

## **Conducting Research on Teaching Literature: The Influence of Texts, Contexts, and Teacher on Responses to Multicultural Literature**

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The purpose of this report is to examine issues associated with studying teaching of literature in reference to a study of high school students' responses to multicultural literature. The purpose of this study was to determine how students' discourses of race, class, and gender influences their responses to multicultural literature as well as how students adopted alternative discourses through coping with the tensions portrayed in multicultural literature. The participants in this study consisted of 14 high school students—eight females and six males of whom nine were white; three, Asian-American; one, Hispanic, and one, a student of African descent, enrolled in a multicultural literature class taught by one of the researchers/authors, Daryl Parks, in Fall, 2001, in Thompson High School, a diverse, urban high school of 1,600 students in a “working class” section of a large, Midwestern city with a student body of 42 percent White, 30 percent Asian, 17 percent African, 10 percent Hispanic and one percent Native American. Students' journal and discussion responses to a range of different multicultural literature texts as well as interviews about their perceptions of themselves and the course were analyzed using critical discourse analysis based on coding of the different types of discourses adopted by participants.

Results indicated that students' responses were influenced by three different factors: the teacher's modeling of alternative ways of thinking about texts by adopting alternative perspectives; responses to texts in which students experienced characters challenging status-quo discourses and institutional forces; and context, in which student challenges to each others' discourses led students to revise their discourses. In experiencing characters interrogating ideological forces limiting their development, students began to examine forces in their own lives limiting their own development. Students who shifted in their discourses over the period of the course were most open to entertain alternative perspective on themselves and their worlds. These results suggests the need in conducting research on teaching literature to examine the influence of all three factors—teacher modeling, texts, and contexts on shifts in students' thinking about literature (76 references).

In this paper, I address various issues on research on teaching literature—certainly a large topic. I would like to focus my discussion on issues associated with analyzing students' learning to adopt critical interpretations of texts, particularly multicultural literature. I do so because it's been the focus on my work for the past four year (Beach, Thein, & Parks, under review). This was a one-year qualitative research study of 14 high school students—eight females and six males of whom nine were white; three, Asian-American; one, Hispanic, and one, a student of African descent. These students were enrolled in a multicultural literature class taught by one of the researchers/authors, Daryl Parks, in Fall, 2001. At the time, Parks, a white male, was in his seventh year of teaching. In this class, students read and discussed a variety of texts including, *The House on Mango Street*, *Bless me Ultima*, *Kindred*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Obasan*, *Smoke Signals* (film), *Woman Warrior*, *Love Medicine*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and

*Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. This class is part of a college in the schools program through which 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students receive college credit for taking this course while still in high school.

An important aspect of this study was that most of these students were from working-class backgrounds constituting stances associated with working-class identities. They were students at Thompson High School, a diverse, urban high school of 1,600 students in a “working class” section of a large, Midwestern city. This school was chosen for its diversity (the student body is 42 percent White, 30 percent Asian, 17 percent African, 10 percent Hispanic and one percent Native American) and because the recent demographic shifts in the school and the community created a unique site for studying racial and social class tensions.

I argue for the need to focus on three components simultaneously influencing growth in students’ learning to adopt critical interpretations: the influences of texts, context/student, and teacher. While this is relatively classic rendering of traditional reader-response, transactional models of response (Rosenblatt, 1978), it differs from those models in emphasizing the ways in which this transaction is mediated by discourses, genres, narratives, language, and intertextuality operating in particular historical and cultural contexts (Fairclough, 2003). It also differs from those models in highlighting the ways in which interpretation is mediated by participation in networks of social relationships with other readers with allegiances to different contexts with different agendas (Shuart-Faris & Bloome, 2004). And, as recent “history of the book” research on literary responses in past historical contexts (Finkelstein & McCleery, 2001) reminds us, the meaning of interpretations need to be grounded in an understanding of the larger historical and cultural forces shaping interpretations, text construction, and norms operating in communities of readers/theater-goers.

In examining studying these three components: texts, contexts/readers, and teachers, I propose some methodological approaches on how to conduct research on this components.

### *Texts*

Rather than perceiving texts as singular entities, I frame them as spaces that invite, evoke, or position readers to experience dialogic tensions between competing discourse perspectives. In doing so, I draw on Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (2004) recent work on how places themselves contain their own pedagogical agendas. Ellsworth cites the example of the Vietnam This strong sense of the value of creating irreverent spaces for students reflects what Elizabeth Ellsworth describes as an interest in the pedagogies of place, “The experience of the learning self in the times and places of knowledge in the making, which are also the times and places of the learning self in the making” (p. 8). For Ellsworth, places and spaces have their own inherent pedagogical designs that link external, physical realities to ways of imagining and thinking. She notes that places “speak to and about pedagogy indirectly through design...[they are] things in the making [that] provide us with a ‘zone of historical indetermination’ that allows room for experimentation” (p. 9). She cites the example of the Vietnam War Memorial designed by Maya Lin. Lin wanted to create a memorial that encouraged visitors to generate their own reflections on those who died in the war, noting that “‘I create places in which to think, without trying to dictate what to think’” (p. 9). Lin believes strongly in the need to “‘create places in which to think without already knowing what we should think’” (p. 10). At the same time, places also invite participants to acquire new perceptions by “‘confront[ing] us from outside the concepts we already have, outside the subjectivities we already are’” (p. 10).

Texts function in similar ways by positioning readers to take up competing perspectives associated with “third space” contexts which postcolonial (Bhabha, 1994) theorists refer to the

hybridity operating in contested, often contradictory versions of spaces, particularly in terms of binary/essentialist categories applied to identities. Soja (1996) describes the Firstspace as the actual, “real” physical places of the neighborhood, workplace, home, school, etc., in which practices are defined according to rules and expectations. The Secondspace is the imagined, idealized versions of spaces development by planners, architects, or educators that define how they believe spaces should operate. For example, the standards movement in schooling functions to define how schools as Firstspaces should ideally operate. Because Firstplaces rarely operate according to expectations, the tensions between the actual and the imagined ideal create a Thirdspace, a space of resistance to expectations.

For Alex Kostogriz (2002), Thirdspace is “a way of living and learning with difference(s) and ambivalence in systems of cultural representations and practices of representing” (p. 6). “Thirdspace is not about a resolution of contradictions between differences but is itself a way of living and learning with difference(s) and ambivalence in systems of cultural representations and practices of representing” (p. 10).

Adopting a Thirdspace perspective also entails interrogating discursive positioning of people through what are often fixed or binary language, signs, and symbols (Bhabha, 1994). This results in “splitting” (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 98-99) of “of discourse, culture, and consciousness, in which students both take up and resist the privileged language of academic contexts” by challenging dominant discourses (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004).

#### *Challenges to Status-Quo Systems from Counter-Narratives, Genres, and Language*

In experiencing these Thirdspace perspectives in responding to literature, students are adopting perspectives mediated by counter-narratives, genres, and language in opposition to dominant, hegemonic perspectives. They may also experience characters recognizing how they are controlled by these dominant, hegemonic perspectives, leading these characters to take up counter-narratives, genres, and language to challenge political and economic systems. By adopting these characters’ perspectives, they experience a character shifting from perceiving themselves as active subjects to objects shaped by systems.

The shift from first-person to third-person reflection involves perceiving a character as “subject” operating in systems to perceiving a character as an “object” constructed by status-quo systems (Beach & Spicer, 2004; Kegan, 1994; 2000). Characters’ identities are shaped by a sense of agency constituting themselves as “subjects,” which Robert Kegan (1994) defines as “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, embedded in” (Kegan, 1994, p. 62). Characters begin to perceive themselves as “object,” which refers to “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate on” (Kegan, 1994, p. 63). “What is ‘object’ in our knowing describes the thoughts and feelings we say we have; what is ‘subject’ describes the thinking and feeling that has us. We ‘have’ object; we ‘are’ subject” (Kegan, 2000, p. 38). Roth, Hwang, Goulart, and Lee (2005) note:

This stepping back constitutes a conversion from a direct, unmediated relation with the lifeworld to an indirect, objectifying, and objectified relation (Buber, 1970). The conversion is constituted by the change of view from the first person to a (quasi-) third person; that is, it is constituted by a change from the mere experience of resistance of an individual subject to the idealized perception of a contradiction from a generalized and generalizing perspective of the collective. (p. 91).

This shift from perceiving oneself as subject to object often serves as the basis for portrayals of character's narrative development in literature. Characters are often initially congruent with their social worlds but, from perceiving themselves as the "object" of those world, become increasingly aware of the limitations of those worlds. Shifting from "subject" to "object," leads them to challenge the discourses and cultural models constituting their identities, leading to construction of new worlds and a rearticulation and resituation of the self (Lewis, 2004). Kegan (2000) illustrated this shift from "subject" to "object" in literature with the example of Isben's *The Doll's House*. In the play, Nora's husband's, Torvald, attempts to maintain control of his wife, reflecting his allegiance to patriarchic systems and traditional family roles in the late 1800s. In the beginning of the play, Nora assumes a subservient, childlike identity. However, after a series of miscommunications and misunderstandings that lead to her husband forbidding her to visit her own children, Nora begins to perceive herself as "object" of the patriarchic system. Unable to accept such an arrangement, Nora tells her husband that she is leaving him. Torvald then implores her to recall her "sacred duties... toward your husband, and your children." She replies, "I'm no longer prepared to accept what people say and what's written in books. I must think things out for myself, and try to find my own answer."

