

## Creating a Caring Classroom in which to Teach Difficult Histories

Maia G. Sheppard

*University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*

WHEN I TAUGHT high school history, I was often struck by the depth and breadth of suffering I asked students to consider while in my classroom. Student reactions to traumatic historical events, such as slavery, genocide, and war, were rarely what I expected: some students were saddened, others ambivalent, and still others failed to acknowledge the suffering at all. Like all of us, my students had their own personal encounters with difficulty and suffering. Yet because many of my students were refugees and immigrants, who were uprooted from homes and families due to political and economic circumstances beyond their control, their encounters with suffering often mirrored the difficult events studied in my classroom. Bringing student experiences into the classroom often led discussions in unanticipated directions, and while I aimed to create a classroom where students felt empowered to share their experiences, to use their voices to make sense of the past and their own lives, this was not an easy task. At the end of a lesson, I often wondered how the personal connections my students made with the topics of war, migration, and oppression affected their understanding of history.

This paper reports findings from a study that explored the classroom culture that developed in a university history classroom when the professor's pedagogical decisions encouraged students to make personal connections with difficult issues, events, and ideas in history and their own lives. I describe how this experienced teacher attempted to create a classroom

where students from diverse national, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds could challenge their assumptions about Africa by learning about and from contested and traumatic historical events. While it is increasingly common for teachers to work with diverse groups of students in P-12 and post-secondary institutions, understanding how such diversity is being embraced or marginalized within the day-to-day teaching and learning in academic institutions remains uneven and often unexplored. This research examines what happens when an educator approaches the diversity of her students as an opportunity for deep and meaningful learning about contested and traumatic historical events. How does the teacher create a place where students are willing to share and question their own experiences, values, and images of self and other through the study of African history? What type of classroom culture develops when a group of nationally, linguistically, ethnically, and generationally diverse students is encouraged to engage in this deeply personal and private work in the public space of a classroom?

The large public university where this research took place is located in a Midwestern urban setting that has a significant and growing African immigrant and refugee population.<sup>1</sup> Over the past decade, more than half the total population growth in the state has occurred among Asian, Native American, Hispanic, and black populations, including a substantial Somali refugee population.<sup>2</sup> According to school records, of the approximately 30,000 undergraduate students attending the university, seventy-nine percent are white. Looking to theorists who grapple with issues of globalization and try to make sense of how the increased mobility of the world's people is affecting local communities can provide some theoretical frameworks in which to conceptualize approaches to teaching in increasingly diverse educational settings. In response to many discussions about globalization, historian Arif Dirlik theorizes that the complex relationship between the local and the global along with the similar concepts of place and space reveal the porous boundaries of places and of the need for the local to realize its power and to define itself through a place-based consciousness. The "struggle for place in the concrete is a struggle against the power and hegemony of abstractions."<sup>3</sup> In opposition to the concept of the local, of place, is the concept of space: "space is product, the geographical equivalent of the commodity; place, on the other hand, is product *and* work, with the uniqueness of the work of the craft or the artisan."<sup>4</sup> In the classroom, the porous boundaries between the concrete and the abstract, between the local and the global, can often be found in the experiences of students, in their ability to make sense of history by connecting with the experiences of geographical and temporal others. The teacher can make the history classroom a place where learning is meaningful by giving attention

to the particularities of the local (the lived experiences of individuals) so that a stronger relationship with the more abstract global (historical events and ideas) can be built.

This ethnographic research into the culture that is created through the teaching of contested and traumatic histories examines the place of the classroom and the work of a teacher who brings the multiple and divergent voices of students and experts to the study of Africa. It is an exploration into how one teacher's pedagogical choices create a place where the local and the global, the abstract and the particular, are in constant communication as students are encouraged to construct new images and understandings about each other and the history of Africa.

