

## The Dilemmas, Challenges, and Duality of an African-American Educational Historian

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This article examines the dilemmas and challenges of objectivity, presentism, and voice and agency I have encountered as an African-American historian of education whose research focuses on the education of Black people. A perplexing problem has been how to conduct good and “respectable” research while identifying with the African-American community I am researching. Drawing on personal research experiences and the selected work of historians and education researchers, I discuss how I have dealt with these methodological queries in my research. Despite dealing with the challenges and dilemmas of objectivity, presentism, and voice and agency in my research, I argue that the “double-consciousness” I face as an African-American scholar within the academy may be transcended by using solid and innovative conceptual and methodological approaches. The article concludes with a reiteration of emergent themes for conducting good research.

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The dilemmas and problems of the Negro scholar are numerous and complex. He has been forced, first of all, to establish his claim to being a scholar, and he has had somehow to seek recognition in the general world of scholarship. This has not been an easy or simple task, for, at the very time when American scholarship in general was making its claim to recognition, it

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was denying that Negroes were capable of being scholars. (Franklin, 1963, p. 64)

**T**he eminent African-American historian John Hope Franklin (1963) wrote the preceding passage during an era in which African-American scholars struggled with the challenges of doing good historical research while “uplifting their race.”<sup>1</sup> As an African-American historian of education whose work focuses on the education of Black people, I find that Franklin’s words and concerns resonate as much today as they did when he wrote them nearly half a century ago. Like Franklin, W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Horace Mann Bond, and other past African-American historians, I am committed to the concept of race uplift to improve the social and educational conditions of Black people. At the same time, I strive to make my scholarship rigorous, precise, and respected in the academy. This dual agenda of uplift and academic research, however, is not unique to African Americans. Feminists, gays and lesbians, immigrants, and others work as researchers while striving to improve social conditions in their respective communities (see Chaudhry, 1997; Collins, 2000; Kennedy & Davis, 1993, 1996; Smith, 1999).

In this essay, I reflect on my research experiences by addressing the dilemmas and challenges of objectivity, presentism, and voice and agency I grapple with as an African-American historian of education. In addition, I reflect on how other scholars’ work has helped inform my thinking and methodological approaches in my research. In this essay, I do not attempt to offer an exhaustive review of education literature on research methods, but rather to discuss scholarship that has helped me address the dilemmas and challenges I face as an African-American scholar. This

essay, therefore, may be viewed as part “research autobiography” and part review of relevant literature. My hope is to build on recent scholarship on research concepts and methodology (see Alridge, 2001; Asher, 2001; Banks, 2002; Sandoval 2000; Tillman, 2002) and advance ongoing discussions on methods among educational historians and education researchers.

### The “Objectivity Question”

In some of my recent research, an African-American colleague and I conducted interviews with largely unknown African-American participants in the Civil Rights Movement (see Daniels & Alridge, 2003). The communities in which we conduct our research are predominately African American. As scholars indigenous to these communities, my colleague and I understand and identify with the language, culture, dialect, and worldview of the people we interview. When we present our findings at conferences, White scholars frequently ask how we remain objective and detached from our research and how we avoid “contaminating” our research as African-American scholars. I have come to understand that such questions are considered legitimate in the world of academic research and, as Rowley (2000) points out, are “dialectical challenges” that African-American scholars face as they strive for objectivity in their scholarship.

Objectivity has long been the foundation of research in the physical and social sciences. The quest for objectivity, however, has not been foreign to humanists, particularly historians (Banks, 1998; Breisach, 1983; Du Bois, 1944; Kincheloe, 1991; Mannheim, 1936/1985; Novick, 1988; Scriven, 1972). Peter Novick (1988) argues that historians have striven to free their discipline of subjectivity, relativity, ambiguity, and multiple interpretations. According to

Novick, “the objective historian’s role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge; it must never degenerate into that of advocate or, even worse, propagandist” (p. 2). Novick’s thesis is that historians have struggled toward “that noble dream” of objectivity. At the same time, he argues that presenting a single definition of historical objectivity is as difficult as “nailing jelly to the wall,” thus, making attainment of objectivity ambiguous. Novick states, “I do not think that the idea of historical objectivity is true or false, right or wrong, I find it not essentially contested, but essentially confused” (p. 6).

