



## **Speaking With One Another” in Community-Based Research: (Re)Writing African American History in Berks County, Pennsylvania**

**Laurie Grobman, Penn State University- Berks**

This article addresses the “problem of speaking for others” in a joint community-based research project between the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Reading, Pennsylvania branch and Penn State Berks to uncover, document, and disseminate to the public African American history in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Integrating community partners’ and students’ voices with her own, Grobman suggests that the Berks County African American History project approached a model of CBR in which whites and African Americans spoke (and wrote) with one another. She argues that this productive, but highly complex collaboration between community partners, students, and faculty reminds us that theoretical understandings of such concepts as hybridity, border-crossing, and blurring of group-based differences and identities do not necessarily occur in practice; rather, the Black-white binary, sometimes for very good reasons, is not dissolved. Grobman recommends strategies that will aid others involved CBR to create venues that approach equal authority rather than paternalistic service.

**O**n November 5, 2005, at the 18th annual National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Reading, Pennsylvania branch Freedom Fund Banquet, Mr. Frank Gilyard, Director of the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum in Reading, asked the audience to support the expansion of the museum. He implored, “Let us tell our own story.” Several minutes later, I, a white faculty member at Penn State University, Berks campus



in Reading, stood before the mostly African American crowd as I was introduced as the team leader of a joint community-based research project between the NAACP and Penn State Berks, herein referred to as the Berks County African American History project, to uncover, document, and disseminate to the public African American history in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Suddenly, I felt what I had already known: “Anytime a White person assumes a position of authority in a community space that is used primarily by communities of color, problems of legitimacy, intention and practice emerge” (Zimmer 13). In this case, the “community space” was not only the banquet room itself, but more importantly, the erased local histories of African Americans.

The result of this collaboration is a volume of short essays and facts called *Woven with Words: A Collection of African American History in Berks County, Pennsylvania* and a corresponding website (<<http://www.readingnaacp.org/book.html>>).<sup>1</sup> As a work of public history and community-based research (CBR), dissemination has taken several forms: the book and website’s debut at the Reading branch NAACP annual Freedom Fund banquet in November 2006; distribution of over 500 complimentary copies of the book to every educational institution, library, and historical institution in Berks county (this dissemination, undertaken by the executive board of the NAACP, is in progress); availability of the book at the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum in Reading, PA; three student conference presentations at the 2006 Annual Pennsylvania Conference on African American History<sup>2</sup>; publication of two articles by students in *The Berks Historical Review*, the quarterly magazine of the Historical Society of Berks County; and appearances by Gilyard and me on a local television talk show called *For the People*. Moreover, members of the NAACP Board presented the book to the Reading Public School District Board of Education and to the Berks County Intermediate Unit. Faculty in the Elementary Education program at Penn State Berks are working with future teachers to present African American history from *Woven with Words* to the Boys and Girls clubs throughout the city of Reading and



to develop Social Studies curricula to be used in the Reading public school system.

Despite these accomplishments, the discomfort I felt on that evening in 2005, and the question of whether it is “valid to speak for others” (Alcoff 7), remains a significant issue in the project under study and in CBR generally. The “problem of speaking for others” (98), as Linda Alcoff defines it, is that when individuals from a privileged or dominant group speak for individuals from an oppressed group or the group itself, the speakers may, and often do, reinforce that group’s marginalization (99). All four faculty in the Berks County African American History project are white. Three of the 18 students who participated in the historical research are African American while 15 are white. The four male students who created the website are also white.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we must ask: Were the white faculty and students in the project speaking for Berks County’s African Americans and the students of color?

In this article, I suggest that, through great effort and awareness by everyone involved, the Berks County African American History project approached a model of CBR in which whites and African Americans spoke (and wrote) with one another.<sup>4</sup> I do not suggest that the project was “successful” in every way. Rather, I assert that a productive collaboration between community partners, students, and faculty—what one community member I interviewed described as “one of the best things that happened in our community in a long time”—is also a complex web of interrelated issues that disappear from view only to reappear again. It reminds all of us interested in university-community partnerships that theoretical understandings of hybridity, border-crossing, and blurring of group-based differences and identities do not necessarily occur in practice; rather, the Black-white binary, sometimes for very good reasons, is not dissolved.

In spite of, and because of, these challenging matters, Gilyard, Jefferson, Williams, Johnson, and I envision a long term relationship



between Penn State Berks, the local NAACP, and the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum to “jointly create work and knowledge” (Bushouse 32). As Brenda Bushouse argues, these relationships will progress only if the community and university acknowledge their complexity and invest time and resources to address them (32). Studying identity politics in the Berks County African American History project is one such undertaking to move this relationship forward. Moreover, I use this experience and the voices of the community partners to recommend strategies that will aid others involved CBR to create venues that approach equal authority rather than paternalistic service.

### **Methodology: Multiple Voices**

How does a scholar who partners with students and community members on a research project write a scholarly article for a scholarly journal to be read by a small community of scholars? I thought about this question at length as I began preparing my research, and again later after receiving revision suggestions from Steve Parks, Reflections editor, and the anonymous reviewers. As Marie Sandy and Barbara Holland note, “there are few published studies documenting the perspectives of community members in partnership with universities” (30). Clearly, if university and community partners are to speak with one another, teacher-scholars must include community voices in our research. I chose a methodology that includes two forms of primary research aimed at giving voice to community partners and students: an interview with the four Reading branch NAACP members central to the project (see Appendix A for Interview Questions) and a student questionnaire.<sup>5</sup>

The individuals I interviewed were central to this project and remain instrumental in our ongoing partnership. Robert Jefferson, the primary liaison between the NAACP and Penn State Berks, was at the time the Vice-President of the local NAACP and is currently the President. Gilyard, who is on the NAACP executive board, founded and directs



the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum in Reading, a small museum housed in a church that once served as a way station in the Underground Railroad. Jefferson and Gilyard gave permission to use their real names. The other two interview participants chose to remain anonymous, and I will refer to them as last names Williams and Johnson. The interview is my attempt to bring these individuals' voices directly into the scholarly community. Our interview evolved into a 2.5 hour five-way conversation, meandering in many interesting directions.

