A PORTRAITURE STUDY OF AN
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ON HIS
JOURNEY TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

A Dissertation in
Educational Leadership

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2016
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ABSTRACT

Presented as a counter-story to the narrative of deficit thinking regarding African Americans, this portraiture study about Vincent Clark’s high school journey was guided by the question of what and/or who motivated and supported him to return to (after over a year in jail) and graduate from high school. Vincent, the portrait’s actor, is African American. He was raised and schooled in the western United States and was a high school student of the researcher. The study combined the use of portraiture methodology and critical race theory. Drawn from the critical race theory tradition, counter-stories are about the marginalized stories or experiences of people – people who themselves are often marginalized. The study used retrospective data collected in face-to-face interviews several years (fewer than 10) after Vincent's high school graduation. Vincent credits relationships with family members, relationships with staff in jail and school, and pivotal events as motivation and support along his complex journey to graduation. Also, acknowledging that the portraitist is also part of the portrait, the researcher includes pieces of his own story to help frame the portrait.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

In the middle of the night, John Wilson began preparing his family’s move from rural South Carolina to southeast Virginia so that his children would not have to live a farming life like he did. Even though he had only two days of formal education, he wanted his children to have the chance to go to school. John’s youngest child, who is my mother, went on to finish high school and college, and she worked as a teacher for many years. Then, when I was in high school, my mother started graduate school.

My father, who comes from a background of modest means, also graduated from high school and college and eventually completed his doctorate at Penn State. (That is why I was born in State College.) He has been a professor pretty much all my life. That also meant many of our family friends were professors. Also, growing up in neighborhoods that were predominantly White and middle class, there was hardly any question of whether I would graduate from high school.

When I became a teacher, however, I worked in high schools for students who faced major struggles and for whom high school graduation loomed in the balance. I worked in very small schools in two different American states, where many of my students were Black – like me. Indeed, we helped students to succeed. The actor at the center of this portrait is one of them. At the same time, those students represented even more Black students who were struggling to graduate from high school. And many of
them, who did not attend supportive schools like the ones I worked at, would not graduate from high school.

At a national level, the high school graduation rate for African Americans is cause for great concern at 57% (Swanson, 2011). Compounding the negative economic and carceral implications of low graduation rates (Ewert, Sykes, & Pettit, 2014), the literature has an overwhelming emphasis on the negative issues associated with African American youth. I came away with the impression that reading research about African Americans meant reading research about problems. It is one thing to problematize the relationship between Black youth and schools, between Black youth and carceral institutions. The education and societal discourses benefits from that. However, I am concerned that the preponderance of research situating Black people within contexts of crisis risks, over time, limits the ways in which African Americans are viewed and, thus, are allowed to be. The recent words of actor Viola Davis, the first African American woman to win an Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series, come to mind as elucidating this idea: “You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there.” She went on to say, “Here's to all the writers, the awesome people that are Ben Sherwood, Paul Lee, Peter Nowalk, Shonda Rhimes – people who have redefined what it means to be beautiful, to be sexy, to be a leading woman, to be black” (Park, 2015). I did not seek to refute the researchers who probe the problem areas related to African Americans. My study intersects those areas, too. However, I do not want people to see me on the street and dangerously hallucinate that I am something other than what they are: fully human.
During my career as an educator, I have encountered students whose journeys I think could be sources of hope for families raising Black children, could further inform educators and policy makers about our Black children, and could shed more light on the humanity of Black people. This study highlights the journey of one of those students.

So, the problem my study addresses is two-pronged: 1) High school graduation rates, especially for African Americans, are startlingly low in many states; and 2) There is a paucity of research that helps readers to gain intimate knowledge of the complexities of the journeys to high school graduation for African American youth.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

As Petty (2001) recommends, I began this project with the “end in mind” (p. 73). The end being a story, a portrait rather, not necessarily of achievement but of a journey. A journey that would inspire youth to see hope in situations that might feel hopeless, to encourage parents of Black boys to not give up on raising our youth, and to remind educators and policy makers that our Black boys, like all boys, are human.

I referenced high school graduation rates as a starting point in this dissertation not because I hope simply for more African American youth to graduate. Graduation rates are a major issue; however, I also hope other Black young men will, like Vincent, desire to be an example for a young student coming up behind them or an inspiration to another person who maybe faces serious environmental challenges. I want them to see
graduation as not only an achievement but also an opportunity to pour back into another young person in need.

I conducted a portraiture study on a young African American male focusing mainly on his high school journey from ninth grade through graduation. My primary interest was in what and/or who he credits as the motivation(s) and support(s) for his return to and graduation from high school. The young man is one of my former high school students, who I call Vincent in the study. I think Vincent’s story is comprised of aspects and dimensions found within the stories of other people. His is a story about being who we already are: human.

Portraiture was well fit for this study because, being a qualitative methodology, its social constructionist aspect provided the needed flexibility and capacity to capture both Vincent’s perceived connections between and meaning-making of the significant achievements, obstacles, motivations, and support structures along his high school journey (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Maxwell, 2013).

And while portraiture’s inquiry inevitably uncovers areas in need of improvement, one pillar of portraiture is a “search for goodness,” which holds the portraitist accountable for listening for and presenting qualities of the actor’s (or research subject’s) goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I think the portrait of Vincent’s journey toward graduation would serve to do the following:

- Motivate high school students, especially – but not only – African Americans, to continue on toward graduation;
• Uplift families who are struggling to raise Black boys; and
• Heighten the sensitivities of United States educators and policy makers to the complexities and triumphs of being a young African American male.

Likewise, this study could have the effect of increasing general society’s awareness of the complexities and triumphs of one of its endangered populations, thus leading to more sensitive, or equitable, practices and policies both in P-12 education and law at the local, state, and federal levels.

**Research Question**

I wanted to examine student motivation and support as it relates to completing high school: What, if any, are the experiences that motivated and supported Vincent's decisions both to return to and graduate from high school?

**Ontology/Assumptions**

The narrative about, for example, racial prejudice in law enforcement is strongly countered by the popular orientation to believe that police in the U.S. act ethically. Events that some people might interpret as police mistreatment might be seen by others as somehow warranted by the actions or attitudes of the victims of that perceived police misconduct. One of my goals for this study was to join the effort of other critical race theorists to declaw the prevailing narrative’s grip on the U.S. socio-legal imagination (Parker & Lynn, 2002).
I am mindful that Vincent (or I) easily could have been Tamir Rice, an unarmed African American 12 year-old killed in a park in 2014 by police officers in Cleveland, Ohio; Eric Garner, a 43 year-old unarmed African American man who was assaulted, strangled, and killed in 2014 on the street by police officers in New York, New York; Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager who was pursued, shot, and killed in 2012 by a neighborhood watch member in Sanford, Florida; Michael Brown, a young unarmed African American man shot and killed in 2014 by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri; Walter Scott, an unarmed African American man shot and killed in 2015 by police during a traffic stop in North Charleston, South Carolina; and Freddie Gray, an unarmed young African American man who died in 2015 from a broken spine after being arrested (illegally) by police officers in Baltimore, Maryland; and further back, Amadou Diallo, an African immigrant mistaken for a suspect, who was shot and killed in 1999 by police officers in New York, New York; James Byrd, a Black man who in 1998 was chained by White men to the back of a truck and dragged along a road to his death in Jasper, Texas; and Rodney King, an African American man viciously brutalized in 1991 by police officers during a traffic stop in Los Angeles, California.

As an African American man, I see the many recent tragedies involving Black males dying at the hands of those enforcing law, custom, and codes of conduct as evidence of continued racial tensions in the United States. Albeit, the victims range widely in age from 12 years old to 50; in weight, from Freddie Gray being described as “slender” (Stolberg & Nixon, 2015) to Eric Garner being described as 350 pounds and “at
least 6 feet 3 inches tall” (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014); in familial roles, from fathers to sons to brothers; in location, with deaths in the Northeast (i.e., MD, OH, and NY), the West (i.e., CA), the Midwest (i.e., MO), and the South (i.e., FL, SC, and TX); in occupation, from student to horticulturalist to forklift operator; in persona, Tamir Rice was “well liked” by other kids at school (Wright & Ortiz, 2014) to Michael Brown being called a “gentle giant” to Freddie Gray being described as “easygoing” and someone who “liked partying” (Stolberg & Nixon, 2015), I think part of the problem in those unfortunate situations is the lens of Black objectification through which Black males are often perceived, which resonates with scholar Lisa Ikemoto, “The act of subordinating occurs first in the mind of those with authority” (as qtd. in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I think people’s perceptions, in general, of Black males in the United States do not honor the breadth of humanity of Black males. Instead of seeing a person who is fully human, I think many people perceive Black males as trouble, as objectified bodies of problems, as an embodied potential for danger. Maybe Benjamin Banneker’s words in 1792, in response to hard-to-swallow thoughts of Thomas Jefferson about Black people, still ring true, “I suppose it is truth too well attested to you, to need a proof here, that we are a race of beings, who have long labored under the abuse and censure of the world; that we have long been looked upon with an eye of contempt; and that we have long been considered rather as brutish than human ....” (Merchant, 1993, p. 116).

So, in response to Black objectification, as a reminder to the U.S. of the presence and humanity of Black people, I present this work in solidarity not only with Banneker’s
epistolary plea to Jefferson to accept the humanity of Africans in America (Merchant, 1993), but also with educator Dr. Carter G. Woodson’s whose creation of Negro History Week (which became Black History Month) was a response to the omission of Black contributions to U.S. history as well as Langston Hughes’ poetic response to poet Walt Whitman that “I, too, sing America.”

I do not mean to suggest that these perceptions are limited to those who are not Black. Black people are not necessarily immune to the narrowly defined images of Black males generated by mainstream media. This portraiture study was designed, in part, to help readers see Black males as fully human.

**Theoretical Framework**

Several aspects of Vincent’s life lead me to use critical race theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework. Although CRT does not have a universal definition, Solórzano & Yosso (2002) characterize CRT as having at least five focus areas: (1) *the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination* (e.g., class, sex, gender, and sexuality); (2) *the challenge to dominant ideology* on issues, like objectivity, meritocracy, the role of voices that do not represent the status quo, and research that is oriented in deficit thinking; (3) *The commitment to social justice* primarily along lines of race/ethnicity, class, and gender; (4) *The centrality of experiential knowledge* of minoritized peoples, thus legitimizing their knowledge, stories, and lived experiences; (5) *the transdisciplinary perspective*, which draws on multiple fields within law and the
social sciences to present analyses that are more historically and culturally comprehensive.

**Definition of Terms**

- **African American/Black**: African American and Black, although limited in their accuracy and comprehensiveness as labels, are used interchangeably in this study.

- **Minoritized** – Chappell and Cahnmann-Taylor (2013) best characterize my reasons for using “minoritized” rather than “minority”:

  By minoritized youth, we refer to any and all who identify in contextually situated, nondominant communities such as race, class, sexual orientation, language, dis/ability, religion, and gender. As we identify such contexts, we are aware that minority/majority status is unstable and contingent (p. 243).

- **P-12**: Pre-K through 12th grade

  Note: Readers might notice the absence of the “of color” often attributed to certain populations in the United States. However, because of what feels like a harkening to the term “colored,” I do not refer to any person(s), people, communities, students, or scholars as “of color” – unless used in a quote. In addition to “colored” feeling pejorative to me, I am of the belief that naming some people as “of color” suggests that some people are without color, thus promoting White people as people – no color attribution required – and the rest of us as caveated people, thus promoting a standardization of Whiteness.
(Jones, 2011; Suchet, 2007). To my ears, the “of color” naming convention is hegemonic – not ontologic.

**Summary of Literature Review and Methodology**

**Literature Review**

In addition to a tense racial landscape framed in part by nationally publicized tragedies involving African Americans dying at the hands of agents enforcing law or a code of conduct, this study was contextualized by literature on the educational leadership community's challenge to orient their practice toward solutions for societal issues; the mire of zero tolerance policies, racially disproportionate school suspensions and expulsions, and the school-to-prison pipeline; the value of restorative justice; troubling federal-, state-, and city-level data on high school graduation rates primarily of African Americans; youth involvement in gangs and education as a response to replace suppression; the accountability challenge of having school resource officers in schools; and, regarding individual and interpersonal relationships, literature on vulnerability and perfectionism as well as double consciousness and the “color line.”

**Methodology**

Broadly, portraiture is a qualitative methodology that, in essence, creates portraits with words by trying to join together social science and art (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). The portraiture methodology draws on the traditions
of phenomenology, ethnography, and fine literature (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
Although unlike ethnography, however, portraitists are challenged to listen for – rather than to – a story to render a narrative that is not only accurate, but also compelling (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). One of portraiture’s defining characteristics is its “search for goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). That does not mean ignoring the difficulties and blemishes in the story, but rather to present the bitter and the sweet (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Specifically, portraiture methodology has several aspects. The researcher is highly visible in all steps of the process, there is a strong emphasis on building positive relationship(s) between the researcher and the person(s) or institution(s) being researched (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997), the inquiry and final portraits emphasize various dimensions of context and voice, and symbols and metaphors help to shape the aesthetic of the final portrait. The four dimensions of context are as follows: (1) internal context, the “physical setting”; (2) personal context, the “researcher’s perch and perspective”; (3) historical context, the “journey, culture, ideology” of the institution where Vincent both works and went to school; and (4) shaping context, which is how the various kinds of context shape the actor and how the actor affects the various kinds of context. In addition to the dimensions, context includes emphasis on “symbols and metaphors,” which are “aesthetic features” that help to shape the final portrait. Regarding voice, the several dimensions are as follows: (a) voice as interpretation, (b) voice as preoccupation, (c) voice as autobiography, (d) voice discerning other voices, and (e) voice in dialogue. I have
provided a more detailed description of the portraiture methodology in Chapter 3.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Audience

Most of the American public does not read scholarly education journals. And where they get their information from, news media, those authors and journalists do not often draw from scholarly literature (Yettick, 2015). I think the compelling nature of portraiture’s narratives can widen the range of audiences interested in scholarly literature.