Kegan (2000) notes that this is more than simply Nora "changing her mind" (p. 67). Nora has come to, "a new set of ideas about her ideas, about where they even come from, about who authorizes them or makes them true (p. 67). In this sense, she is no longer subject to others' definitions of "sacred duties." These changes also involve more than simply adopting a different way of knowing. They involve "*being* someone different—the Nora at the end of *A Doll's House* who has the temerity to call her "sacred duties" into question" (Kegan, 2000, p. 68). Nora recognizes how a patriarchic system as mediated by Torvald's narratives, genres, and language positioned her as subordinate. Thus, the shift from "subject" to "object" also involves recognizing how narratives, genres, and language function to perpetuate status-quo systems by mediating identities as subservient to those systems.

Nora then resists the system by creating counter-narratives, genres, and language that parody or challenge narratives, genres, and language reflecting patriarchic discourses. By recasting the conventional, public "Me" position in alterative discourses, the "I" adopts new, alternative roles through narrative, genres, and language. Nora develops a counter-narrative for herself that challenges the familiar narrative of the dutiful, subservient housewife. She begins to reformulate language use by redefining the meanings of "husband," "wife," and "family" in ways that challenge the cultural meanings of these categories operating in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through creating counter-narratives, genres, and language, Nora reconstitutes her identity.

In our study, one of the most popular books was Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, a novel that portrays the transformation of Bone, an illegitimate daughter born to 15-year-old, white, working-class Anney Boatwright. The novel portrays Bone's struggle to overcome sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather Daddy Glen while seeking to find a future for herself. Along the way she struggles with the patterns of her larger impoverished family, and her mother's inability to rescue her from Daddy-Glen. Bone is ultimately saved by her Aunt Raylene who provides an alternative family world in which she achieves some sense of agency.

In the novel, Dorothy Allison examines stereotypical categories of social class reflecting middle-class discourses of working-class people as "white trash." Moira Baker (1999) notes that Allison (1994) in her essay, "A Question of Class," interrogates bourgeois discourses of working-class people. In that essay, Allison argues that these middle-class discourses positing that working-class people are poor because they lack motivation or schooling deliberately

marginalizing working-class people. Baker points to a scene in *Bastard out of Carolina* in which Bone reflects on her mother's numerous attempts to obtain a birth certificate without "Illegitimate" stamped on it: "'Mama hated to be called trash, hated the memory of every day she'd ever spent bent over other people's peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall and looked at her like she was a rock on the ground' (3-4)" (p. 5). Baker notes that this is an example of the characters' recognition of how the middle discourse reflecting in the category of "white trash" created a sense of Bone's inferiority.

Baker notes that Bone's transformation derives from her resistance to these discourses, resistance fostered from being placed in conflicting, contradictory positions, leading to her awareness of how the class system was positioning her as inferior. Bone's relatives challenge the discourses by creating alternative narratives and categories that identify the contradictions of patriarchal, class-based discourses. And, Bone's Aunt Raylene, who refuses to work in the local factory, "does not merely speak an oppositional discourse; she embodies it in her own living" (p. 6).

Students in our study were aware of Bone's increasing resistance to dominant patriarchal and how, shifting from a first-person to third-person perspective, Bone was increasingly aware of how a system of poverty and class hierarchy repressed her and her family. In his analysis of the novel, Mitch noted the power of such systems in both Bone's life and that of Daddy Glenn. In a journal entry, he noted how Bone becomes aware of her family's poverty:

Bone recognizes that her family is more poor than the other people at church and school.... On p. 66, she says, "just for a change, I wished we could have things like other people, wished we could complain for no reason but the pleasure of bitching and act like the trash we were supposed to be," her mom making a big effort to not be identified as "trashy," but Bone still picks things up and starts believing she is. Later on p. 82, her mom's explaining to Bone, "we're not bad people. We're not really even poor." But Bone says "we knew what the neighbors called us, what Mama wanted to protect us from. We knew who we were." This is where she first makes the distinction between who she's "supposed to be" and who she "is" in terms of her social class.

Mitch is charting how Bone is moving from a first-person to third person awareness of the effects of poverty on her identity. Mitch also considered how Daddy Glen, now destitute, is envious of his relatives' wealth, but within the prevailing class system in the town, he's a failure:

Daddy Glen complains, "nobody wants me to have nothing nice." Daddy Glen is basically an outcast because he associates with the Boatwrights [Bone's family]... I think the difference between Daddy Glen and Bone is Bone has lived in poverty since birth and so she as a default sees herself as poor, and Daddy Glen came from a wealthy family, so he doesn't think that he's "good enough" because he's trying to live up to expectations.

Mitch recognizes that Daddy Glen realizes that he is a victim of the class system, but, unlike Bone, he is never entertains alternatives to that system that would afford him with a sense of agency. Given his lack of power within the larger community system, Daddy Glen turns to assert his power within his family through abuse of Bone. As Mitch notes "He's got to find a way to deal with his frustration, so he turns to the only thing he knows to empower himself, and that is to victimize Bone."

Mitch is therefore framing his analysis of the novel in terms of institutional critique of lower and middle class social structures. He attributes some of this critique to his brother's

influence, who he attributes as helping him “see poverty as a problem of society. I don’t think of poor people so much as I do poverty and the injustice inherent in it.”

*Adopting historical perspectives associated with perspective-taking.* Texts also invite students to experience portrayals of past historical contexts and worlds that challenge official predominant Eurocentric, masculine interpretive frames and idealized narratives of historical progress for race, class, and gender groups. Pat Ensico (in press) argues that multicultural literature provides counter-narrative portrayals of history that fills in the “silences, partialities and absences in historically formed narratives of access to education” (p. x) excluded from official historical accounts taught in schools. She argues that all historical narratives need to be perceived “as contingent and partial both because a singular perspective is necessarily limited and because the traumatic events through which people have lived, from the Middle Passage to 9/11 cannot be fully witnessed or fully addressed” (p. x.). She proposes a critical-inquiry pedagogy that challenges idealized progressive narratives that calls students attention to “historical, political and cultural absences, divergences, and paradoxes” (p. x).

Brenda Daly (2005), drawing on Boler (1999) distinguishes between passive empathy and “testimonial reading” in which readers critically examine their subjectivity related to the experience of racism. According to Boler (1999, p. 164), when readers engage in “testimonial reading,” “instead of a consumptive focus on the other [in the novel], the reader accepts a commitment to rethink his or her own assumptions, and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as one’s own views are challenged” (p. 231). To model her own processes of being White, she discusses her family’s history with her students, focusing on instances of racist practices in her family and her own schooling in the 1950s in North Dakota. She recalls that despite the diversity of her classmates,

politeness dictated that these ethnic and racial differences should not be mentioned. Such politeness is, as I understand in retrospect, repressive; for one thing, it gave so-called whites considerable strength of numbers: all those who claimed a white identity did so over and against an Africanist presence. I also learned in school, through an all-white, male literary canon, that whiteness was the norm. At the same time, because we studied mostly English writers, not Norwegians—Shakespeare, not Ibsen—I learned that the English were, supposedly, superior to Norwegians. This knowledge was conveyed through silences, since our teachers or parents were too “polite” to say such things aloud; therefore, I also learned to keep secret my thoughts on such matters. In short, the silent curriculum in my school taught me that while I was inferior to certain whites, I was nevertheless part of a superior race. (p. 223).

Rather than openly expressing her emotions about this racial positioning in this culture of silence, Daly both suppressed these emotions as part of being a “nice,” “popular” girl, and she projected them onto African Americans. In her “testimonial reading” self-reflections, she also realized how her white identity shaped her responses to British literature that served to reify the superiority of Whiteness within her culture.

To encourage her students to critically reflect on their own readings related to their white identities, she asked students to read novels by white women portraying representations of madness: *Jane Eyre*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Bell Jar*, followed by a reexamination of these white perspectives with a reading of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, that retells *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of the “mad” Jamaican woman, Bertha, who in *Jane Eyre* is portrayed as a “clothed hyena.” She then asks students to apply their responses to *Wide Sargasso Sea* to reexamine their initial responses to *Jane Eyre*. Her students then

recognized Bronte's racist portrayal of Bertha defined markedly from Rhys's portrayal. Similarly, to foster self-reflection on one's own response stances as white students.

Rather than simply reading historical accounts of these horrific historical events in a social studies class, in responding to literature, students are experiencing characters' complex, often inexplicable reactions to these events that defy rational explanations. In our study, in responding to the internment of the Japanese in *Obasan*, students experienced an event for which there is no clear explanation: why would Americans engage in the same repressive practices that they condemned in their enemies—something that it also the case with current torture of so-called “combatant enemies.” In another novel read in the course, *Kindred*, by Octavia Butler (1979), students experience how the meanings of narratives, genres, and language differ according to historical and cultural contexts. In this novel, the protagonist, Dana, is an urban, African-American female who is a writer in 1970's Los Angeles. She is transported back to the world of slavery in antebellum Maryland through a link to her great-grandfather and slave-owner, Rufus. In the novel, she experiences the harsh realities of lived slavery set against the distant notions of slavery as mediated by 1970's historical narratives (Rushdy, 1993). She understands her present self through understanding her past heritage not only as related to her white great-grandfather, who fathered her grandmother with another slave, but also as constructed in the contemporary urban world of Los Angeles.