I distributed questionnaires (see Appendix B) to student participants in March 2006, more than a full year after students' participation in the project ended and after several had graduated. Although only five students, two African American (I call them Betty and Sherie) and three white (I call them Carolyn, Mark, and Jenny), filled out the questionnaires, their voices are compelling. At the same time, their comments as a whole must be interpreted cautiously because they are limited in number and may not represent the perspectives of the entire group. Because I had not planned on this research study, I did not save student writing from the classes, except for the research articles published in *Woven with Words*.

### **The Effaced Histories of Berks County's African Americans**

Berks County, located in the southeastern portion of Pennsylvania, was founded by Conrad Weiser in 1752. Berks County was settled by Swedes, Quakers, German Amish, French Huguenots, Mennonites, and English. Reading, the county's city, and Berks County were named for Reading in Berkshire, England, the English home of William Penn's family (Penn founded the province of Pennsylvania). Migration and immigration have over time changed the ethnic landscape of Berks County to also include African Americans, Asian Americans, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Jews, Latinos, Native Americans, and others. African Americans were first brought to Berks County as slaves, although few county residents know this fact and it is rarely spoken of in local schools. Until the late 18th century, the majority of African Americans



in Berks County were either slaves or indentured servants. By 1850, the U.S. Census lists the African American population in Reading at 285 persons, all of them free.

U.S. Census records indicate that in 2000 whites made up 88.2% of the population of Berks County and 59.2% of the city of Reading. From 1990 to 2000, the Black or African American population increased from 9.7% to 12.2% in the city of Reading and the Hispanic or Latino population, comprised of Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and Dominican Americans, increased from 18.5% to 37.3% in the city of Reading.

Berks County's "regular history," "the history most students expect" (Filene 483), is white, European, and male: William Penn; Conrad Weiser; Daniel Boone; a rich agricultural heritage; Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site (the furnace was in operation from 1771 to 1883); the Reading Railroad (which has appeared in the board game Monopoly for decades); the textile industry in first half of 20th century; and in general the county's history as a major industrial center, helping to supply war efforts from the Revolution through WWII. When locals boast about their cultural heritage, they cite John Updike, Wallace Stevens, and Pennsylvania German folk art and architecture.

But as my students discovered, there are other histories that must be told, and our primary venue for so doing was through writing. History is, as Michael Olneck observes, "selective. It excludes as well as includes, forgets as well as remembers, hides as well as places in view" (335). Historical memory and narratives construct past and present social positions and legitimate current practices. But telling new stories and constructing different memories challenges and resists exclusionary ideologies. Rewriting history is more than telling the same story a new way; it is re-orienting.



In this project, students learned that the histories of minority ethnic groups must be “dug out from between the lines of biased white accounts” (Gilman 226). John Kuo Wei Tchen points out that “making the historical experiences of the excluded and marginalized manifest” involves “extending the net of what historians have usually considered acceptable historical subject matter” (202). This is precisely what Karen James of the Pennsylvania Museum and History Commission told to my students during a class visit: “Doing African American history,” she stressed, is not the same as “doing white history.”

Students worked with primary sources, including documentary evidence, photographs, newspapers, advertisements for runaway slaves, and census data. They explored relevant aspects of material culture, including, for example, architecture and housing, industry, domestic and vernacular arts, and artifacts speaking to ethnic and cultural identity. Several times during the semester, members of the local African American community came to Penn State Berks and held hours-long research sessions with students. Students learned to conduct oral history, including such elements as focusing on a specific group for interviews, developing questions, and writing narratives, and they spoke often with Gilyard at the Berks campus and at the museum. While studying and writing history, students became “producers rather than consumers of knowledge” while also “serv[ing] immediate public needs and purposes” (von Joeden-Forgey and Puckett 132, emphasis in original). In doing history, students’ writing played a meaningful role in the world outside the classroom; most important, their writing helped to secure African Americans’ place in Berks County’s history.

### **Whose “Community Space”? Community-Based Research and “the Problem of Speaking for Others”**

The Berks African American history project may be categorized as community-based research (CBR), a form of service-learning that involves “research with and for the community” (Strand 85).<sup>6</sup> I use the term “community” in CBR as defined by Randy Stoecker:



“the community is the people living with the problem and those organizations that they democratically control” (41). In the project under study, then, the community includes members of the local branch of the NAACP, the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum, and the African American community in Berks County. The four individuals interviewed for my study assumed leadership roles in the project and therefore represented their respective organizations and the community.

I also want to complicate Stoecker’s definition, however. Stoecker explains that “The outsiders trying to solve the problem or the funders who are paying the outsiders to solve the problem are typically not part of the community, though there may be bridge people who have roots in the community and can help build relationships between the community and outsiders” (41). Although not African American, I am an involved member of the Berks county community. I have lived here for over 20 years, raise my children here, and am committed to bettering the lives of all who live and work here, especially those from marginalized and disadvantaged groups. Moreover, one of the participating African American students has deep roots in Berks County, while the other two African American students identified as insiders by virtue of being African American, although they had only lived in the county for one or two years of college. Some of the white students born and raised in Berks County identified as community members while recognizing that their whiteness also placed them outside the immediate African American community. As I will explain later, this notion of communities as both separate and overlapping had a consistent presence throughout the project.

As a form of CBR, the Berks County African American History project was fairly unique. The “problem” addressed is not among the social ills often associated with much of CBR, such as poverty, underfunded schools, or homelessness; rather, the problem is a largely invisible, erased history.<sup>7</sup> Yet the community members saw this project as crucial





to their ongoing agenda of calling attention to the long neglected history of African Americans in Berks County and to continued efforts to empower their people, especially the children. As Jefferson stated in the interview, he and the other individuals who initiated the project wanted “to open that door” to document our community’s history, to give our children a “tool to change attitudes about themselves,” and to “educate the whole community.” Jefferson added, emphatically, “We did accomplish this.”