### **The Study**

This ethnographic study of an undergraduate-level university history class began with a desire to better understand how a teacher creates a classroom environment where both academic and emotional aspects of traumatic histories are acknowledged and valued. This research does not focus on what and how much content about Africa students acquire through this approach to teaching. Rather, an ethnographic approach is used to improve understanding of how the classroom becomes a place where learning about contested and traumatic events in history becomes meaningful to a diverse group of students.

A semester before this research took place, I attended a local conference on teaching about genocide and the Holocaust where Professor Ann Lake<sup>5</sup> presented a paper discussing her experiences teaching about genocide and African conflicts at the university. Professor Lake was an Assistant Professor of History with affiliations in the African and African American Studies, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and Human Rights programs at the university; she is a specialist in East African history, Great Lakes Africa, colonialism, and oral history. The descriptions she presented of her classroom, of students confronting traumatic events—historical as well as personal—and of the reflective, pedagogical questions she asked about how to help students cope with emotional issues related to studying history immediately resonated with my own experiences as a teacher and interests as a doctoral student in social studies education. A couple of months later, I approached her with a request to observe her classroom in order to better understand the issues she addressed in her paper. She was very willing to provide a place for me to learn and to explore these issues related to teaching history.

Throughout the course of the spring semester, I observed three-fourths of the scheduled class meetings, communicated with the professor via

e-mail, held informal discussions, and conducted two semi-structured interviews that primarily inquired into her pedagogical purposes and decisions. Further data was collected through informal conversations with students before, during, and after class on a regular basis and semi-structured interviews with three students towards the end of the semester. The purpose of these interviews was to develop an understanding of a variety of perspectives about what was happening in the class. I purposely spoke with students from different nationalities, genders, and age groupings in order to get a range of experiences. This is an ethnographic case study primarily because I maintained an ethnographic “way of seeing” throughout data collection and analysis.<sup>6</sup> This entailed focusing on the role of culture, consistently observing how people behave, and trying to discern the meanings—shared or not—behind the patterns of behavior. Through thick descriptions of events, people, and conversations, a more transparent image of the classroom culture emerges.<sup>7</sup>

The official title of the course I observed in the spring of 2007 was “Historical Background to Current African Conflicts: Case Studies” and was taught by Professor Lake. The course syllabus stated that the semester would be spent examining nations where significant conflicts were either currently taking place or were in the process of resolution, such as Kenya, Liberia, and Sudan. The class met in a mid-sized classroom with room for approximately seventy students. The modern-looking tables and chairs in this room were arranged in a U-shape on three ascending levels, all facing the front of the room where there was a large, institutional desk and a long blackboard. The room was regularly crowded with students, their bulky jackets, and bulging book bags. The design of the room allowed each student to see the faces of most people in the class. It was by far the most diverse classroom I had been a part of in my years as a graduate student at the university. When Professor Lake would take attendance, she called out an amazingly diverse list of names. Through class discussions and conversations with students, I learned that people taking the class came from many countries, including Liberia, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, France, Japan, and the United States. While almost 80% of the general student body at the university was white, just fewer than half the students in this particular class were white. Some students were in their early twenties, others in their thirties and forties. Some had international careers in politics and conflict resolution, others had yet to travel outside U.S. borders. Students studied graphic arts, computer science, ceramics, Latin American history, Afro Studies—the list went on. It was precisely such diversity that one young woman I interviewed sought out when requesting permission to join the class after the start of the semester. Like many in the class, she had no background or personal connection to Africa.

While she claimed an ardent dislike of history classes in high school, she was drawn to this course by its reputation for open discussion and her desire to better understand Africa.

When Professor Lake taught, her voice was quiet and her tone vacillated between playful and sadly serious. From surface appearances, she could easily be categorized as an anxious academic, yet her openness to sharing personal experiences, such as documenting acts of genocide in Rwanda, quickly convinced me that this young-looking, professionally yet simply dressed white woman must have enormous personal strength and a highly developed capacity to express this strength in volatile situations.