Because of the difficulty of reaching a definition of objectivity, I looked for guidance to the reflections of earlier scholars who have confronted this issue. The noted African-American social scientist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois responded thoroughly to the question of whether Black scholars could be objective in their scholarship on Black people. In an essay titled “*Phylon*: Science or Propaganda,” Du Bois (1944) addressed inquiries about whether the journal he founded and edited, *Phylon*, was an “organ of science or propaganda.” According to Du Bois, some viewed Black scholars’ writing about and advocating for Black people as propaganda rather than objective or scientific research. Du Bois responded by discussing the dilemma of objectivity and advocacy that Black social scientists and historians often faced:

But it [social science research] must begin with the near and known as a starting point; and then despite temptation, set goals of dispassionate and ruthless adherence to truth. It can no longer find scientific refuge in detachment from its subject matter; nor just as surely, none in refusal to regard its own personal problems as subjects of scientific investigation. (pp. 6–7)

Du Bois believed that the pursuit of objectivity was critical to social science and historical research, but that African-American scholars could conduct meticulous and rigorous research without detaching themselves from the communities they were researching. At the same time, Du Bois believed that Black scholars should not allow their personal interests to cloud their interpretations in their research. In many ways, Du Bois’s dialectical position reflects his concept of “two-ness” or double-consciousness, in which he ar-

gued that African Americans experience a dual-consciousness as they attempt to maintain their cultural and historical ties to the Black community while interacting with the larger dominant culture (see Alridge, 1999a; Du Bois, 1903/1989). So it is with the African-American scholar who faces double-consciousness as a researcher. John Hope Franklin (1963) also provides a poignant description of this dilemma of the African-American scholar:

It is, of course, asking too much of the Negro scholar to demand that he remain impervious and insensitive to the forces that seek to destroy his dignity and self-respect. He must, therefore, be permitted to function as vigorously as his energies and resources allow, in order to elevate himself and those of his group to a position where they will be accepted and respected in the American social order. (p. 64)

Franklin (1963) and Du Bois (1944) do not dismiss objectivity as a goal for Black scholars struggling with this dialectical challenge in their research. Instead, they advocate an objectivity that recognizes Black scholars’ connection to the Black community. Franklin’s (1963) “objectivity” stresses a solid and consistent methodological approach backed up by sound argument and documentation. His approach does not strive for complete detachment of the historian from the subject of study, but instead stresses a systematic and balanced examination of sources. Unlike the idea of historical objectivity that claims that history should be free of subjectivity and that historians should be detached from their subjects, Franklin (1963) and Du Bois (1944) acknowledge the reality of their own subjectivity and see no conflict between doing “good” solid research and “uplifting their race” (Franklin, 1963).

Franklin’s (1963) and Du Bois’s (1944) ideas about the role of the African-American historian have been instrumental in helping me develop a research agenda that examines Black education and history. They have taught me not to distance myself from studying Black people and their education because I am African American, but to embrace my research in a way that improves the social and educational conditions of Black people. Their work as Black scholars has also taught me that, while I should acknowledge my subjectivity, I should use consistent and rigorous

methodological approaches, which include such strategies as triangulation of sources and careful explication of my arguments substantiated by data.

Other scholars have also been helpful in my developing thought about objectivity. During the 1930s and 1940s, when Du Bois (1944) was addressing the issue of objectivity in his work, Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal (1944) was conducting a mammoth study of race and race relations in the South. The Carnegie Corporation of New York selected Myrdal because they believed the political issues of racism in the American South would not overly influence him. Myrdal, nonetheless, was careful in stating that all scholars bring certain biases to their work. He claimed, “Full objectivity, however, is an ideal toward which we are constantly striving, but which we can never reach. The social scientist, too, is a part of the culture in which he lives, and he never succeeds in freeing himself entirely from dependence on the dominant preconceptions and biases of his environment” (p. 1035). Instead, Myrdal argued that scholars must strive to expose the explicit and implicit valuations they bring to their research (see Banks, 1998).

More recently, feminist scholars have extended the ideas of Du Bois (1944), Franklin (1963), and Myrdal (1944) about objectivity and the valuations we bring to our research. Sandra Harding (1991), for instance, advocates the concept of “strong objectivity,” which places the researcher under analysis on the same “causal” plane as the subject of the research. As a result, researchers recognize their complicity in the lives of their subjects and identify strategies that encourage research subjects to be active collaborators in the study (see also Code, 1991).

In helping me address the problem of objectivity with “strong objectivity,” African-American feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has offered a valuable way to think about objectivity as an African American doing research in Black communities. She argues that, as a Black female conducting research in Black women’s communities, she runs the risk of “being discredited as being too subjective and hence less scholarly” (p. 19). Collins reconciles this dilemma by not accepting the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy as a researcher. Instead, Collins recognizes her

race as well as her gender, class, and sexuality in shaping her research identity. In her role as a researcher, she also sees her positionality as a Black woman as a strength, rather than a weakness. For me, Collins's recognition of her Black identity, as well as her other identities, adheres to the concept of "strong objectivity" and has prompted me to articulate more clearly my own identity as an African-American educational historian working in Black communities.