Mark Chesler and Carolyn Scalera distinguish between two primary models of community service learning: those that work within social frameworks to provide services to oppressed and disadvantaged populations, and those that attempt to dismantle those structures that control the allocation of resources to oppressed and disadvantaged populations (19). The project described herein was of the latter kind: by writing Berks County African Americans into the county’s history, we hoped to challenge, resist, and revise “official” versions of local history. Thus, among the most important goals of CBR is to “democratize the production and control of knowledge” by “recognizing the legitimacy of the knowledge and world views of powerless people and by sharing authority wherever possible in every stage of the research process” (Stoecker 85).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, CBR has a critical action component: “to contribute in some way to improving the lives of those living in the community” (85) and to “help the community acquire some information that they see as important to their ongoing work” (85).

If, as Stoecker argues, a crucial objective of CBR is to “undermin[e] the power structure that currently places control of knowledge production in the hands of credentialized experts” (36), how does a CBR project led by “credentialized experts” in the academy undermine rather than reproduce dominant power structures? In this particular case, how can a project to write African Americans into U.S. history carried out primarily by whites work against the structures that have effaced such a history in the first place?



The “problem of speaking for others” is associated with the broader, multifaceted notion of identity politics, which covers a range of issues related to the nature and origins of individual and group identity, political views, and mobilization efforts of particular marginalized groups to challenge and resist dominant structures, definitions, and social positions. Generally, identity politics is based on the idea that group members themselves are the best hope for improvement of that group’s marginalized status. In other words, these groups should speak, write, and act for themselves. Indeed, as Alcoff and Satya Mohanty suggest, many successful social movements that have greatly improved our society and increased social justice, for example the civil rights movement and the women’s movement, “were led, never exclusively but primarily, by the oppressed themselves” (2). Further, as Abdul Alkalimat suggests, the dual mission of Black studies is to rewrite American history to account for erased histories and “to establish the intellectual and academic space for Black people to tell their own story” (qtd. in Graham, with Dietzel, and Bailey 196; emphasis added). Yet, is there room in the “intellectual and academic space” for whites to tell African Americans’ stories? Does doing so inevitably distort non-white histories and perpetuate historical inaccuracies and injustices, or can it perhaps facilitate more accurate historical retellings?

The interview reveals that Jefferson, Gilyard, Williams, and Johnson agree that African Americans should tell their own histories because African American history has been ignored, erased, or/and obscured in the nation’s master narratives. Johnson was very emphatic that “most African Americans are skeptical of whites telling our stories” since “whites have always been in control of history, even today. . . Our [African Americans’] story is not told.” Gilyard observed that there is no funding set aside in Pennsylvania to train teachers about African American history. He asked, “How do we get to the point that our history is told?” Williams echoed this sentiment: “We need to be included in [U.S. history].” Gilyard and Jefferson stressed their view that Berks County’s African American history has been grossly



distorted by the only daily newspaper in the area, *The Reading Eagle*. Still today, they asserted, the newspaper “slants the news about African Americans.” Significantly, Johnson added that there are “still a lot of naysayers” in the local community who are upset that *Woven with Words* was written primarily by whites. Their view aligns with Jane Phillips who explains, “In recent years, marginalized groups in American society have come to realize that the histories of their communities are best preserved *through their own stories*” (173, emphasis added).

Nonetheless, Jefferson, Gilyard, and Williams knew that by seeking out Penn State Berks as a collaborator, they would be reaching out to predominantly white faculty and students (although not realizing how few faculty of color are at Penn State Berks, they expected to have some non-white faculty participation). Jefferson was gratified that Penn State was so willing a partner and saw the collaboration as a significant opportunity; Williams echoed these views: “We needed a formal project to make this happen . . . we wanted [our local history] documented, [and] this was a way to make it happen.” Gilyard acknowledged being pleased when he first met the students because there were three African Americans. Jefferson stated that when he first met the 8-10 white faculty at our first meeting together, “I did feel apprehensive because it was clear that some faculty in that room were apathetic. . . I was concerned about the attitudes of these professionals and suspected some would fall out, and they did.” Yet the four individuals I interviewed also agreed, in Jefferson’s words, that “There are some whites who are dedicated and committed” to redress past wrongs.

### **“Speaking with One Another”: Sharing the Intellectual and Academic Space**

Scholars generally believe that identity-based academic programs such as ethnic studies produce “better, more truthful and less distorted scholarship on the lives and experiences of marginalized identity groups . . . when the faculty in the academy itself became more



diverse” (Alcoff and Mohanty 2). There are clear advantages to forming such group-based allegiances within higher education: individual and group empowerment for those whose voices have been suppressed by dominant discourses; a sense of belonging, especially within an often hostile institutional setting; and, importantly, a political power base that can propel changes which otherwise might not occur. Ethnic studies programs or critical communities of a particular discipline play significant roles in ensuring that scholarly work that has been historically unrepresented or underrepresented is included in curricula: “Institutionally, minority studies have been made up by necessity of whatever has been excluded from the canon and the mainstream work of the disciplines, the afterthought of the academy, if thought at all” (Alcoff and Mohanty 8).<sup>9</sup>

A strict form of identity politics asserts that one’s identity should align the individual with a political perspective and, therefore, problematizes an outsider’s authenticity or right to speak within or for a particular group.<sup>10</sup> However, I suggest, like Alcoff, that there are legitimate reasons for speaking for others and that to “simply retreat from all practices of speaking for” substantially “undercuts the possibility of political effectivity” (107). But when academics consider whether and when it is appropriate to speak for others, “we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context” (113). We do this, Alcoff asserts, through dialogue and learning as much as we can about the reception of the speech. Ultimately, Alcoff argues that we must ask, “Will it [speaking for others] enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples?” (116).