Narrative Interpretation

Indeed, this is a portrait of only person. However, this one person speaks with a voice that was acquired within and is inextricable from a multilayered context (Moen, 2006). And his voice is a “…heteroglossia of culturally situated voices that ventriloquete though the singular voice that is claimed by an individual” (Gudmundsdottir as qtd. in Moen, 2006, p. 3).

According to Moen (2006), printing and disseminating Vincent’s narrative means it can be interpreted in ways quite different from Vincent’s (or anyone else mentioned in the portrait) intentions. That risk is what makes this endeavor a little scary for me as a novice portraitist. At the same time, it can mean that Vincent’s story can make changes at the level of thought or policy in ways that neither he nor anyone portrayed in it anticipated.
High School Graduation Rates in the United States

The popularly-accepted high school graduation rate in the United States has increased a few percentage points to between 72% (Swanson, 2011) and 75% (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox, & Moore, 2010), which makes for good news\(^1\). However, whether one sees that increase as good news or not, the situation for African Americans is bleak. According to Heckman & LaFontaine, (2010), the graduation rate for African Americans and Latinos nationally is 65%. For African Americans, the numbers worsen still with a graduation rate of 57% (Swanson, 2011). Additionally, the national graduation rate for males nationally hovers around 50% (Swanson, 2011).

However, as sad as the national data are, they do not tell what has been an even sadder story in some states, cities, and for African Americans. For example, when I was teaching in San Francisco Unified School District in 2005, its high school graduation rate was 57% (Swanson, 2009). The situation is worse in some of the nation’s other major cities: Detroit City School District's was 38%, Cleveland Municipal City School District's was 34%, and Indianapolis Public Schools' graduation rate was only 31% (Swanson, 2009). Regarding African Americans, Faircloth & Tippeconnic (2010) reported a 39% graduation rate for Blacks in South Dakota. In Nevada, the 2007 graduation rate for

Blacks was 31% (Progress, 2010). Going back even further, in 2001, the high school graduation rate in the state of New York for Blacks was 35% (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). In Pennsylvania, the rate was 81% for Whites (among the highest nationally) (Orfield et al., 2004). The rate for Blacks in Pennsylvania was only 46% (Orfield et al., 2004).

High school graduation data are complicated by issues related to accuracy and lack of uniformity of methods and populations used to calculate rates (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Ewert, Sykes, & Pettit, 2014). Ewert, Sykes, & Pettit, 2014 argue that imprisoned populations often are not well accounted for in statistics on educational attainment in the United States. Considering the dramatic numbers of young African American males who are locked up across the United States, the story on high school graduation rates for African American males likely is different (potentially worse) than the figures presented in mainstream education literature. In 2011, the federal government asked for uniform reporting on high school graduation rates.

To be clear, retaining and/or reclaiming youth in schools, many of which are heavily structured around high-stakes testing is not without controversy – partly because success in the labor market significantly relates to personality traits and behavior, and is

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only tenuously related to the cognitive capacities measured in schools (Bowles and Gintis, 2002).

**Gang Involvement and Schools and School Discipline**

Most commonly, youth join gangs for the following reasons (ranked in order of reported importance): protection, fun, respect, money, and/or because a friend is in the gang (Howell, 2010). Curry, Decker, and Egley (2002) also recognize that a young person might join a gang if a family member is already in a gang, which aligns more with Vincent's upbringing.

Vincent grew up in the American West in a family that had a local reputation of being gang involved. And although gang involvement does not necessarily lead to gang membership, it is no surprise that Vincent became a full-fledged gang member (Fagan, 1989).

On the societal level, this was during a period of gang activity that in some major U.S. cities was held responsible for over a quarter of all homicides and assaults (Decker, 2002). This period led into a backlash not only against gangs, but also those who were considered to look gang-like. I remember living in California in the early 2000s and hearing this within the discourse of my urban education network. And as Decker (2002) writes, a focus on gang activity had an additional effect of simply criminalizing youth,

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3 But it did not take education researchers to know this: Japanese art scholar, Kakuzo Okakura, in his 1906 classic, *Book of Tea*, wrote, “[E]ducation, in order to keep up the mighty delusion, encourages a species of ignorance. People are not taught to be really virtuous, but to behave properly.”
which (expectedly) regressed toward minoritized youth. As a tame example, three Black youth donning identical pairs of Nike sneakers attempting to enter a night club together might be denied entry because of the perception that those youth's matching attire indicates gang membership.

In the 1990s, the most relied upon yet least fruitful response to gang activity was suppression. Education was found to be a more effective response (Decker, 2002), thus scholars are calling for more schools to be active participants in resolution efforts (Gebo & Sullivan, 2014). Although Vincent’s story involves him being a gang member, it also involves him exiting the gang, all of which could provide an insightful response to Gebo and Sullivan (2014), who recommend more research on gang-involved and non-involved youth to help create more effective policies and programs. Although there are schools participating in community wrap-around efforts for youth, those efforts still are exceptions rather than the norm (Gebo & Sullivan 2014).

Zero Tolerance, School-to-Prison Pipeline, and Restorative Justice in Schools

In the estimation of scholar and critic Henry Giroux (2009),

Too many youth within the degraded economic, political, and cultural geography occupy a “dead zone” in which the spectacle of commodification exists side by side with the imposing threat of massive debt, bankruptcy, the prison industrial complex, and the elimination of basic civil liberties (p. 12).
I do not know what constitutes “too many youth,” but no matter how many it takes to reach that threshold, schools those youth attend also occupy that “dead zone.” Those schools also doubly part of Giroux’s (2009) “dead zone” because the prison industrial complex intersects the school-to-prison pipeline.

According to Thalia Gonzales (2012), the number of students suspended at the national level has increased dramatically, nearly doubling between the mid ‘70s and the new millennium. In 2006, African Americans were doubly overrepresented in public school expulsions nationally. “In the 2006-2007 school year, there was no state in which African American students were not suspended more often than [W]hite students” (p. 294). Kim, Losen, & Hewitt (2010) help us to see that African American and White youth are not equally likely to be suspended, expelled, or arrested at equal rates for the same kinds of acts at school. Actually, African American children are more likely.

Zero tolerance policies that result in a school having high levels of suspensions and expulsions also negatively affect the climate of that school, and the suspended/expelled students end up not doing as well academically and become more likely to dropout (Gonzales, 2012). To me, and maybe I am biased because of the situation of this research project’s actor, it is especially tough when that suspension or expulsion involves a discretionary action of a school resource officer (SRO), who often operates within a network of accountability and makes decisions based on a set of priorities different than trained and credentialed educators (Brown, 2006). Moreover,
Merlo & Wolpin (2009) report that youth who are out-of-school at age 16 are four times more likely than in-school 16 year-olds to be incarcerated as adults. Kim, Losen, & Hewitt (2010) found that being arrested can have a profound effect on a child's decision to stay in school – making that child twice as likely to drop out. And if that child goes to court in addition to the arrest, then that likelihood doubles again (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Similar to Merlo & Wolpin (2009), Kim, Losen, & Hewitt (2010) found also that the likelihood of getting caught back up in the criminal justice system increases if that child gets out of jail.

Whereas punitive systems of discipline, sometimes fashioned as zero tolerance policies resulting in racially disproportionate suspensions and expulsions, can heighten the risk of students entering the legal system, put distance between students and their school community, and maybe even lead to students dropping out, restorative justice focuses on the cultivation of positive relationships between students and their school community (Gonzales, 2012). Gonzalez (2012) defines restorative justice in schools as an

…approach to discipline that engages all parties in a balanced practice that brings together all people impacted by an issue or behavior. It allows students, teachers, families, schools, and communities to resolve conflict, promote academic achievement, and address school safety. Restorative justice practice in schools is often seen as building on existing relationships and complementary with other
non-discipline practices, such as peer mediation or youth courts (p. 281).

**Brief Historical Overview.** The racial implications of the school-to-prison pipeline are connected to a larger narrative of oppression, one that is explained in numerous book volumes and films; however, I will provide just a brief history of the relevant connections here. In 1865, to a mixture of delight and dismay, the U.S. Constitution's 13th Amendment abolished *chattel* slavery. “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” Unfortunately, as indicated by the presence of the “except” clause, the entire institution of slavery was not eradicated. Not only has that clause remained, it undergirded the Black codes, which returned many emancipated slaves and their offspring to a life of forced labor and inhumane conditions in penal institutions in many states. The convict lease system, which was a state's leasing of prisoners for labor in return for streams of cash, soon evolved—as did Jim Crow laws. Although the convict lease system in its original form has ended and federal and state legislation helped to lower the boom on Jim Crow, the industry of private prisons and prison labor continues. Especially with the War on Drugs and its disparate sentencing guidelines (Provine, 2011) and racist underpinnings (Baum, 2016). And it is flourishing: In the last few decades, we have seen spikes in state corrections budgets. The web of prison construction (and its attendant industries), prison labor, corporate use of that prison labor, and the prison
legislative lobbies constitute a prison industrial complex, which has at its center a Constitutionally sanctioned form of slavery.

*Challenge to the Field of Educational Leadership*. I am reminded of scholar Michelle Alexander (2012): “More African American adults are under correctional control today – in prison or jail, on probation or parole – than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began” (p.180), as well as Fenwick English’s (2007) challenge to the academic community in the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) “. . . to shape our intellectual and research agendas to re-establish the civic mission of public education and to re-energize our purpose to force our constituencies to confront the profound social and economic inequities that schools often reproduce and perpetuate.” Maybe to help “shape” researchers’ agendas, similar to how Gilligan responded to Kohlberg with the claim that women’s moral reasoning is different from – rather than inferior to – men’s (Stefkovich, 2006), we could benefit more from Black voices – like Vincent’s – to provide insight regarding issues that still plague our schools (Tillman, 2005).

**Relationships with Others and Self**

Many of us are already familiar with the power and significance of good relationships. However, the literature confirms that people often adopt beliefs from other people who they are in close relationship with (Martin & Dowson, 2009), draw energy from relationships that can be used for personal motivation (Martin & Dowson, 2009),
and find familial ties to be a source of resilience in challenging times (Cunningham & Swanson 2009). In a school setting, when a student has a solid relationship with a teacher or staff member in an educational setting, then that relationship can lead to the student taking on the teacher’s/staff member’s beliefs about school (Martin & Dowson, 2009).

**Vulnerability**

Regarding relationships, I found it helpful to use terminology of vulnerability from researcher and author Brené Brown (2012) as way to characterize some of Vincent’s relationship-building in the portrait. According to Brown, “Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center of meaningful human experiences” (p. 12). Additionally, she writes about “perfectionism,” which she describes as having a hindering “mythology.”

Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving for excellence. Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth. …Perfectionism is not about self-improvement. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. (p. 128-29).

Brown also calls perfectionism a “shield,” and it can shield us from our own vulnerability, which she defines as “…uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (2012, p. 34).
Double Consciousness and the Color Line

Over a century ago, scholar W.E.B DuBois provided us with a concept of double consciousness, which he described as a tension between a Black consciousness and an American consciousness.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois & Provenzo, 2005, p. 14).

Although the term “Negro” has faded from common parlance, double consciousness seems the central issue for who Payne & Brown (2010) would call “street-life-oriented Black boys” and who the authors claimed to struggle in schools with the not-so-hidden curriculum of White middle class values embedded within overall school curricula more so than with handling the academic content. And those who embrace the White middle class values are more likely to do well in school (Payne & Brown, 2010). That is not to suggest that adopting White middle class values is better than adopting other values. Those values simply are those undergirding public education and, thus,
adoption of them often is necessary (though maybe not sufficient) for individuals to succeed in school.

Whereas double consciousness symbolizes an internal struggle, DuBois also wrote about the social struggle brought about by the “color-line.” Even though explicit evidence of racially motivated attacks is not as prevalent in the current era (although residents might say different in Jasper, Texas, where James Byrd was murdered by a trio that included White supremacists and whose death led to a hate crimes bill), the way Black folks are still being victimized in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (e.g., headliner cases mentioned in Chapter 1) it is hard to deny the stamina of DuBois’ concern that “[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (2005, p. 54).

Because the color line has been a fault line for ignoring, copying, and destroying Black people in times both far removed and recent, I think the work of poet Audre Lorde resonates with DuBois. She writes:

…[W]e have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals (1984, p. 115).
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Purpose and Significance of the Study

I conducted a portraiture study on a young African American male focusing mainly on his high school journey from ninth grade through graduation. My primary interest was in what and/or who he credits as the motivation(s) and support(s) for his return to and graduation from high school. The young man is one of my former high school students, who I call Vincent in the study. I think Vincent’s story is comprised of aspects and dimensions found within the stories of other people. His is a story about being who we already are: human.

Portraiture was well fit for this study because, being a qualitative methodology, its social constructionist aspect provided the needed flexibility and capacity to capture both Vincent’s perceived connections between and meaning-making of the significant achievements, obstacles, motivations, and support structures along his high school journey (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Maxwell, 2013).