Professor Lake came to work at this particular university because of the large African population in the metropolitan area. She created the course specifically for the students at this university and believed that the institution provided a unique opportunity for an international group of students to come together and challenge their own thinking about themselves, where they come from, and what is possible in the world. Professor Lake described her teaching as a form of activism: "I used to work for the UN in Rwanda and I saw the way history was taught, how it supported genocidal behavior. I want students to question what they learn, to be critical." She admitted she had never wanted to be a teacher and had never taken an education class. But recently, teaching has become her response to the violence she has experienced. Her goal for the course was to create a learning experience that would provide her students with the knowledge and skills to act in their own unique and positive ways to affect their worlds.

### **A Caring Context**

My initial research questions centered on the relationship between official historical knowledge and personal experience, and how the public place of the classroom could be molded to allow for sharing more private experiences with violence and conflict. Early observations in the classroom revealed that not only was the professor sharing her experiences and emotions about conflict-ravaged communities, but so were the students. As the weeks went by, I began to realize that these initial questions about historical knowledge and personal experience only scratched the surface of what I was observing in the classroom and what students were saying about the class. The questions being asked and discussed in class were about Africa, about history, about conflicts, but there was something bigger going on. One young woman I spoke with helped me understand this feeling when she described the class as being about "what it means to be human." I checked the syllabus to see if there was some hint that what this young woman and I were encountering in the classroom was

an articulated goal, but it was not. The stated objectives of the course centered on students being able to ask intelligent questions, see patterns in events, think historically about current events, and question images of Africa in the media. I realized something was happening in the classroom that transcended the subject matter and the general teaching methods of lecture, viewing films, and discussion.

Professor Lake was somehow able to use the study of traumatic histories to create a place where questions of morality and humanity were both personally and publicly explored in much greater depth. Her classroom reflected Nel Noddings' ethic of care, an ethics rooted in feminism that emphasizes "living together, ... creating, maintaining, and enhancing positive relations— not just on decision making in moments of high moral conflict."<sup>78</sup> What was Professor Lake doing that invoked this ethic of caring in her classroom? As a graduate student studying social studies education, it was difficult to find examples of theory and practice speaking to each other in meaningful ways. Yet, somehow in the college classroom of a history professor that confessed to never having taken an education class, I found Noddings' theory about an ethic of caring speaking to me. In the following section, I describe and analyze Professor Lake's practice to better understand how she went about creating a caring classroom.

### Sharing Experiences

The concept of *experience* is central to Noddings' ethic of caring: "A relational ethic remains tightly tied to experience because all its deliberations focus on the human beings involved in the situation under consideration and their relations to each other."<sup>79</sup> One way that Professor Lake established an ethic of caring in her classroom was through her focus on lived experiences. She resisted an abstract, impersonal understanding of history in multiple ways: by sharing her own experiences, bringing in guest speakers, showing documentary films, inviting students to discuss their opinions and experiences, and in continually asking students to think about the experiences of the people involved in the places and conflicts being studied.

One class session about Kenyan history in early February exemplified how consistently Professor Lake asked the class to look at their own experiences, to question them, and analyze them in relation to the experiences of others, especially people involved in the conflicts being studied. Professor Lake began that day's class by addressing student questions related to an upcoming paper: "People are struggling with Kenyan history. What is Mau Mau? Who is Mau Mau? You are right to struggle with these questions. *Kenyans themselves are struggling with these questions.*" This desire to

make sense of history, to understand the present in light of the past, was at the center of the students' experience in the class, and Professor Lake made clear that these issues were not just an academic exercise; Kenyans' were also living with these questions in their daily lives. She continued discussing why she wanted students to read the required text about Kenya, *Imperial Reckoning*: "I wanted you to have a *feeling* about what 'divide and rule' means. How it is ripping apart. I want you have this understanding because most westerners 'get it' but they don't *feel* it."

