particularly students of color and students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds within our scholarship. In order to see and better understand what has historically not been seen in many traditional paradigms, it is crucial that we continue to familiarize ourselves with epistemologies (e.g., Black feminist theory, Latina feminist theory) that have evolved from the lived experiences of those whom we teach and study; otherwise, we run the risk of misrepresenting and silencing the very voices we seek to understand and hear.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to stress that teaching is a rewarding profession, but it can be difficult and complicated. Although this research focused primarily on Black young women' perspectives, it is important to note that the British literature course that Ms. Y taught was designated by the district. She was a dedicated teacher who recently retired and who cared a great deal about all of her students and their learning. Anyone who has been a teacher, regardless of their color, understands how difficult it is recognize and understand the perspectives and "lived" experiences of each student in our classrooms. Research such as that reported here is intended to help teachers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, and researchers better understand at least one set of "lived" experiences that some Black female students may be having. I would like to thank Ms. Y and the students who participated in my study and colleagues and family members for their feedback and support throughout the process of writing this publication. I would also like to thank my colleagues for supporting me over the past years as I have revised and submitted multiple versions of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

Applebee, A. (1974). *Tradition and reform in the teaching of English: A history.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Babb, V. M. (1998). *Whiteness visible: The meaning of whiteness in American literature and culture.* New York: New York University Press.

Ball, Arnetha. (1999). Evaluating the writing of culturally and linguistically diverse students: The case of the African American Vernacular English speaker. In Charles Cooper and Lee Odell (Eds.) *Evaluating Writing* (pp. 225-248). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Blackburn, M. (2005). Disrupting Dichotomies for Social Change: A Review of, Critique of, and Complement to Current Educational Literacy Scholarship on Gender. *Research in the Teaching of English, 39*(4), 398-416.

Bloome, D., Christian, B., Otto, S., Carter Power, S., Shuart, N. (2005). *Discourse analysis and the study of classroom language and literacy events: A microethnographic perspective.* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Cadzen, C. (1988). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Carter, S. (2001). *The possibilities of silence: African-American female cultural identity and secondary English classrooms.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Collins, P.H. (2000). B*lack feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd Ed.). New York: Routledge.

Cross, W. (1971). *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American identity.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom.* New York: New Press.

Dyer, R. (1997). *White.* New York: Routledge.

Fordham, S. (1993). Those loud Black girls. *Anthropology and education, 24*(1), 3-32.

Foster, Michelle. (1992). Sociolinguistics and the African American community: Implications for literacy. *Theory Into Practice, 31*(4), 303-311.

Frankenberg, R. (Ed.). (1998). *Displacing whiteness.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Giddings, P. (1984). *When and where I enter: The impact of Black women on race and sex in America.* New York: William Morrow.

Gilmore, P. (1985)."Gimme room:" School resistance, attitude, and access to literacy. *Journal of Education, 167*(1), 111-128.

Grant, M. (1916). *The Passing of the great race.* New York: Charles Scribner.

Green, J.,& Wallat, C. (1981). Mapping instructional conversations: A sociolinguistic ethnography. In J. Green & C. Wallat (Eds.), *Ethnography and language in educational settings* (pp. 161-205). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Green, J. (1983). Exploring classroom discourse: Linguistic perspectives on teaching-learning processes. *Educational Psychologist, 18,* 180-199.

Green, J. & Bloome, D. (1998). Ethnography and ethnographers of and in education: A situated perspective. In J. Flood, S. Hesth, & D. Lapp (Eds.), *A handbook for literacy educators: Research on teaching the communicative and visual arts* (181-202). New York: Macmillan.

Green, J., Franquiz, M. & Dixon, C. (1997). The myth of the objective transcript:
Transcribing as a situated act, *TESOL Quarterly, 3*1(1), 172176.

Gumperz, J.& D. Hymes (Eds). (1972). *Directions in socio-linguistics: The ethnography of communication.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Gumprez, J. (1986). *Discourse strategies.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Guy-Sheftall, B. (Ed). (1995). *Words of Fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought.* New York: New Press.

Harris, V. (1990) African American children's literature: The first one hundred years. *The Journal of Negro Education, 59*(4), 540-555.

Harrison, J. (1997). Lisa's quiet fight: school structure and African American adolescent females. In K. Lomotey (Ed.), *Sailing against the wind: African Americans and women in U.S. education* (pp. 45-54). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words: Language life and work in communities and classrooms.* London: Cambridge University Press.

Helms, J. (Ed.). (1990). *Black and White racial identity: theory research and practice*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Henry, A. (1994). The empty shelf and other curricular challenges of teaching for children of African descent. *Urban Education, 29*(3), 298-319.

Howard, G.R. (2006). *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations of sociolinguistics.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kochman, T. (1972). (Ed.), *Rappin' and stylin' out: Communication in urban Black America.* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Labov, W. (1972). *Sociolinguistic patterns.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dream keepers.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1996). "Your blues ain't like mine:" Keeping issues of race and racism on the multicultural agenda. *Theory into Practice, 35,* 248-255.

Lee, C. (2001). Unpacking culture, teaching, and learning: A response to the pedagogy of power. In W. Watkins, J. Lewis & V. Chou. (Eds.) ,*Race and education: The roles of history and society in educating African-American students* (pp.89-99). Boston, MA: Allyn-Bacon.

Lomotey, K. (1990). *Going to School: The African American Experience.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Maher, F. A., & Tetreault, M. K. T. (1997). Learning in the dark: How assumptions of whiteness shape classroom knowledge. *Harvard Educational Review, 67*(2), 321-349.

Mitchell, J.C. (1984). Typicality and the case study. In R. Ellen (Ed.), *Ethnographic research: A guide to general conduct* (pp. 238-241). New York:Academic Press.

Mehan, H. (1979). *Learning lessons.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mishler, E. (1991). Representing discourse: The rhetoric of transcription. *Journal and Life History, 1*, 255-280.

Ochs, E. (1979). Transcription as theory. In E. Ochs & B.B. Schieffelin (Eds.), *Developmental pragmatics* (pp. 43-72). New York: Academic.

Richardson, E. (2003). *African American literacies.* Rutledge: New York.

Roediger, D. (1994). *The wages of Whiteness: Race and the making of the American working class.* New York: Verso.

Russell, K, Wilson, M. & Hall, R, (1992). *The Color complex: Politics of skin color among African Americans.* New York: Harcourt Brace.

Smitherman, Geneva. (1977). *Talkin and testifying: the language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Taylor, R. (1995). *African American youth: Their social and economic status in the United States.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Tatum, B. (1997). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race.* New York: Basic Books.

Williams, C. (2006). "You gotta reach'em:" An African American teacher's multiple literacies approach in a middle school language arts classroom. *Theory into Practice, 45*, 346-351.

Willis, A. (2002). Dissin' and disremembering: Motivation and culturally and linguistically diverse students' literacy learning. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 18*(4), 293-319.

Woodson, C. (1933). *The mis-education of the Negro.* Washington, DC: Associated Publishers.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Stephanie Carter at Indiana University, WW Wright School of Education, 201 North Rose Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47405.