James Banks (1998) views objectivity as a legitimate goal for constructing public knowledge and also supports the concept of "strong objectivity." He argues, "Researchers should strive for objectivity but acknowledge how subjective and objective components of knowledge are interconnected and interactive" (p. 6). In a more recent study, Banks (2002) provides a historical account of how social and cultural contexts have influenced the research of social scientists and historians. This study has heightened my understanding of how individuals' experiences help frame their identities as researchers and has provided me with an historical framework that outlines how scholars have dealt with objectivity and subjectivity in their research.

Schools of thought such as postmodernism and critical theory, both of which are concerned with the ideological dimensions of objectivity, have also informed my thinking. Joe Kincheloe (1991), for instance, reminds historians that issues such as objectivity often have embedded ideologies constructed to maintain existing disciplines in their most traditional forms. Kincheloe, therefore, advocates an approach called meta-analysis, which he describes as offering an examination of the "myriad ways in which ideology helps shape and change the nature of the disciplinary matrix." A meta-analytical approach, he argues, pushes scholars to be more "ideologically aware, more self-aware, more interdisciplinary, more capable of producing a sophisticated picture of the educational past and its multidimensional relations to the educational present" (p. 231; also see Cohen, 1999; Lowe, 1996).

Banks (1998), Collins (2000), Du Bois (1944), Franklin (1963), Harding (1991), Kincheloe (1991), Myrdal (1944), and others have provided me with conceptual lenses for addressing objectivity in my scholarship. From their concepts and ideas, I have concluded that objectivity does not

have to be a mystical and entirely unobtainable goal that prevents me from doing research on African-American education. These scholars have helped me understand that there are implicit and explicit ideological aspects to all research, that I, too, bring a conceptual lens to my research, and that I am inherently a part of all research that I conduct. At the same time, they have encouraged me to be rigorous in my scholarship and to strive for "strong objectivity" by recognizing my complicities in the communities I research, substantiating my claims with a multiplicity of sources, and offering a careful explication of my arguments.

### The "Fallacy of Presentism"

Several years ago, after I presented a conference paper as a graduate student, a professor cautioned me about the problems I might encounter in my research examining the educational and social thought of African-American educators. The professor warned me that my work in the history of Black educational thought might be viewed as "presentist" if I attempted to use it to make generalizations about present educational conditions in the Black community. This "fallacy of presentism," as David Hackett Fischer (1970) calls it, is the historian's mistake of over-reading the past into the present or forcing contemporary values and views onto the past.

Historians of education have sometimes been vulnerable to this charge because of their academic positions in colleges of education, in which they have been encouraged to provide teachers and administrators with a "functional" history for the present (Donato & Lazerson, 2000; Lagemann, 2000). As a young and aspiring historian of education, I appreciated the wisdom of the professor's words and for the next few weeks pondered how I might address the potential of presentism in my work. Over the years, I have sought to develop my own understanding of presentism, while not giving up my belief that the past can inform and help us understand the present.

In thinking about concepts and methodological approaches to help me address the potential of presentism in my scholarship on Black educational thought, I looked to the work of Arthur O. Lovejoy (1936/1964) and Roy Harvey Pearce (1948, 1967), two pioneers in the field of the history of ideas. In his classic study, *The*

*Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, Lovejoy (1936/1964) demonstrated that although ideas may be studied and analyzed as units, scholars should study the historical and ideological milieus within which ideas evolve to understand their various manifestations. In *The Great Chain of Being*, for instance, Lovejoy examined the idea "that all of creation forms a chain." Starting with God, in an "infinite series of forms," Lovejoy traced the idea of God and creation on a metaphorical chain from Plotinus through Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and others. Lovejoy illustrated that the idea of the "chain of being" changed over time and showed how historical and intellectual contexts might alter an idea (Keiger, 2000, p. 3). Lovejoy's work has helped me conceptually in understanding the protean nature of ideas and the impact that historical context can have on them. Lovejoy's concept has encouraged me to be more cognizant about interpreting Black educational thought within its historical context and also forced me to see how ideas shift in time and among individuals.

Roy Harvey Pearce (1948) built on the ideas and methods of Lovejoy (1936/1964) and cautioned that historians should, "Proceed to put the idea back in its proper context (the social body) and attempt to see how both idea and context have been modified and how the idea has interacted with other ideas in the same context" (Pearce, 1948, p. 374). Pearce (1967) put his method into practice in his classic *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind*. In examining the idea of Native Americans as "savages," he analyzed the idea of savagery within the context of 17th and 18th century European thought, which emphasized the primacy of Christianity, Western progress, and modernization.