At this point, her lecture transitioned smoothly from a focus on people's feelings about living under imperialism to the politics of creating a national history and how these national histories are constructed and manipulated. She used examples from American history, talking about the image of the American work ethic as embodied in the experiences of people such as Abraham Lincoln and manipulated more recently in presidential politics by Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, to connect the American students' experiences with their national history to the Kenyan context. Her discussion about plaid shirts, clearing brush, and Presidents trying to be "a man of the people" prodded students to see how average people come into contact with the national history in their day-to-day lives as well as how history can be a tool that shapes the experiences and identities of Americans, Kenyans, and people everywhere.

Professor Lake then brought in her own experience of researching and writing a history of Burundi from the perspective of one particular ethnic group in the country, a group whose history did not reflect the commonly accepted national story. She described the outrage and anger with which her work was received by the elite in Burundi, who "accused me of trying to create disunity and confusion." As she talked about this, she was not upset about how her work was disputed, but rather turned it back to the students and asked, "How would you feel if an outsider came and tried to rewrite your history?"

In the space of about twenty-five minutes, in her quiet yet confident voice, Professor Lake was able to connect her students' experience of studying Kenya to Kenyans' experiences of living with their national history, then to their experiences with American history, and finally to her own experience of researching and writing history in Burundi. Throughout this episode, and throughout the class, she asked students to think deeply about the experiences of the people involved in the topic of study. She also pushed students to consider the people and processes involved in the production of histories. Her short lecture ended with the arrival of the Kenyan guest speaker who came to talk about growing up during the struggle for independence, yet another way that she invited students to experience what they were studying in a more relational manner.

Professor Lake paid attention to the ideas presented in class and to how students were affected by what was examined and discussed in class. In March, when the topic of study was the recent civil war in Liberia and its complicated history, Professor Lake showed two videos from *Nightline* (an American news and commentary television series) to provide a vivid visual documentation of people's experiences during the conflict as well as to focus students' attention on how Liberians were portrayed in the American media. I have very few field notes from that class; during the videos I wrote, "There is a lot of violence in the videos—showing torture and dead bodies ... I had to close my eyes at points." One scene from the second *Nightline* is still clear in my memory: a man has been captured by the rebels, they are near the coast, and a fishing boat sits in the background. The rebels want the man to confess something, his hands are tied behind his back, and he is on his knees when they put a grenade in his mouth. It was a horrible, traumatic scene. When the film finished with only a few minutes left of class, Professor Lake opened the discussion by asking for student reactions to how the media portrayed Liberians. A heated, uncomfortable argument (which was cut short as class ended) about the role of the media in creating and showing such images broke out between two articulate women. The tension in the class was high as students filed out of the room.

Two days later, during the next class meeting, Professor Lake began by talking quietly, almost remorsefully about the videos: "Watching violence causes violence. I know this and I was not appropriate in presenting the films. I did not prepare you for what you were going to see." The room had the quiet feel of focused interest; no one was texting, reading the campus paper, or even writing notes as Professor Lake began to share some of her own experiences with violence while working as a human rights monitor in Rwanda: "I have been witness to people being beaten, I have walked over corpses, had a gun pointed at me. It changes you ... I didn't help you decompress after you watched the violence; I did not help us deal with what we saw. You have feelings about what you see—we can't just have an academic conversation about it. I should have handled it differently." She then invited students to come to her office if they want to talk about what happened in class or what they are learning about. A student raised her hand to comment that she wanted Professor Lake to continue showing such videos because she wanted to put a face on the horror she was learning about. Professor Lake replied, "You are right, it is important to see and I will continue to show these types of videos, but I need to be more sensitive." Professor Lake spoke for a bit more about the role of the media before turning the class over to two Liberian students who lectured and led a discussion about their understanding and experiences with conflict. Professor Lake was trying to make sense of how different pedagogy and



content affect different people. Considering the diverse groups of students in her class, some who have experienced such violence, others who had no idea about it, she was trying to figure out how to make it real for some, and to process what was real for others.

