

Chapter 3. Re-Living the Stories of Black Women and Girls from a Historic Black Town in Alabama

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In January of 2015, I took an educational trip to the Zora Neale Hurston Festival in Eatonville, Florida with a group of Black women and women of color graduate students and professors from The University of Alabama. The purpose of the trip was to fellowship with my peers and professors, while to also learn more about one of our favorite authors. We arrived at the first event which was a fish fry along a bank that was hosted by the Historic Black Towns and Settlements Alliance (HBTSA). It was there at the fish fry when I met the mayor of the oldest incorporated black town in Alabama. As a native Alabamian, I had never heard of this town and was fascinated by what I had just learned. From that initial encounter grew a lasting relationship with the mayor and other citizens, relationships that helped me to create a dissertation project titled “Hear My Voice: Stories of Black Women and Girls in a Historic Black Town.” I spent the next 2 ½ years deeply involved in the culture and with the residents of the town through a key community project and my dissertation. Through my research, I participated in a PhotoVoice Project, which is a type of research where participants take photographs of something, in this case things and places in their town, and write narratives about why they chose to take a particular photo and any questions and thoughts they had about the artifact in the photograph. The photos are typically artifacts of places and/or spaces that are tied to the community, sometimes with a historical aspect or simply something of interest to the photographer. For this particular project, the ultimate goal was to have the girls “discuss what they liked about the things and places in the pictures they took, what they did not like, and what and how they would change those places and things for the betterment of their community” (Holloway, 44). I used their interviews to learn more about their stories for my dissertation project. The second part to my project was a collection of oral histories that I conducted with five women (2 of whom were residents and the other 3 were closely affiliated with the town in numerous ways).

Throughout the research process of my dissertation project, I struggled with my evolving identity and positionality. I state in my dissertation,

Being a Black woman graduate student and dealing with my own challenges within the academy while simultaneously figuring out my self-identity was a major factor in why I chose to

devote my time in research and writing to understanding Black women and girls. Collecting oral histories from the women and girls in Hobson City simply felt right as I considered countless things I have learned about myself over the years and because of my newfound fearlessness of understanding both Black girlhood and womanhood by participating in scholarly conversations, conversations where I previously felt I was unqualified to speak. Purposefully choosing to engage with Black girls and Black women was a brave move on my behalf, and yet the familiarity of the town of Hobson City made it easier for me to solidify that decision. (44)

As a young 20-something Black woman pursuing a PhD at a Primarily White Institution, I struggled a lot with where and how I fit in because, according to certain statistics, I was not even supposed to be in higher education spaces. I was often the only black person in my classes, and sometimes, I got lucky and there would be two or three of us in class together. So when this project began to develop, I was excited that I had a choice to devote my time, energy, and resources towards a project with people who I looked like and shared similar experiences with.

That was until the research actually began.

I soon became confronted with the struggle of my positionality with the participants. Although we were the same race and gender, I was still considered an outsider to their community and their home. Even when I would visit unofficially such as for the town's Founders' Day weekend, there were times where I still felt the disconnect between me being a graduate student working on a project and them being my "participants." That was hard for me to accept at first, but the more that I learned, the more I figured out that it is okay to experience that feeling. As I continued with my project, I naturally created a healthy distance between myself and the participants. I did not try to force any other shared connections outside of my study. In the long run this helped me to see my research more objectively, to read and code my oral histories objectively, and to ultimately produce an ethical research project.

When I decided what I wanted to research and how (through oral histories), my positionality as a Black woman interacting with other Black women and adolescent girls quickly emerged. I remember feeling like a big sister to the girls as I witnessed the tellings of their town from their young minds and perspectives. The stories that the girls shared through their interviews connected with me in many ways. They were elementary and middle school aged Black girls living in and learning about their historic town. They were so curious, which excited me because I remember being that way at their age. One girl shared her knowledge of a local staple restaurant in the town, "Yea, and I put it because it has the year that it was first made and established. And like it's historic ... I knew that it was

a [restaurant] there before and they remodeled it and made another one so that people will come back to it” (girl 1). Another shared her vision to remodel the gym in the historic school by saying, “I think because like the goal, it can be fixed. It basically seems so empty and it doesn’t get used often. A newer type of goal. The floor would be a little better, instead of the floor it is because it’s a little creaky. The walls can be the same color but they will be painted better” (girl 2). Lastly, another girl shared her thoughts on a picture of a group of mayors from the Black mayors conference by saying, “Umm these people that’s in the picture. They look like very good people and like now people is messing up [the city] and bringing violence back in [the city] and looking at these people ... like what we’re doing now ... Maybe we could be in their place” (girl 3).