Pearce's (1967) study showed that White Americans came to view Native Americans' spiritual practice as "primitive" and uncivilized because of the prevailing views carried over from 17th and 18th century Europe. Many Europeans during these centuries glorified Western ideas and technology as benchmarks of civilization. The manifestation of the idea of Native Americans as savages, Pearce showed, resulted from racist ideologies that portrayed non-Western societies as uncivilized and primitive. In addition, Pearce argued that such

ideas constituted a rationale for systematic mistreatment and near annihilation of Native Americans by the U.S. government in the 19th and 20th centuries. Pearce's work has been extremely important to me because it reinforces the importance of placing ideas in their historical context and because it demonstrates how ideas from the past may provide some insight on ideas and policies in the present.

Lovejoy's (1936/1964) and Pearce's (1948) emphasis on placing ideas within their historical and intellectual contexts has been a constant reminder to me to use what I call "deep contextualization," to avoid generalizing and making presentist interpretations in my research. "Deep contextualization," as I see it, is the historian's task of thoroughly immersing events and ideas in their historical and intellectual contexts when assigning meaning or interpretations to them. I learned the value of this technique after I experienced a perplexity in some of my recent work. For example, in a study examining the educational ideas of Black educators Anna Julia Cooper (1892/1988) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) during the late-19th and early-20th centuries, I was at first mystified by the xenophobic and Social Darwinist language and ideology that Cooper and Du Bois sometimes used in arguing for equality for Blacks and developing educational agendas for Blacks. Both Cooper (1892/1988) and Du Bois (1903/1989) referred to the need for Blacks to achieve "civilization" and to use education as a means of getting on the road to "progress." To me, their words implied that Blacks were uncivilized, which in many ways reinforced existing notions of Black inferiority during the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

After considering the influence of Cooper's (1892/1988) and Du Bois's (1903/1989) 19th century classical Western education on their thinking, and by placing their language and ideas within the context of the some of the most influential ideals of the time, such as Victorianism, Civilizationism, and Progressivism,<sup>2</sup> I began to better comprehend how and why Cooper and Du Bois used such language. I concluded that Cooper and Du Bois understood the limitations of the ideologies of their day, but realized the need to use the prevalent discourse of the times to convince government officials and politicians

that Blacks' civil rights should be respected and enforced. As pragmatists, they reconciled the negative aspects of the ideologies of their time with Blacks' aspirations for equality to construct educational ideas that promoted self-determination, agency, and promise in Black communities (see Alridge, 2002a).

Although I continue to believe that some aspects of Cooper's (1892/1988) and Du Bois's (1903/1989) language and ideas reinforced notions of Black inferiority, the process of "deep contextualization" has helped me to understand the nuances in Cooper's and Du Bois's educational ideas and their approach to race uplift. The process also has helped me offer historically sensitive interpretations of Black educational thought even when I have used such ideas to provide insight about contemporary issues in Black education (see Alridge, 1999a; 1999b). This method encourages historians to think more carefully about assigning motives and meanings to their subjects and the events they study before imposing interpretations or insights about the past on the present in a manner that may be anachronistic or presentist.

While being cognizant of the context in which educational ideas have developed, historians of education must also be mindful of the influence of their own contexts on historical studies. For example, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, various groups called for equal opportunity and an end to their disenfranchisement in American society (Gresson, 1995), and scholarly work of the time undoubtedly reflected this revolutionary spirit. Researchers such as Michael Katz (1968), Clarence Karier (1975), David Tyack (1974), and Joel Spring (1972) moved away from the traditional history of education approach that praised schools as democratizing agents and began to critically examine schools as places that often reinforced existing social hierarchies (Cohen, 1999; Sanders & Williamson, 2001). Observing the influence of the 1960s on the work of these well-known and well-respected scholars has provided me with a clear example of how historical work is affected by the time in which it is written. Their work has helped me see that, as an African-American historian influenced by the present social conditions in the Black community, I can acknowledge the influence of the present on my research perspectives and still pro-

duce rigorous and respectable academic scholarship.

The work of V.P. Franklin, a well-respected scholar of Black educational and intellectual history, however, has been the most influential in helping me recognize how contemporary influences may affect my research and writing. By acknowledging contemporary policy issues that provide an impetus for his work, Franklin has provided me with an understanding of how scholars can do good and meticulous historical work while revealing the influence of the present on their work. For example, in his book *Black Self-Determination: A Cultural History of the Faith of Our Fathers*, Franklin (1984) discusses the agency of Blacks in U.S. history in overcoming racism, social inequities, and other obstacles. One key part of his argument focuses on African-Americans' historical use of education as a means of helping Blacks become self-sufficient and to gain a sense of "self-determination." The book's focus on the history of African-Americans' self-determination and agency responded to the stereotypes and conservative politics of the 1980s that promoted images of Black entitlements, Black welfare queens, and Black social pathologies in society.