Again, here we see Professor Lake making pedagogical decisions to construct a place where historical conflict is not an abstract concept to be examined and analyzed as an academic exercise, but a personal and emotional encounter with the lived experiences of others. Professor Lake reflects Noddings' description of a caring teacher as "one who is concerned with behaving ethically strives always to preserve or convert a given relation into a caring relation."<sup>10</sup> She is deliberate in how she constructs the relationship students have with history. In the example of studying Liberia, she asked all the students to read academic texts, watch graphic depictions of the war, and think critically about how these images were created and used in America, and then asked students who experienced the conflict to be the voices who presented the history. Along the way, she drew attention to, acknowledged, and respected the power of emotions and feelings in this process of learning the past.

Throughout the semester, there were days of lecture, of overhead maps, and dates and names listed on the blackboard, and while learning these were important, they were not the purpose of the class. There was not one test or quiz, only reflection papers and essays that required students to engage with the history—to respond to arguments presented in books or films or create their own arguments that could be supported by the books, films, and lectures. Professor Lake was not putting history in a neat package for students to consume. She was not asking students to blindly follow her lead (her mantra was "question everything I say"), but rather she was asking them to engage in the complexity of history, to resist the desire to simplify.

### **Creating a Space for Caring Relationships**

Creating a university history class culture rooted in care is a transgression; to engage in creating such a place is to challenge the expected and accepted professor-centered, lecture-based history class that is the common experience in universities. The complex layers of diversity that defined the student body in this classroom complicated creating an alternative, safe, and somehow shared "culture." As this group of students came together twice a week for two and half hours over the course of one semester, I questioned what common culture could develop in this crowded space of linguistic, national, disciplinary, generational, and educational diversity. Could this context become a place where public, shared meanings develop?

Having taught the class before, Professor Lake was deliberate in her ap-

proach to constructing a learning environment where relationships among students and between students and knowledge could be built. She had taken care to find an appropriate physical space: the first class sessions met in a room where the desks were in rows and faced forward, so she petitioned for a room change that would enable more authentic discussion, allowing for students to look at each other while speaking. Professor Lake had also been actively involved in determining the population of the class. She spoke of problems she faced cross-listing the course in the History and Afro-Studies departments and how she worked to ensure the listing appeared on both web registration sites. One student shared with me about how she gained admission to the class beyond the registration deadline by seeking out Professor Lake and convincing her that she would be a good addition to the class because of her interest in social justice issues. Another student spoke with me about how Professor Lake asked him to be in the class even though it was not a part of his required program. She wanted his voice to be heard in the class, she wanted his experiences working throughout Africa and his own studies in African history to be heard in the class.

Through face-to-face discussions and via e-mail correspondence, Professor Lake built and maintained thoughtful relationships with her students. These relationships with students were crucial to Professor Lake's ability to shape the tone and direction of class discussions. In her regular, informal conversations with students after class, she invited specific students to share their thoughts and experiences in upcoming classes. A particularly vocal and mature student from Liberia also told me of how she asked him to tone down an argument that he was making too strongly and to speak less when he was unfairly dominating class time. "She has taught me how to be tolerant when making a strong argument," he said in relation to Professor Lake's interventions to his class participation. With these actions, she was deliberately molding a classroom environment that provides a place for students to thoughtfully and authentically engage with each other and with the topics being studied.

### **Resistance to Transgression**

Professor Lake's approach to teaching history is rooted in posing questions, presenting multiple perspectives, and embracing the uncertainty that shuns simple, quick answers. Professor Lake spoke of the challenges she faced as she contested the expected approach to teaching history in order to create a place that nurtured an ethic of caring in an undergraduate history classroom. The history department was reluctant to provide the classroom she requested, they were also reluctant to cross-list her class with other departments. She often spoke of feeling unsupported by the department

in her approach to teaching and learning.

