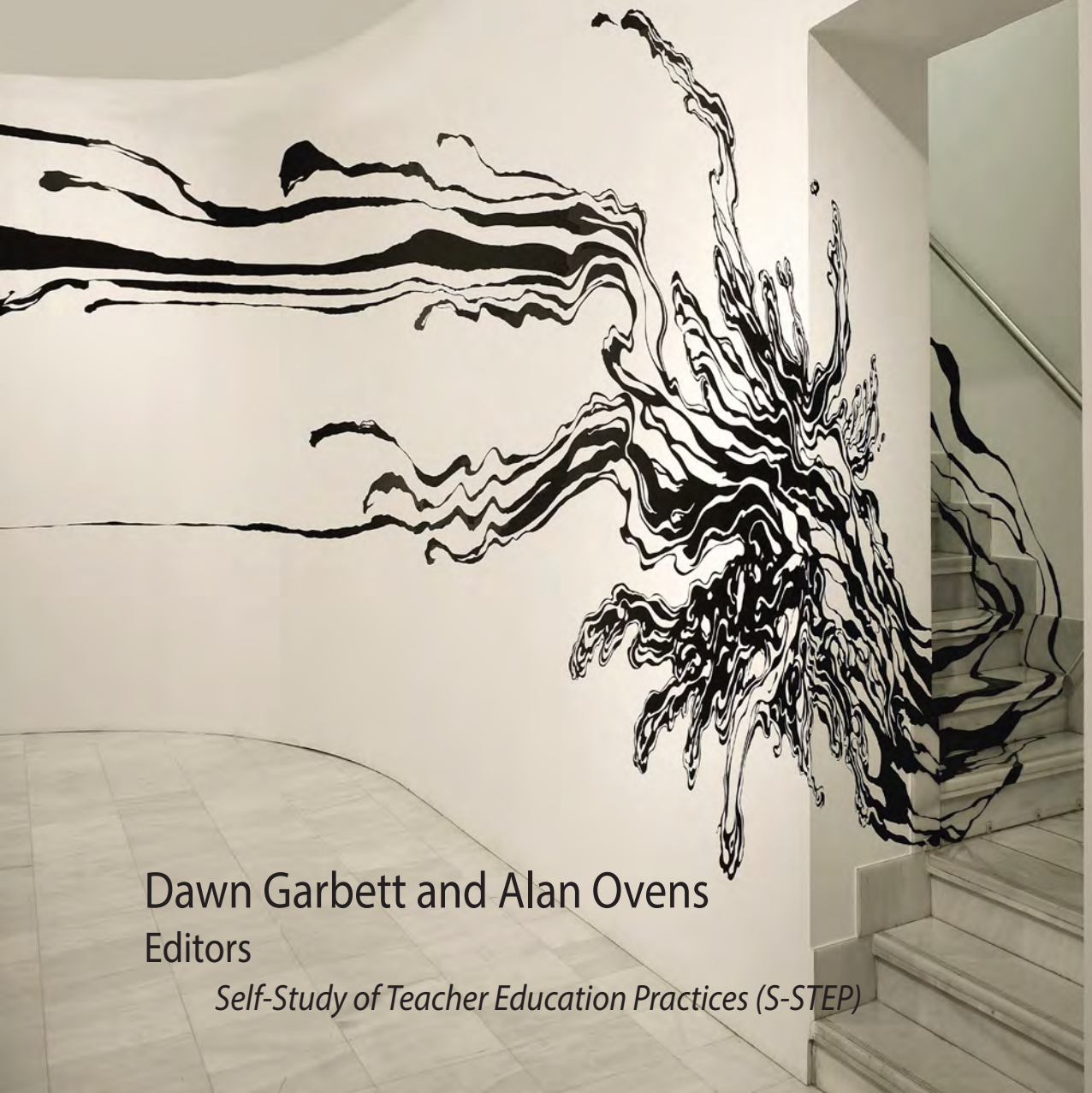


Pushing boundaries and crossing borders

Self-study as a means for researching pedagogy



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Editors

Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP)