In his preface, Franklin (1984) clearly acknowledges the influence of domestic and global events of the 1980s on his views about Black self-determination. Franklin notes, "The campaign of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) for a Palestinian state in the Middle East and the activities of the South-West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO) in Namibia and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland are examples of 'underground' or guerilla movements that have as their primary objective self-determination for a culturally diverse group" (p. ix). In the tradition of historians like Du Bois and Woodson, who considered the contemporary conditions of Black people during their lifetime in their writing, Franklin's study of Black self-determination also recognizes the conditions of Black people and world events during the 1980s. At the same time, the study offers a thorough and rigorous historical analysis of Black self-determination. Franklin's work has been insightful to me because it reinforces my idea that I can do solid historical work while acknowledging the present context in which I write as a historian.

In recognizing the influence of present realities on how and what I research and write, I have been helped by two additional concepts: the Akan (African) concept of *sankofa* and Vincent Harding's (1986) concept of *the river*. Sankofa means "return to the past to go forward." As a measure of time, it looks at history on a circular plane rather than as a linear process (see Tedla, 1995). As a methodological construct for doing and writing history, *sankofa* guides historians to think of history not as events frozen in time, but rather as occurrences that are one with the present and future. Sankofa, therefore, provides multiple insights as to how the present and future are and will come to be.

The *sankofa* approach prompts us to see the Black experience in America—from its beginnings on the coast of West Africa, to the lynchings of Blacks during the early 1900s, to the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, to the present—as one struggle. In writing history, the *sankofa* approach allows historians of education to see to it that events in the past are not dismissed as issues that no longer affect the African-American community. A *sankofa* approach helps connect the history and experiences of African and African-descended people over space and time.

Vincent Harding (1986) does not use the term *sankofa*, but extends the concept by using the analogy of a river. Harding notes that he and his African ancestors are on the same river of struggle and that they share the same moment in time in a somewhat spiritual sense. He comments,

I knew that what I wanted and needed to write about was something that had never been developed in one work: a narrative, analytical, and celebrative history of the freedom struggle of Black people in this country, beginning before there was a country. I was especially concerned to try to convey its long, continuous movement, flowing like a river, sometimes powerful, tumultuous, and rolling with life; at other times meandering and turgid, covered with the ice and snow of seemingly endless winters. . . . Somehow I believed that my vow to keep faith with the creators and the children of the river would also lead me to be faithful to the truth of their experience as I saw it, read it, felt it. I knew that I must not be afraid to let that commitment speak for itself, to let my own baptized voice be heard. (p. xix)

Although I use the concepts of *sankofa* and the river as ways of thinking beyond the linear construct of time predominant in western culture, I agree that historians must be careful not to transport events, places, and people from the past to draw grand, sweeping conclusions about a problem or issue in the present. This type of scholarship ignores space and time and disregards the impossibility of duplicating past circumstances in the present. As a result, it is likely to produce anachronistic interpretations of the past and future. Researchers can, however, begin to address presentism by acknowledging that the present in some ways influences their research, given their position in the present, and by showing similarities between historical contexts surrounding past and present events.

In several articles I have written over the years, I have used the concept of *sankofa* and the river metaphor to connect W.E.B. Du Bois's thinking to the conditions of Black people and their education today. Instead of examining Du Bois as a historical figure who wrote and spoke about Black education, I have presented his ideas within the time frame when he lived while conceptualizing how his thinking continues to be relevant today. The concept of *sankofa* has helped me move beyond rigidly linear conceptions of time to see the connections among and insights to be gained from Du Bois's ideas over time (Aldridge, 1999a; 1999b).

The concepts and methods of V.P. Franklin (1984), Harding (1986), Lovejoy (1936/1964), and Pearce (1948, 1967) have provided useful ways of thinking about Du Bois's educational thought not as views frozen in time, but rather as ideas that continue to flow on the "river" of the Black experience and that may change meaning as their historical contexts change. From this perspective, while I am committed to studying how African-American educators and ideas of the past might inform us today, I am equally committed to joining my forebears on the river of the Black experience in constructing my own ideas and theories of optimal educational strategies for African Americans.

### **Voice and Agency**

Closely connected to the issues of objectivity and presentism are those of voice and agency. African-American researchers have long struggled with the dilemma of

allowing their voices to be heard while also giving voice and agency to the Black communities in which they are researching. By voice, I mean a community's perspective on how to improve its social, economic, and political conditions. Agency, like voice, relates to empowerment and individuals' abilities to affect their environment and act on their own behalf. By articulating these definitions of voice and agency and giving credence to the researcher's voice and the voice of his or her people, African-American educational historians address what Scheurich and Young (1997) have called "epistemological racism"—a tenet of Western positivistic research that marginalizes the worldviews of minorities and people of color.