Some students also resisted Professor Lake's transgressions. They did not want to see the complexities that can blur ethical boundaries; not all students wanted a history class that encouraged them to care about the people sitting next to them or even the people in the events being studied. Throughout the semester, a couple of students remained unengaged, texting through lectures, missing classes, or doing crosswords. They took no visual or active part in co-creating or maintaining a caring classroom.

Other students who were more active participants in class discussion also resisted the caring classroom. Allowing diverse and personal perspectives of history and suffering into the classroom challenged some students' epistemological beliefs regarding history. When Professor Lake interrupted her own lectures to pose questions to the class about people's experiences with conflict or to talk about how issues of identity shape these experiences, students often tried to steer her back to the more factual content of her lecture by asking her "what really happened" or "what is the real reason," as if there was some truth that could be seen if only she could get past all the personal stories and conflicting accounts.

In a conversation outside of class one spring afternoon, one of these vocal students shared that he believed "there is one true history" and that "the history classroom is where you can debate but learn the truth. It is the teachers' responsibility to determine what is the truth." As a former history teacher and serious student of history with plans to pursue a Ph.D., he had strong opinions about what should happen in the class. He was a vocal participant in class who was more likely to talk about dates and sequencing of events than about his own personal stories of growing up and political involvement in Liberia. He worked with Professor Lake on history projects outside of class, but spoke about history from a very different perspective. He wanted more focus on the facts and details. "The American students in the class will not leave with a good understanding of African history. They will only be understanding people's perspectives." While he had great respect for Professor Lake, he would never create a history classroom environment the way she had: "Human rights people need to talk about how they feel. It's important—it's intellectualism, but it is not history." African history and conflict was not abstract to this student, he came to the class with a lifetime of experiences to make this particular history feel real and important. He did not need a classroom to foster a sense of care about people who experienced conflict; he had come to the United States to learn history, to get a degree *because* he cares.

The structure of the class also led some students to resist Professor Lake's approach to history. In her attempt to create a classroom that was responsive to student interests and needs, the direction of the class some-

times felt less than structured. One student spoke of how some people did not appreciate Professor Lake's "willy-nilly approach to teaching." I most often encountered this frustration with Professor Lake's flexibility in issues related to "the country project." The country project was a loosely designed group assignment that asked students to work together to study one country or region in Africa in-depth and co-create a report about the most pressing issues facing that region. Professor Lake included this assignment in her syllabus for both academic and relationship-building reasons. She hoped that working in groups would help students get to know each other, and would help them process the information they were learning about Africa.

Early in the semester, Professor Lake announced, "I will give extra credit to groups who go to African cultural activities together—like restaurants or films or things like that." An African student called out in a laughing voice, "Can we get extra credit for going to Club Africa [*a local dance club*]?" Professor Lake smiled, thought for a moment, and responded, "Well, if you go with your country group members, then yes. The point is to get to know each other better, experience new things, or share your experiences with African activities with new people." This approach revealed the connections Professor Lake was trying to foster among students and between students and Africa.

Within the first couple of weeks of the class, Professor Lake tried to organize the country groups, asking students which country they wanted, reading out group lists, and taking requests for changes. After one attempt early in the semester to get the groups started, she decided that students should focus on other papers and finish the group work later in the semester. In late March, she gave some time for the groups to meet for the second time at the end of class. There was a lot of confusion throughout the room regarding who was in which group, with students standing around, reluctant to move out of their seats and a few others calling out "Ethiopia, over here!" or "Francophone meet up here!" Many students went up to Professor Lake to figure out which group they were in or to change groups. Once the group I was sitting in on came together, the six members had some side conversations and then left class without talking together about the project. Professor Lake allotted time for a third in-class meeting a couple of weeks later, and once again, there was a lot of confusion and slow movement as the groups tried to reconvene. My group was missing two members this time, and there was much frantic talk about what the assignment actually entailed, as well as some complaining about the amount of writing required for the class: "I haven't even turned in my Sudan paper yet. Man, is this a *supposed* to be a writing intensive class?" A sheet was passed around the group to collect e-mail addresses and a plan was made

to communicate outside of class via e-mail. Students were resisting; they viewed the country project as an unwieldy assignment rather than an opportunity to learn from each other in a supportive environment.