Through her time-travel experiences, she recognizes that history and the heritage of slavery has a profound influence on her current identity as a contemporary African American. This return to the past is itself a biographical counter-narrative that serves to mediate the construction of her memory as well as her present identity. At one point, Dana returns to the present without her arm, something that she cannot explain to her husband, Kevin. Ashraf Rushdy (1993) describes the role of biographical narrative in constructing her identity through linking past memories with the present to create an ongoing narrative:

Dana provides the possibility for that narrative—which would give her a sense of selfhood by returning her to and re-engaging her with the past—when she employs her memory: “I closed my eyes again remembering the way I had been hurt—remembering the pain” (p. 10). Within the parameters of her recollection, as presented in the novel's seven chapters, we receive the study of Dana's unique relationship to her slave-holding great-grandfather Rufus Weylin. Dana's memory, then, acts as a framing device to constructing the story of her relationship with her ancestor... Her memory is a performance of history, a performance of such potency that it incorporates her into the past, leaving “no distance at all” between her and the remembered events. (p. 137)

As she moves back into her past world, Dana confronts a sense of loss and destruction, as symbolically represented in the loss of her arm. In reading about her experiences of slavery, the students in the course relived Dana's experiences of slavery not simply an historical event or morality tale, but an experience fraught with complexities, contradictions, and silences that persist in contemporary Los Angeles. In experiencing Dana's testimony, students also learn how the distortions, incompleteness, and silences about events reflect larger institutional forces at work, for example, how the historical records of slave ownership Dana uncovers about her past are completing silent about the morality of slavery. They students may then define how able to define how her identity is shaped by discourses and cultural models operating in slavery and in contemporary Los Angeles,

In doing so, they recognize how some of the characters in the novel are never aware of themselves as the “objects” (Kegan, 1996; 2000) of systems (Leontev, 1981). The white male

plantation owners in *Kindred* were not consciously aware of operating in a system of white racism and privilege, even though their practices reflect their participation in that system. In contrast, Dana applies contemporary counter-narratives and language to gain an awareness of how the system shapes her and her ancestors. At the same time, Dana herself is having difficulty understanding her experience in history, leading the students to recognize the limitations of their own attempts to formulate a coherent, definitive explanation of slavery. Students also questioned whether Dana had a right to impose values and beliefs from the modern world onto the past. They also wondered as to whether those living in the past, such as the slaveholder, Rufus, should be held accountable for their actions based on modern values and beliefs or based on the norms of their own historical period.

Thus, the time-travel genre of *Kindred* itself modeled and mediated the kinds of cross-cultural comparisons of different social worlds shaping the characters' identities. By highlighting differences and dialogic tensions between the worlds of the 1970s and slavery, students shifted their focus from a first-person perspective focus on Dana as "subject" to a third-person focus on Dana as "object" of slavery and the contemporary world, leading them to focus on the influences of their own worlds on their identities.

*Defining intertextual links.* Students also read across different texts, using intertextual links to define similar themes across texts that represented instances of characters' resistance across different cultures. For example, in responding to *Obasan* portraying Japanese internment camps, Pamela described similarities in terms of form between *Obasan* and the Nazi control of Polish ghettos in *Maus* and *Maus II*:

In *Maus*, the males and females were split into different camps. In the beginning of *Obasan*, the males and females were split into separate sleeping quarters. In many cases, people had to get passes to see their families. In addition to having camps split into male/female, some men were sent to labor camps. The labor camps in *Maus* were more severe, but labor camps none the less... Early in the war, on p. 103, Emily says in her journal, "Mind you, you can't compare this sort of thing to anything that happens in Germany... Canada is supposed to be a democracy." In fact they were quite comparable. After everything was finished, on the last page in the memoranda sent to the senate, it says the orders were "an adoption of the methods of Nazism."

And, she drew parallels between the internment and the post 9/11 orders "to do what was necessary on the U.S. borders to provide stability and safety." Pamela used these "text-to-text" links to formulate critiques of "fascist" institutional forces operating in these texts, connections that constituted their social stances and identities in the classroom discussions, consistent with the idea of intertextuality as driven by social agendas (Shuart-Faris & Bloome, 2004).

*Stances as mediated by popular culture and media texts.* Texts also evoke stances and perspectives that are highly mediated by popular culture and media texts. These stances are mediated by popular culture representations of the topics and issues based on certain discourses or cultural models. These stances also reflect tensions in popular culture between the actual and the desirable shaped by what Judith Butler (1993) described as "normalizing discourses" as driving the need to be perceived of as "normal" as the desirable within certain social communities or contexts, as well as who has the power to define what is considered to be normal within a community or context.

Within texts, there are multiple, competing character perceptions regarding what's considered to be normal or desirable, as well as the legitimacy of those social norms and who can dictate those norms. For example, in *Kindred*, Dana adopts one set of perceptions regarding

normality and desirability in slavery in opposition to the slaveholder's perceptions. And, in contemporary 1970s Los Angeles, she adopts another set of perceptions about her husband regarding the normality and desirability of their mixed-marriage relationship. Characters also perceive each others' identities in terms of their own social and cultural agendas.

Readers sort out these conflicting perceptions by drawing on discourses and cultural models derived from popular culture, media, and other literary texts. In our study, the working-class female participants' perceptions of moral dilemmas facing female characters in *House on Mango Street*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, *Kindred*, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*—dilemmas such as ways of coping with sexism and racism in a relationship or what is meaning of romance. In their research on the cultural models of romance, Holland and Eisenshart (1990) found that these cultural models were highly mediated by popular cultural representations of romance. In our study, some of the working-class females adopted a stance mediated by popular culture texts based on the belief that while they are expected to marry, they perceive marriage as an inevitability and not necessarily a positive, romantic venture. Likewise, these girls understand that in an unpredictable world, they must find ways of being responsible for their own financial stability. This is consistent with Greer's (2004) theory of "flexible moral realism" which suggests that working-class women interpret lived and text worlds through a stance that is flexible in terms of understanding women's negotiations of relationships. In this stance women are realistic about the difficulties of marriage and other relationships, and focus on the notion that despite mishaps, moral and ethical lapses, and other struggles, it's still possible to find resolution and maintain a sense of happiness in life (p.148).

#### *Studying Text Positioning of Readers*

How then do researchers examine the ways in which texts position readers and readers uptake of that positioning? One approach is to focus on students' openness to grappling with the conflicted stances invited by the dialogic tensions in the text. This involves determining differences in students' resistance to dialogic tensions as well as how they may take up interpretation of dialogic tensions.

*Resistance to dialogic tensions.* In our study, some students resisted grappling with dialogic tensions while others were open to grappling with those tensions. They perceived little need or ethical imperative in exploring dialogic tensions given their allegiance to the high school's monologic world of white privilege and intellectual control (Kubal, Meyler, Stone, & Mauney, 2003; Weis, 1996) and to family worlds in which there was limited exploration of alternative perspectives. These students also adopted a backlash stance to exploring racial tensions by perceiving Whites as victims of employment inequity and affirmative action programs (Chaisson, 2004; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2000). Because they did not perceive themselves as shaped by economic forces constructing class differences and limiting their lives, they turned to discourses of whiteness to resist dealing with economic forces (Bettie, 2003). These resistant students were therefore primarily adopting first-person perspectives on individuals as the primary unit of analysis, resisting the need to examine larger institutional forces.

A study of ninth graders responses to N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and a film about Wounded Knee, a class of 19 high school students, 5 of whom were white, the white students were relatively reticent about participating in discussions (Glazier & Seo, 2005). The white students were particularly reticent about making connections between the texts and their own cultural experiences, while students of color who were more likely to discuss their cultural experiences. Glazier and Seo (2005) speculate that because students assumed that the

text is about the “other,” they then dismiss the text. On the other hand, even Students of Color may be resistant to discussing graphic portrayals of racism; in one study, younger elementary students of color adopted a stance of “engaged resistance” to “the feelings of helplessness or danger” in responding to such portrayals (Möller & Allen, 2000, p. 172).

White students may remain silent fearing that the benefits of engaging in discussions are outweighed by the detriments, such as appearing racist or insensitive (Beach, 1997; Gallagher, 2003). White working-class male college students are particularly resistant, given their reluctance to challenge economic structural inequality because they assume that they are advantaged by that structure (Trainor, 2002).

*Recognition of dialogic tensions.* If students do identify dialogic tensions between conflicting perspectives in the text, then researchers could determine the kinds of tensions identified and motivations for focusing on those particular tensions. In our study, we noted that students frequently focused on tensions related to issues of social or government support versus individual initiative, particularly in terms of affirmative action. Some students’ perceptions of characters were shaped by their cultural models of affirmative action, models acquired from the larger community or parents, in which nonwhites are represented as garnering unfair advantages due to affirmative action programs.