And while portraiture’s inquiry inevitably uncovers areas in need of improvement, one pillar of portraiture is a “search for goodness,” which holds the portraitist accountable for listening for and presenting qualities of the actor’s (or research subject’s) goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I think the portrait of Vincent’s journey

4 The name Vincent is a pseudonym.
toward graduation would serve to do the following:

- Motivate high school students, especially – but not only – African Americans, to continue on toward graduation;
- Uplift families who are struggling to raise Black boys; and
- Heighten the sensitivities of United States educators and policy makers to the complexities and triumphs of being a young African American male.

Likewise, this study could have the effect of increasing general society's awareness of the complexities and triumphs of one of its endangered populations, thus leading to more sensitive or equitable practices and policies both in P-12 education and law at the local, state, and federal levels.

**Research Questions**

I examined a former student's motivation and support as it relates to completing high school: What, if any, are the experiences that motivated and supported Vincent's decisions both to return to and graduate from high school?

**Recruitment and Procedure**

*Rationale for Having Only One Participant*

The study has one actor (or participant). According to Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, originator of the portraiture methodology, “The portraitist is very interested in the single case because she or he believes that embedded in it, the readers will discover resonant
universal themes. The more specific, the more subtle the description, the more likely it is
to evoke identification. And amazingly – another irony – if the portraitist is to speak to
an eclectic and broad audience, living and working in other contexts, then the piece itself
must be very specific and deeply contextual” (2005, p. 13). So, going deep into one case
allowed me as the portraitist to fashion a portrait that resonates with readers across a
broad spectrum.

Moreover, in the depth, or particularities, of Vincent’s story lies the fodder for
generalizability (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) – however, not in the research
sense (Maxwell 2013, p. 30). Instead, the particularist aspect of qualitative methodology
– particularly, portraiture methodology – presented an opportunity and a challenge to
write a narrative that reflects not only Vincent's story but also resonates with the story of
the reader (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Why Vincent?

In my career as a classroom educator, I worked with many students – many of
whom were African American. The two high schools (including RMHS) where I taught
attracted students from contexts where those students were less likely to graduate from
high school. While teaching at RMHS, I crossed paths with an African American male
student by the name of Vincent, who was returning to high school after being out of
school for over a year. Eventually, I learned that his journey toward high school
graduation includes more than one year in jail, gang membership, high school
suspension, the death of his mother, the imprisonment of his brother for a capital offense, and being accepted to college on scholarship.

The broad strokes of Vincent’s journey, on their own merit, make for a remarkable story of an African American young man graduating from high school even though he had taken longer than conventionally aged high school graduates. By the time he got his high school diploma, Vincent was eligible not only for a driver’s license but also to vote. The numbers of years between starting and finishing high school would register Vincent’s graduation as a negative statistic in some of the conventional literature on high school graduations; however, his completion remains a triumph for him and for African American males in general.

Even though he finished, Vincent’s graduation was by no means an easy journey. It seemed just as likely that he would not finish.

I identified Vincent as the optimal candidate for this single case (although this is not a case study) for the following reasons: (1) the breadth and dynamism of the preliminary data that his journey includes: the achievements and obstacles cover a range of issues affecting young African American males; (2) he was schooled in a U.S. context, which will resonate with my intended U.S.-based audience; and (3) his willingness to examine his own life, a willingness I have witnessed in the years since meeting him.

Although I would have preferred asking in person, Vincent and I live in different time zones, so I telephoned Vincent about the possibility of him participating. He quickly agreed and also expressed additional interest in participation because of wanting
to know more about conducting graduate-level research.

**Portraiture Methodology**

Portraiture is a qualitative methodology that, in essence, creates portraits with words by trying to join together social science and art (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). The portraiture methodology draws on the traditions of phenomenology, ethnography, and fine literature (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). However, unlike ethnography, portraitists are challenged to listen for – rather than to – a story to render a narrative that is not only accurate, but also compelling (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). One of portraiture’s defining characteristics is its “search for goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). That does not mean ignoring the difficulties and blemishes in the story, but rather to present the bitter and the sweet (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Specifically, portraiture methodology has several aspects. The researcher is highly visible in all steps of the process, there is a strong emphasis on building positive relationship(s) between the researcher and the person(s) or institution(s) being researched (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997), the inquiry and final portraits emphasize various dimensions of context and voice, and symbols and metaphors help to shape the aesthetic of the final portrait. The four dimensions of context are as follows: (1) internal context, the “physical setting”; (2) personal context, the “researcher’s perch and perspective”; (3) historical context, the “journey, culture, ideology” of the institution where Vincent both worked
and went to school; and (4) shaping context, which is how the various kinds of context shape the actor and how the actor affects the various kinds of context. In addition to the dimensions, context includes emphasis on “symbols and metaphors,” which are “aesthetic features” that help to shape the final portrait. Regarding voice, the several dimensions are as follows: (a) voice as interpretation, (b) voice as preoccupation, (c) voice as autobiography, (d) voice discerning other voices, and (e) voice in dialogue.

Context

Vincent's portrait is situated within multiple contexts: historical, personal, and internal. “In portraiture, we find the same levels of context at play. The historical context can be seen as the variety of research frameworks from which portraiture derives and deviates, without which we would not be able to distinguish the artful qualities of the methodology. The personal context in which the researcher is creating a portrait is manifest in the experiential repertoire of the researcher; for example, whether he or she is familiar with the subject or has particular expertise, assumptions, or expectations that modulate the presentation of the subject.

“The internal context of the portrait is manifest in contextual details (such as the subject's history, background, or location), which the researcher does or does not include by virtue of which the subject is understood by the reader in one way or another” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 32-33).

*Internal Context.* Internal context references the physical setting of the study.
Although Vincent’s story weaves through multiple physical settings (e.g., his high school in California, imprisonment in California, high school at Rocky Mountain High), I provided internal context on Vincent and Rocky Mountain High (RMHS), which is not only the site where Vincent graduated from high school but also where he lived and worked at the time of the study. It also served as the research site.

Physically, he is tall with shoulders that are broad and skin that is chocolate brown. His resting face does not quite prepare you for his radiant, squinty-eyed smile and disarming laugh. Vincent is polite, sociable, and asks probing questions in his continual search for greater knowledge and wisdom.

RMHS is situated in the hills just outside of a small mountain town and is invisible from the road. It is a tight-knit community where all students and most staff live on campus and is the school where I first met and became Vincent’s teacher. The serene mountain setting is the backdrop for an intense schooling experience where all staff and students are on a first name basis. Although often trying new ideas, many aspects of the school's design have remained the same since its inception. The students come from a diversity of racial/ethnic backgrounds and family models, varying levels of urbanicity/ruralness, and span ages from low teens to upper 20s. Some of the students have been struggling in school; some have stopped going – or seldom go – to school; and some have been recruited straight from carceral contexts. In addition to teaching classes, several of the staff members also double as houseparents for student housing.

In addition to being a teacher, I was a houseparent, which meant living in one half
of a duplex with nearly a dozen high school students living in the other half. It made for many long, intense days of in-class conversations, after-class coaching sessions with students on their writing, meals with students and/or staff, informal conversations with students who lived in my house, conversations with students who visited me from other houses, playing soccer or basketball or whatever the intramural programming had in store for the school, addressing student conflict, and advising students.

*Personal Context.* Personal context is a reference to the portraitist’s “perch and perspective” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). “Noting the perch and perspective of the portraitist, the reader can better interpret the process and product of her vision. In portraiture, then, the place and stance of the researcher are made visible and audible, written in as part of the story. The portraitist is clear: from where I sit, this is what I see; these are the perspectives and biases I bring; this is the scene I select; this is how people seem to be responding to my presence” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 50).

Regarding my “perch and perspective,” Vincent and I got connected in several ways as soon as he arrived at the school as a student several years ago. During the two years that our time at the school overlapped with one another, I was his adviser, neighbor, writing coach, and he took one of my writing classes in his first term. I remember that Vincent's writing skills did not quite match his advanced age. By conventional standards, he was far behind in his mechanics, but he was a determined and hard worker – helpful traits to have later in both his college career and the fellowship he was completing at

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5 I have laid out much of my perspective in the Ontology/Assumptions section of Chapter 1.
RMHS at the time of the study.

When I arrived to conduct the interviews, Vincent was working. His shift at the school that night ended around 10:30pm. On his off time is when I interviewed him. And even though I no longer was employed at RMHS, the conversations Vincent and I had in the interviews felt just as comfortable as our conversations did when I was his teacher, adviser, and writing coach. Also, RMHS staff members who had been there during my time as a teacher treated me like a relative who did not visit often enough, and students treated me with respect. At meal times (which there are several of at a residential school), I would sit and have conversations with students.

Although Vincent and I spent time talking and interviewing on campus, we also spent lots of our interview time off campus at a nearby café, restaurant, and bowling alley all within a few minutes of driving time from the school. In the interviews, I was no longer the teacher but simply the portraitist, and he was the actor – no longer the student. And instead of me helping to him to complete a writing project, he now was helping me to complete mine.

*Historical Context.* To complement the physical description, historical context is about the philosophies, ideologies, values, goals, culture, and origins of the institution. RMHS is independent and fully funded. Although the instructors are informed by education standards, nontraditional, the school’s curriculum is nontraditional. It probably needs to be considering that the students are admitted from contexts of being unsuccessful in (primarily) public schools. Moreover, these are students whose access to
schooling alternatives (e.g., private school) is limited. So, this school – which is fully funded – uses methods found less frequently in mainstream schooling in hopes of helping students who have been unsuccessful to finally achieve success and graduate from high school.

Being set in the mountains is an expression of the school’s commitment to learning experiences that happen both inside and outdoors. There have been classes that integrate mountain biking and physics, mathematics and rock climbing, theater classes that involve performing a musical on an outdoor stage. Also, all students participate in an orientation program that involves a multi-week trip into the wilderness with school instructors who are trained in outdoor education and leadership. Completion of the wilderness experience during orientation is required of every student.

During the orientation, among many other lessons, students learn how to live with another, something every student does until graduation from the school. They live together on campus in houses, each having a wing where the males sleep and another wing where the females sleep. Those wings make up half of each house. The other half of each house is inhabited by one or more staff members who serve in the role of houseparent(s). Each house has activities and meetings, as well as a culture unique to each.

In addition to living under the same roof, staff and students do much together. The school strongly encourages staff and requires student participation in the weekly intramural program, which consists of outdoor, indoor, and water sports. The intensity of
competition ebbs and flows, usually according to each individual’s interest in athletics.

Each weekday morning, the students and staff gather around a hearth in the dining hall. It is a face-to-face ritual experience of sharing announcements, voicing concerns, giving away items, presenting new information, congratulating school community members, and saying farewell to those leaving the school. And someone provides music – usually a live performance.

In that same dining hall, staff and students often sit together for meals. It is part of the community building that strengthens the bonds between staff and students. It helps students connect to an array of caring adults, who personalize the experience of schooling.

To extend that personalization into mentorship, each student is placed in an advisory, a small group of around six students and three staff members. This small group environment is in place to help ensure that each student has a staff member who is familiar with their progress – but not just academic progress. Being a residential school – and one whose students and staff come from all over the country – students need support in a range of areas: dealing with challenges in the classroom, communication with their houseparent(s), relational issues with other students or staff, and spiritual needs.

The advisory also provides students with a group that can provide them new experiences. Being small in size, staff members are much more able to take their advisory off campus for short field trips. This exposes students to experiences that maybe they have never had. For example, Vincent shared with me that his first time at a farmers’
market was when I organized a trip for our advisory to attend a nearby market – one of the best in the country – which hums with produce vendors, hot food purveyors, wine sellers, baked goods, medicinal remedies, and music.

**Aesthetic Features**

The aesthetic features of note in portraiture are “symbols and metaphors” that are intended to help to give shape and foundation to the overall portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Thus, my use of metaphors and imagery was to capture not only the attention of the audience but also the connections between the physical and internal contexts (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997): in this case, the connections between words of Vincent and the patterns of RMHS.

**Shaping Context**

The various dimensions of context are not necessarily static (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). There are some elements of, for example, the historical context that have and will remain the same. However, the internal context, for example, shifts with the seasons: admission of new students multiple times a year, hiring of new staff, and/or responses to dramatic events that inevitably happen at the school. Those shifts can affect the actor (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Likewise, the actor can affect a change in some contextual aspects (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). For example, in his role at the school, Vincent is able to shape
the historical context by his role (and others’) in helping to maintain a climate of health and well-being among the student body. Also, he could leave a legacy of replicable programming designed to address student well-being in creative ways long after his temporary position ends. And it was my responsibility as the portraitist to pick up on and depict changes – large or small – in the context, and how those changes either affected Vincent or are the result of Vincent's presence.

**Voice**

*Voice as Witness.* The portraitist is an outsider, which means having a fresh perspective that the insiders usually have lost – or would not even consider. It means foregrounding patterns or ideas that exist only as background to the insiders (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

*Voice as Interpretation.* As a portraitist, I am challenged to make meaning from what I witness while developing the portrait. So, I have interpreted what I experienced with Vincent at RMHS in ways that make sense to me. I have used a combination of basic descriptive detail and rich, or “thick,” descriptions (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Additionally – and this is key – I responded to the challenge of including enough description, or enough data, for readers to have the ability to draw conclusions different from mine (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

*Voice as Preoccupation.* In portraiture, this is the set of lenses through which I view my work and the world (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It consists of my
theoretic bent, my academic studies, and my pedagogy after years as both an outreach and classroom educator.