A useful, though rather dated, study that has helped me think about the issues of voice and agency is Thomas L. Webber's (1978) *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831–1865*. Webber's study is an example of a history of education that comes primarily from the slaves' rather than from their masters' perspectives. Although Webber uses archival and documentary data, he allows the voices of Black slaves to be heard through the many slave interviews conducted by interviewers from Fisk and Louisiana State Universities and from the Works Project Administration. Defending his approach of illuminating the voice and agency of enslaved Africans, Webber asserts, "Only through the members of a given social system, through the attempt to see the world as they see it, can we hope to understand the subjective meaning with which that group and its individual members understand themselves and the world in which they live" (p. 263). Webber further promotes voice and agency by investigating the oral history of the slave culture. By listening to the voices of the slaves themselves, he found the common themes of self-determination and agency in Blacks' quest for education and schooling during slavery.

A more recent study that in many ways builds on Webber's work and has been valuable in helping me think about voice and agency comes from the field of philosophy of education. For instance, Stephen Haymes (2001) discusses the agency of enslaved Africans by arguing that they developed an elaborate existential philosophy of pedagogy that resisted the "dehumanizing

project of American slavery.” Haymes, like Webber, offers a bottom-rail view (see Davidson & Lytle, 1982) of history that focuses on the life experiences of common people or people on the lowest stratum of society, in this case enslaved Africans. By studying, understanding, and acknowledging that enslaved Africans developed complex ways of thinking about their plight and disseminating their survival views to subsequent generations, Haymes has encouraged me to move beyond the traditional ways of presenting narrative and to think more philosophically about the meanings behind the narratives and folklore of a group.

Webber’s (1978) and Haymes’s (2001) work has been instrumental in encouraging me to uncover the epistemological perspectives of groups not typically examined from the “bottom rail” view. For instance, in some of my current scholarship, I am exploring the social and educational ideas in hip hop culture and music that have not been systematically studied in the field of the history of ideas. Like Webber’s and Haymes’s work, my scholarship in this area has forced me to move beyond examining only primary source documents in search of social and educational ideas in hip hop, to also exploring lyrics and “folklore” in hip hop. Webber’s and Haymes’s work has encouraged me to apply methods of literary analysis and to rethink the epistemological aspects of hip hop. Much of my preliminary work in this area reveals that hip hop, like the slave narratives studied by Webber and Haymes, has an existential worldview that reflects the life experiences of many Black, Latino, and White youth. By studying the social and educational ideas in a subculture such as hip hop, I attempt to illuminate the voices and agency of marginalized youth (see Alridge, 2002b). Webber’s and Haymes’s work and their methodological approach have helped provide a path and foundation for my work.

Another historian who presents Black agency in education and schooling is James Anderson (1988) in his classic work, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. Previous studies on Black education, such as Henry Bullock’s (1967) book, *A History of Negro Education in the South, from 1619 to the Present*, rested on a liberal progressivism that downplayed Black agency in education in favor of a teleological view

of Black education (see Butchart, 1988). Anderson deals substantively with the issue of Black agency by challenging the liberal progressivist view and by establishing a conceptual framework of self-determination and agency for Blacks.

Anderson’s (1988) text is replete with examples of Black agency in education. For example, Anderson explains that many ex-slaves established educational “collectives and associations,” hired Black teachers for their schools, and maintained a network of Black-run schools. He further describes ex-slaves’ resiliency in creating and controlling their own education and schooling by discussing Blacks’ establishment of “Sabbath Schools” to educate both Black children and adults and to maintain control of their education. Fifteen years after its publication, Anderson’s book remains one of the most powerful examples of what historical research can look like when the agency and self-determination of the group under study are taken into account. The book is also an example of historical research grounded in a philosophy of Black agency and self-determination as keys to understanding Black educational history.

In many ways, Vanessa Siddle Walker’s (1996) book, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*, builds on the themes of Black self-determination and agency in telling the story of her all-Black community school in Caswell County, North Carolina. Because many of the people in Siddle Walker’s study are still living and because Siddle Walker herself was a member of the community she was studying, she was able to provide an anthropological *emic* (insider’s) perspective. Like Anderson’s (1988) study, Siddle Walker’s work has a Black agency-based epistemological perspective that challenges many *etic* (outsiders’) liberal and integrationist perspectives, which argue that all-Black schools are not good for Black children.<sup>3</sup> Siddle Walker’s methodological approach of relying heavily on oral interviews and her familiarity with the school and region provide a cultural understanding of the community she studied. Her study, therefore, provided me with an example of how to merge ethnography and history.

Of her methodological agenda and approach, Siddle Walker (1996) says that she wanted to “provide a cultural understand-

ing of an environment from the perspective of the environment’s participants . . . with attention to the chronology and context in the tradition of the historian” (p. 221). That Siddle Walker lived in the community, is Black, and understands the nuances of language, the oral tradition, storytelling, and culture in her Black community should not be ignored. Her lived experiences played a role in her ability to understand and articulate the epistemological perspectives of her community. Her work continues to serve as a model for Blacks and other scholars to recognize Black communities’ voices and agency in their research (also see Siddle Walker, 2000).