As a teacher-scholar specializing in multicultural literature, I regularly cross cultures as I research and teach literature by writers of color. Doing so, I firmly believe, will facilitate, in small but important steps, “the empowerment of oppressed peoples.” I want to participate in this work, and I know the realities of higher education where to prohibit white instructors from teaching multicultural literature is to inevitably



erase these writers' voices. Equally important, I continually learn and develop my knowledge of the literature and cultures represented and develop pedagogical methods and strategies for teaching these texts responsibly.

Delores Aldridge argues that teaching Black Studies, in particular, requires "the strength to know the truths behind the accepted truths" (70). Joyce Joyce concurs: "[T]hough the issue is complex, race is not the essential criterion for a teacher of African-American literature" (28). Rather, "Whites [who teach in Black Studies or who teach African-American literature] must understand that Blacks', Whites' and other peoples' of color thought patterns have been shaped by racism and that these patterns have been shaped differently" (52). That is, if white teachers do the necessary work to become informed and to interrogate our socially constructed beliefs and ways of knowing—to "unlearn our largely white, middle-class biases" (Green 19)—all teachers of African American history can teach sensitively, responsibly, and knowledgeably.

Yet I also know that crossing cultures is quite complicated. As the project under study illustrates, issues of cultural boundaries, ownership, and appropriation elicit strong views and emotions from everyone involved. Group-based differences and identities are sometimes necessary and cherished. African Americans, in particular, have resisted and survived centuries of cruelty and oppression by working together against dominant, white power structures. This racial group, perhaps more so than any other, has fought to establish its collective identity in a nation that for too long denied their very humanity. Centers become margins, margins become centers, outsiders become insiders, insiders become outsiders and, for fleeting moments, binaries do break down, only to resurface.

I could not have participated in the Berks African American History project without a sense of my and other whites' obligation to sometimes



speak for others. Equally important, I concur when Alcoff advocates that “we should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others” (110-11). My sense that I should become involved, and especially to become the team leader, could only work if I consistently monitored the complex dynamics of the group and proactively worked with faculty colleagues, community partners, and students to get us as close as possible to the point that we would *speak with one another*. Facilitating such a partnership generally took place at two levels: in the classroom and through collaborations with community partners.

### **In the Classrooms**

The first course in the Berks County African American History project was American Studies 322, American Ethnicity, an upper-level requirement in the American Studies major, which I taught; the second a Special Topics course called “Writing History” created for this project and taught by Gary Kunkelman, which filled an advanced major requirement for the Professional Writing major.<sup>11</sup> Both courses were situated and taught within a framework of critical multiculturalism, which works against appropriation and erasure of difference by explicitly addressing specific social categories of difference. Working collaboratively, we challenged poorly documented, erased histories, and the structures that allowed such histories to disappear from view. Although we taught our classes differently, Kunkelman and I shared similar learning objectives and pedagogical strategies to help students to see themselves as equal partners rather than white knights. Below, I discuss each of these three strategies separately, but in reality they overlap.

*1) Foster students' understanding of entrenched white power structures and white privilege, especially how these concepts work to erase histories of non-white groups.*



Simply put, all students must learn about white privilege and its relationship to discrimination, prejudice, and poverty, even if they don't fully accept it (and many do not). I used Adalberto Aguirre, Jr. and Jonathan H. Turner's textbook, *American Ethnicity: The Dynamics and Consequences of Discrimination* to promote these complex understandings, supplemented by several readings on race and ethnicity, stereotypes, cultural appropriation, and cultural hybridity. After reading Frances Kendall's "Understanding White Privilege," I had students write from Kendall's perspective and then their own about the Berks African American History project, specifically to address Kendall's points that white privilege involves "discounting people of color" (7) and "the privilege of writing and teaching history only from the perspective of the colonizer" (9). In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, students also read and discussed this human tragedy by examining issues of race, white privilege, poverty, the media, and rhetoric.

*2) Expose students to the complex nature and functions of writing revisionist histories.*

Students must also learn United States history differently so they understand what it means to write history.<sup>12</sup> As Richard Lowy puts it, the "critical mission of ethnic studies—both in terms of political praxis and intellectual insight—is to declare, discuss, and debate the meaning of Eurocentric hegemony and to refute the false universalism" typically associated with Eurocentric views (724). I encouraged students to "try on" a non-Eurocentrist view, *at least during the period of their research and writing*, by using this interpretive lens as they address the content of the course. I assigned Michael Harper's poem, "American History," newspaper accounts of the Birmingham church bombing, and history textbook excerpts as an introduction into these concepts. Students read historical and literary writings that revise aspects of U.S. history.



Against the background of white privilege and the erasure of African American histories, students were able to turn to (re)writing local histories. They began to consider issues of historical truth and interrogated traditional versions of American history. In so doing, students came to understand how writing inscribes and (re)inscribes realities, how histories are written by socially constructed individuals, and how they as student-scholar-writer-historians might step outside master narratives to write responsible and truthful histories.

The white students' responses indicate how doing local African American history promoted a deeper understanding of how white privilege affects historical renderings. For Mark, "the fact that libraries and museums only had a limited amount of sources and documents regarding African American history also opened my eyes to the aspect of white privilege." Carolyn's detailed response is replete with insight:

As someone who had already previously conducted historical research and written articles as the culmination of that research, *Woven with Words* made me realize that much of my previous scholarship focused—quite narrowly—within my race. I do not, nor have I ever considered myself racist; however, an inner ethnocentrism existed without me even being aware of it. This ethnocentrism was created by cultural influences—the amount of scholarship already available (and published by a journal or publishing house) shapes the research process, many times without our realizing it. . . . I always understood that African American history was not as readily accessible prior to 1900 as white history is, but I only began to comprehend the full implications of this during the project. Time and again, I was confronted with incomplete records, a lack of records, and/or history documented by white historians (not always unbiased) rather than African Americans. Much of a rich cultural heritage and historical heritage was lost.