“The Girl Who Lived”: Exploring the liminal spaces of self-study research with textual critical partners

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Self-study research relies on voice to engage in the “dialogue, collaboration, and critique” necessary to validate and establish trustworthiness in self-study research (Samaras & Sell, 2013, p. 93). Yet, voice—a speech phenomenon that “is not merely equivalent with speaking, but involves the authentic expression of personal experiences” (Warner, 2009, p. 8)—can be rendered silent in the face of powerful and alienating discourses. In the work that follows, I describe my period of voicelessness and the impact of this period on my self-study research. In particular, I foreground my methodological approach to recovering “authentic voice”—a concept of voice where the testimonial of individual experience has “an affective function of persuasion, insofar as the [hearers’] emotional responses to the conveyed personal experiences might bring them around to new ways of thinking and treating the individuals whose collective marginalization and oppression are represented” (Warner, 2009, p. 9).

Rather than present the self-study in which the issue of authentic voice surfaces, I highlight the two-year period of voicelessness (2015-2017) that marks my three-year self-study project. Additionally, I discuss the textual—rather than human—critical partners whose words anticipated my need for care and “othermothering” (James, 1993) and carried me across this liminal period. I close by describing the authoritative pedagogical voice that eventually surfaced in dialogue with J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (which the title of my paper references). Admittedly, in focusing on this liminal period of voicelessness rather than the self-study itself, I walk a fine line between self-study research and reflection. Yet, I make the attempt in an effort to “[push] the boundaries” of self-study research—our conference theme—and in anticipation of future novice self-study scholars for whom a textual critical partner may be the only collaborative partner available to guide them through the liminal spaces of the study of their teaching practices.

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D. Garbett & A. Ovens (Eds.), *Pushing boundaries and crossing borders: Self-study as a means for researching pedagogy*, Herstmonceux, UK: S-STEP, ISBN: 978-0-473-44471-6

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Voicelessness

My period of voicelessness surfaced within the first months of my professional career in higher education as an African American woman at a predominately white institution (PWI) in the Midwest, United States. In the fall of 2014, I began a tenure track position as an Assistant Professor within a School of Education in the area of TESOL teacher education. In this role, I work primarily with U.S. born K-12 in-service and preservice teachers, many of whom have grown up within a two-hour radius of the University. In order to fully embrace my new position, I felt the need to leave behind my home field of Applied Linguistics (AL) and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), an international field primarily focused on adult and post-secondary education—fields where, as a native speaker of American English, I am part of the socio-cultural majority. My race—though not ignored—is often backgrounded to the symbolic and material power afforded me by my native language and national origin.

However, in the field of U.S. K-12 teacher education I am a marginalized scholar. Much of the marginalization I encounter in this field is communicated through discourses of lack, absence, and difference that circulate in speech and writing about individuals of my race as students and as educators. These are discourses that warn about the "cultural gap" (Sleeter, 2001) and "demographic and cultural mismatch" (Ladson-Billings, 2005) between the predominately white teaching force and the increasingly black, brown, and linguistically diverse student bodies. These discourses echo across dissertations, journal articles, and conference presentations. Their existence in these academic spaces suggest the ongoing presence of socializing forces that reinforce and reify these discourses as authoritative oral and written practices. Moreover, these discourses reflect an entrenched "system of linguistic norms" that have resulted in a "common unitary language" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 270), but one that fails to attend to the differing contextual realities "on the ground". Such discourses reflect a privileging of whiteness (and thus a prioritization of the needs, concerns, anxieties of white, and mostly female, teachers) and an erasure of the presence of educators of color (and their needs, concerns, and anxieties). Additionally, these discourses fail to consider people of color like myself who teach in PWIs and for whom "the overwhelming presence of Whiteness can be silencing" (Sleeter, 2001, p. 101).