In addition to learning from research in their own field, educational historians have much to learn from qualitative scholars and ethnographers (see Dougherty, 1999). Much work in the anthropology and sociology of education uses approaches to oral tradition and epistemologies that give credence to Black communities. For instance, in his ongoing scholarship on the role of education in Black communities, Jerome Morris (2001) relies on the voices and ideas of Black educators in discussing the education of Black children. Morris argues that the voices of Black educators have historically been ignored on issues about school desegregation in St. Louis, but that policymakers might gain some important insight by listening to them. In illuminating Black educators’ voices and agency, he privileges the voices of 21 Black educators he interviewed for a study of St. Louis’s desegregation plan and argues that their views are similar to those of critical race theorists. This work is significant because Morris shows us that Black educators have important insights that might have made the desegregation process run more smoothly in St. Louis. His argument that the Black educators in his study promoted ideas about legal issues dealing with race and education prior to critical race theorists gives voice and agency to Black educators (also see Foster, 1997).

Scholarship by anthropologists such as Lubna Chaudhry (1997) has also been instrumental in helping me think about my own voice and position in my research (also see Asher, 2001; Smith, 1999). Chaudhry investigates her position as a Pakistani Muslim immigrant woman conducting ethnographic research with Pakistani Muslim women immigrants in the United States. I

am most interested in her idea of being “reflexive” or critical of her own position, approach, and reasoning as a scholar studying her own community and people. As a result of her reflexive approach, Chaudhry’s study in many ways is as much about her voice as it resonates within the research as it is about exploring the lives of others. Chaudhry’s study highlights the influence that her own life experiences, religion, and parents have had on her development as a person and scholar, even as she gives voice to the experiences and influences that have shaped other women’s lives.

Finally, historical research in gay and lesbian studies has also been useful in providing me with insight about the challenges of researching a historically oppressed group (see Miller, 1998; Sears, 1997, 2001), and I have been able to relate my experiences as an African-American researcher to the experiences of gay and lesbian scholars. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis’s study (1993), *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, has been useful in helping me further understand the power hierarchy that exists between researchers and the communities they study. Their study, like Siddle Walker’s (1996), combines ethnographic and historical methods to explore the voices of lesbian communities over time and to provide an understanding of working-class lesbian culture past and present.

In writing their “ethnohistory,” Kennedy and Davis (1993) were concerned about their relative power as middle-class lesbian scholars conducting interviews in the working-class lesbian community of Buffalo, New York. To address this power dynamic, they concluded, “We had to balance our need to give narrators control over the interview with our need for comparable information from narrators” (p. 183). Conceptually, Kennedy and Davis addressed the issue of voice and agency by thinking of and referring to their subjects as narrators rather than interviewees. They also began by asking their subjects very broad questions, allowing them to believe that their voices would be heard.

In addition to using open-ended interviewing techniques, Kennedy and Davis (1993) used “reflexivity,” similar to Chaudhry (1997), to monitor their positionality and subjectivities. They also provided their subjects with some power by consulting them for follow-up help in inter-

preting their data and interviews. Kennedy and Davis’s work in the lesbian community has been helpful in reminding me of the various identities that I may have that might hinder my insider status in researching the Black community. Their discussions about their status as academics and as middle-class individuals has also encouraged me to be more “reflexive” in my research, reminding me that I am not assured of complete “insider” status simply because I view myself as a member of the community I am researching. In interpreting my data, I must always recognize and account for the fact that the majority of the members in the Black community may not share my academic background or class status.

In my current research project interviewing Black participants in the Civil Rights Movement, I attempt to be “reflexive” and to think about positionality and power dynamics in my effort to provide voice and agency to those who participated in the endeavor. As a result, I have been asking myself how my personal experiences affect my research. How did my education in a rural southern town affect how I conduct my research? How has my education and subsequent work at large, predominately White universities in the North and South, affected how I communicate with people in my study? What power dynamics exist between my subjects and me? Chaudhry’s (1997) and Kennedy and Davis’s (1993) work has helped me to look beyond a one-dimensional view of myself as an insider or indigenous researcher to recognize that I have multiple statuses or identities: African American, male, middle class, and academic researcher (also see Banks, 1998; Gee, 2001). Such questions have helped complicate my work by making me aware that my voice and my own interpretation of agency are also embedded in my historical analyses.

