

Analysis

The story of a Dairy Queen, “Old South Goes with the Wind” led off the *Rim of the New World* series. It is an inside-out view of a changing American landscape. A principal lesson from the story is the value of using the voice and language of the story’s characters. Hull does this not just with a liberal use of quotes but with dialogue, the overheard exchanges between people inside and outside the Dairy Queen.

The story taps into universal themes—aspiration, assimilation, rebellion—but tucks those grand notions into the action of smaller scenes and conversations. Like the other stories in the series, this one reports beyond stereotypes to find a more complex story.

Some stereotypes are timeless and inescapable: immigrants sacrificing to get ahead; narcissistic young people failing to live up to their potential or to their elders’ expectations. But most people are multidimensional, which a little more reporting will reveal.



Pakistani worker Faisal Khan puts a large drink on a customer’s tray. “If you’re gonna be somebody, then you gotta do some things you don’t like,” he says. (Photo: Sarah L. Voison/The Washington Post)

Notice how the pictures of Rizwan Momin and Cisco change when the writer goes beyond their workplace and describes their lives (**Text: pp. 218, 222–223**). The story also renders the characters more complex by showing their many sides, including, in the case of Momin, some prejudices (**Text: p. 217**).

Hull describes the Dairy Queen as a sieve through which a new demographic reality emerges (**DVD: Hull interview, 00:01**). In that way, the story is a powerful example of how to use a listening post, a place that offers insight into a community or communities by virtue of who passes through. A person need not do the sort of immersion journalism Hull chose to make potent use of such a place.

Hull says that a journalist should “adopt the world of your adopted world” when writing such a story (**DVD: Hull interview, 6:56**). But sometimes, as with the phrase “Dirty South,” adopting the language of sources can confuse those unfamiliar with the slang (**Text: p. 218; DVD: Hull interview, 9:04**). And because stereotypes abound about the South, the phrase may strike people unfamiliar with the hip hop world as a regional slur. As with using sources who fulfill racial or ethnic stereotypes, the best journalistic response is not avoidance but deeper, fuller reporting, which this story provides.

In the Classroom



The multicultural workers at the Dairy Queen often find themselves serving people whose cars, or in this case, T-shirts, are adorned with the Confederate flag. (Photo: Sarah L. Voison/The Washington Post)

In a story so rich in characters, a discussion is likely to arise about how well Hull portrays the various archetypes represented at the Dairy Queen. Try to elicit from students a sense of how they feel about each of the characters, including the minor players who appear at the drive-up window. Expect that some students will focus on the phrase “Do what now?” early in the story (**DVD: Hull interview, 11:08**), while others may raise questions about using Cisco’s rap and sometimes ungrammatical speech.

Spend time asking students, “Why do you feel this way?” as each impression emerges. The journalistic payoff is this: understanding how specific details, quotes, and scenes affect the reader will help students learn how to collect and deploy those reporting and writing tools effectively. It’s also likely to get students talking about the regional, racial, and ethnic stereotypes that worry journalists writing about places such as the Dairy Queen.

Students may also balk at Hull’s notion of having a “shaman” check out her stories to catch racial and ethnic misunderstandings or miscues that she may not have noticed (**DVD: Hull interview, 14:48**).

Often, that means having someone of the racial/ethnic group about whom you’re writing read through your story. It’s a humbling and valuable practice, but some students may see it as ceding their independence, which is a good moment to talk about vetting stories (**see DVD Topic Index: Who Should Review Your Stories?**).

Here’s an additional point to make on this matter: So-called shamans can fail you. No individual knows everything about any group. Some people may share your cultural or racial blind spots. Some may give opinions beyond their experience or expertise. Some “shamans” tire of the role and opt out. Use all your resources, including “shamans,” to get things right, but remember that there’s no substitute for learning, so keep educating yourself about the people around you.

Capturing the Authentic Voice

What makes a voice authentic? It's more than just including a verbatim quote or full sound bite. It also means understanding a source well enough to know which bite/quote detail or scene best captures the personality, motives, and meaning of the source. Without that authentic voice, stories are done *about* people rather than *with* them.

In the Dairy Queen story, Cisco embodies that point. We hear him rap throughout, and his voice—sometimes in dialogue, sometimes in the interview, sometimes in verse—is distinct. Add that to the details of Cisco's style and the matters of appearance that preoccupy him, and the reader has a deeper, more nuanced—and more authentic—picture of a source.

Getting to that authenticity, journalists universally say, takes time, whether it's spent getting to know sources on a beat, talking to people without pen, microphone, or camera, or engaging in the kind of immersion reporting Hull conducted with Cisco and his colleagues at the Dairy Queen.

Also in the DVD Topic Index

Besides Capturing the Authentic Voice, the interview with Anne Hull has entries listed in the Topic Index in the following categories:

Building Trust / Establishing Credibility
Casting the Story
Covering People Like You
Covering People Different From You
Describing People by Race and Ethnicity
Doing Your Homework

Ethics: Dealing With Stereotypes
Ethics: Handling Quotes
Ethics: Portraying People Fairly
Ethics: What Is Balance?
Getting People to be Candid
Language Choices

Assignments

1. Using public documents, research business ownership patterns in your community. Report on what ownership trends, if any, emerge that correlate with demographic changes in the area.
2. Pair up with another student. Interview one another for fifteen to twenty minutes each, focusing on something of great importance to the interviewee. When the interviews are done, write a 300-word story in the voice of the interviewee. Read the stories to one another and discuss how authentic each was.

3. Working in small groups, prepare presentations that address Hull's notion that "people kid themselves" when they say their life experiences don't affect their reporting (**DVD: Hull interview, 00:56**).