*Text engagement.* Researchers also need to consider variations in students’ level of engagement with different texts. One of the reasons for the popularity of a book such as *Kindred* was that it was relatively easy to read, while the dialect of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the complex plot development, use of symbolism, and shifting points of view of *Love Medicine* proved to be more difficult for students, a reaction characterized by other researchers as “aesthetic resistance” (Soter, 1997) or “aesthetic shutdown” (Athanases, 1998). Given the difficulty level of the language and symbol systems of many multicultural texts, it is important that teachers not forego using these texts by providing students with some assistance in comprehending language and symbols. In teaching *Love Medicine*, Parks therefore provided students with additional assistance in interpreting the novel, giving them excerpts of criticism that interpreted symbols, shorter reading assignments between discussions, and a “family tree” of the characters in order to navigate the complex relationships.

Differences in engagement and interest also varied across different students according to race due to differences in background cultural knowledge, findings consistent with Amosa’s (2004) research indicating that Australian ethnic students responded more positively to multicultural literature than did white students. In her study, ethnic students were significantly more likely to adopt characters’ perspectives, cite personal relevance of texts, and connect texts with other texts or prior experiences than were white students. They were also more likely to identify instances of prejudice in texts than did white students.

### *Contexts/students*

A second component is that of the social contexts or spaces operating in text worlds, the social context or spaces of the classroom, and the larger social contexts or spaces to which students hold certain allegiances. Studying the influence of contexts on interpretations requires that researchers examine the nested relationships between specific micro-contexts operating in the classroom, the classroom context, the larger school context, and allegiances to other contexts outside of the school: family, community, workplace, and virtual worlds (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998). Studying the intersections of different contexts entails determining the norms,

expected roles, sense of community, tools, and larger objects driving these worlds (Engestrom, 1987).

*Positioning of student identities in social/figured worlds.* Within social or figured contexts in junction with text positioning, participants are positioned to adopt certain identities as “culturally imagined types such that others and, even the person herself as least temporarily, treat her as though she were such a person” (Holland & Leander, 2004, p. 130).

Based on her research on Latino adolescents’ uses of popular culture, Moje (2004) posits the concept of “spatial and temporal identities” as “versions of self that are enacted according to understanding of and relations in different spaces and time periods” (p. 17). Rather than explore adolescents’ Latino identities simply based on cultural heritage, Moje focuses on how adolescents’ spatial positioning relative to hybrid, borderland spaces of national, community, neighborhood, home, suburban (often malls and movie theaters), and virtual spaces constitutes their identities. The meaning of their uses of popular culture texts in these spaces often involved racial or ethnic identity construction mediated by participation in these spaces, for example, reading newspapers and books by and about Latino/as as a means of identifying with their Latino neighborhoods/community. Adolescents therefore construct different versions of self according to the people they interact with in different spaces (Blackburn, 2005; Sarroub, 2005). When worlds are perceived as incongruent, students perceive these borders as insurmountable barriers between worlds, particularly when they assume they lack the social or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1974; 1977) valued in academic worlds.

In a study of a female high school student, Janette, who perceives herself as a “tattooed freak” (p. 138) enrolled in an alternative program, Vadeboncoeur (2005) contrasted aspects of time/space of the traditional school with the alternative program. In the traditional school, time was highly segmented and regimented, while in the alternative school, Janette could work on projects for extended periods of time during the school day. And, while spaces were limited to either staff or students and the library was controlled, spaces in the alternative school were jointly used by both staff and students and the library functioned also as a community center/meeting site. Because Janette did not function well in what she perceived to be as oppressive traditional high school spaces, she was more comfortable in the alternative school spaces that allowed her to work at her own pace and in relatively private spaces.

Vadeboncoeur draws on Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival as a “space where the prohibitions of social life are tossed out and replaced by spectacles [and] temporary challenges to hegemony, and a fleeting and impermanent celebration of the dialogism between the standard system (centripetal) and alternatives to the norm (centrifugal)” (p. 141). She identifies instances of a celebration of the carnivalesque in Janette’s poetry, for example, a poem about the girls’ bathroom in which she portrays tensions between girls focusing on their appearance in front of the mirror and their suffering from bulimia that serve to challenge gendered constructions, as well as defining her own simultaneous identification with and resistance to these constructions.

Over time in different worlds, social positionings can “thicken” so that a person becomes increasingly defined, labeled, and celebrated or marginalized within a social hierarchy (Holland & Lave, 2001; Kehily, 2005). In spatial terms, those with power or agency to act often assume center stage, positioning those with less power or agency to the margins (Roth, Hwang, Goulart, & Lee, 2005). In our study, a group of white, male students often assumed center stage in the discussions by voicing discourses of masculinities, competition, and individual achievement, discourses privileged within the school and community. When certain groups assume center stage, people in the margins resist by taking up alternative practices and create their own center,

transforming what was the center into the margins (Roth, Hwang, Goulart, & Lee, 2005 p. 42). Some of the white females in the study who were marginalized by the males' attempt to control the floor challenged the males by formulating alternative feminist discourses that then positioned themselves as in the center and the males on the margin. Some of the male participants in our study regularly challenged statements by one of the female participants, Kayla, whom they perceived to be outspoken and problematic. Drawing on their peer-group allegiances to traditional masculine discourses of competitive sports, they attempted to position her as deviating from a shared figured world of masculine discourses that was the prevailing norm in the school and its classrooms, a positioning that marginalized Kayla and her perspectives. As these positionings began to "thicken" over time, Kayla resisted this positioning by challenging masculine discourses that reflected her allegiances to feminist orientations portrayed in the literature.

In our study, because the students were enrolled in a course for which they were receiving college credit as high school students, they were on a peripheral trajectory that involved acquiring certain academic practices associated with being a college student. While they were not fully participating physically in an actual college world, they were exposed to practices associated with being a college student. For example, in writing journal entries and papers, students had to learn to develop their theses by not only providing supporting evidence, but also by entertaining alternative perspectives and counter-arguments, strategies consistent with the genre of argumentative writing valued in first-year college composition courses.

This represented a challenge for some of the students in that they were accustomed to their familiar role as "high school student." Moreover, because they were accustomed to relatively traditional instruction that involved little intellectual exploration, they were participating in the course as students with peripheral access to the academic world of college work.

Thompson High School was a highly controlled culture with continuous monitoring of student behavior and enforced regulation of closed-campus rules. This physical control over students was often focused on students of color, particularly African-American students, who are assumed by many teachers and staff as the most likely to deviate from school norms or challenge authority. The fact that students of color were the most likely suspects reflects a link between the practices of physical control and a cultural model that emphasizes the values of order, punctuality, control, hierarchy, and "rationality," a cultural model that also reflects a discourse of Whiteness set against what is perceived to be the assumed lack of control and irrationality of students of color (Barnett, 2000)

For the more academically motivated students in this school, this intellectual control manifests itself both as boredom and frustration. Kayla, a 12<sup>th</sup> grader at Thompson, expressed these ideas in her comments about the academic climate at Thompson, "It's so easy here and I get bored... Well I mean I like it cause I don't have homework and different things like that. I still learn but in a sense I feel like my, my brain, my knowledge power that I have in a sense is going to waste. I mean, I could be learning so much more."

*Racial tensions at Thompson.* From 1970 to the time of our study, Thompson went from being an all-white school to one in which Whites comprised only 40% of the school's population, a shift that itself fosters racial conflict within the school and the community. Because many of these white students defined racism as the expression of racist comments, a discourse of prejudice (Bonilla-Silva, 2001), they did not perceive themselves as participating in institutional or systemic racism. In maintaining a sense of control over the facilities, the

students, and the traditions of the school, the school community in many ways resists the cultural transformation that comes with shifting demographic groups. While struggling to become a place of true diversity, Thompson is still rooted in white culture and white traditions that have been in place for generations. Groups that are relatively new to the school have become peripheral factions, and are only slowly beginning to become pieces of the mainstream student culture. Thompson may be a demographically diverse school, but interactions between racial groups often remain quite minimal or superficial, as is the case in the broader community.

The culture of male athleticism infiltrated nearly every aspect of life at Thompson, a norm that exists in comfort alongside the emphases of physical control and limited intellectual expression, as noted earlier in this chapter. As previously noted, Thompson's athletic tradition reaches back well into its past, as well as far into the community and beyond. This section explores the ways that athletic "tradition" and "pride" help construct a culture that is defined by very clear racial and gender hierarchies.

The discourse of physical control that mediates social practices in the school is consistently linked to a discourse of athleticism, as well as a cultural model in which competition, self-discipline, achievement, and physical prowess are highly valued (Barker & Galasinski, 2003). The administration consistently assumed that self-discipline acquired through sports directly transfers to self-discipline in other activities. The most popular girls at Thompson, like the most popular boys, tend to be white and they tend to be involved in athletics. Girls who identify as "jocks" often expressed contempt for other girls who were outspoken or argumentative in class.