Voice as Autobiography. This dimension of voice reflects my life history, how my family and geographic landscapes – which include the religious, lingual, and educational – have shaped the way I view and approach the world (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Voice Discerning Other Voices (Listening for Voice). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) borrowed from the work of Eudora Welty the distinction between listening to a story and the more deliberate endeavor of listening for a story (p.99). The work of the portraitist is to listen not only to the story being shared, but also for a way to share the story in such a way that the readers will be inspired – not only informed. Although portraiture draws on the tradition of ethnography, one seminal difference, according to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997), is that “[e]thnographers listen to a story while portraitists listen for a story” (p. 99).

Voice in Dialogue. This is the portraitist being visible in the dialogue with the participant (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In the study, this involved my sharing with readers some of the dialogue between Vincent and me. The reader is then able to track how I (re-)establish rapport with Vincent and facilitate a journey into the many spaces of his story I knew little or nothing about. Also, showing both of our voices in dialogue facilitates for the reader deeper insight into how I employ myself as a research instrument (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
Relationships

The relationship being built between the portraitist and actor is at the heart of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Navigating Intimacy. “Portraits are constructed, shaped, and drawn through the development of relationships. All the processes of portraiture require that we build productive and benign relationships. It is through relationships between the portraitist and the actors that access is sought and given, connections made, contracts of reciprocity and responsibility (both formal and informal) developed, trust built, intimacy negotiated, data collected, and knowledge constructed” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135).

Even though Vincent and I have rapport, it was dormant for some time. I recognize that the success of this study hinged heavily on my ability to reinvigorate my relationship with him in a positive way.

The Search for Goodness. “The distance that portrait writing requires affords a view of the whole with which insiders may be less familiar. The portraitist works from the vantage point at which goodness can be apprehended – even as it is marked by mistakes and failure. Subjects struggling for success may not on their own have time for the luxury of recognition of achievement or the perspective of situating struggle within a larger construct” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 36).

For multiple reasons, I have looked for the good in Vincent. First, I appreciate that orientation of portraiture because honoring the good in Vincent (if I have done this
right) also honors the good in the reader. Second, I acknowledge that Vincent is not without blemish – no one is – but I believe a focus on goodness counters the tendency to present African American actors/participants/informants as problematic, or in need of someone to save them – maybe even as scapegoats. I believe that such an approach dehumanizes and relegates African American people to the status of social invalids.

*Empathetic Regard.* As the portraitist in this study, I was challenged not only to search for goodness but also to develop empathy: to connect with Vincent by imagining myself walking in his shoes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Developing empathy increased the intimacy of my connection with Vincent (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), which hopefully lead to him being more open in the interviews, thus providing me greater understanding of the shoes I imagined myself walking in. As my empathy grew, so did my ability to render a portrait that I pray is both accurate and compelling (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

One of the ways I encouraged Vincent to be more open is by sharing my own insight in our interviews. Hopefully, the intimacy created by my sharing is reflected in the depth of the final portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

*Reciprocity and Boundaries.* Although I worked to foster intimacy, I remained focused on the path laid out by my research question. Vincent agreeing to share his story is not him agreeing simply to share his business (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I was explicit with him about my commitment to boundaries, which protect both his integrity and that of the work (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
Vincent’s participation in this study meant taking time out of his busy schedule, opening himself up to questions, and placing a considerable amount of trust in me. Although I did not offer him compensation, to reciprocate, I provided a safe space for him to share his story, to motivate other youth and families who are in great need of it. Also, because of his curiosity, I fielded Vincent’s questions regarding graduate-level research.

**Limitations**

*Retrospective Data*

Vincent graduated from high school in 2009, which means the interview responses he gave regarding his time in high school are retrospective data. From one perspective, the time lapse suggests that his memory fallout could negatively affect the data collection process. However, from another perspective, the time since graduation has provided Vincent much needed space for reflection to more clearly identify the motivation(s) and support(s) that got him back into high school and helped him to graduate.

*Bias*

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997), Miles and Huberman caution researchers regarding three “probable” sources of bias: holistic fallacy, elite bias, and
going native (p. 246). (Because I only have one actor, elite bias\(^6\) does not apply and was not treated here.)

1) Holistic fallacy: “interpreting events as more patterned and congruent than they really are, lopping off the many loose ends of which social life is made” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 246)

2) Going native: “losing your perspective . . . becoming coopted into the perceptions and explanations of local informants” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 246).

*Holistic Fallacy.* Portraiture might have a built-in tendency toward holistic fallacy because of its interest in listening *for* a story and portraying it in a way that will interest readers within and outside of the field. To stave off this source of bias, I (a) avoided presenting Vincent's story as complete. Yes, he is in a good place with his current job and accomplishments, but that does not mean that he couldn't have been in a more favorable situation had he been given different circumstances to live with and/or had he made different decisions within the time period of his life that is the focus of my study; (b) portrayed Vincent's narrative as still unfolding. Because of the obstacles I am aware of Vincent already overcoming, I have to avoid portraying his triumph as already complete. Vincent is not at the end of his life or career but shared with me (and readers)

\(^6\) Elite bias – “overweighing data from articulate, well-informed, usually high status informants and underrepresenting data from less-articulate, lower-status ones” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 246).
lessons from his journey. No, he is in medias res and shared with me how he is making it – not how he has made it.

Going Native. Having worked at the school where Vincent worked at the time of the study, I know a lot about the culture: the round-the-clock schedule, the types of needs presented by many of the students, the consistent hum of stress on the lives of faculty/staff, the jargon, stories we told ourselves about why other staff or students acted the way they did, and the collective imagination of the place. I allowed so much of that to structure how I went about my day while I worked there. And through subsequent visits over the past six years, I have witnessed that the school has maintained a familiar rhythm. Now, had I conducted this study after being gone from there for only a year or two, I might have greater “going native” challenges. However, after so many years of distance, I looked at Vincent's story with a detachment that allows me to notice influences and their related behaviors/decisions, as well as parse as elements the aspects of Vincent's story that, before, I might not have seen as discrete. Moreover, being able to see the elements enabled me to better analyze and portray their relationships.

Research Procedure

Portraiture relies heavily on interviewing and direct observation (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Because qualitative methodology challenges the researcher to gather data in the participant’s home setting (Maxwell, 2013), I traveled to RMHS and conducted five in-depth semi-structured and unstructured face-to-face qualitative
interviews. After Vincent moved from RMHS to start work at a different high school on
the East Coast, I conducted the sixth and final interview in Pennsylvania at a halfway
point between his current job and University Park. Mainly, I used unstructured
interviews as there were perceptions and knowledge of Vincent’s high school journey
that I had little or no knowledge of (Singleton & Straits, 2010). I used the semi-
structured interview procedure because were certain questions, like when he started high
school or how long he was actually incarcerated, that I wanted Vincent to answer
(Singleton & Straits, 2010). The semi-structured interview was informed by an interview
guide, freeing me from needing to ask the questions in any particular order or having to
ask any questions that Vincent answered in other responses (Singleton & Straits, 2010).
(See Appendix for the interview guide.) The interviews included a mix of closed- and
open-ended questions: the closed-ended questions to illicit specific data and the open-
ended questions, which were the most interactive (Singleton & Straits, 2010), to gain
insight into Vincent’s perceptions and meaning-making (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis,
1997). I audiotaped each interview.

Vincent’s main involvement was in the primary data collection, which was one
week. After the primary data collection stage, Vincent’s involvement in the subsequent
months consisted of a follow-up interview, reading chapter drafts of the dissertation,
suggesting edits for the final draft, and the communications required to coordinate those
procedures.

Portraiture, like other qualitative methods, is flexible enough to allow the research
room to adjust research questions, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and methods while in process as determined by the researcher (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

My current research plan for the main period of data collection was as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Described and fielded the actor’s initial questions about the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducted interview off campus. Duration: 1-2 hours.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Days 2-7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conducted four more interviews off campus or in private location on campus. Duration: 1-2 hours.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I had originally planned to transcribe each interview the same day that I conducted the interview. However, midweek, after still not completing even the first transcript, I came to terms with the impossibility of this part of my plan and admitted my shortcoming to Vincent. Luckily for me, he expressed no interest in seeing the transcripts, that he knew what he said to me in the interviews, and was interested only in seeing my draft before the dissertation is finalized. I had already planned to show him a draft and to seek his participation in the editing process. I happily agreed to his new terms of agreement.
Framework for Data Analysis: Portraiture, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Counter-Storytelling

To analyze Vincent’s transcribed interview data, I used both the aesthetic and framework of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), as well as the tool of counter-storytelling, which is couched in critical race theory (CRT): “The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-stories can come in the form of personal stories/narratives, the stories/narratives of others, or composite stories/narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

To be forthcoming, I struggled with the decision to settle on CRT as a framework for analysis. Originally, I thought CRT would detract from the focus of my work. I feared two potential outcomes: that race would dominate the final project to the detriment of portrait and that some White readers would be turned off by an emphasis on race. So, I left CRT out of my work, and, with the guidance of the dissertation committee, searched for a framework that would quell my fear. I explored Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which, because of my lack of linguistics training, I felt inadequately equipped to do justice to; critical ethnography, but when I saw its use of CDA as framework of analysis, my concerns about CDA kicked back in; and critical legal studies (CLS), which is criticized for not focusing enough on race. And that lack of emphasis is what lead to the creation of critical race studies!
So, after discussing this with the dissertation committee and with a few informal advisors, after reading some of the relevant literature, after having time to sit in discomfort and uncertainty, \textit{and then} revisiting literature on critical race theory, I chose to accept that I was in the role of a critical race methodologist: an African American male telling another African American male’s story – as reverberated through my own. This mirrors a quote by Mari Matsuda in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002 describing critical race theory:

\begin{quote}
[T]he work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goals of eliminating all forms of subordination (p. 25).
\end{quote}

Although I do not define myself as “of color” (see Definition of Terms section above), I recognize that others will identify as such. And my reasons/purpose for portraying Vincent overlap those of critical race theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002):

1) I seek to “challenge the dominant discourse” regarding the deficit narrative about African American youth – especially young Black men, and

2) I take seriously the “centrality of experiential knowledge” of minoritized peoples and the marginalized stories of their/our lived experiences.
3) I see this project as an expression of my “commitment to social justice” in matters related to race and gender.

4) I acknowledge the “intercentricity of race and racism and other forms of subordination (e.g., class and gender) within Vincent’s narrative. For example, I learned in the interviews with him that he was suspended at least twice – and from two different high schools. Because of what the school-to-prison pipeline data reveals about racial disparities regarding suspensions (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010), it is possible that both of those instances were at least partly related to race.

5) Because critical race theory’s “transdisciplinary perspective” draws on multiple fields within law and the social sciences, I analyzed the data using the lenses fashioned by my undergraduate academic background in sociology, my knowledge of law and legal resources gained from taking a full year of law classes at Penn State’s Dickinson School of Law, my master’s studies and years of experience in the field of teaching/secondary education in California and Colorado, and my doctoral studies in educational leadership.

While interviewing Vincent, two experiences gave me more peace about using CRT. The first took place when Vincent and I were preparing for what I think was our third interview, which took place in a spot that he chose: the bar in the bowling alley near RMHS. I should note that RMHS is located outside of a small town. The bowling alley also contains, among other things, a restaurant that has a bar. In addition to Vincent and I being at the bar, there was a young mother with the cutest child in a baby carrier on the
floor by her feet. Vincent and I had been sitting at the bar for about five minutes before moving to a table. It was the middle of the afternoon. During those five minutes at the bar, I placed my clunky audiotape recorder between him and me and pressed record. After making an offhand comment to the bartender about having to conduct an interview with Vincent, she responded, “Ahhh, that’s what you’re doing!” The bartender, who was a White woman in her 40s or 50s, had served Vincent in the bowling alley before, but she had not ever seen me before because I was only visiting. I guess she had not seen very many interviews take place there either. I filed that moment away in my memory.

The second experienced happened took place last November right after our final interview. Because Vincent was working at a school within driving distance of University Park, he and I had decided to meet up halfway between at a restaurant inside of a brewery in Pennsylvania. After the interview, while my clunky audiotape recorder was still on the table between us, a White guy, who probably was in his 40s, approached our table with an emphatic yet jovial, “What are you guys doing?” We told him that an interview had taken place. We shared a smile, he maybe gave us some words of encouragement, and then he went on his way.

Although he was very positive in his approach, the fact that he approached us at all was peculiar. I mean, Vincent and I were having a conversation. And that guy walked past several people who also were having conversations. Granted, ours was the only one with a clunky recorder in the middle and a notetaker. But after that incident, I retrieved the memory from the bowling alley and started thinking that something other
than the archaic tape recorder had sparked the reactions in those two scenarios. I immediately started thinking that the peculiarity of our interviews was a reflection of people’s views of African American men because I cannot help but think that we would have not aroused any interest in our interviews if Vincent and I were White. So, during the act of creating a counter-story, I received what felt like confirmation of the need for more counter-stories.
Chapter 4

VINCENT

I was excited last summer to take a solo drive out west to Rocky Mountain High School (RMHS). Not only is that where I used to live and work, but it was also where Vincent Clark was living and working. Vincent was then interning at the high school where he graduated from. Usually interns, or fellows, stay just one year. However, in special situations, a fellow stays on for two. I arrived on campus at the tail end of Vincent’s second year.