As I listened to the girls’ stories over and over, I reflected on weekends and summers from my childhood in Whistler, Alabama (a predominantly black town in Mobile County) and Panola, Alabama (a rural town in the Black Belt territory of West Alabama) spent at my granny and grandma houses and how I remember our family’s cemetery, the local family churches, and what those places meant to me as a child. I saw my own curiosity through those five girls. I shared relatable stories with them and I saw my positionality align and depart many times. I was aware that although I shared some lived experiences with them such as growing up in the Black church, being a young Black girl navigating middle school, etc. I could not relate in other ways. For example, they lived in a town where 90% of the population was Black. I did not share this type of lived experience at their age, although later as a teenager I did. When I was their age I only gained an understanding when I would visit my grandmother or other relatives who lived in similar areas. I felt as though I did not have an authentic relationship of truly living in a predominantly Black environment at such a young age and how that may have impacted them and myself in various ways throughout the project. I did not gain that type of lived experience until I moved to my mother’s hometown as a teenager. There were other times where the overlay of experiences was evident though such as our shared love for certain music artists and food. I would listen to their school day recaps and reminisce on how I had similar experiences at their age. So those times were nostalgic for me and also pure happiness, but the feeling of being the “other” never went away simply because of my positionality as a researcher. I was grateful to gain some level of understanding from their point of view, but I was still aware of my positionality. I also knew that differences in our lived experiences helped me to realize that I had to be extremely careful of how I presented myself and my research to them. I did not want them to perceive me as this young Black woman coming into their space, their town with any type of superiority.

The stories from the women were authentic and beautiful representations of the rich history of the town. As I interviewed them I saw my mother, aunts, and grandmothers in my family. My time with them reminded me of my relationships with the women in my family as the child, niece, and granddaughter. I remember

feeling the responsibility to protect the girls, but not so much with the women and I am sure it was because of our age differences and how my positionality moved from big sister to one of being the young “niece” whenever I was with any of the women participants, listening to their stories, officially for oral histories, and at other times over lunch or dinner. I come from a family of a lot of Black women who were successful in their own rights, as educators, mothers, community figures, and more. I felt the same strong connection I had with my own family with the women who were part of the project. One is a political figure there, and another taught at the only high school for Black people in that county for a number of years. Others have deep familial roots dating back to the town’s inception. One woman reflected on her experience of witnessing the Freedom Riders by saying, “The Freedom Riders came through ... And I’ve met several of these people who were on that bus, I’ve been in meetings with them and coming-togethers with them, and we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Bus Burning and so actually I’ve met people on that bus” (woman 1). Another woman expressed love for her town by sharing, “Now, I love [my town]. One thing that being connected to [my town] is that everybody, if you find a good neighbor, you got a good neighbor. Even when I lived out on my own, now I live with my mom, everybody watched out for everybody” (woman 2). A third woman shared her educational background stating, “I went through life thinking that if I got the highest degree I could, I would be able to make changes in education. My master’s degree is in supervision and curriculum development” and stated “So all of the sudden I realized, “You are so wrong, the only way you gonna make changes or do anything in education or anything else is you’ve gotta be in the political arena (woman 3). These snippets of their narratives provide a rich glimpse into what I experienced interacting with the women participants and how, through their stories, I related in various ways from the shared experiences of loving my hometown, understanding the importance of education and politics, and being aware of Black history in Alabama.

The timeline of my project and the breaks between the interviews helped to reinforce my positionality as a researcher because I had time for critical reflection. I was able to think through how intersectionality played a major role in my experience with the participants. I was able to examine how their unique experiences were shaped by the intersection of race and gender. I had time to reassess my role and motivations to ensure constant ethical research practices. In any research project that involves human participants there are always risks and self-motivation. I risked the chance of not getting what I expected as valuable interviews and the participants risked exposure and exploitation. The latter was a major factor in creating and maintaining a healthy distance because I wanted to make certain that I presented their stories in the most respectful and meaningful way possible and sometimes when those professional and personal lines are blurred it can be more difficult to ensure objectivity, reliability, and validity. To maintain a healthy distance between myself and the participants, I focused on building a positive

rapport with them within the confinements of my role as researcher and I always debriefed with my dissertation chair after each interview session. I rarely interacted with the participants outside of my research time unless it was an activity or event such as the town's Founder's Day weekend. The limited outside involvement kept personal and professional boundaries clear. I feel in the end that I maintained an ethical positionality throughout the entire project from conducting the research to the analysis, and ultimately producing my dissertation.

As a Black woman professor now, I think back on my time spent in that town and how a beautiful project was brought to life because of those Black women and girls. I reflect on how much intersectionality was part of that project including race, gender, age, and privilege. I began my collegiate journey not knowing what career path I wanted to take, yet I ended up as an Assistant Professor of English at one of the top Historically Black Universities in Atlanta, Georgia. I did not end up where I am today by happenstance. My graduate experience helped reveal and shape my complex identity through rich and meaningful relationships, conversations, dinners, game nights, writing sessions, and field trips with a dynamic group of Black women professors and peers from the English Department at The University of Alabama. The love I gave and received from that project came from the lived experiences of my childhood, the women in my family, and the women and girls who graciously shared their stories with me. I went from being one of few Black students in my college classes to teaching, collaborating, researching, and learning with those who look like me, and it continues to be such a fulfilling experience that words can not describe. I advocate tirelessly for my students, I whole-heartedly serve my university, and find joy in doing research as a Black woman scholar. The stories of the Black women and girls who I had the honor of working with for my project, have greatly influenced who I am as a Black woman scholar today. Their narratives live through my pedagogical practices, through what I choose to research and write, through my mentorships, and more. Reflecting on my positionality from that project has unlocked a deeper understanding of the participants and given me a renewed sense of purpose as a professor and scholar.