The questionnaires provide some evidence that students were aware of the enormity of what they were being asked to do. Carolyn writes,

[The African American community members we interviewed and spoke with] were all excited to discuss their heritage with us and thrilled to see their history and culture being explored. Many of them recalled times of segregation and the destruction of their history (African American war heroes' grave stones being paved over for a parking lot, for instance) in our own times.

Betty "was impressed with the amount of oral history that we were able to gather. It was like they [community members who shared their histories] were so happy to share their experiences and so happy that someone was going to use it in such a positive way." Jenny's comments reveal her effort to step outside her cultural constructions to reach some level of objectivity:

We had material that guided us, but the class discussion and Gary's [Kunkelman] comments on our writing were the most beneficial. He was/is a newspaper man. We found all material we could and were taught how to look at it from not a personal point of view, but just as a newspaper reporter reporting the facts. When in doubt, we could always turn to our guide book, email Gary or each other. I emailed and talked to [an African American classmate] on several occasions.

Gilyard "wasn't concerned that students would distort or slant [our history]. The students didn't question [the veracity] of the stories of the people who were there." Like the students in Boyle-Baise and Binford's Benjamin Banneker School project, "Knowledge of local history made students feel more connected to their community" and students "found themselves 'becoming more aware' of racism in their town."<sup>13</sup>



### *3) Facilitate open discussions of race in our classrooms.*

Jenny's remarks above also point to the third primary strategy: to facilitate open discussions of race. Several scholar-teachers in multicultural education and service-learning have discussed the difficulties associated with classroom discussions of race (see, for example, Davi, Dunlap, and Green; Green; Moya; TuSmith and Reddy). I agree with Ann Green's points that the presence of African American students in the classes "made discussions of race harder for majority students to dismiss" and "helped me to think and learn about race as well" (24). However, addressing race in the classroom is especially challenging when only a handful or fewer students are of color. In my course, the one African American student was the only student from a visibly minority background. Citing Hans Herbert Kögler's contention that dialogue is "capable of leading us to new insights and critical self-reflection through experiencing the other" (qtd. in Tchen 200), Tchen argues that teachers "must be mindful of hegemonic power that constrains open discussion" (200). In a classroom where an instructor and the majority of students are white, an African American student may rightfully question her white teacher's ability to explicate issues of race. Instructors should be aware of the pressures that students of color may feel in these classrooms. Thus, I was always careful not to put this African American student on the spot or to make her feel like she was the spokesperson for African Americans, and I was always mindful of her potential discomfort.

Four students who completed questionnaires felt that, overall, racial barriers were overcome and tensions alleviated through open communication. Betty wrote, "I was heartened by the [white] students' reception to the project and the work they did. I wasn't sure, in the beginning, that they would really want to participate. Many of them went beyond 'lip service' and really developed an appreciation and understanding." Jenny's perspective aligns with Betty's: "[An African American classmate and I] both came to an understanding of what it



was like to be in the other's shoes when it came to race. Talking and communication was the key to being sensitive to the cause, but at the same time, professional about it." Jenny also comments:

In class, we had discussions on the material and the African American students spoke up to offer an opinion or suggestion...at least [one student] did. I did hear [another student] mumble under her breath sometimes if she didn't like something, but I spoke to her later about how she was feeling and brought it to the attention of the class. . . I think we were as honest and open as possible because we were . . . a team that had been together for several years [as students in the same major] already . . . a tight knit group. I can say that there was a little animosity that was brought up, but I felt it got cleared up. If it hadn't, I spoke to the African American students and encouraged them to speak up. There were a few things outside of class that lead to animosity within the class, but I really thought all the students were more concerned and excited about the research...we all learned together through this. . .In the end, it's communication, the ability to ask questions in a constructive way, that leads to understanding and acceptance. . .Caucasian students weren't afraid to say, "Hey, I'm white, I don't know what it's like to be African American, so show me and help me to understand." African American students were called on frequently to discuss all of our research. We shared our writing and commented on it, just as we had been trained [as writers] to do. . .I tried to get people to look at all sides before I did my research and tried to look at all sides of my research to keep it that way. I constantly discussed my research with other African Americans to see if I wasn't doing justice to the project. They gave me honest feedback. As stated before, there was at least an attempt for every non-African American culture to step into the shoes of African Americans . . . to fight to build bridges.



Yet Sherie's remarks remind us that despite our best efforts, creating safe and productive spaces for students of color is challenging and must continue. Sherie comments: "I found myself not putting the effort because I felt like the token black kid in the group." I know Sherie well—

I have had her in two classes both before and after this semester—and we continue to talk about her experiences as a black woman in a predominantly white college. In fact, Sherie and a small group of African American students met with me and a colleague over dinner several times to discuss such issues, and the students asked us share their insights and perspectives with the faculty. It is this kind of dialogue that will help me to learn, to share what I learn with my colleagues, and to develop better ways to assist minority students to feel comfortable in predominantly white classrooms.

In a current Life History partnership between my Ethnic America class and the NAACP leadership, I have two African American students in a class with nine white students. I have tried to carefully monitor the African American students' classroom experiences by paying attention to class discussions and by speaking to them about how they are feeling about class discussions and related matters. For the life history assignment, I assigned to each of these students a community member who I knew would serve as a role model and mentor. I also try to walk that fine line between engaging non-white students privately outside the classroom while without making them feel "singled out," something Sherie and I have discussed at length. But I remain acutely aware of the difficulties students of color face in these projects, and while I do not have all the answers, I will continue to work with students of color to help navigate these difficult waters.

### **The University-Community Partnership**

Ideally, CBR is initiated and undertaken jointly to address a problem or concern identified by the community. These projects recognize



the value that all constituents—students, faculty, and community members—bring to the table. CBR is research that is done “*with* rather than *on* the community” (Strand 85, emphasis in original). The Reading branch NAACP initiated the Berks County African American History project; with Board approval, then-President Steven McCracken approached Penn State Berks seeking faculty and student involvement. Jefferson saw the collaboration as a significant opportunity for the community and the students. He “felt good about [the researchers] being students.” The work would be “a lesson for them in life and [provide] a different perspective, an opportunity for [students] to be objective [about African American history].” But to make this happen in a way that created as close to an equal partnership as possible, given each person’s role, responsibilities, and educational and work experiences, several shared understandings had to be put into place.