The June sun was beaming when I rolled in. There I was preparing to spend several days interrogating Vincent about the stories marking his journey to high school graduation while carrying my own story about having tried to give up on my graduation journey – not to high school but to college. Back when I was not much younger than Vincent, in the final year of my undergraduate studies in North Carolina, I tried convincing myself that I did not need to graduate, that the work I wanted to do at that time did not require a college degree. However, during that phase, my parents came to visit, and it was then that my mother harangued me into seeing that my graduation was not simply a solo accomplishment. She challenged me to widen my perspective to see how the sacrifices of my parents and the needs of my younger sister were about to intersect at my pending graduation – and that I should not take lightly an opportunity for such an intersection.
No tour was necessary when I arrived at RMHS because I remembered vividly the contours of the campus: the multi-building layout with the breathtaking mountain backdrop and pristine thin air, uncovered soil/gravel pathways between buildings, open office concept in the administrative and faculty areas, and classroom buildings and student houses separated by a dining lodge filled with round tables. I was back in one of the places I consider home. Even some of the neighbors were the same: other instructors who also staffed the student residential facilities. There were mostly new faces, but the vibe of the place was the same. I walked into the dining hall with the same feeling of comfort that I left with many years ago. It still felt like home.

My lodging for my stay was down on the lower (in elevation) end of campus with one of my dearest friends and mentors, Mikaela. A veteran on the scene of student services in contexts involving incarcerated youth, Mikaela is a storehouse of wisdom. She was an administrator at RMHS for all the time that I worked there and has continued until the present. Both of us looked different than when I first arrived many years ago as an intern straight out of college. My beard has become salted with gray and she has started settling into senior citizenship, her perm turned [dread]locks now a natural closely cropped. She received me with open arms, like someone welcoming a dear but far away relative who seldom visits.

For Mikaela, her home is both haven and oasis. A place for her to read (which she does voraciously), watch movies, play online video games, cook her amazing food, and smoke her menthol cigarettes. (Her house is one of the only places on school
grounds where she can smoke indoors.) She prefers to keep the visits from students and other staff members to a minimum.

Vincent definitely was one of the visitors she preferred. Although he was on duty the day I arrived, he came down to greet me shortly after I showed up. Broad shouldered, around six feet tall, and bow-legged, Vincent Clark has dark chocolate skin and a disarming smile. And like me, he is pigeon-toed. Pressed against his barrel chest, we hugged and slapped each other on the back. I marvel at him now being a staff member and, together with Mikaela, bask in what it means to have poured so much into Vincent.

Mikaela’s house ended up being the site for one of the interviews. (The other sites were a bowling alley, café, and two restaurants.) Because of the depth of trust between all three of us, there were no confidentiality risks. Plus, both Vincent and I felt at home there. And both from the kitchen and the couch, she jumped right into the questions I was asking Vincent. I did not mind. Actually, I was happy about it. I know that her involvement created a different dynamic in the interview for Vincent and me, but it is one that I think furthered the goals of this overall project. Not only has she been one of my mentors and friends, she also has been the same to Vincent. That is a connection that she and he established from their first meeting: when she interviewed him for admission to RMHS while he was still confined to juvenile hall.

Before conducting this research project, the last time I had seen Vincent was two years previous at his college graduation.

Standing under a tree in the spring rain, I witnessed with a smile the pomp and
circumstance of Eastern College’s commencement. Umbrellas were not allowed into the grassy, tree-filled area of campus where the graduation was being held. Eastern provided some ponchos, but many folks were without covering. The rain on my head did not compare to the sun shining in my heart. Vincent Clark was graduating! A momentous achievement for sure – but not just for Vincent. His graduation also honored those who have been part of his journey. Some of those folks were in attendance: his older sister Raquel, nephew Nicholas, cousin Demetrius, and Aunty Contance. Mikaela, a few of Vincent’s other friends, and I also were there to celebrate this triumphant moment.

Notably missing from the family members in attendance – although there in spirit – were Vincent’s maternal grandmother, his biological father, his mother’s boyfriend, Vincent’s three younger brothers, and their mother. Vincent’s mother would have been overjoyed at his college graduation. A high school graduate herself, she went on to study cosmetology. According to Vincent, “…[M]y mom was super intelligent and had a very massive vocabulary.” She had books all around the house, was always reading, and required her children to take school seriously.

V: It was what my mom required: You have to go to school. And school was cool! …[G]irls is at school. These awkward interactions are at school. These dudes who are putting you on blast about something in order to make themselves feel better are at school. All these different social interactions are at school. You know? And I think that's what I also went to school
for - for the social interactions, as well, but the other part, like the classroom, the homework...that was part of it.

Vincent remembers his mom being “constantly in the know.” Not only did that apply to news events, but also she knew everything that he was up to. He trusted his mother and felt like he could talk to her about pretty much anything – a dynamic that she intentionally established.

V: Because my mom was the type of mom who was like, “Vincent, whatever you do, I prefer you do it in my house. Whether you wanna smoke, smoke here. ...Whatev... What do you wanna do, do it here, so I can control... so you ain’t out there doin it. ‘Cause you gon do it either way.”... That’s the thing I loved about my mom. I could talk to my mom about anything. It’s nothing that I did that my mom didn’t know I was doing. Nothing! NOTHING!

There was much for his mother to keep track of considering all the places they moved. Although he graduated from Eastern College, Vincent did most of his schooling and growing up thousands of miles away in California. He reported that his family moved every year, all in a tight radius of neighboring cities.

V: Because it wasn’t just like moving in Black neighborhoods. No it was... We lived in Sylvan Park and Eagle Heights. You know?
Two different places, but primarily Latino. So there, I’m playing soccer every day. You know? And that’s where I first heard *mayate*. *Pinche mayates*. Like, and it’s like what what?!

What does this mean? The people tell me this… He was like, *nigger*, Vincent. Woooo. But I also learned a little bit of Spanish. You know? And like…culture and soccer. I got pretty good feetwork with soccer. Almost as good as my basketball handles. Right? Then you know when I moved to Warmington Downs. That was primarily White folks. You know? Like, middle class, upper middle class. Because of Section 8 and the money that came in from my car accident, we could afford that for a little while. It was like big houses with lawns and backyards at that point.

Vincent’s mother moved her family so often partly because she was trying to keep her children away from violence and gangs. She almost lost her own life and Vincent’s during his first year of life due to a gang bombing her mother’s house. In the middle of the night, his mother rushed him out of the house to safety. The seed of gang life had been planted in Vincent; however, it would lay dormant for many years.

As a child, Vincent became well acquainted with gang life having grown up in a family with a local reputation of being gang involved and having gang members. Gang involvement does not always denote gang membership (Fagan, 1989). Moreover, the membership status of each family member over time is not necessary for this project.
V: …[Y]ou know, some friends they, who sanctified and go to church, they can’t come over to my grandma house. I gotta go to they house because “Vincent live at the gang banger house.” Straight up. Like, that’s how they... like, “Mitchell, you can’t go over there. Vincent live at the gang banger house, so y’all got to stay here and play.”

And even though the family was enmeshed in a gang context, gang life was not embraced by the entire family, and, to some, the importance of school was considered both at odds with and more important than gang life. Vincent put flesh to this importance in a story about being a little boy and watching the reactions of his other little cousins when his older cousin, Kendrick – whose mother died in the gang bombing – brought a gun to school.

V: “Beat him up!” And my cousin Demetrius [Kendrick’s brother] and Uncle Richard was holding him, and we was all just beating him up. You know? And we couldn't hurt him, obviously, but I think it hurt his pride that we...that that was happening. He couldn't stop it. So, again, this message of school is important...was reinforced.

In Vincent’s upbringing, the enculturation of school’s importance and fighting seemed parallel. As a child, Vincent was fighting other little boys in the park at the
behest of his older cousin, Kendrick. That same cousin also taught Vincent to use fighting as a way family members resolve issues. Vincent recalls an episode from when he was 15 years old.

V: Oh, we got a issue? Oh, we solving this... [Kendrick said,] “Oh, you smelling yourself?” You know? He came from [out of state].... He like, “Come in the backyard.” I’m like, “Yeah, let’s go!” [Laughter] Boom! We just...you know? It’s like this area in my grandma backyard... [W]e’re on the concrete top, and I would just take off on my cousin, Kendrick, like “Uh aahn, you ain’t gon take off on me first.” And we was doing it. But he was hitting me with them grown man hits, and I’m like 15, and they was buckling me! I’m like, I ain’t going in like that no more! And then he hit me with one. Boom! I toppled over. And then he was like, “Don’t get up!” And he like hovering over me, so I can’t get up anyway. And then helped me up, and then we went and had some sweet tea. [Laughter] ...My grandma kept some sweet tea in there. Just had some sweet tea and chilled out. So, that kinda like normalized it.

Not only did Vincent’s grandmother sanction fighting, but so did his mother. Vincent described a day when one of his brothers came home after having been beat up. Naturally, Vincent’s mother was displeased. Her next move involved putting Vincent and his bruised brother in the car and probing, “…[W]here do he live?!” When they
arrived, Vincent’s mother went up to the door, “Uh, your son just beat up my son. Tell your son to come outside.” Unfortunately for Vincent’s brother, he got beat up a second time. But this time, because both Vincent and their mother were present, Vincent’s mother demanded that Vincent beat up the once-again victorious boy. “And most of the time, me and the other guy’s always friends. But I gotta beat him anyway ‘cause my mama told me so.”

Being bow-legged and pigeon-toed were reasons others had made fun of Vincent. However, eighth grade was when they became reasons girls started finding him cute. And like many middle schoolers in the U.S., his ego began to swell around that time. That expanded ego also might have made him particularly susceptible to Leon, the friend he met during that time who encouraged the seed of gang life within Vincent to sprout.

The seed flowered into episodes of Vincent fighting rival gang members in school bathrooms as well as maintaining at least a 3.0 GPA and being viewed favorably by his teachers. School life and gang life – at least for a while – coexisted quite harmoniously:

V: And I’m still in class on time, I’m not ditching, no no no, I’m there. But still I had a Mack 10 in my backpack. I still had a ounce of cocaine that I was about to make into some crack, and dish it up among the youngers so they can make they little bit of $25, $50, $100 quota…. Then, I was the freshest, you know, at this point.
Moreover, Vincent was focused on achieving his education dreams while living the gang life.

V: Because you got to understand: Within all of this craziness and madness, I had a vision! ...I had a vision and goals and a path! Like, my idea was I’m gonna go be middle linebacker for the Florida State Seminoles.
E: Really?!
V: Yes!
E: All the way from...
V: ...eighth grade!
E: ...California?!
V: Oh yeah! I’m going to Florida to go to college! And I’ma be done with college by the time I’m twenty—...between 22 and 23.

Vincent’s “vision” and material reality marched in step for a while. He reminisced about playing football in California during his ninth grade year at Sable High and getting moved up to the varsity team by the end of the season. However, the “vision” experienced a major setback.

At Sable High, Vincent witnessed a school security guard choking a fellow student. The student’s sister, who was in distress as she watched her brother not be able to breathe, asked Vincent to intervene. So, Vincent punched the security guard. This quickly led to Vincent being rushed by multiple security guards. But even while being swarmed, Vincent’s concern had subsided because the fellow student could now breathe.
The swarming was easier for Vincent to handle than what came next:

V: But the worst part was explaining to my mama what I had just done. ‘Cause it was... It didn’t seem like a strong rap to me. It still don’t actually. [Laughter] “Vincent, what did you do?” I knocked out the security guard, Mama. “Why?” ‘Cause someone needed my help.

His aid came at a very high cost: expulsion. This uprooted Vincent and set him adrift through a continuation school, another high school, and, eventually, landed him and several gang affiliates face to face with some pretty heavy criminal charges. Vincent was staring down a felony murder rap. Only later did he learn that the weight of the charge was attributed to court-documented testimony of his associates, statements that, according to Vincent, were false. However, in the meantime, he had started wrapping his mind around the idea of life imprisonment.

The meantime turned into over a year of detention, but the character of Vincent’s affiliates’ statements eventually was revealed. “I had stopped talking to them friends. Like, I didn’t want nothing to do with them. Because all they statements was in the ‘scripts....”

Vincent’s anger became elation and that elation ripened into motivation.
Obviously, I can’t distinguish who from who. I don’t trust myself to distinguish that. This is no longer a game or a situation I think I understand or I think I’m in control of. …And it made me so happy that they showed me that’s who they are. Because they had my 100 percent loyalty. Now I’m loyal to me. And in my mind, being loyal to me means now I’m pursuing an education.

While on the inside, Vincent applied to and interviewed with Mikaela for admission to RMHS. He would enroll his desire to be the best – whether the best leader of other young men or the best reader in his elementary reading program – in the service of his education.

Vincent’s renewed focus on education was supported by a one of the jail’s staff members, Pierre, believing in him. Vincent’s and Pierre’s connection was established all of a sudden. One day, Pierre just showed up unannounced in Vincent’s cell. It was 5:30am and Pierre had jerked Vincent from his bed while exclaiming, “Vincent, you’re worth so much more! You can do so much more!” Apparently, hearing those words from Pierre hit home because at that moment Vincent adopted Pierre as his mentor. Vincent finally had a male role model, a man who he respected enough to share his thoughts with in hopes of receiving honest and loving guidance, like, “No, you’re thinking about this wrong.”