The next week, one of the more vocal young men in the class raised the issue of the country projects at the start of class: “Professor Lake, I think I speak for a lot of people in the class here—the country projects are a problem. It’s hard to find time to meet, and some groups have countries we have covered in class and others don’t, and the ones who don’t have a lot more work to do. You know?” This started a discussion about possible options for writing papers without having to do a country project or doing the country project without working in groups. The discussion continued through e-mails with Professor Lake outside of class and into future classes. When the topic came up again, there were students whose head-nodding and comments made clear that the groups were not working. Professor Lake asked for student input and feedback about what they wanted, what they thought was fair, so that with only a couple of class meetings left before the end of the semester, the country project was relegated to one of a few options for the final assignment.

Professor Lake’s desire to create a caring classroom by building relationships and creating a stronger sense of community was complicated by two key factors. One was the uncertainty that was the result of her unconventional approach to historical knowledge and to student work. When grades are at stake and students are trying to balance the work of other classes and life outside of school, certainty and clarity are important aspects of a comfortable learning environment for many students. The other complicating factor was the purpose of the class. Professor Lake’s unwritten goals for the class and hopes for her students do not always match the expectations that students brought to the classroom. Some students were in the class for the credits, others to learn the facts of African history, and still others for the experience of being in Professor Lake’s class. The classroom then became a place where these expectations bumped-up against each other and caused friction.

## Conclusions

Historian and anthropologist Arif Dirlik tries to make sense of how environments can be experienced and constructed differently when he describes the distinction between space and place, as mentioned earlier.<sup>11</sup> Part of the question of what happened in Professor Lake’s classroom rests in these conceptions of place and space. Is the university classroom a commodity, part of an economic system of buying and selling information? Are students purchasing the time and knowledge that are present in the *space*

of the classroom? Is Professor Lake's expertise a commodity that can be purchased? Or is the classroom a *place* where knowledge is crafted and constructed through relationship? The struggle against the "hegemony of abstractions" is very real in this place.<sup>12</sup> In her classroom, Professor Lake worked to construct a place of learning where the real and lived experiences of the people being studied and the people in the classroom were central to students' knowledge of Africa, history, and conflict. She put forth images and stories in order to limit the perceived distance between "us" and "them." The people who had experienced oppression and violence, people who lived through war were in the classroom, they were part of the conversation. Seeing the violence in videos, reading the details in academic books and articles, and hearing from those who survived diminished the abstraction of some distant other who cannot be understood.

Analysis of Professor Lake's classroom revealed the pedagogical decision she made in order to create a caring classroom. A striking factor of her classroom was how strongly aligned her epistemological beliefs about historical knowledge were with her pedagogical decisions about how to teach history. Her belief that the construction of historical knowledge is shaped by personal stories and perspectives led her to create a classroom where careful consideration was given to lived experiences and making personal connections with the past. In order to create a classroom that reflected her understanding of history, she paid careful attention to the physical place of the classroom, ensuring that it was conducive for student interactions. She spoke openly about wanting to develop a supportive community; she created group-based assessments and provided extra credit when students engaged in extracurricular activities outside of class that led to getting to know each other and the subject matter better. Professor Lake attempted to develop trust with students by sharing her stories, by inviting and listening to students' experiences, and by taking their perspectives into account when planning assessments. Sharing her own stories relating to the topic at hand also demonstrated her belief that personal perspectives and experiences are integral to learning history. She asked discussion questions that encouraged students to share their personal perspectives and experiences as well. Professor Lake used texts and films that reflected her respect for the complexity of experiences and perspectives in learning history and encouraged students to examine this complexity.