Encountering these discourses of lack, absence, and difference in my initial year on the job was personally traumatic. They were in opposition to my lived experiences as an African American raised in the southern U.S. city of Atlanta, Georgia. In Atlanta, historical segregation gave rise to multiple Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)—Spelman College, Morehouse College, Clark Atlanta University—whose graduates become educators within the state and across the southeast (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011, p. 198). As a consequence, I have always known and been surrounded by K-12 educators of African descent; as the daughter of an African American mom who attended Spelman College, I was well-acquainted with black college professors; as an educator in the city of Atlanta, I spent my first ten years working alongside black teachers. The discourses in my new environment conflicted with this experience, creating dissonance in the foundation of my reality and calling into question the validity of my personal and professional experiences. This dissonance stripped me of my voice and left me in a liminal space of voicelessness where I was unable to produce any scholarly work of note for over two years.

This voicelessness also impacted my teaching. Fortunately, I recognized the need to address the impact of these alienating and powerful discourses on my work. I needed to do so for myself, but also for my current and future students for if I as a seasoned educator could be silenced by these discourses, so then could my students. Thus, at the beginning of the second year of my voicelessness I began a self-study of my teaching practice in a preservice (undergraduate) methods course I teach annually, "Instructional Approaches to TESOL Methods at the Middle/Secondary Grades". This combined theory and method course introduces preservice teachers to the K-12 pedagogical strategies used to make content area (mainstream) classroom instruction accessible to English language learners (ELLs). However, I also wanted to design the class to challenge students to interrogate ideologies they hold about ELLs. At the heart of my study is the desire to engage with the following pedagogical challenge: "Is there an instructional approach that I can adopt in my TESOL Methods course that reflects my authentic voice, decenters the privileged

position given to whiteness in teacher education, and speaks to all educators from and through a lens (language) of inclusiveness?"

In order to begin this self-study, I had to address my voicelessness. Yet, how does one move forward in self-study research and engage in a critical and collaborative partnership when doing so means reliving the trauma of discursive encounters one wishes to forget and creating textual evidence too painful to record.

Artists and artwork as critical partners

Hamilton (2005) provided me with a starting point into my self-study research. Absent “critical friends and colleagues in [her] surrounding area” (Hamilton, 2005, p. 59), she entered into a critical partner relationship with the “spirit” of artist Winslow Homer (1836-1910). Hamilton describes Homer’s work as “controversial in his time...[as he] included many of the people—women and people of color—that were not ordinarily included in art at the time” (2005, p. 61). For Hamilton, engaging with the work and with the spirit of Homer served “as a tool for critical reflection” which she documented in journal form as a way “to explore the effects of this art exhibit on my thinking about my teaching and myself-study” (Hamilton, 2005, p. 61-62).

Though artistic works provide a space for reflection, they also allow for engagement in Bakhtinian dialogue—a discourse-to-discourse engagement accomplished partly by treating sentences (texts) as utterances specific to a time and place that anticipate future utterances (Morson, 2006, p. 55). As such, these texts and our responses to them become our guides—providing the critical partnership to foster collaboration and inquiry, as well as the “intellectual and emotional caring” (Pine, 2009, p. 236) that may be missing in our immediate environment. These artistic texts reach through the time and context in which they were written to address us—their “ideal listener” or even their “superaddressee” (Morson, 2006, p. 56)—in our current context. Their past words, which seem to anticipate our present needs, leave us feeling heard. As guides, these works can provide comfort across the borderlands of discursive discomfort, reflecting the pain of our experience while also “schooling” us in the vocabulary we need to speak for ourselves. Overtime, their words become our words, though enriched with our own ideological intentions—ultimately leading us through the liminal space of voicelessness to a renewed voice enriched by the heteroglossic and polyphonic encounters with the artistic and textual works of our critical partners.

