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# Teaching the Power of the Word: Conference Proposal for the University of Georgia Qualitative Interest Group

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**Teaching the Power of the Word: Culturally Sensitive Pedagogy in a  
Chicago Public High School: Performance for the Qualitative  
Interest Group of the University of Georgia**

January 7, 2005

**Biographical Information**

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*Actor:*

Cathy Lu, MI, University of Michigan

*Chair:*

Alexandra Miletta; Assistant Professor, City University of New York

**Type of Session:**

Panel Presentation

‘Teaching the Power of the Word’ is an ethnodramatic performance piece that runs about 50 minutes. Because I wish to present the entire ethnodrama, I am submitting this proposal as a panel presentation. I would like an hour-and-a-half to put on the show and take questions about the production. If possible, I would like a late afternoon or evening session slot.

**Title of session:**

Teaching the Power of the Word: Culturally Sensitive Pedagogy in a Chicago Public High School

**Abstract:**

This ethnodramatic performance piece shares with the AERA community the personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) of an accomplished senior English teacher who works in a multiethnic general high school in the Chicago Public Schools. The production's goal is to dramatize the knowledge of practice—the highly emotional knowledge of whom one is and how the world works—a culturally responsive educator relies on as she teaches and cares for her students.

**Requirements:**

'Teaching the Power of the Word' requires an computer slide projector, a screen to show these slides, a sound system suitable for playing classical music and a wireless mike for the actor. I will bring most of these items from the University of Michigan.

I would like to give The University of Georgia the option of choosing one of two possible productions:

1) *The Traveling Show*—in this production I would bring to the University of Georgia the actor, the props, the visual effects, and the recorded music that would allow my team to put up the show in a conference room or lecture hall with little assistance from the University.

2) *The Full Show*—in this production I would work with a faculty member or a graduate student from the University of Georgia who would help my team put on the show in a university theater. (They would be credited for this work.) This production would require a stage crew—whom I could not pay for—and more elaborate props—some of which might be produced on site. Ideally, but perhaps not realistically, we would work with a University of Georgia student orchestra—whom I could not pay for—and have live music instead of recorded excerpts. My team would supply the actor, costumes and visual effects. The orchestra would be asked to learn the suite from Tan Dun's soundtrack for 'Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon'. We would need one technical rehearsal and one full dress rehearsal—these could be on the day before the performance—to put the show together.

**Presentation Summary**

A few years ago, I began a long-term ethnographic research project to study accomplished (Berliner, 1986) teaching. In preparation, I asked a group of experienced Chicago Public School

teachers I worked with when I taught in Chicago to help me recruit a participant for the pilot interviews. They recommended Anise Arcova (pseudonym). Anise had taught in the Chicago system for many years and there were few teachers my colleagues admired more. Anise worked in a multi-ethnic, high poverty general high school and her senior English classes were renowned for the difficulty of the books her students read and the quality of their writing and discussions. Similar to Patricia Benner's work with expert nurses (Benner, Tanner, & Chelsea, 1996), I structured our one-on-one open-ended interview sessions (Grele & Terkel, 1985; Weiss, 1995) by mailing Anise a short list questions. The first was "*Describe a lesson or a unit where you made a difference in your students' lives.*" The second was: "*Describe a student whom you were able to reach.*" Throughout our time together, Anise spoke fluidly about her teaching and offered a rich collection of stories about her relationships with her students both inside and outside of school. Similar to the teachers in Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), Michelle Foster (1997) and Jacquelyn Irvine's (2002) ethnographic work, love was an active force in Anise's practice. She spoke honestly about the difficulties she faced while focusing most of her attention on the unique strengths and personalities of her students.

During our second session, Anise brought in a stack of letters her students had written to her the previous June and read them during the interview. Her students' writings confirmed many of the stories she told and prompted her to recall new details about her classes.

The verbatim transcripts (Denzin, 2001) from those and subsequent interviews are the foundation for my new ethnodrama: 'Teaching the Power of the Word'. Unlike other genres of research representation—such as the PowerPoint lecture—ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2002) allows the practitioner's voice and experience to directly engage the audience. My team's one-woman show (Smith 1993, 1994) is designed to present the music of Anise's voice and the energy of her storytelling in a form (Jones, 2002; Kalb, 2001) others can see, feel and respond to aesthetically. The production's goal is to communicate the caring, the risk-taking and the continual decision-making that are the hallmarks of culturally responsive educators' work (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Williams, 2003) while, at the same time, creating a drama that stands by itself as a work of art.

A workshop production of the ethnodrama was performed as part of the peer-reviewed program of the American Educational Researcher's Association in San Diego this year. Audience members

said they were transformed by the show. They said it helped them look deeply into a strong and powerfully lived life.

The show will be revised and given new stage directions for QUIG. Because the show runs 50 minutes there will be extensive time for discussion after the performance.

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