Secondary teachers may make many similar choices in their planning and teaching. One primary distinction between teaching at the secondary and post-secondary levels would be the amount of structure and scaffolding required to develop community and to engage students in examining the complexity of the past through a variety of experiences and perspectives. Professor Lake's struggles to design assessments that reflected her vision

of learning in community, of students actively engaging in examining the complexity of their own perspectives about the past in order to gain a broader and more nuanced understanding of history, reveal the importance of creating clear structures and expectations for group work. Scaffolding is necessary not only to prepare students to see and engage with multiple perspectives, but also to prepare students to cope with the emotional responses that come from witnessing the suffering that accompanies studying historical conflicts. More so than Professor Lake did, secondary teachers must think about and plan to prepare students for the cognitive and emotional challenges their students will encounter when studying history. Supporting students as they face the difficult issues in history is crucial to creating the trust necessary in the development of a caring classroom community.

Professor Lake, like many teachers who veer from traditional forms of instruction, encountered resistance to this approach to teaching history from both her department and her students. The university structure provided some resistance to her unconventional approach and some students, accustomed to learning in conventional spaces, were also resistant to her pedagogy. Secondary teachers could expect these forms of resistance as well as resistance from parents. Teachers could address this by being open with all members of the school community regarding their goals and methods of teaching history, and by providing research that supports their pedagogical decisions. From Professor Lake, we realize that teachers who hope to create a caring classroom must be prepared and comfortable with the uncertainty and resistance that comes with inviting personal experiences and emotion into the study of history.

While this analysis is limited to a single case, it raises important questions for teachers, both secondary and post-secondary, attempting to create a place in their classrooms for students to make deeper, stronger connections to history. In Professor Lake's classroom, meaningful instruction was not abstract; it was directly related to some form of understandable experience. Professor Lake used her life and her stories as an invitation to students to develop a relationship with history and Africa. She taught African history because her life experiences taught her to care deeply about a people and part of the world that most Americans neither understand nor try to understand. Every week, she stood before students and tried to foster interest, knowledge, and—underneath the surface—a caring relationship with Africa. Facts and debates about causes, effects, and outcomes were important, but would not necessarily lead to caring. So, quietly, patiently, insistently, Professor Lake brought her own experiences to the class, asked students to share their stories, chose books and films that focused on the lived experiences of people, trying all along the way to encourage students to build a relationship with Africa, because it is only through relationships

rooted in lived experience that true caring can develop.<sup>13</sup> Lake's teaching resisted an impersonal, abstract approach to understanding the past and others. Her focus on emotions and feelings was a challenge to the status quo of many university classrooms. She was one of the teachers who, in Noddings' words, was "concerned with their students' academic achievement, but, more importantly, they are interested in the development of fully moral persons. This is not a zero sum game."<sup>14</sup> Professor Lake used her position in the university to create a place where knowledge was more than a commodity, where acquiring knowledge was a moral as well as an intellectual pursuit. Her classroom was a unique place, constructed by the milieu of stories and voices of students, her own experiences, guest speakers, and of the people who are being studied. This place was contested by students who did not engage in discussions or even in note-taking; she was resisted by students who just wanted the facts. But the place of learning that she so carefully constructed did yield positive results, because, as one student said, "this class is about real learning, not just going through the motions. It's not just part of the regular system."

## Notes

1. U.S. Census Bureau, *Census Data for the State of Minnesota 2000* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).
2. Tom Gillaspay, "Education and Minnesota Demographic Change," Report presented at the College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, 2005.
3. Arif Dirlik, *Places and Politics in an Age of Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 23.
4. Ibid.
5. All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality of participants.
6. Harry F. Walcott, *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1999).
7. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
8. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), 21.
9. Nel Noddings, "An Ethic of Caring and its Implications for Instructional Arrangements," *American Journal of Education* 96, no. 2 (1988): 218.
10. Ibid., 218-219.
11. Dirlik.
12. Ibid., 19.
13. Noddings, "An Ethic of Caring."
14. Ibid., 222.