Allegiances to discourses and cultural models operating in these different worlds influenced students' interpretations. Some of the white males drew on the discourse of competitive athleticism to interpret characters' practices in terms of adopting a competitive stance. For example, one white male athlete consistently applied discourses of individualism and meritocracy also mediated his interpretations of characters' actions. He explained the successes and failures of characters' actions in terms of the level of their own individual initiative and motivation, as reflected in his explanations of character's actions in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. He argued that Bone's future depends on her own self-initiative—that she herself is responsible for her own fate. As he noted:

I think she could if she stayed in school and went to college after, just like anybody else could. But, I don't know, the things that went on in her life might mess her up a little bit. She might need counseling or something, but I still think that she could get probably get through it. I just think that she has a chance like anybody else. *Anybody* can (his emphasis), if you do the right stuff and work hard your whole life.

In discussing Daddy Glen's problems, Corey suggested that because Daddy Glen had not adhered to his family's expectations for him, he should begin living the way he was "brought up" in a middle-class family.

I thought that Glen sort of started off backwards from his family. His family is rich, and he should have an easier life to start off with, but he kind of failed at everything and started going down the tubes and now he's got to rebuild his way back up. Like, you guys were saying, he didn't follow in his family's footsteps; he kind of funneled down. He's got to just build up and work harder now to get back up to where his family is... with expectations.

These responses reflect Corey's larger allegiances to the school world in which athleticism serves as a hegemonic discourse of control, excluding many female and nonwhite

students from positions of power. All of this suggests the need to study how student response reflects allegiances to discourses of power operating in classroom and school contexts.

#### *Studying Contextual/Student Influences*

Studying these contextual/student influences entails some qualitative analysis of the classroom and school cultures, as well as students' perceptions of and allegiances to those cultures. In our study, two of the researchers conducted ethnographic analyses of the school and community cultures, focusing particularly on the ways in which discourses of whiteness and athleticism and a history of white control shaped the school and community culture. Observations of the cafeteria during lunch periods offer further examples of social and racial stratification among students at Thompson. With very few exceptions, students clearly organize themselves into racial groups (Tatum, 2003). A similar pattern was often seen in observations of classrooms where students were allowed to choose their own seats.

There are a number of possible explanations for these patterns of in-school segregation at Thompson by race. One explanation for this in-school segregation may be the lack of a discourse of class that would serve as a bond between the shared challenges facing both working-class Whites and working-class people of color (Bettie, 2003). Bettie (2003) suggests that that working-class students from different racial backgrounds fail to find solidarity with one another because while race is very visible in the United States, social-class is nearly invisible and transparent. She found that students lack the discourses for talking about the ways that social-class may provide common grounds in understanding institutional oppression. Lacking this discourse of class, students turn to the more familiar discourse of race as the primary frame of reference for defining peer differences and relationships (Keating, 2004).

Understanding these discourses operating in the school helped us examine the students' interpretation of racial conflicts. Because many of the white students defined racism as the expression of racist comments reflecting a discourse of prejudice (Bonilla-Silva, 2001), they did not perceive themselves as participating in institutional or systemic racism. These students were also resentful about the economic advantages afforded their middle-class suburban peers, for example, parental support for going to college. This resentment of their middle-class peers paralleled their resentment towards Thompson students of color whom they perceived as receiving similar financial scholarship support; in both instances, these working class white students understood themselves as marginalized.

#### *The Teacher*

Another component is that of the teacher. Researchers could examine teachers' adoption of different stances and identities associated with creates classroom spaces that foster students' reflective explorations of their positioning, stances that themselves can reflect certain ambivalences. In our study, the teacher, Parks, challenged students' discourses underlying these prototypical conceptions by voicing "orienting discourses" (Rex, 2001; 2002) that contradicted the students' discourses constituting characters' identities.

*Challenger and supporter.* Adopting a critical pedagogy approach, teachers are challenging students' status quo discourses. At the same time, they also need to provide support for the difficulties involved in interrogating these status quo discourses. Rather than marginalizing white students by implying that they are racist simply because they are white students who are failing to subscribe to the teacher's agenda, teachers need to consider these students' perspectives and the emotional appeal of "race-talk" or conservative discourses. As Jennifer Trainor (2002) notes:

We are asked, on the one hand, to respect, even love, students...and we must, on the other, organize our teaching around attempts to change students. Caught between these two mandates, we struggle to represent whiteness and white students as perpetrators of injustice who must be taught to disavow whiteness and as legitimate social actors on whom we must risk “an act of love.” I want to suggest that once we confront this contradiction and the ways it delimits how we see mainstream students, it becomes possible to represent and understand encounters with resistant students in less politicized and essentialized terms. (p. 634).

Trainor (2002) has her students explore the more private, subjective processes of constructing one’s racial identity, requiring an appreciation of both the “rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious, thought and feeling” (p. 637). She cites a study of white college students (Gallagher, 1995) that demonstrates the emotional appeal of the “whites as victim” theme as a rallying cry for group identification with others who share this discourse. Given the potential for conservatives to exploit white anger, she argues for the need to avoid the use of “rhetorical frames that demonize whiteness and white students” (p. 647) and to directly challenge discourses of Whiteness through recognition of the role of subjectivity in shaping discourses of race and class.

One strategy teachers employ is to make students feel more at ease in discussing issues of race so that such discussions become a part of ordinary conversation in which all students share a sense of comfort (Bolgatz, 2005). A study of the use of this strategy on high school students’ willingness to discuss race in a class taught by a white and an African-American teacher found that sharing narratives about experiences with race served to create a relaxed atmosphere while at the same time, raising issues of racial difference (Bolgatz, 2005). For example, the African-American teacher shared anecdotes about his mother having to pass a literacy test in order to vote, sharing that provided students with some understanding of the historical and institutional forces of racism shaping his identity. Over time, as students became accustomed to sharing these narrative experiences, they were less intimidated by discussing race.

Students can then study how narratives themselves function as a tool for reifying essentialist categories of race or “race-talk” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Ann Winans (2005) has her students examine the ways in which race is constructed through essentialist narratives that allow them to remain “safe” in specific, local social relationships. She helps students critically examine assumptions inherent in “narratives of colorblindness” as reifying racism as individual prejudice, while at the same time remaining sensitive to white students’ fear of not wanting to be perceived as racist. Rather than assigning guilt by critiquing these narratives, she has students explore their ambiguous feelings about race, particularly in terms of the ethical dimensions of relationships with others: “Preserving innocence is one aspect of colorblindness, yet another aspect emerges from a desire to act ethically toward others, to affect the lives of others in positive ways” (p. 264).

Winans’s students examined writers’ autobiographical narratives about race to highlight the ambiguities and contradictions in their own experiences of constructing and coping with race. For example, in having students discuss James McBride’s (1996) *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother*, she asks students to explore the contradictions associated with being the mother of a family of 12 biracial children evident in quotes such as following: “Mommy’s contradictions crashed and slammed against one another like bumper cars at Coney Island. White folks, she felt, were implicitly evil toward blacks, yet she forced us to go to white schools to get the best education. Blacks could be trusted

more, but anything involving blacks was probably slightly substandard. (McBride, 1996, 29).”

In discussing the mother’s color-blindness, Winans’s students explored the limitations and contradictions associated with colorblindness, as well as distinguishing between being a white person from white privilege. Noting that McBride’s mother was white, the students recognized that she did not necessarily subscribe to white privilege. In her teaching, Winans avoids attributions of

innocence and guilt [that] offer false resolutions that misrepresent the complexities of students’ experiences [by] seeking to understand the consequences of our actions and responding accordingly, then we are freed to explore students’ narratives of those experiences rather than facing, confronting, and rediscovering “correct” conclusions. (p. 272).

And, teachers may make explicit how their own narratives, genres, and language mediate discourses of race and identity construction, describing the ways that different forms of racism and whiteness themselves were shaped by these narratives, genres, and language. For example, Walter Jacobs (2005) employs the idea of the “teacher as text” (p. 9) approach in which he, as an African-American instructor, describes his particular experiences with racism associated with popular culture texts. He then encourages his students to study him as a “text” in terms of how his construction of racism as an African American teacher with authority in the classroom influences his interpretation of race in texts. Then, when his predominately white students note that he may be biased about his perceptions and therefore racist, he argues that his perceptions represent only one of many different, multiple forms of racism operating in the classroom.

None of this means that teachers simply assume the role of a neutral, facilitator because to do so will only perpetuate students’ dominant discourses (Powers, 2002). Denise Baszile (2003) challenges the notion of creating an illusionary “safe” classroom space, noting that the classroom can never be “safe” given the fact that students are continually under surveillance by their peers and by persons outside the class. She argues in favor of a contested space that addresses conflicts given her belief that:

racism is not only an institutional phenomena, it also an inter/intra personal one. To act as if my experiences are irrelevant is to allow many students to remain too comfortable, to obfuscate my complexity as a person and to reinforce the idea that race and racism is simply about respecting difference. The question, for me then is not whether to include my experiences, but how do I engage students critically and responsibly. Knowing that I am the first and for many the only encounter with a Black female professor, I have come to understand that I am myself a counter hegemonic text, a living oppositional framework and as such a subject of study by the students. (p. 31).