Vincent’s respect for Pierre contrasted sharply with the respect he had for his own
father. Vincent reflected on the lack of his father’s presence resulting in susceptibility to
the influences of the streets and eventual incarceration.

V: [T]he time when I needed [him] and I needed to figure out some
things, I found it some other places. And I had to hit my head a
thousand…bunch of times in a bunch of hard ways before I got to
know who Vincent was and like really know who I want to be or who
I should be. (Vincent’s emphasis)

Additionally, regarding the man who his mother had long been in a relationship
with, Vincent also held him in low esteem for being what he considered a dependent
person – dependent on Vincent’s mom, on the family, and on government services –
which was a disposition Vincent considered anathema to the image of independence he
held as a hallmark of manhood.

After the falsehoods were uncovered, the judge on Vincent’s case ordered
Vincent’s release from custody. He went to spend time with one of his brothers, who
gave Vincent a haircut. The day after, Vincent petitioned his gang to disenroll him.
Shifting his loyalties came at a high exit cost. Disenrollment, or being “put off my
hood,” involved being brutally beaten by members of the gang. “Like you wouldn’t’ve
recognize[d] me.” Afterward, he no longer associated with them nor did he share with
them any of his new post-jail contact information. “All of them thought I had died.” The
gang life flower had withered away.
A man in his family who Vincent did respect was his cousin Kendrick – the same cousin who taught him fighting as a tool for resolution. Shortly after leaving behind gang life, Vincent hoped to start anew in a different city. So, he left the state to visit Kendrick, who introduced a fundamental shift in Vincent’s thinking. Kendrick asked Vincent what he wanted for his life. Vincent’s ahead-of-his-time response went something like the following:

V: “Get this high school diploma, and I wanna go and do some good work. I don’t know what that work look like, but...and then I wanna end up in college.”

Listening to Vincent’s goals and looking at Vincent’s outfit – a 4XL T-shirt and blue denim jeans that he was intentionally sagging off his behind – Kendrick told him simply, “You gon have to change up some things.”

Because he was admitted to RMHS, Vincent never went to live with his cousin, Kendrick. When Vincent and the other new students got to RMHS that fall, he was a determined 18-year-old who still had at least two years of high school to complete, and I was a cocky literature and writing instructor. After his six-week new student orientation, he registered for a flash fiction course I was co-teaching. I still remember the dramatic narrative Vincent submitted for the course’s final story project. (Although I had no knowledge of it then, it was clear that the fifth grade competitive reading program Vincent participated in – and won – was paying off). Indeed, he had great ideas,
However, the development of his writing mechanics in his previous schooling had not kept pace with his fecund imagination.

To address his and others’ individual writing needs, each student in the class was instructed to choose a writing coach from among the co-teachers. (There were three of us.) So, Vincent received one-on-one attention to his specific set of writing needs from both his primary writing coach and me as I was serving as both the lead teacher and supervisory writing coach.

At that time in my career, I was an unreasonably demanding writing instructor. However, I did not see my pedagogy as being too demanding. I simply saw myself as being a challenging teacher and a thorough writing coach. Years of reflection have allowed me to see that my pedagogy, which I thought of as full of gusto, was instead lacking in maturity. Luckily, Vincent’s psychic and emotional maturity enabled him to find value in my writing approach.

That maturity also was reflected in his openness to learning something from everyone at RMHS: staff, students, and even the people he did not especially like. In one of our interviews, I asked him about that disposition.

V: So, I’m looking at [a fellow student.] I don’t know if I like how you are carrying yourself in this way that is boastful, it’s

8 In conversations with Vincent prior to starting this portraiture project, he described his preferred process of writing in college as being the process he learned in that flash fiction course. Many thanks to Alan Barstow, the teaching fellow who co-taught with me my first flash fiction course and who helped me to refine the revision and editing approach taught to me by educator and author Herbert Kohl while my academic advisor at the University of San Francisco.
unhumbled, but what I can appreciate about you is your passion.
And everyone gets that critique from me.

I pushed him to talk about where that disposition came from, and he reflected on how the
gang life he thought he understood had shown to him its wavering allegiances. And
closing the gang chapter of his life also meant to him leaving behind the modus operandi
of violence and fear.

E: ...[W]hat is it? Remind me what made you open to everybody
being an influence – a positive influence: either I can learn...

V: Nah I’m gon learn something.

E: I’m gon learn something from you. You know what I mean? How
did you...? Did we cover this?

V: I don’t think so. Cuz I don’t know...I don’t know...I don’t know
if I know the answer. Like I can think about...

E: ‘Cause that’s a pretty major thing to say, I’m not going to
necessarily feel threatened by you, I’m not going to necessarily
feel overshadowed by you, I’m gon learn from you! I’m not going
to necessarily take offense to what you’re doing even if what
you’re doing could be interpreted as...
V: You know what it was? I remember. It was...I’m no longer in the world I knew. And the world I thought I knew, I didn’t know. ... That’s not my world now. My world is positive. My world is building me up, so I can build my brothers up, so I can build other people up.

Vincent’s shift in worldview resonated with my own shift, which began a couple years after we met. Like Vincent, upheaval is what instigated the shift in my disposition. My cockiness as an instructor was but one point in a constellation of issues that I had not addressed during my teaching years – issues that I later realized were hampering my effectiveness as an instructor and hindering my willingness to be a team player. After a few years, my contract to teach at RMHS was not renewed. Not having that teaching job meant not being a houseparent, so I had to move out of the house I was living in on campus. And so began a humbling spiral of material losses. However, that spiral involved additional nonmaterial losses, ones with enduring effect: I lost my arrogance, my need to be judgmental, and my infatuation with control. And those losses left room for vulnerability, connection, and compassion. The modest gains I derived from cockiness have been wildly exceeded by the fruits of vulnerability, connection, and compassion – all of which have informed my approach to this research project.

While Vincent was riding on the corrections bus to juvenile hall, he was thinking about the many stories he heard people in his neighborhoods tell about jail. The ride
gave him time to contemplate the kind of persona he wanted to adopt while inside. He considered being really mean but then thought, “[I]t’s always somebody meaner.” The limited definition of what was cool, what it was okay to be in jail reflected the narrow definition of cool in the California neighborhoods he had lived in – which emphasized “getting girls” and “gang bangin’.” RMHS, however, offered a wider definition of cool.

V: There’s not a present culture at Rocky Mountain High that’s screaming at you to fall in line with it. …At Rocky Mountain High, [cool] was for you to define. …It's so many different types of people here. …This is a place for you.

From my view as an instructor at that time, Vincent was thriving. I had seen him be successful in the classroom, and I saw him successfully navigate RMHS’ social setting, which is crucial considering the school’s social setting comprises students’ social world within and beyond the classroom. Not only was the range of “cool” working for him, it also was evident that Vincent’s family’s multiple moves, which might have been a hardship at those times of packing boxes and lugging furniture around, were now a social toolbox.

V: …[We] moved every year. So, in that exposed me to so many different types of people. So, this is what the Black kids who grew up around all the White kids look like. This is how we
should interact... This is how the Black girl, Latina girl, or the...who live around all...or opposite, the White boy who grew up in the Black neighborhood, the Asian kid, or the Samoans.

Moreover, the moves not only gave Vincent cultural exposure, but also they honed his ability to survive and thrive in new environments. “I think that’s probably one of my biggest assets: my ability to shift my thinking in order to do and to get to where I wanna get and to be.” Even at this place that drew from a national population and that had a wide range of cool, Vincent had become one of the cool kids on campus.

Then came the cold winds of tragedy.

About a year into his time at RMHS, Vincent and Charlie went home to be with their mother in what would be her final days. Although she was mostly unconscious during those days, Vincent read to her, played her some of her favorite music, and stayed by her side. Neither eating nor showering. Vigilant. After nearly a week, she passed. Vincent ran his hand over her face to close her eyes. Because of their relationship, her death was a profound loss and rebirth.

V: Like, I knew no matter how bad I fucked up, I could always go back to my moms. [Laughter] And that was gone, E. And ...you know when...I’m just gone say parents because some people...Because when your parents die and they your support, you know you got to learn how to walk and do and talk and move a different way! You gotta learn how to walk again! Literally, you have to learn everything over because
everything you’ve learned thus far has not been to...I’m not gon say “everything,” but in your unintentionality, what you’ve learned and how you’ve adapted to meet social groupings and environments is not for you to thrive and for you to be better, it was for show. It was so I can get girls, so I can...when I run into these situations, I can fight well. None of it was for the betterment of Vincent so he can be stable at one point. So, that’s what I mean that you gotta learn how to walk again. You have to learn how to talk. You have to learn how to be. It changes everything!

Her passing also meant newfound motivation in pursuit of a high school diploma.

V: But, at this moment, I knew I would never have a home until I got it for myself. You know? You know, that home part is important, but that security that comes with parents... You know? That was the most motivating thing I think trumps everything.

Vincent returned to RMHS and resumed thriving. But he ended up leaving a second time. This time due to suspension. Although he had put behind him the gang life, he still struggled with discerning how to apportion his loyalties. It was hard for him to resist service to what he called the “bro code.” Not only was it hard to resist, he found the “bro code” difficult to define. Even without being articulable, Vincent got suspended for allying himself with a group of young men at RMHS to consciously violate the
school’s code of conduct. This was done beyond the eye of staff, but one student who heard about the manifold violation alerted the administration. Because multiple individuals were involved and in various ways, the administration meted out a range of disciplinary actions, which included Vincent’s suspension.

Suspension from RMHS means being uprooted not only from your education but also your housing. Vincent was again back home. Cool had crumbled into a cold shoulder from his older sister, into embarrassment, into sleeping on the living room floor at his grandmother’s house. A house that was already filled with an assortment of other family members who had no other homes to go to.

Vincent also dreaded going home because it meant facing his cousin, Demetrius, Kendrick’s brother. He looked up to Demetrius as part of the “village” that helped to raise him. Vincent’s mother would call on Demetrius to provide for Vincent when his needs were greater than her means. So, suspension made Vincent concerned that he was squandering an opportunity to advance in ways that Demetrius’ criminal record had held him back from doing. So, even though he was suspended indefinitely, Vincent was continuing pursuit of high school graduation at a local community college. (He still had not let go of his GED aversion, not wanting to put it on his résumé.) And, just like in the earlier days, Demetrius helped him to do so by lending Vincent items like a vehicle to get to school and making sure that the car always had a full tank of gas.

Living out of suitcases, Vincent’s desire to have a house of his own was reinvigorated. Moreover, on top of what he saw as a debt to Demetrius, Vincent now
aspired to set an example for his nephew, Nicholas. Vincent was determined “to be a man my nephew can look up to, and promote in a different way what is cool and what is it okay to be.” Not only is Nicholas precious, he also is the only. Actually, Vincent's brothers have no children, and his sister Raquel has just one: Nicholas.

Wanting to set a positive example for Nicholas is an extension of Vincent’s efforts to set a positive example for his three brothers. Brothers who became motivation for his high school graduation even before their mother passed away. Brothers who he was responsible for waking up on school mornings. Brothers whose clothes he was responsible for ironing at night. Brothers whose homework he was to make sure got completed. He lamented not focusing more on them while instead leading young men in his gang. But he had returned his focus to them after uprooting himself from gang life.

V: I remember, before I wanted a home I wanted to lead by example. So, I guess in thinking about leading, I guess the leading...who I wanted to lead shifted: I went back to my brothers and myself as well. Yeah... Because it was nothing like coming home and seeing my bros. Like, me and my bros...like that's my wolf...that's my pack.

The “pack” experienced moderate success. One brother, Charlie, had joined Vincent as a student at RMHS. (Charlie lived in the house that I houseparented.) Another brother, Lamont, got caught up in the revolving door of the juvenile justice
V: Lee calling me, like, “I’m getting to college like you. Like, I just tutor everybody now. Like, I’m just tutoring everybody, Bro.” I’m like, Yeah that’s right. I’m like, Yeah that’s how you gotta do it.

E: That’s great man.

V: Yeah. Lee shifted. Lee shifted because of my leadership.... Lee was on the path: hardworking, stopped smoking trees, got this job.... You know, yeah Lee was on the journey. He turned. You know? But the thing was his location.

His brothers were reminders of why their mother did not want to raise her children in certain areas of California.

During his suspension, the connection Vincent had with Mikaela, a connection that had been established while Vincent was incarcerated, became even more crucial. Suspension from RMHS had not broken their connection. Actually, it might have intensified it. Mikaela and Vincent talked at least twice a week while he was at home, each telephone conversation lasting for hours. Fearless and skilled at probing sensitive areas of the mind, Mikaela challenged Vincent to think about why he got suspended,
what kind of man he wanted to be, and, more importantly, to think about his thinking – to elevate his metacognition.

V: And up to that point, I hadn't really thought about where that...those notions of what's acceptable, what's not acceptable came from... I hadn't processed it for myself... I didn't know I thought that way. [Laughter] That support made me conscious of how I thought. ...And I think that was the biggest thing. I think once I became conscious of how I thought...Am I intentionally being this way? And if I'm not, if this is not who I want to be, then I need to rethink some things.

Vincent returned to RMHS with a few more months to complete before finally graduating from high school! The graduation ceremony was a precious gathering of Vincent’s family and friends. Sadly, his mother could participate only in spirit. Thankfully, all three brothers attended. And if RMHS had a football program, the remaining two Clark brothers likely would have applied right during the ceremony!