*1) Recognize the expertise each individual brings to the collaboration.*

I was an expert in certain aspects—teaching, ethnic studies, and writing, for example—and community members were experts in their own histories and communities. Gilyard’s knowledge of Berks County’s African American history is encyclopedic. He has made it his mission to document and disseminate what he has stored in his mind and in his museum (and he has stacks of documents and artifacts in his home). He is passionate about sharing family and community stories with all people, including the time his home was firebombed in the 1970s after moving into one of the Reading suburbs. Mark, one of the students, writes this about Gilyard:

To be able to put into words what I have learned from Frank Gilyard would be quite a task. I learned more from him than I learned from any book or historical document regarding African Americans. I not only learned about some crucial historical information, but also the personal struggles of being African



American, and the success stories of Frank Gilyard and his many accomplishments.

Jefferson was a master at encouraging community participation, mounting community support, organizing research sessions, and bringing issues to the NAACP Executive Board. Both Williams and Johnson were intimately familiar with the community they were representing, they knew what the community wanted and how the community might respond, and they worked hard to mediate and deflect criticism.

*2) Share the work and decision-making.*

Community partners and members were involved at every stage of the process. We met regularly for more than a year, from planning through completion. The NAACP board members' initial goal was a 40-page pamphlet, but as the project progressed, together we decided to pursue a more comprehensive collection.

Gilyard, Jefferson, Williams, and Johnson read drafts of all articles before final printing and shared these drafts with other NAACP members. Several revisions were put into place as a result. Together, we brainstormed about the title and cover design of the book. Many of us sought images of a quilt and collectively selected the image on the cover and on the website (with permission from the designer). During these meetings, Gilyard taught us all about the meanings of these quilts in the Underground Railroad. We also held several meetings with the student web developers, who were taught in their classes to listen to and work for clients' needs. At each meeting, we discussed, debated, and ultimately ended up with an attractive and usable website for the local NAACP and the history project.

*3) Faculty and students must "listen closely" to the community partners (Green 19, emphasis in original).*



What this meant for *Woven with Words* was telling stories of and through community members, whether by interviews of the living or documents reflecting the lives of the dead. We had to be mindful of the larger objective (in addition to the details of course requirements, grades, etc.) of telling history through those who have lived it. I view our work as “intercultural inquiry,” as Linda Flower defines it, or a “literate action” in which the partners involved “attempt to *use* the differences of race, class, culture, or discourse that are available to them to understand shared questions” and to “transform both the inquirers and their interpretations of problematic issues in the world” (186). Students and community members negotiated meanings—of and about local history and racial injustices—in sustained intercultural dialogues.

### **Whose Community in Community-Based Research?**

On November 11, 2006, I stood side-by-side with Robert Jefferson at the 19th annual National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Reading, Pennsylvania branch Freedom Fund Banquet as Jefferson, Gilyard, Williams, and Johnson unveiled *Woven with Words* to the largely African American audience. We were thrilled and proud to be there. However, when it was my turn to speak, having been asked to do so by my community partners, my legs and hands were shaking. I had written my speech with great care, still somewhat insecure about how I would be received by the crowd. My voice trembled with trepidation:

This book is for all of *you*. But it is also, in *my* view, for all of *us*. And it is especially for *all our* children. *All our* children need to know the truth of history, its good and its bad. *My* own children are 12 and 14, and throughout the process, I talked with them, not only about the facts my students uncovered, but the implications of what they uncovered. Complimentary copies of these books will be in all *our* schools and libraries and other educational institutions throughout Reading and Berks. Hopefully, *all our* children will



learn about *your* rich heritage—*your* despair and *your* triumphs--as *you* became the strong community *you* are today. (emphasis added)

I was cognizant and tentative about my use of “my” and “our” and “your.” In the community created through the partnership we were often, but not always, able to break down the Black/white binary, and it took diligent effort and shared goals to do so. But outside the community we together created, the binary operated in ways that were instructive. For example, some members of the community insisted that a substantial piece of the article written by Brian Engelhardt on African Americans and Berks County baseball be deleted, as this section focused on the efforts of a white man, Gordon Hoodak, to create a baseball field for inner-city youth.<sup>14</sup> To Engelhardt, including Hoodak’s story illustrated how far race relations had come in Reading baseball. However, from what I could gather, to the community partners whose African American history had for too long been buried under white histories, Hoodak’s story overlaid their own. One group’s history rarely happens in isolation, but must its telling always include all parties? May a group have its *own* history? Does telling one group’s history inevitably distort or erase another’s? These multifaceted questions yield no easy, or perfect, answers.

Ultimately, I believe that the Berks County African American History Project was a success, but it was a complex *moment* of success in a morass of more complex moments. Together, community partners, students, and faculty gave the gift of history to the African American community and the entire Berks community. Universities and communities can and must work together across racial groups, but we must also be mindful that despite the successes we attain, there are larger issues to be addressed, and work still to be done—in the classroom, in the communities, in American history, and in the banquet room.





## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 1500 copies of the book were printed with funds from a Pennsylvania State House legislative grant acquired by Representative Thomas Caltagirone and by Penn State University.

<sup>2</sup> All students were invited to present their work, but only four students, all white, chose to do so.

<sup>3</sup> At Penn State Berks, the vast majority of students are white. The project was open to all students, but to participate, students had to enroll in one of two courses. With the help of the Multicultural Counselor and Equal Opportunity Director, I actively recruited students of color. However, the two courses for which students could enroll to participate were upper level courses serving the American Studies and Professional Writing majors and would count only as electives for students in all other majors. The faculty at Penn State Berks is also primarily white, with very few African Americans. The then Academic Dean sent an email to all faculty asking for participation in the project, and several responded, although some dropped out before the project began.

