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Narrative, Voice, and Power: Exploring Regimes of Power in a Previously Whites-Only University in South Africa

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It seems quite appropriate that at a conference dealing with individual narratives from the apartheid “past”, we should also explore how these narratives shape identity and their impact in the lives of individuals as they try to make sense of their experiences in the present. Academic institutions that were reserved for whites under apartheid, and which currently subscribe to transformation goals – at least at a policy level – are interesting sites for investigating how the past may be evoked through narrative in the present. In this paper, I make the methodological case for narrative inquiry as a unique approach to critically examine the various ways in which power and dominance are reproduced through text and talk at a South African university. The paper is based on the analysis of textual narratives presented by a faculty staff member (the subject) to different “audiences” in an attempt to make sense of his experience of the denial of promotion to the rank of full professor. By juxtaposing the narrative inquiry of the subject’s narratives with the textual dialogue between him and the Chair of the promotions committee, I engage in an interpretation of how power dynamics play out in the context studied, and demonstrate the subtle ways in which language is used to silence, control and mystify the reasons for denial of promotion. By analysing the subject’s narratives in his search for meaning and quest for an explanation, I will show how narrative voice can become a tool for political action with a potential for enacting change.