None of the three brothers, however, would attend Eastern College’s commencement with the family and friends. Charlie and Lamont were (and remain) behind bars. And Lee, although not a member of a gang, was killed in an encounter with a gang.

Vincent’s travails and triumphs became a source of wisdom for his return (after
college graduation) to RMHS as an intern. I close the portrait with Vincent’s reflection on a conversation he, as a mental health intern, and a student were having. That interaction sparked for Vincent a moment that was particularly reflective for himself because the African American male student he was talking with – who was sharp, fiery, and athletic – was caught in a clash of cultural and class values between him and the school, a clash similar to how Vincent’s transition to RMHS began.

V: And so I’m talking to [an RMHS student] about [integrity]. And as I’m talking to him, I realize I had to learn these same things... I had to consciously be aware like, “Vincent, that’s not right. In order to get here, this is what these people do. This is... When you’re angry, it’s not fighting! You can’t pop nobody, Vincent! We need to talk to some folks.” Right? “We need to be able to work through this.”... It’s a different culture.
Chapter 5

ANALYSIS

Importance of Relationships

In addition to the betrayal motivating Vincent to return to high school, the
relationships Vincent had with his family, specifically his mother, brothers, nephew, and
cousins were crucial as support and motivation as those relationships undergirded his
belief in the importance of schooling and helped to give meaning to his pursuit of it
(Martin & Dowson, 2009; Cunningham & Swanson, 2009).

That belief in schooling being the thing that would help him in his pursuit of self-
improvement is a neoinstitutional response reflective of the Reconstruction-era shift away
from political involvement to “book-learning” as a main vehicle for Black people's uplift
and advancement (Du Bois & Provenzo, 2005). Vincent pursued schooling to give him
the best chance at having a house of his own rather than becoming more politically active
in hopes of voting in and for people and policies that would advance people's rights to
fair and equitable housing.

Additionally, the support he received from relationships with Pierre and Mikaela
assured him that there were people who cared about his life path and were willing to pour
energy into helping him to direct it (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Pierre coming into his life
as a male mentor was serendipitous. He helped Vincent to channel his desire to be the
best into improving himself. And the support Vincent drew from telephone
conversations with Mikaela while suspended from RMHS was gargantuan in that she helped to facilitate his metacognitive awakening. He started to think about what kind of man he wanted to be.

Even when Vincent was suspended from RMHS, his motivation to graduate from high school did not wane. While temporarily at home, he attended the local community college’s high school program for which he got tremendous material support from his cousin, Demetrius. Also, Vincent received additional support after being released from jail when Demetrius’ brother, Kendrick, admonished change in Vincent’s physical appearance.

Additionally, Vincent considers the support of three factors as integral in his cultural shift at RMHS. One, the many moves between various neighborhoods and cities exposed to him a range of peoples and cultures. Those amounted to a valuable toolkit at RHMS, where students stream in three times a year from a broad spectrum of backgrounds. Two, his “ability to shift my thinking in order to do and to get to where I wanna get and to be.” Vincent could shift his thinking but it would take a while before Mikaela would help him to think about his thinking. Three, the school’s wide definition of cool meant a less competitive environment to navigate. Thus, Vincent had fewer reasons to revert to his previous “purpose” of being “the biggest and baddest.” However, even with his ability to shift and fewer reasons, the transition was an uphill climb for Vincent, who still found a way to rebuild a world wherein his loyalty to other young men in a countercultural endeavor trumped all other priorities.
Double Consciousness

Vincent looked back on the cultural shift required of many students for success at RMHS. The following quote contains a passage that ended the previous chapter; however, below it includes an additional statement at the end that is pertinent to transition.

V: And so I’m talking to him about [integrity]. And as I’m talking to him, I realize I had to learn these same things…. I had to consciously be aware like, “Vincent, that’s not right. In order to get here, this is what these people do. This is… When you’re angry, it’s not fighting! You can’t pop nobody, Vincent! We need to talk to some folks.” Right? “We need to be able to work through this.”… It’s a different culture. Right? And so a lot of ways, I think, for students coming outta the hoods – I don’t care if they coming from Cali or they coming from New York – they gonna have to assimilate…

The struggle to “assimilate” is echoed in Payne & Brown (2010) as they write about “street-life-oriented Black boys” struggling not so much with academic content in school as with the not-so-hidden curriculum of White middle class values embedded within overall school curricula.

That passage sounds like the “integrity” that Vincent is talking to that other
student about is defined by the new culture they are in. That struggle to adopt a new culture, one that involves, for example, resolving issues using communicative rather than pugilist means, hearkens back to the double consciousness W.E.B. Du Bois described over a century ago.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois & Provenzo, 2005, p. 14).

I do not in any way mean to suggest that to be African American is to be pugilist and to be a middle class White American is to be communicative. There is no such dichotomy. Instead, I focused on the transition that Vincent and the other student were addressing in a specific instance highlighting the dual awareness of what self thinks and what mainstream (White) America will think of self.

Vulnerability

In addition to the twoness of double consciousness, the “assimilate” quote suggests a simple element of before-and-after. Like, Vincent used to be pugilist in how
he resolved issues but transitioned into using verbal communication to settle disputes. That before-and-after element is also seen in Vincent's transition in jail. Whereas leading up to the betrayal his “...purpose was to be the biggest and baddest,” because of the betrayal, or what songwriter John P. Kee might call “a valley experience,”9 Vincent embarked on a new path of vulnerability. Researcher and author Brené Brown (2012) defines vulnerability as “…uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (p. 34) and considers it the “…the core, the heart, the center of meaningful human experiences” (p. 12).

The path to vulnerability involved no longer needing to continue reading books from the little jail library about heralded leaders like Malcolm X and Genghis Khan to better understand how to lead young Black men in juvenile hall as he had led young men in the streets. Rather it involved accepting the betrayal and its attendant pain without trying to become a more perfect leader in an attempt to secure greater loyalty from followers. Although perfectionism would have been a reasonable response, Vincent chose otherwise. Maybe he was already familiar with Brené Brown because on the “mythology” of perfectionism she writes, “Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. …Perfectionism is not the key to success” (2012, p. 129). Moreover, she also calls perfectionism a “shield” that can block us from our own vulnerability.

While in jail, the buds of vulnerability showed themselves in his relationship with

9 From Kee’s lead-in to his song “Lily in the Valley” on the 1993 eponymous album: “In this life everybody shall have a valley experience.” Songwriter and singer John P. Kee went from a life dictated by the streets to being a widely acclaimed Black gospel music artist and ordained minister.
one of the jail’s staff members, Pierre, who saw good in Vincent. Vincent and Pierre’s connection was established early one morning and all of a sudden. At 5:30am, Pierre showed up unannounced and jerked Vincent from his bed while exclaiming, “Vincent, you’re worth so much more! You can do so much more!” Apparently, hearing those words from Pierre hit home because at that moment Vincent adopted Pierre as his mentor. Vincent finally had a male role model, a man who he respected enough to share his thoughts with in hopes of receiving honest and loving feedback and guidance.

Vincent’s choice to instead pursue success through education (sans gang life) put him in an environment wherein his vulnerability would bud even more. Because of it, he was able to interpret his conversations with Mikaela as reasons to become more conscious of his actions and, potentially, to make changes in his life.

E: I don't know that we dug into... But you started talking about when you were kicked out of Rocky Mountain High, you were home, Mikaela called you regularly. Maybe not regularly, but she called you...

V: Yeah yeah yeah!

E: ...bunch of times. So, I see that as like a support structure.

V: I agree!
E: Like, I'm trying to support this student toward graduation. Right? Tell me how important, if it was important at...

V: ...that process was for me?

E: Yes.

V: That was super important for me because, you know, Mikaela was giving me things to think. And like although I was struggling through the reasons why I was kicked out, she helped me process that. So a lot of the things I'm thinking about was 1) Why I was kicked out. Right? And Mikaela was just making me think about What does it mean to me a man?

E: What does it mean to be a man?

V: Yes. Well, through our conversations, that's what I started thinking about actually.

E: She didn't ask you that directly?

V: No! That's where I arrived at from our conversations.

Vincent took those conversations to heart as they were helping him to become
“…a man who my nephew can look up to, and promote in a different way what is cool and what is it okay to be.” To “promote in a different way what is cool” means allowing oneself to be “emotionally exposed” because it would mean showing Nicholas something outside of “gettin’ girls” and “gang bangin’” – some of the mainstream images and perceptions of Black men. It meant encouraging Nicholas to do something that Vincent had learned to love as a child: read.

V: ![My nephew... he loves to read. He LOVES to read. Like, me and him when I’m there in California with my sister...like, soon as I get there, he know...he bring me a book and he’s like, This what we reading. You know? We go back and forth: I’ll read this page, he’ll read the next page.](image)

I asked Vincent his thoughts on whether he would have graduated from high school had he not turned away from gang life. He was convinced that there would have been no graduation for him, that either death or jail would have been the inevitable outcome.

V: ![I needed something to shake me to the core... I don’t know if I was ready to let it go. I didn’t ‘til I was wearing the blue and whites – and the off brand Chucks. You know, that’s the get-up in juvenile hall.](image)

Although he did say that he needed something to “shake [him] to the core,” I wondered if Vincent thought jail itself was a good thing for him. Oh, how that would
complicate the portrait! However, his interview responses did not back up the idea of jail being good for him. Jail itself neither stopped nor changed Vincent. Just like he led young Black men in the streets, he was leading young Black men in juvenile hall. He was not attending the educational program that was designed to help students gain a high school credential. No, there are no data nor any previous knowledge I have of Vincent that suggests jail being a good thing for him.

However, although jail itself seemed not to transform Vincent’s life, it is what happened while in jail that instigated a change in him: When Vincent learned that his incarceration was a product of his own gang members’ betrayal, it was that revelation that both unhinged his gang loyalties and allowed him room to reaffiliate himself to his own education pursuit.

Vincent not only was determined to get an education, he was set on getting a high school diploma – not a GED. Considering his unconventional pathway, I asked him if he ever thought of just getting a GED.

   V: And so I knew because of all the places I’ve been exposed to that the GED it carries this negative association with it.

   E: You felt that? Or you knew that?

   V: I knew that! And I felt it, knew it, whatever! I didn’t want a GED!
E: You met people who had GEDs?

V: Yeah! But I’ve heard how people talked about them.... Even then I picked up on that underlining judgment and tone.

It stands to reason that Vincent, who always wanted to be the best and who says his GPA was always 3.0 or better, would desire an education credential with more prestige than the GED. And from an economic standpoint, Vincent had the right idea by aiming for a high school diploma because GED holders fare more like high school dropouts than graduates (Ewert, Sykes, & Pettit, 2014). Moreover, Vincent’s attraction to a diploma (and to college) was in step with a cultural value of education he found in the communities he navigated through.

V: Whether they’re just saying it out loud...it’s cool to say you want to be educated and you want to go to college.... Even in these communities.... “I want to go to college.” You know? It’s the natural...It’s the default response for a lot of people.

Gangs and Schools

Youth most commonly join gangs for the following reasons (ranked in order of reported importance): protection, fun, respect, money, and/or because a friend is in the gang (Howell, 2010). Also, a young person might join a gang if a family member is already in a gang (Curry, Decker, and Egley, 2002). Well, between Vincent’s friend,
Leon, and his own gang entanglement, the likelihood of Vincent joining a gang was pretty high.

Right before Vincent became a gang member, gang activity in some major U.S. cities was held responsible for over a quarter of all homicides and assaults (Decker, 2002; Vincent grew up in the outer reaches of a major California city.) This period led into a backlash not only against gangs, but also those who were considered to look gang-like. It is during that backlash when Vincent started down the path to gang life.

In the 1990s, the most relied upon yet least fruitful response to gang activity was suppression (Decker, 2002). Education was found to be a more effective response (Decker, 2002), thus scholars are calling for more schools to be active participants in resolution efforts (Gebo & Sullivan, 2014). However, education was not the thing that pulled Vincent out of gang life. For one, it is not clear from the interview data that school competed with gang life: He maintained at least a 3.0 GPA and his teachers loved him even though he also was resolving confrontations with rival gang members in school bathrooms. Loyalty to the gang and loyalty to school were parallel – not diametrically opposed.

V: And I’m still in class on time, I’m not ditching, no no no, I’m there. But still I had a Mack 10 in my backpack. I still had a ounce of cocaine that I was about to make into some crack, and dish it up among the youngers so they can make they little bit of $25, $50, $100 quota...
See, for Vincent, even though gang life and school ran parallel, loyalty superseded (and undergirded) them both. In order for schooling to become more important than the gang, the issue of loyalty needed to first be addressed. Only after Vincent received information concerning the betrayal of his gang affiliates did he shift his loyalty away from them and to himself.

**War on Drugs**

The contents of Vincent’s backpack might have made his life very different had Sable High been targeted at that time by one of the undercover drug operations of the Los Angeles Police Department (Lait, 1999). Not long before Vincent started high school, LAPD officers had gone undercover as high school students to purchase drugs from and make arrests of drug dealers in schools. The officers, who teachers had no knowledge of, went to class – even did some of the homework – and ended up making a bevy of arrests (Lait, 1999). Because of the War on Drugs, had Vincent been caught up in one of those operations, he could have been in jail for longer than the fourteen months he spent inside.