<sup>4</sup> I reject the phrase “speaking with and to rather than for others,” as suggested by Alcoff (110-11). See also ethicist Sharon Welch who states, “We must work with, rather than for, others” (qtd. in Green 19, emphasis in original). Although I understand that in these contexts, Alcoff and Welch use “others” to acknowledge the dominant/non-dominant status of white and African American groups in the United States and to recognize the erasure of African American history by white power structures, I am concerned that the term “others” perpetuates the notion that whites are the central norm against which all nonwhites should be measured.

<sup>5</sup> I received approval to conduct research on human subjects for this project through the Penn State University Compliance Office.



Community partner's interview statements are unedited. I am using pseudonyms for my students. Student's questionnaire responses are unedited, except for obvious punctuation errors, spelling errors, and typos.

<sup>6</sup> Because it is a form of service-learning and thus involves students, CBR is distinguished from other forms of activist, community, and university research collaborations (Strand 86).

<sup>7</sup> See also Elisa von Joeden-Forgey and John Puckett, who taught CBR projects in which undergraduate history majors at the University of Pennsylvania worked with West Philadelphia high school and middle school students on local history projects and were "doing history" (120, emphasis in original).

<sup>8</sup> Although I understand Stoecker's use of the word "powerless" and believe it applies to the historical erasure of African Americans in U.S. history, I do not believe it applies to the community leaders of this project. These individuals, all of whom are retired but lead full lives as volunteers, are deeply involved in bettering the lives of African Americans in Berks County and can point to many important successes.

<sup>9</sup> Alcoff and Mohanty use the term "minority" to indicate the amount of a group's power and access to resources.

<sup>10</sup> A rigid identity politics also problematizes what an insider should or should not say, that is, essentialist claims that, based on an individual's politics, he or she is not "'Black enough,' or 'Queer enough,' or 'real feminists,' etc." (Jacobs 4).

<sup>11</sup> I had hoped that Gary Kunkelman would collaborate with me on this article, but he was unable to do so. He and I co-edited *Woven with Words*, and we spent a great deal of time before, during, and after the project discussing the issues it raised.



<sup>12</sup> Teacher-scholars who use service-learning in the history curriculum tend to agree that the combination offers “a starting point for history, a present situation with immediate and pressing problems” (Harkavy and Donovan 1). By addressing local concerns and integrating the community into the curriculum, “historians can engage a wider public than they normally do in specialized monographs or traditional college courses,” and students find that history is more relevant to them (Bailey, et al. 1722). Through community service learning, “students will struggle to define their responsibilities to a diverse public, including persons who might not be part of their own social groups and those who do not share their values or culture” (1723).

<sup>13</sup> Boyle-Baise and Binford’s students investigated the history of the Benjamin Banneker School, a segregated school that operated from 1915-1951 in a Midwestern college community.

<sup>14</sup> In the original draft of the article, Engelhardt (one of two contributors to *Woven with Words* who were not students) wrote about the efforts of Hoodak, in his twenty-fourth year as principal of Lauer’s Park Elementary School in Reading, to work toward establishing an inner-city baseball field. It was announced on October 22, 2004 that in a partnership between the Reading Phillies and the Olivets Boys and Girls Club, a baseball facility on the site of the former Lauer’s Park baseball stadium would be built, which the Olivets would lease from the Reading School District for one dollar a year. A \$200,000 donation was received from an anonymous donor who conditioned his gift on the field being named after Gordon Hoodak. The Gordon Hoodak Stadium opened in 2006.



## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Barbara Roswell, Stephen Parks, and three anonymous reviewers for their excellent feedback and assistance in improving my article.

## Works Cited

- Aguirre, Adalberto Jr., and Jonathan H. Turner. *American Ethnicity: The Dynamics and Consequences of Discrimination*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- Alcoff, Linda. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique* 37 (1991): 5-32. Rpt. in *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*. Ed. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1995. 97-119.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín, and Satya P. Mohanty. "Reconsidering Identity Politics: An Introduction." Alcoff, Hames-García, Mohanty, and Moya 1-9.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín, Michael Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M L. Moya, eds. *Identity Politics Reconsidered*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.
- Aldridge, Delores P. "The Kitchen's Filled—But Who are the Cooks?: What It Takes to Teach Black Studies." *Phylon* 49.1/2 (1992): 61-70.
- Bailey, Douglas, Gabby DeVinny, Carre Gordon, and Paul John Schadewald. "AIDS and American History: Four Perspectives on Experiential Learning." *The Journal of American History* 86 (2000): 1721-1733.
- Bushouse, Brenda K. "Community Nonprofit Organizations and Service-Learning: Resource Constraints to Building Partnerships with Universities." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 12.1 (2005): 32-40.



- Boyle-Baise, Marilynne, and Paul Binford. "The Banneker History Project: Historic Investigation of a Once Segregated School." *The Educational Forum* 69.3 (2005): 305-14.
- Chesler, Mark, and Carolyn Vasques Scalera. "Race and Gender Issues Related to Service-Learning Research." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* spec. iss. (2000) 18-27.
- Davi, Angelique, Michelle Dunlap, and Ann E. Green. "Exploring Difference in the Service-Learning Classroom: Three Teachers Write about Anger, Sexuality, and Social Justice." *Reflections: Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy* VI (2007): 41-66.
- Filene, Peter G. "Integrating Women's History and Regular History." *The History Teacher* 13.4 (1980): 483-92.
- Flower, Linda. "Intercultural Inquiry and the Transformation of Service." *College English* 65 (2002): 181-201.
- Gilman, Rhoda R. "Exploring Multicultural Perspectives in History." *Minnesota History* 53.6 (1993): 225-29.
- Graham, Maryemma, with S. B. Dietzel, and R. W. Bailey. "Review: Historizing the Black Experience or Telling One's Own Story." *College English* 52.2 (1990): 194-202.
- Green, Ann E. "'But You Aren't White:' Racial Perceptions and Service-Learning." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 8.1 (2001): 18-26.
- Harkavy, Ira, and Bill M. Donovan. Introduction. Harkavy and Donovan 1-9.
- Harkavy, Ira, and Bill M. Donovan, eds. *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in History*. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 2000.
- Harper, Michael S. "American History." *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*. 1970. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1985. 62.
- Jacobs, Walter. "Living & Learning Difference that Makes a Difference." *Multicultural Education* 9 (2002): 2-10.