When faced with these challenges, her white students resort to silence for fear of being perceived as racist, which is read by students of color as an implicit admission of racism, creating frustrations for students of color who then themselves become silent. While students of color may share their experiences, white students’ failure to share their experiences leaves discourses of Whiteness unchallenged. Keeping silent serves to reify the power of white students, who assume that there is no burning need to voice their opinions, particularly if those opinions will be challenged. Silence can also reflect a sense of shame about not having previously challenged racist practices. As Thandeka (2002), notes, “white people cannot talk about race because the stories we tell ourselves about our childhood work to cover up our red-

faced confusion when our parents, unknowingly perhaps, denied our honest, loving impulses (e.g. to make friends with the child of color down the street).” (p. 56).

*Referencing one’s own identity construction.* Teachers can model ways of adopting certain stances in the classroom by describing their own experiences in negotiating competing allegiances between different worlds. Parks shared childhood narratives of financial destitution, family members’ run-ins with the law, and the prevalent drug culture of his factory-employed neighborhood. In discussing his own working-class background, Parks established identification with his own students, who perceived him as a “co-author of students’ lives” (Rymes, 2001, p. 168)—someone who is able to bridge competing worlds.

In perceiving Parks as “one of us,” his students established a relationship with him so that they perceived him as someone who had a shared interest in their personal lives given his own prior experiences (Borkowski, 2004). In his teaching, Parks is continually addressing questions of identity construction: “Who am I? Who are the others around me? How am I seeing things? How are they seeing things? How are they seeing me?” In doing so, he shared his autobiographical experiences with students to reference certain aspects of his identity.

In addition to the challenge of addressing issues of race in a school in which white privilege and control remain the cultural norm, Parks also faced the challenge of helping high school students acquire new academic practices and assume the “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977) of college students. Socializing high school students into college academic communities of practice involves helping them adopt new practices that differ from their familiar practices operating in high school classrooms (Beach, Lundell, & Jung, 2002; Harklau, 2001).

To help students make this transition, Parks made explicit the practices involved in critically analyzing literature consistent with first-year-college work. Because he knew that his students would have difficulty projecting themselves into an unknown, unfamiliar world of college, Parks knew that he had to do more than simply modeling certain academic practices. He also had to demonstrate how he operated in a college world as a person from a working-class background. Central to that transition was his experience of learning to value the intellectual aspects of academic work that transcend the idea of simply being on a college campus and taking college coursework. Given these instrumental conceptions of schooling (Seitz, 2004), Parks had to show his students how analyzing literature affords him some intellectual satisfaction as a worthwhile endeavor. In doing so, he helped students envision themselves as operating in a future world so that they could project themselves into the future and perceive the value of operating in that world. For Wenger (1998) teacher/mentors need to help students imagine “who they are, who they are not, who they could be...reinventing the self, and in the process reinventing the world” (pp. 272-273). He argues that teachers also need to go beyond their conventional institutional roles by “just being adults [who] act as members and engage in the learning that membership entails.” (p. 277).

In sharing autobiographical narratives mediating his trajectories into academia, Parks faced a challenge noted by teachers from working-class backgrounds of how to position himself between close attachment to one’s family and neighborhood and the often alien, impersonal academic world (Ryan & Sackrey, 1996; Shepard, McMillan, & Tate, 1998; Villanueva, 1993; Zandy, 1990). People from working-class backgrounds who have gone to college and/or graduate school often struggle to negotiate their identities in relationship to the working-class backgrounds they have “left behind.” For some, such negotiation demands a rejection or silence regarding their working-class backgrounds or experiences. For others, making this transition involves creating a Thirdspace (Soja, 1998) that rejects binary either/or thinking to consider the

benefits and limitations of both working-class and academic worlds. In describing his own experience of growing up in a working-class home and becoming an academic, David Borkowski (2004) notes that he was not bookish, was not a good student, and did not like school or his teachers, practices and attitudes related to his working-class background. In working with students from working-class backgrounds, he attempts to connect with all of his students regardless of their attitudes, noting that “I don’t value some students over others because they’ve already pocketed some cultural capital...I felt obliged to invite all of my students into the conversation, generating as many voices as possible” (p. 116). He therefore does not perceive his role as simply one of socializing students into acquiring academic discourses which are themselves class-based. Rather, he perceives his role as exploiting differences in his students’ background experiences to create diversity in his classroom.

To help his students conceptualize the idea of operating in a cultural world, he employed a “fishbowl” metaphor to help students interpret practices and beliefs as shaped by cultural forces. Early in the course, the metaphor emerged from a journal prompt in which he asked students to respond to the following: “Water is to fish as culture is to people.” The crux of the conversation was around whether or not fish know that they are in water. Once students acquired an understanding of the metaphor, they continued to use it to remind themselves that they are operating in particular cultural worlds. As Parks noted in a journal reflection about a discussion of *Kindred*:

The whole idea of a culture having such profound influence in the lives of its members seems pretty fresh to the students. As we discussed the character of Rufus in *Kindred*, students understood that his culture had shaped him to such an extent that he could not break free of the norms and examples given to him by his father; he felt that rape was a culturally acceptable option but that the love of a black woman was not. Students keep coming back to the idea of culture as a fishbowl and that there was little chance for Rufus to even consider an outside idea. At the same time, students were quick to note that somehow some individuals in the society were able to transgress the culture and consider ideas like abolition, racial equality, and the like.

In a class presentation, in describing the world of the family in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, he talked about the insular nature of the family world for the children growing up in that family: We’ve been talking about the fishbowl and fishbowls describe families too, when you grow up in a family, you think that the way your parents parent is normal, that that’s how the whole world does it, and you think however your brothers and sisters behave, you think that’s normal. And if you have a Grandma and all your uncles and cousins doing the same thing, it all seems normal, so you’re sort of stuck in a family culture fishbowl.

*Serving as a cultural broker/guide to a community of literary readers.* In addition to mentoring students into the college world, Parks also served as a cultural broker or “tourguide” to introduce students into a larger community of readers who enjoy or participate in interpreting literature (Edelsky, Smith, & Wolfe, 2002).

To help students define connections between their experiences in lived worlds with interpretations of text worlds, he provided them with three scaffolding categories for formulating these connections: “text to text,” “text to life,” and “text to world.” As students described their lived worlds, he continually asks them “How is this world constructed?” That is, just as the students became adept at interpreting the social pressures on characters in a text, such as Rufus in *Kindred*, Parks asked them to apply the same types of lenses to considering the constructs of the social worlds in which they lived. Parks also posed similar questions related to broader

forces, such as “how is America constructed?” For example, he asked students if it would be easier to go camping as a White person or person of color across small towns with largely white populations. While the response for many students was begrudging, they noted that it would likely be easier to visit small towns if you were white.

Parks also modeled transfer of interpretations of the symbolic meaning within texts to students’ interpretations of their own lives. For example, in his own response to *Bastard out of Carolina*, he described the thematic focus of the influence of prior generations on current generations. In response to this modeling, students described their own experiences with generational conflicts. One student noted that his friends and parents were struggling with alcoholism in terms of differences in generational attitudes.

*Teaching critical lenses.* Parks also modeled the use of different literary critical analyses associated with adopting “feminist,” “Marxist,” and “deconstructionist” lenses, among others (Appleman, 2000). To help students compare the differences between these lenses, he put students into groups and asked members of each group to assume a different lens. In teaching students to apply a feminist and Marxist lenses, Parks asked students to examine how differences between characters’ power is related to differences in race, class, and gender. For example, in desiring students to assume a Marxist perspective with *Love Medicine*, Parks asked questions such as: “Who has power within the novel and how are their lives portrayed? Who has no money in the novel and how are their lives portrayed?”

*Using drama activities.* Teachers also employ drama activities to help students envision and reflect on participation in imagined worlds. For example, in studying *Bastard Out of Carolina*, students created monologues in which they adopted one character’s voice confronting some of the issues in the novels portraying different characters’ identities. In these performances, Parks asked that the student first describe the character’s behavior, then proclaim: “You think you know me, but you don’t!” The notion of using speech to reveal a character’s underlying traits and attitudes was consistent with Parks’ use of the “iceberg” metaphor--that surface practices suggests larger, deeper phenomena beneath the surface.

In performing these monologues, students broke out of their conventional classroom identities and experimented with alternative roles. For example, Mai, a Hmong student who was normally quite reserved in classroom discussions, became highly engaged when she adopted the role of Tenorio, one of the characters in *Bless Me Ultima*. As Parks noted:

We all loved her little taped on moustache and beard. She basically told us everything we knew about Tenorio. I loved when she threw the bird up in the air and said, “whew I killed Ultima’s spirit guide!” and she spun in a circle with glee. It was like the only time that I saw her carry out what she’d obviously practiced a great many times. It was like her mental checklist said, “when you throw owl, spin and yell to show emotion.” It was a great moment of seeing someone slip from complete nervousness into the fulfillment of one of the hundred things she’d practiced.

In other drama activities, Parks had students take characters from the novels and place them into lived-world situations. For example, with the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students assumed the roles of Janie’s grandmother, Janie, and her multiple husbands. Working in pairs, students adopted these roles of these characters and a “counselor” who would ask them questions about their practices and perspectives. For example, students had previously criticized Janie’s grandmother for forcing Janie to marry a man for whom she had no love. When Janie and her grandmother met with a “family counselor” to explore reasons for their conflict, the

grandmother described her experience of slavery, sexual abuse, and poverty that led her to recommend marriage as a form of security.