Dialogues with “Mama Lorde” and “Sister Gloria”

Inspired by Hamilton (2005), I invited two feminist writers of color to serve as my critical partners—Audre Lorde (1934-1992) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004). In inviting these two writers to walk alongside me as critical partners, I entered and became part of an ongoing dialogue about race, gender, and the powerful discourses that silence and contribute to the marginalization of others in the academy. As such, their poems and essays addressing the marginalization of individuals “who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older...” (Lorde, 1979/2007, p. 112), anticipated my experiences as a woman of color in a field where I am “conditionally accepted” (Grollman, 2016). Their writings left me feeling recognized at a time when my scholarship and teaching interests were often misrecognized (Bourdieu, 1977) through the lens of my race and gender. Moreover, I encountered the “othermothering” (James, 1993, p. 45)—the African American cultural practice of offering maternal support and care to members of the community who are not their own—that was lacking in my professional life. In my dialogues with these critical textual partners, I affectionately refer to these writer-scholars as “Mama Lorde” and “Sister Gloria”, and I will continue to do so in this text.

I am not naturally drawn to poetry, but in “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (1977), Mama Lorde anticipated me when she wrote that “[f]or women...poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible

action. (Lorde, 2007, p. 37). She further anticipated my challenges as a woman of color in academia when she wrote "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" (1980). Anticipating the silencing discourses in academia and the fear that hinders one from expressing the reality of one's lived experiences, Mama Lorde addressed the inner speech that held sway over my tongue and led to my continued silence:

But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, "Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside." (1980, p. 22)

Mama Lorde's words were meant personally for me, delivered in the first-person and drawing upon reported speech. Moreover, her words held back little at a point when she faced the reality of losing her life to cancer. Mama Lorde in her past wisdom counselled my future self, advising me that her silences "had not protected [her]" and that "[our] silence will not protect [us]" (1980, p. 21). Such words moved me to reconsider and reengage with those moments in my University setting where I had remained silent and failed to address the marginalizing discourses that impacted me, the reception of my work, and the perceptions of our students. The honesty and directness of her speech in "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (1981) granted me permission to feel my own anger—"the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation" (Lorde, 2007, p. 124).

Sister Gloria's writings make visible the pain of those who are made to feel they (we) do not belong. She describes life along the U.S.-Mexican border as "una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds". This open wound does not heal, but instead "hemorrhages again"—forming a border culture (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, p. 25). For Sister Gloria, a border culture is:

...a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los *atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'. Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot (1987/2012, p. 25)

This border culture and its inhabitants that Sister Gloria describes speak to me as a woman of color living and working in predominately white spaces. In the small college town in which my University is located, I am not infrequently made to feel like a "transgressor", an "alien". The "unnatural boundary" is one erected by the shopkeepers who look at me with not-so-subtle suspicion; it is the discourses of lack, absence, and difference that greet me at work's door.

In dialogue with Sister Gloria's work, I came to recognize myself in her writings: I too felt "[a]lienated from [my] mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture"; I am that "woman of color...[who] does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits" (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, p. 42). In this recognition, I came to see the power of translanguaging—the unselfconscious and yet determined movement between the linguistic borders of Spanish and English. For Sister Gloria, translanguaging provides an authenticity of voice—a discursive pathway—through *los intersticios* of the borderland for *los atravesados*. Sister Gloria's employ of translanguaging reminded me that the search for voice was unnecessary; the language of one's culture—my culture—was readily available, sufficient, and waiting to serve as a guide through the borderlands or marginalization and voicelessness.

In the end, my dialogic and critical partnership with the texts of Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa supported, comforted, and even challenged me as a scholar of color teaching and researching in the borderland of a predominately white U.S. higher educational institution. Dialogue with their texts served as social, cultural and linguistic guides through the borderland of my institutional space and *los intersticios* of my voicelessness. Their writings provided me with the euphemized and metaphorical language to push through the *herida abierta* left by my encounters in the field of teacher education with discourses of lack, absence, and difference in order to engage my most authentic voice—a voice with the capacity to teach my preservice TESOL Methods course in a way that decenters the privileged position given to whiteness and instead speaks to all educators from, and through, a language of inclusiveness. This language and voice are reflected through my instructional use of an extended analogy I call the “Harry Potter Border Crossing Analogy” (HPBCA).