- Joyce, Joyce A. *Black Studies as Human Studies: Critical Essays and Interviews*. Albany: SUNY P, 2005.
- Kendall, Frances. "Understanding White Privilege." 2001. <[http://www.uwm.edu/%7Egjay/Whiteness/Underst\\_White\\_Priv.pdf](http://www.uwm.edu/%7Egjay/Whiteness/Underst_White_Priv.pdf)> 23 Apr. 2007.
- Lowy, Richard F. "Eurocentrism, Ethnic Studies, and the New World Order." *Journal of Black Studies* 25.6 (1995): 712-36.
- Moya, Paula M. L. "What's Identity Got to Do With It? Mobilizing Identities in the Multicultural Classroom." Alcoff, Hames-García, Mohanty, and Moya 96-117.
- Olneck, Michael R. "Re-naming, Re-imagining America: Multicultural Curriculum as Classification Struggle." *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 9 (2001): 333-54.
- Phillips, Jane. "'We'd Be Rich in Korea': Value and Contingency in *Clay Walls* by Ronyoung Kim." *MELUS* 23.2 (1998): 173-88.
- Sandy, Marie, and Barbara A. Holland. "Different Worlds and Common Ground: Community Partner Perspectives on Campus-Community Partnerships." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 13.1 (2006): 30-43.
- Stoecker, Randy. "Community-Based Research: From Practice to Theory and Back Again." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 9.2 (2003): 35-46.
- Strand, Kerry J. "Community-Based Research as Pedagogy." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 7 (2000): 85-96.
- Tchen, John Kuo Wei. "On Forming Dialogic-Analytic Collaborations: Curating Spaces Within/Between Universities and Communities." Alcoff, Hames-García, Mohanty, and Moya 193-208.
- TuSmith, Bonnie, and Maureen T. Reddy, eds. *Race in the College Classroom: Pedagogy and Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002.
- von Joeden-Forgey, Elisa, and John Puckett. "History as Public Work." Harkavy and Donovan 117-33.



Zimmer, Steve. "The Art of Knowing your Place: White Service Learning Leaders and Urban Community Organizations." *Reflections: Writing: Service-Learning, and Community Literacy* VI (2007): 7-26.

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions for NAACP Executive Board Members and Director of the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum

1. What were your initial goals for this project?
2. Before meeting with anyone from Penn State, did you have any expectations or preconceived ideas about the races and/or ethnicities of the Penn State students and faculty who might become involved with this project?
3. When the project began and you met face-to-face with participants from Penn State Berks, how did you feel, given the racial and ethnic make-up of the project team?
4. Please describe your feelings about working on this project about African American history with primarily white students and faculty.
5. Do you think there are any problems or concerns, generally, with whites telling the stories or writing the histories of African Americans?
6. If you answered yes to Question #5, do you think these problems or concerns were alleviated to some degree in the Woven with Words project? If so, how? If not, why not? Please explain.
7. What is your response to the first few sentences of the introduction to Woven with Words, written by Gary Kunkelman and me:  
On November 5, 2005, at the annual NAACP Reading Branch Freedom Fund Banquet, Mr. Frank Gilyard, Director of the Central Pennsylvania African American Museum on North



10th Street in Reading, asked the audience to support the expansion of the museum. He implored, "Let us tell our own story." Although many of us from Penn State Berks who worked on this project are neither African American nor from Berks County (some students live here while going to college, while others commute to campus from their homes elsewhere), we knew from the start that the African American community in Berks does, indeed, need to tell its own story. We worked diligently to ensure that these stories were told through the community's eyes.

8. How pleased are you with the final product, Woven with Words?
9. Are you aware of the Berks African American community's overall response to Woven with Words? What positive comments have you heard? What negative comments have you heard?
10. Has this interview led you to think differently about any matters we have discussed? Please explain.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Questionnaire for Penn State Berks Student and Graduate Participants in the Woven with Words Project**

Please respond to the following questions with as much detail as you can. If there are any questions you wish to skip, that's fine.

1. To what extent did your involvement with Woven with Words lead you to reflect on your race/ethnicity?
2. To what extent did your involvement with Woven with Words lead you to reflect on and learn about the poorly documented, even erased histories of African Americans?
3. If you are a non-African American student: To what extent were you comfortable writing about a marginalized group's history? Did





- it initially raise any discomfort for you? If so, to what extent was that discomfort alleviated throughout the project?
4. If you are an African American student: To what extent were you comfortable with your non-African American peers writing about your group's history? Did it initially raise any discomfort for you? If so, to what extent was that discomfort alleviated throughout the project?
  5. To what extent did this project and course help you to understand the concept of white privilege? Please explain.
  6. To what extent, in your view, did the course materials and content inform the Woven with Words project? Please explain.
  7. To what extent, in your view, did the Woven with Words project inform the content of your course? Please explain.
  8. If you presented your research at the annual Pennsylvania African American History Conference in Harrisburg in April 2006, what did it feel like to be speaking to a primarily African American audience? Please explain.
  9. If you presented your research at the annual Pennsylvania African American History Conference in Harrisburg in April 2006, how do you feel the primarily African American audience responded to your presentation? Please explain.
  10. In addition to historical information, what did you learn from your conversations with members of the Berks African American community? Please explain.
  11. As you are aware, the courses contained elements of ethnohistory, the process of becoming so integrated into a group as to alter one's angle of vision. To what extent was your "angle of vision" altered? Please explain.