Teachers also use drama activities to address issues of power and identity. In his work on the use of “imaginative inquiry,” Brian Edmiston (2005) devises activities in which a community group is engaged by a “client” to complete a certain task or activity, leading students to create an “as-if” figured world. In participating in these activities, students are continually constructing and negotiating their identities in relations with others. In doing so, they are grappling with issues of uses of power “with others,” as opposed to “over others” or “for others,” issues of power related to social justice. Students are continually reflecting on how shifts in power and control influence each others’ perceptions their contributions to completing an activity. For example, in a town meeting, if certain participants begin to dominate the meeting, creating an “us”/“them” binary, the students then explore how such a binary influences their involvement in the meeting.

*Facilitating discussion.* Another key teacher role is that of facilitator of classroom discussions. Rather than direct students to certain text passages, Parks encouraged students to select their own passages that served to illustrate their interpretations. He then refrained from voicing his own interpretations, asking students to react to each others’ interpretations to encourage tensions between competing interpretations. Students wrote in their journals as homework assignments or engaged in freewrites in the beginning of class. Additionally, Parks often read aloud or provided students with a list of quotations as a means of provoking discussions. For example, in discussing the film, *Smoke Signals*, he provided students with anonymous quotations that he had culled from students’ journals related to the topic of race and asked students to circle the three quotes they perceived to be the most controversial, for example “White people as a group enjoy an easier life than anybody else in the country.” In response to the quote, “Realistically, I feel most reservation Indians to be well to do with free money. Somehow in *Love Medicine* they tend to portray our government as cheap but I don’t see it. Indians see us as unfair, but I don’t believe it is true in real life,” students debated the issue of Native American’s judgments of Whites for their past actions against Native Americans, as well as making generalizations about Whites as a group.

*Mediating racial tensions in the classroom.* The three female Hmong students in the course, were often reluctant to actively participate in discussions. Some of this reluctance may reflect the fact that while students of color constitute the majority in the school, they are rarely acknowledged or listened to by those with social power. Such hesitancy may also be consistent with Southeast Asian cultural norms regarding both gender and the classroom authority of the teacher (Lee, 2001; 2005). While Parks experienced some measure of success in mediating white students’ resistance to interrogating racism, he was less successful in drawing these students into the classroom conversations of race and whiteness.

When Parks talked with these students individually about their participation, they explained that in discussing issues of race, they were fearful of being perceived as biased if they expressed racial solidarity with peers or characters of color. One of the three students, Mai explained that this displayed itself even in small ways, “I wanted to talk about how much I enjoyed the novel *Obasan*, but I feared that the other students would think that I liked it just because it was Asian.” Pauline noted that while white students experienced the invisible burden of a fear of being misunderstood as racists, the students of color were fearful of being perceived as saying something primarily in terms of racial allegiance; they feared being seen as doctrinaire or narrow-minded.

Recognizing that these students did not have an opportunity to develop this topic, Parks and Thein met privately with one of the students, Mai, a highly motivated student who ranks in the top of her class and plans to continue her studies next year at a state university. Mai's comments challenged the assumption that white teachers or students can readily understand or empathize with the experiences of people of color either in lived worlds or text worlds (Lewis, 2000). She also argued that by focusing his attention primarily on the issue of white students' privilege in these conversations, Parks paradoxically marginalized the students of color. And, she also implied that simply encouraging the white students to recognize their privileged status did not necessarily mean that they were any less privileged.

Mai's critique also reflects a larger issue of how nonwhite students are positioned in a class focusing on diversity issues in which they are expected to educate white students about their lives as "different" consistent with portrayals of nonwhite characters in texts. McCoy and Jones (2005) describe this as the "burden of representation" (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 183) in which it is assumed that all members of a nonwhite groups are similar in which negative behaviors of that group are generalized as representative of a negative trait associated with that group, for example, Blacks as dependent on welfare. In addressing the issue of these burdens in a college class, McCoy and Jones (2005) note that:

...the burdens "oppressed communities" carry include correcting these negative images and behaviors and projecting more positive ones to American society. We discussed how this burden limits the freedom of such groups or individuals to pursue goals or to develop in ways that these communities see fit. (p. 63).

The Hmong students were limited by this "burden of representation" in that within the school culture, they were often stereotypically perceived as an immigrant group originally from a relatively primitive agricultural culture in Cambodia and Laos who were having difficulty assimilating into mainstream American culture. Thus, as Mai notes, she knows "how much harder I have to work for things" in having to continually confront this group representation.

Over time, the Hmong students became less reluctant to participate and more willing to challenge other students. In final focus-group discussions about the course, they noted that they had learned to confront and challenge "race-talk" discourses by citing instances of their own actual experiences of racism that contradicted some white students' attempts to deny their culpability associated with racism as a system.

### *Determining the Influence of Teaching: Tracking Learning or Change*

Studying the influence of teaching on student learning poses a number of methodological challenges. Employing traditional measures of literary learning such simply determining the increased use of interpretation over time may not capture the complexity of the kinds of interpretative practices students acquire from participating in a course.

*Amending and revising discourses and cultural models.* One alternative measure of change is the extent to which students amend and revise their discourses or cultural models. Over the period of six months, we did not expect students to demonstrate marked changes in their discourses or cultural models. Rather, they momentarily entertain new, alternative discourses and cultural models only to fall back on traditional, familiar discourses. Or, they only slightly amend or modify their discourses or cultural models rather than adopt totally new discourses or cultural models.

The fact that these shifts only occur over a long time period is evident in a six-year-study of a group of eight middle school teachers who discussed multicultural literature texts and related

issues of identity, race, and multicultural education within the context of a rural, largely white Iowa community (Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Lewis, Ketter, & Fabos, 2001). Within this cultural context, in responding to the multicultural literature, these teachers largely adopted what the researchers defined as a discourse of “liberal humanism” in which characters that differ by race, class, and gender are constructed as individual people who are perceived to share the same values. On the other hand, some teachers, over time, moved towards adopting what the researchers defined as a discourse of “critical multiculturalism” that focused more on the larger institutional forces. These teachers focused on the aspects of institutional power portrayed in the multicultural literature and in their own everyday experiences, as well as tensions between their own perspectives in their group discussions.

At the same time, all of the teachers moved from fixed positions to entertain alternative discourses that challenged those positions, an important finding related to our own study results. For example, Barb, who framed the shooting of the black character in individualistic terms, momentarily shifted to consider the fact that if the character had been white, then the police may not have shot him, a perspective voiced by other participants that considers race as the key factor in explaining the shooting. Such a shift was useful for getting students to consider the possibilities of institutional influences in the interactions of individual actors.

In considering how or why people may want to amend or revise their discourses and cultural models, it is useful to consider the role of emotional attachment to or desires for certain discourses, as, for example, adolescent Skinheads have for a discourse of Nazi violence. In our study, those students who resisted change were most likely to subscribe to familiar, monologic discourses of athleticism and femininity that afforded them with a sense of certainty, mitigating against their need to amend or revise these discourses. Marshall Alcorn (2002) argues that people who adopt certain definite, bed-rock, fixated discourses are not likely to be changed through rational debate or competing discourses. They may only change if they desire some change in themselves. “A new discourse will effect a change only if the subjects desire and make use of this discourse. Real change requires not the discourse production of new knowledge [as discourse] but a certain mobility in desire.” (p. 98).

For Alcorn, desire creates a dialectical conflict related to a demand for a better symbolic representation of the world and one’s identity. This dialectical conflict stands in opposition to what Lacan describes as the “master discourse”—the need for an authority figure in the form of political or religious leader, for example, who provides people with a sense of certainty. One of the subjective appeals of a “master discourse” is that it provides a ready-made alignment to a community of similarly devoted members. People then define their identities as loyal followers of the leader or authority figure who fulfills their desires for an identity constituted by a set of non-dialectical, fixated beliefs.

One component of this “master discourse” political appeal to white working-class males is an appeal to Whiteness as challenged by affirmative action programs and “political correctness” (Roediger, 2001; Keating, 2004). Based on her research on white college students resistance to discussing race, Jennifer Trainor (2002) argues for the need to examine the emotional appeal of a white privilege discourse, an appeal related to both the “rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious, thought and feeling” (p. 637). In our study, those students who demonstrated little change consistently adhered to a white privilege discourse. One reason for their steadfast allegiance to this discourse was its emotional appeal as reifying their sense of power perceived to be under threat by affirmative action programs as a form of “reverse discrimination.” Given these potential threats, these students gravitated towards emotional

appeals voiced in their family and community about the need to protect themselves from affirmative action programs. For example, Corey voiced opposition to affirmative action programs because, as someone who wanted to go into law enforcement, it was his understanding that he would be discriminated against in getting a job because of the need to hire nonwhite law enforcement people.

As Seitz (2005) argues based on his research with college students, most of these students perceive little reason to interrogate discourses associated with acquiring middle-class values and job aspirations as a driving force behind their education because they perceive little to gain from adopting a critical perspective. An exception to adopting this instrumentalist perception of schooling was Kayla, who recognized the value of engaging in academic analysis as consistent with her projecting herself into the future as a college student.