“The Girl Who Lived”

The HPBCA is “the word...born in dialogue” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 279). It is inspired by my previous readings of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and my present critical partnership with Sister Gloria and her writings about the borderland and *los atravesados* who inhabit this space. Through the HPBCA I present to students an alternative framing of the series—one that backgrounds Rowling’s fantastical division of humans into magical (wizards and witches) and non-magical (Muggles) beings. Instead, the HPBCA foregrounds the numerous borderland experiences faced by the books’ two main characters: Muggle-raised Harry Potter and Muggle-born Hermione Granger. This alternative framing highlights that upon acceptance into “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry” at the age of 11, Harry and Hermione enter a new social, cultural, linguistic, and political reality—one where they are socially, culturally and linguistically marginalized. Many of the trials and tribulations Harry and Hermione face are a result of their not having been raised in Wizarding society. Through this alternative framing, the HPBCA highlights analogical similarities between the educational, social, and personal experiences of Harry and Hermione and real-world English language learners (ELLs).

Exploring this analogy in my TESOL Methods course, has allowed me to move forward with my self-study research, to transform my silence in *los intersticios* (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012, p. 42) into action, and to document and attempt to validate student response to our work together. In addition, I am engaged with a professional community of *Harry Potter* scholars, most of whom are in media studies with an emphasis in fandom, popular culture, and critical pedagogy. Inspired by this long-distance community, I have begun to foster similar community on my home campus. I have gathered together a group of fellow *Harry Potter* fanatics at the undergraduate and graduate levels and together we have explored themes related to teacher knowledge as expressed through the backstories Rowling provides for three of her characters: Remus Lupin, Rubeus Hagrid, and Severus Snape. Adopting the concept of personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), my collaborators and I draw upon the textual conversations, memories, oral histories, images and metaphors to identify the rules by which these three characters live and make meaning as magical teachers (Thomas, Fox, Russell, & Warren, 2017).

Finally, my engagement with *Harry Potter* has led me to a world of online fandom and internet “headcanon”, fan practices that build upon my instructional aim to create discursive spaces of inclusiveness in realms ideologized as “white spaces” (Jenkins, 2017). Fandom—like the field of teaching—is overly imagined as white (and English-speaking) public space; it fails to take into account the people of color (and non-English speakers) who participate in the same or similar spaces around the globe (Jenkins, 2017). However, discursive spaces of inclusiveness are being created in online fan-fictional where *Harry Potter* is reimaged as East Indian (Venkatraman, 2017) and Hermione Granger is of African descent (Begley, 2015). Through Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, I have access to an abundant world of cultural critique where I can observe and engage in literary / literacy practices that aim to interrogate spaces ideologized as white and decenter discourses that exclude the marginalized “Other” (Woo, 2017). Participating in and writing about these activities

have given rise to my authoritative and authentic voice as a scholar and educator. They have helped to bring forth the *Harry Potter* Border Crossing Analogy—an extended analogy born in dialogue with my critical textual partners, Mama Lorde and Sister Gloria, reflective of my travails through the borderlands, and with a “sidelong glance” (Morson, 2006) at the silencing discourses of anti-blackness that persist in teacher education.

Acknowledgement

A sincere note of gratitude to the anonymous reviewers whose comments made this a more authentic, and hopefully stronger, manuscript.

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Pushing boundaries and crossing borders: Self-study as a means for researching pedagogy reflects the fact that self-study is a constantly evolving methodology in which researchers bring their everyday practice into interaction with different forms of inquiry and ways of knowing. This is research from deep within the sense of purpose and passion that drives teachers everywhere to make a difference. The book is imbued with the themes of social justice, thirst for knowledge and civic responsibility. This is research by teacher educators who are pushing boundaries and crossing borders.

In this edited collection, the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) community share how they have explored and probed their own understanding of teaching teaching. The chapters are loosely grouped around the themes of nurturing a passion for understanding teaching; fostering social justice, diversity and voices; and developing local knowledge for dissemination to a wider audience.

Pushing boundaries and crossing borders: Self-study as a means for researching pedagogy is a text written by international scholars to enhance the conversations and understandings associated with this methodology and to support the 12th International Conference on Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices held at Herstmonceux Castle, East Sussex, England in July 2018.

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ISBN: 978-0-473-44471-6