The work of Anderson (1988), Chaudhry (1997), Haymes (2001), Kennedy and Davis (1993), Morris (2001), Siddle Walker (1996, 2000), and Webber (1978) has provided me with concepts and ideas that help me frame my scholarship to illuminate the voice and agency of the people and communities I research. From these scholars, I have learned not to passively accept the master narrative that Blacks were not active in their quest for education and knowledge, but instead to be attuned to hearing

the formerly silenced voices in the communities I research. Evidence of Black voice and agency in education can be found not only in the archives, as Morris and Siddle Walker have shown, but also in the silenced and unheard voices of Black educators themselves. I have also learned to look beneath the surface to see that historically oppressed and marginalized groups often construct their own epistemologies, which may be uncovered through nontraditional methods of historical research. Such methods include literary analysis, philosophical explication, and reflexivity about my own experiences as a researcher within the African-American community.

## Conclusion

In developing my research agenda for the future, I have found Vincent Harding’s (1974) notion of the vocation of the Black scholar to be a useful guide. According to Harding, Black scholars have been called on to offer “sympathetic but hard Black analysis concerning the nature and effectiveness of the sometimes strange and valiant approaches to struggle which have arisen out of our own generation” (p. 12). With this in mind, I have committed myself to drawing from many concepts, ideas, and methods in a variety of disciplines and areas of study, such as history, literature, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, and immigrant studies, to offer the most rigorous analysis possible of the African-American educational experience.

Based on my experience and the work of other scholars, the following six themes have helped guide my thinking and research: (a) although objectivity is a desired goal in academic research, scholars do not have to detach themselves from their research or research subjects to do good research; (b) researchers should recognize the implicit and explicit meanings of objectivity, critique their own valuations, and strive for “strong objectivity”; (c) scholars should avoid making generalizations between the past, present, and future without regard to historical context, but at the same time realize that the time in which they live inherently influences their research; (d) historians may benefit not only from viewing history as a linear progression of events, where the past has no connection to the present and future, but also by viewing the past, present, and future as interconnected; (e) all

communities and research subjects have a voice and most have a history of agency that may not be readily visible; and (f) in illuminating the voice and agency of a community of which the scholar is a member, the scholar should strive for a critical analysis of self or “reflexivity.”

In this essay, I have not attempted to resolve all of my research dilemmas and challenges. Instead, I have presented my lived experiences as a researcher with dual commitments—one to the academy and its demands of rigorous scholarship, and one to the Black community and Black scholars whom I hope to uplift from the obscurity to which they have been relegated by mainstream historical research. W.E.B. Du Bois’s (1903) idea of two-ness or double-consciousness provides me with a way of situating myself in my research as a member of the Black community and as an academic. It also reframes my position as a methodological tool, rather than a liability, in studying a culture and community that I can understand from within.

This essay builds on and contributes to the work of Black and other scholars who seek to improve the communities in which they conduct their research. I hope that this reflective and “reflexive” research journey, the themes I have drawn from studying other scholars’ thinking and methods, and my conceptualization of my double-consciousness as an African-American historian of education will provide some insights to all scholars who grapple with objectivity, presentism, voice and agency, and other such issues in their research. Above all, I hope to encourage an ongoing exchange of ideas among all those who, dedicated to improving conditions in their respective communities and the recovery of formerly silenced voices, wish to cast their contributions onto the waters of the ever-flowing river of history.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of race uplift was prevalent among African-American scholars and activists during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1989), Anna Julia Cooper (1892/1988), and Booker T. Washington (1897/1969) are only a few of the scholars who used the concept of race “uplift” to describe their commitment to elevating the African-American masses and for advocating Black self-determination and agency through their scholarship. I acknowledge that the concept of race uplift inherently carries with it 19th century Social Darwinist connotations about the inferiority of non-White races. However, I use the term in the tradition of Du Bois (1903/1989) Woodson (1933), Cooper (1892/1988), and later, John Hope Franklin (1963) as a positive way to talk about my commitment to improving the social, educational, economic, and political conditions of Black people. See Kevin K. Gaines (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Victorianism emphasized the ideals of male chivalry, women’s femininity, and women’s role as mothers. Civilizationism was closely tied to Social Darwinism and denoted stages in the evolution of a race. It promoted the idea that “civilized” women were spiritual, delicate, and dedicated to home, while “civilized” men exhibited self-control and good character, and protected women and children. Progressivism promoted the idea that human beings could ameliorate the deficiencies of national life and encouraged communal and community-based means of improving life for the poor. For a discussion of these ideas, see Bederman (1995), Burstyn (1980), and Gordon (1990).

<sup>3</sup> Foley, Levinson, and Hurtig (2000/2001) define “insiders” as researchers who identify themselves with the “ethnicity and/or gender of the students [subjects] they study and who contribute to the ethnographic knowledge primarily for the benefit of such students [subjects].” As an African American working within African-American communities, I consider myself an insider working for the benefit of the African-American community. However, I acknowledge the tension and duality that come into play because I am a researcher whose research is under the auspices of an external institution. Therefore, in some ways, I am also an outsider. For an explication of this issue, see Banks (1998).

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