While the goal of a critical pedagogy approach is to examine power relationships in society, the students were reluctant to critique middle-class values they are striving to obtain, values that served to define their future trajectories, particularly in terms of notions of the family. They frequently perceived their own future in terms of achieving the ideal of “the perfect family,” which Matt equated with “middle class, hard working, a lot of love and that they are always there for each other, both parents and happy family, no problems. I think problems cause dysfunction in families.” Some of their resistance to reading and discussing portrayals of dysfunctional working-class families in novels such as *Love Medicine* or *Bastard Out of Carolina* stemmed from their belief in this idealized middle-class family world contrasted with the difficulties associated with poverty and family life. While both *Love Medicine* and *Yellow Raft in Blue Water* portrayed similar difficulties of working-class Native American lives, the students were less resistant to *Yellow Raft in Blue Water* because it also portrayed characters overcoming adversities, something they also liked about *Bless me Ultima*.

Those white students who were more open to revising discourses and cultural models were less prone to the emotional appeal of the white privilege discourse because, through analyzing the negative historical effects of white privilege on nonwhite characters in the novels, they were beginning to challenge white privilege, leading them to revise their previous adherence to white privilege. For example, Devin, a white male, responded to the portrayals of discrimination against Native Americans in *Love Medicine* and *Yellow Raft in Blue Water* as demonstrating an institutional racism associated with white privilege. He was therefore beginning to critically examine how discourses can operate at an institutional level to limit racial groups.

From experiencing the dialogic tensions in the novels, rather than cling to monologic perspectives students who challenged status quo discourses were also more likely to acquire the flexibility associated with adopting alternative discourses and cultural models. The fact that Devin experienced alternative perspectives acquired through his reading about Native Americans led him to recognize the limitations of his white privilege stances and the need to entertain alternative perspectives.

*Recognizing the need to adopt different cultural perspectives.* Another index of change could be the extent to which students recognize the need to adopt different cultural perspectives as they moved across different worlds within texts. In having to adopt different perspectives for these different worlds, students reflected on the kinds of perspectives required for interpreting that world and whether they successfully adopted those perspectives. In responding to *Kindred*, Kayla noted that when Dana was transported back to slavery:

she had modern knowledge going back to that time. In a sense, it was like what if I went back would I act the same way she did? But I couldn't really say that because ... it just made me think like this because she is pretty much in the same time I am and what if I got called back somehow like she did. It just kept me wondering ... some books I like when they make me ask questions. This one I really did.

Students also learned to judge the limitations of characters' perspectives relative to their cultural contexts, recognizing that characters lacked insights or understandings of their social worlds. This required them to construct the norms, roles, beliefs, and traditions operating in a text world and then noting how characters were not consciously aware of the ways in which those norms, roles, beliefs, or traditions were influencing them. For example, in analyzing Rufus in *Kindred*, Pamela noted that:

He said his mom told him that the slaves who worked on the plantations were called niggers and that the term nigger used to anger him. I thought, it showed that he had no idea what was going on at that time. He thought of the other slaves as niggers as well because he thought they were supposed to be called that. It wasn't because he hated them.

In this excerpt Pamela was interpreting Rufus's perspective as constituted by the institutional discourses and cultural models of slavery, and not simply his own subjective perspective. At the same time, students recognized the importance of having the events of the novel filtered through Dana's perspective as an African-American. When asked to consider how the perspective would differ if the novel was told from a white person's perspective, Mai noted:

You wouldn't be able to feel the pain as much, like if a slave got whipped, and the main person was a white person, the white person would not have been able to tell you how it felt or you just wouldn't know how bad it was to be a slave. If you were seeing it from a white person's perspective.

Mai then contrasted Dana's perspective with that of Kevin's who had a different perspective a White male.

There was a part in the book where the kids were playing a big tossing game and Kevin didn't really understand it. But, I guess, his perspective is, I mean, he knows that it is wrong, but he's not able to do anything about it, or maybe he can, but it would cause a fight....He played the role of the master, like he told Dana what to do. Yes, exactly, he became a part of the culture.

Analyzing the relationships between these characters' perspectives and larger cultural forces shaping those perspectives encouraged students to define perspectives as culturally-constituted, an important step towards distinguishing their own perspectives from others as shaped by differences in culture.

*Re-reading texts based on new perspectives.* As students acquire new perspectives, they could go back to previous texts and reflect on how they may change their initial interpretations of texts, leading to a re-interpretation of those texts. This represents the idea of change as not only moving forward, but also retrospectively moving backward.

Anthony Petrosky (2005) illustrates this re-reading with difficult texts through a series of tasks for interpreting a chapter, "Tame the Wild Tongue," from *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, by Gloria Anzaldua (1987). Petrosky, working with Stephanie McConachie, at the Institute for Learning in the Learning Research Development Center's Disciplinary Literacy Project at the University of Pittsburgh, uses this work with difficult texts to apprentice teachers and teacher-coaches to inquiry projects that involve multiple texts in thematic units, so that they

then design their own inquiry units using various architectures that enable inquiry across multiple texts. Anzaldua, in the reading selection for the Difficult Text unit, writes about her use of different voices and languages (English and Spanish) to portray her multiple identities in terms of race (Spanish, Indian, White) and gender (female, lesbian). This introductory unit scaffolds students through a series of re-readings for a single selection as a model for ways to make such texts accessible for inquiry with students unaccustomed to inquiry and difficult texts. The sequence looks like this:

1. After a first reading in which students note significant moments in the essay, they write about Anzaldua's arguments—what she says in the essay.
2. The first re-reading focuses on ways in which they coped with Anzaldua's use of Spanish and English. They share that writing with peers in inquiry discussions to contrast peers' ways of coping with Anzaldua's polyglot style.
3. For a third re-reading, they identify specific language or moments that represents shifts in Anzaldua's different voices. They share this writing with peers in inquiry discussions to open a study of how voice appears and shifts in written language.
4. Students then return to their first writing and, based on responses to #2 and #3, write a revision of their initial interpretation of what Anzaldua is trying to say. Then they compose a quick-write about how this revised interpretation reflected a change in interpreting the text.
5. They share this writing with peers, noting specific aspects from the text that reflect the changes in their interpretations. They formulate further inquiry-questions as to what aspects of the text are still difficult to understand and remain unexplored.
6. Finally, they step back from the sequence of work to study the different interpretive strategies they used and what the teacher did to influence their use of these strategies, so that they reflectively develop meta-cognitive understandings of the work and its discourse.

These re-reading and reflection activities help students learn the value of re-reading of and posing questions about texts to attend to different aspects of a text. And, through sharing alternative interpretive strategies with peers, students are learning how to reflect on themselves as inquiring readers who are continually formulating new questions leading to new ways of reading and re-reading.

*Critiquing race, class, and gender differences as institutionally constituted.* Another measure of change could be the extent to which students are increasingly more likely to critique race, class, and gender differences shaping characters' practices in terms of institutional as opposed to individual terms. During our study, some of the students became increasingly more adept at identifying how institutional forces of discrimination, schooling, employment, the justice system, etc., influenced characters' practices. These critiques derive from the shift from perceiving characters or self in terms of first-person subject to third-person objects operating within systems (Kegan, 1994). For example, rather than explaining characters' economic plight in terms of their own innate characteristics, they began to attribute their plight to systemic forces limiting their economic or educational opportunities. Michelle noted that in the course, students grew increasingly aware of larger explanations for differences in race, class, and gender identities in terms of "why people are the way they are... and it might not be that person, it might be their culture and poverty level and whatever." This shift also involved moving away from a belief that conflicts can be solved through enhanced human relationships—people getting along better or caring more about each other—as opposed to framing conflicts as reflecting larger

institutional forces of racism, classism, or sexism (Beach, 1997). Michelle described this shift in terms of initially thinking that “we’re all the same and we all have equal chances” to an awareness of the various obstacles facing people “because of their race and their culture and how they grew up and all of the things that they had to deal with that I wouldn’t be white.”

#### *Summary*

In summary, conducting research on teaching literature requires focus on the intersection of texts, contexts/students, and teacher as mediated by discourses and cultural models. Tracking how students learn or change in literature classes involves studying how they take up the practices and stances operating in these classrooms relative to the practices and stances operating in the other worlds to which they are allied. A key factor in all of this is the degree to which they entertain the dialogic tensions and alternative perspectives operating in texts and contexts that invite them to shift their perspective to a third-person perspective and to interrogate status-quo discourses and cultural models. We need more long-term research in K-12 classrooms similar to that conducted with teachers (Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Lewis, Ketter, & Fabos, 2001) to identify those specific instructional practices that are most versus least likely to foster students’ taking up of alternative perspectives and amending their status-quo discourses and cultural models. And, we need more research on how teachers’ self-reflexive use of their own identities as “texts” (Jacobs, 2005) serves to model students’ self-reflexive practices in examining their discourses and cultural models. Finally, we need some understanding of how experiences with characters’ testimonies of past, historical horrific events influence students’ understanding of similar current events.

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