"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 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 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, 2 Black 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

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1I 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.

2Although 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 ethnoographic 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
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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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterances</th>
<th>Analysis of Whiteness and race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ms. Y</td>
<td>What</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>What are we hearing?</td>
<td>Nancy constructs the images described in the book as ugly. What is beauty? And what is ugly becomes the issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>With this um</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>“My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing like the Sun”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>What’s the main idea?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>My mistress’ eyes are ugly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ms. Y</td>
<td>Okay she’s ugly</td>
<td>The teacher re-states Nancy’s point but does not ask her to expand her answer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Beauty in the eye of the beholder kind of idea</td>
<td>Josh begins to problematize Nancy’s suggestion that the mistress in the poem is ugly. He states “then” to reference a particular time period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>It’s that she’s not</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>She’s not what the-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>The uh ideal of a beautiful woman looked at then</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>She’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unintelligible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>That’s good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ms. Y</td>
<td>All right</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td>Okay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td>Because she-he’s not saying anywhere that she’s ugly is he</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td>Although the images</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>He’s given her the characteristics of all</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ms. Y</td>
<td>All right</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>And what um</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>What he’s saying too</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
<td>All right</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is that um what
What we’re
What we can read into it
Most of the sonnets before this
What we can read into it
Tall
Long blonde hair
Pretty big blue eyes
And that was the universal beauty
And that was Dante’s beauty
From the Italians
So you had to be tall
Slender
Long blonde hair
Pretty blue eyes
Rosy cheeks
Uh so if you weren’t that
You were not
Not attractive
Ugly
So if you’re a-a tall brunette
With brown eyes
You’re still ugly
According to the sonneteers
You’re still not attractive- you’re nothing.
So his perfect lady didn’t have eyes like the sun
If she did- had eyes-If she had eyes like the sun.
What -what would it be like to look at her? What would happen to you?
Yes, what would happen to you?
Be blinded (unintelligible)
T-You’d be blinded, okay
If um— okay. Some of us are supposed to be White right uh okay
Are we really White?
No, Peach
Peach? (Laughs)
SS: Laugh
Okay all right— how much difference really do you see (Ms. Y places her hand beside an Pam an African-American girls’ hand.)
Use Manny’s hand. My hand is Black.
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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 poem is “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 represent 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 beautiful 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. In line 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_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natonya</th>
<th>Stephanie Carter</th>
<th>Pam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31. T: Blonde hair, red lips, and pink cheeks</td>
<td>32. P: Yea -all that ugly stuff-that’s ugly!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. S: So like you know —when you were sitting there, and it was being described that way what were you thinking?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. T: What I just said.</td>
<td>35. S: Were you agreeing?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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</td>
<td>37. /P: I didn’t agree.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. /T: And stuff like that I definitely didn’t agree.</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. T: (laughing)</td>
<td>41. S: So (smiling)- so is that what you were thinking?</td>
<td></td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td>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-</td>
<td>44. /P: A White person</td>
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<td>45. /S: blonde hair, okay Pam says “a White person,” (smiling) how does it make you feel as a Black woman?</td>
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<td>46. T: It feels- It feel man</td>
<td>47.</td>
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<td>48. P: It make me feel like she trynna say I am ugly, but I know I look good.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>50. /P: Mhuh</td>
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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-

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**Segment 2, Interview/Conversation Key 3/16/01**

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<th>P: Pam, T: Natonya, S: Stephanie, /: Signals interrupting a conversation</th>
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<td>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</td>
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<td>197. /S: And when you say you have an attitude what do you mean?</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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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...
“Reading and All That White Crazy Stuff:” Black Young Women Unpacking Whiteness

European, not blond, lesbian etc…), and how such images impact their own self image, identity, and willingness to participate in the curriculum (cf., 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’s 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


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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.