The War on Drugs’ disparate sentencing has caused much outrage over the last few decades. Many people considered the disparities as racially targeted because possession of crack, a drug popularly associated with poor urban Black folks, was being more heavily penalized than that of powder cocaine, a drug popularly associated with White folks with money. For example, if that ounce of cocaine – which is roughly 10
grams – Vincent talked about having in his backpack would have been crack cocaine instead of powder cocaine, he would have been looking at no less than a five-year sentence (Provine, 2011). To rise to that same level of mandatory minimum sentence with possession of powder cocaine, he would have needed 50 times the amount he was carrying (Provine, 2011).

The numbers told a cold truth – and in the ‘90s so did John Ehrlichman, one of Watergate ringleaders and former aide to President Richard Nixon (Baum, 2016). In 1994, Ehrlichman admitted to Dan Baum the chilling underpinnings of the War on Drugs:

“You want to know what this was really all about?” he asked with the bluntness of a man who, after public disgrace and a stretch in federal prison, had little left to protect. “The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black[s], but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did” (Baum, 2016, p. 1).

That demonization of Black people, the kind that has spewed forth from the highest levels of executive power in this country, is what this portrait is intended to
counter. And I think the narrative that is marked both by Thomas Jefferson’s “suspicion” – “Comparing them [to Whites] by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid (p. 110)…. I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind” (Merchant, 1993, p. 111-12) – and by Ehrlichman’s admission has a hegemonic power that informs what Bourdieu might call our habitus (Shields, 2004), or in this case the stories about Black people that we continue to believe and operate from. Daniel Quinn, in his critical novel, Ishmael, reminds us of how we are constructed by stories and helps me to justify the present need for both critical race theory and portraiture.

There's nothing fundamentally wrong with people. Given a story to enact that puts them in accord with the world, they will live in accord with the world. But given a story to enact that puts them at odds with the world, as yours does, they will live at odds with the world. Given a story to enact in which they are the lords of the world, they will ACT like lords of the world. And, given a story to enact in which the world is a foe to be conquered, they will conquer it like a foe, and one day, inevitably, their foe will lie bleeding to death at their feet, as the world is now (Quinn, 1995).
I agree with Quinn (1995) in that there is “nothing fundamentally wrong with
people.” This dissertation is not in any way intended as blame or an attack on White
people for, specifically, the decisions made by Ehrlichman, Nixon, and their ilk or,
generally, the delusions about Black people held by people White or otherwise. From
Thomas Jefferson’s denigrating words about Africans in America to Ehrlichman’s
admission of guilt in White House-sanctioned demonization of Black people, there is a
cumulative narrative about African Americans that without relent arguably has motivated
and justified the dehumanization of Black people. And although I believe that folks like
Officers Darren Wilson and Timothy Loehmann are nonetheless responsible for the
deaths of Michael Brown and Tamir Rice, neither can we discount the role of that
cumulative narrative in allowing those triggers to be pulled.

I think this adds credence to a view held by poet and essayist Audre Lorde
regarding how people in the U.S. relate across differences.

…[W]e have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between
us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways:
ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it
if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our
human differences as equals (1984, p. 115).
It is widely known that the American imagination has been negatively affected by, for example, textbook writers’ past choices to “ignore” the contributions of Black folks, among others, to the evolution of the U.S. It is those omissions that led Dr. Carter G. Woodson, a social studies teacher, to establish Negro History Week. It is also not hidden knowledge that because of being often perceived as dominant, music of Black musicians has been on more than one occasion throughout the timeline of American history exploited by those who chose to “copy” and market it to White audiences. Moreover, I think it is impossible to not have witnessed the widespread and longstanding choices to “destroy” Black people both in body and name (e.g., the War on Drugs). And it is that multifaceted objectification of Black people that is part of my inspiration to create this portrait.

**Fighting**

Even though Vincent did not have a history of school behavioral issues, still some readers may agree with the choice to expel Vincent for punching a Sable High school resource officer (SRO) who was choking a student. Whether you agree or disagree with that leadership decision, fighting, be it in the streets or in school, presents a complex issue. Long-time educator and author Herb Kohl, in his reflective volume, *Stupidity and Tears* (2003), comments on how the act of fighting resists simple categorization.

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10 He chose the week in February that included the birthdays of two leaders, Frederick Douglas and President Abraham Lincoln, whose work he considered seminal to the progress of Black people in the U.S. The week was later expanded to a month.
[I]f everyone in the class always fought back when challenged, things would end in chaos. I was as frustrated as [the student teacher] was, and we responded by developing a curriculum on nonviolent self-defense. We didn’t want to sanction fighting, but accepted the premise that self-defense was a necessary survival skill on the streets and sometimes in the classroom. We’re still working on the problem (p. 43).

Vincent’s intervention in the altercation could be seen as a version of self-defense – maybe self-defense by proxy (Vincent being the proxy). To me, the episode harkens to the 2014 death by choking of Eric Garner by members of the New York Police Department (NYPD). Although Eric Garner was much older and not assaulted in a school, there are glaring similarities to Vincent’s case. His fellow student was being choked by a security officer. Eric Garner was choked by NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo11. Both the student and Garner were reported as not being able to breathe. The situations are different in that Vincent’s fellow student survived the encounter.

The death of Eric Garner leaves me wondering if Vincent’s fellow student would have survived without intervention and, thus, casts a light of heroism on Vincent’s defense. Now, I am not suggesting that people should assault police officers on the street or working in schools. However, Vincent’s fellow student survived the encounter.

11 Although Pantaleo was the principal assailant, Officers Justin Damilo, Mark Ramos, and Craig Furlani participated in the assault.
because of intervention, and Eric Garner might still be alive had someone – preferably a fellow police officer but even a civilian bystander – physically intervened on his behalf.\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to the attack by Daniel Pantaleo and company, I cannot help but think about SRO Ben Fields at Spring Valley High School in South Carolina versus the student he was caught on video physically maltreating. The 2015 story and video went viral. What are students to do when the person tasked with keeping them safe is the one jeopardizing their safety and wellbeing? Should students simply take whatever discretionary actions are meted out by SROs? That has been costly. Students at Spring Valley High School know that. Also, students at Coronado High in Colorado Springs, Colorado learned that hard lesson in 2014 as they watched an SRO take what looks frighteningly like a punch at a [Black] student to break up a fight (KRDO, 2014). Students at Rhodes Middle School in San Antonio, Texas learned that same lesson in April 2016 while witnessing an SRO body slam a [Latina] girl presumably to prevent a fight from starting (Baucom, 2016). Or should students fight back or intervene on another student’s behalf? Risky. The reactionary swarm of security officers on Vincent could have resulted in another life-threatening altercation. And in a country where Black and White youth are expelled (and suspended or arrested at school) at unequal rates for the same acts (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010), the options for a Black student like Vincent come at higher risk of penalty.

The ethical issues herein are crucial.

\textsuperscript{12} In the Eric Garner fiasco, although his friend Ramsey Orta did not physically intervene, he did video the assault. It went viral – and, similar to Vincent’s expulsion, led to Orta’s arrest. See Sanburn (2014).
My calling Vincent’s intervention heroic is just as much a statement about the school resource officer’s actions as Vincent’s. When I look at the school resource officer’s actions from the perspective of Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2014) ethic of the profession in educational leadership, which has at its heart the “best interests of the student” (p. 25), I question why he would choke a student. Obviously, that is not in the best interest of any student. But then I am immediately reminded that SROs usually come from another profession, do not necessarily have education training, and although work in a school, are more likely accountable to a law enforcement agency rather than a local school board (Brown, 2006; Wald & Thurau, 2010). So, the SRO’s primary concern in that altercation might have been something other than the student’s education journey (Brown, 2006). That is deeply troubling 1) because the safety of both students was put at great risk – the fellow student by being choked and Vincent by the subsequent swarm of officers – and 2) because Vincent’s education trajectory took a huge hit. And all of this stemmed from the actions of someone who worked in but likely not for the school?

To short-circuit the chain of events stemming from expulsion, suspension, or in-school arrest, some schools have turned to the use of restorative justice. Whereas punitive systems of discipline, sometimes fashioned as zero tolerance policies resulting in racially disproportionate suspensions and expulsions, can heighten the risk of students entering the legal system, put distance between students and their school community, and maybe even lead to students dropping out, restorative justice focuses on the cultivation of
positive relationships between students and their school community (Gonzales, 2012).

According to Gonzalez (2012),

Within the school context, restorative justice is broadly defined as an approach to discipline that engages all parties in a balanced practice that brings together all people impacted by an issue or behavior. It allows students, teachers, families, schools, and communities to resolve conflict, promote academic achievement, and address school safety. Restorative justice practice in schools is often seen as building on existing relationships and complementary with other non-discipline practices, such as peer mediation or youth courts (p. 281).

Restorative justice, founded on “...repairing the harm, stakeholder involvement, and transforming the community relationship” (Gonzales, 2012, p. 299), brings to the center a marginalized yet completely viable alternative whose principals are harmonious with that of public schools, represents a counter-story of sorts to conventional punitive discipline in schools.

Moreover, restorative justice is about “...accountability, restitution, and restoration of a community” (Gonzales, 2012, p. 300), most of which seemed lacking in the administrative response to the episode between Vincent, Vincent's fellow student, and the SRO. Yes, Vincent was held accountable for his actions; however, considering what seems an egregious breach of trust (i.e., choking a student), it seems that both restitution
to the victimized student and restoring community should have been of paramount importance. Instead, Vincent's expulsion forecloses the possibility of repairing the harm by removing one of the stakeholders and sets Vincent on an education path of increased risk and bleak opportunity (Gonzales, 2012). Plus, additional accountability issues remain regarding the SRO.

The restorative justice counter-story as it specifically relates to Vincent's situation might have included Vincent remaining at Sable High, which might have made him more likely to realize his “vision.” He was doing well academically at Sable High and excelling on the football field. Ending up at RMHS, although fortunate for Vincent in certain ways, meant giving up on the athletic part of his “vision” because RMHS did not (and still does not) have a football program. Additionally, a restorative justice response also might have opened the door for conversation about whether the presence of an SRO was actually making the school safer.

**Recommendations**

I conclude this dissertation with my recommendations for policy and future research followed by Vincent’s advice to youth and their families/caregivers. First, regarding policy, I look forward to the day when restorative justice programs are as common as the punitive systems we are so familiar in schools with today. Second, on policy, the cost of the status quo school regarding SROs is too high. I recommend either school boards and law enforcement agencies team up to credential SROs just like other
educators or relieve those officers from their duties in schools.

Third, regarding future research, I believe U.S. society could use more narratives about young people from groups that have been maligned by a misinformed yet hegemonic master narrative. More portraits of African American youth – especially those from urban or rural areas – as well as portraits of American Indian and Latino youth. The malignance of the narrative characterizing some minoritized populations is reflected in abysmal state-level graduation rate data. For example, South Dakota’s graduation rates for Blacks and American Indians are 39% and 30%, respectively—and only 20% for Latinos (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010). Moreover, in Oregon, the graduation rate for Blacks and American Indians is 44% and 43%, respectively (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010). The story is similar in other states – and has been for many years. In 2001, the high school graduation rate in the state of New York for Blacks and Hispanics was 35% and 32%, respectively—in Nevada, 41% and 38%, respectively (Orfield et al., 2004). And looking closer to University Park, the graduation rate in 2001 in Pennsylvania was 81% for Whites (among the highest nationally) – but only 25% for American Indians (Orfield et al., 2004). Pennsylvania rates for Blacks and Latinos in 2001 were 46% and 41%, respectively. Additionally, especially with the discourse on religion becoming more inflamed in this millennium, I think U.S. society could benefit from portraits on Muslim youth.

Fourth, Vincent’s advice to young people is that they talk to their parents and caregivers – the folks that they live with. I second that. Payne & Brown (2009) – and
probably many parents and caregivers – back up that advice.

V: ...[T]he knowledge, and I think the people who care about you the most, who have the best intentions for you and want the best for you, they live with you. In my experience, they lived with me. I'll say that. So, find the answers at home that you're looking for. Open the conversation. And that's what I think I would tell younger Vincent.

Fifth, his advice to the youth is closely related to a second recommendation: Parents and caregivers should create a space within which your young people feel comfortable talking with you.

V: ...I think I would ask those families to figure out their self-worth, so they can...so their child can understand what their self-worth is. And embody that in everything they do everyday. But more than anything, I think it's so important for folks to understand socialization. Straight up: what it means, how it works, so they can understand everything they do - whether intentionally or unintentionally - it plays a role in who that young person will become. Right? And I think that's so important. Right? Environment. Job. What they see everyday. What are you doing around them? What are you allowing? ...Let them know you love them.
Appendix

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Which high schools have you attended?
2. Where are they located?
3. When were you initially incarcerated?
4. How old were you?
5. What reason for your incarceration were you given by law enforcement?
6. In which facility or facilities were you incarcerated?
7. Were you convicted?
8. When were you released?
9. In what way(s) were you recruited to Eagle Rock School?
10. When were you recruited?
11. Before you were recruited, how much high school had you completed?
12. Were you intending to return to your original high school?
13. Were you intending to return to a different high school in California?
14. What, if any, schooling options were presented to you while incarcerated?
15. Why did you (not) get a GED?
16. Please describe to what extent, if any, you were aware of options to return to a high school in your home area.
17. Please describe what motivated you to return to high school.
18. Please describe what motivated you to attend a nontraditional residential school?
19. Please describe the misgivings, if any, you had while considering attending Eagle Rock School.

20. Please describe the support you received to transition from incarceration to Eagle Rock School.
References


Brown, B. (2012). Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead. New York: Gotham.


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