SOCIAL READING IN AN ADOLESCENT BOOK CLUB: CHANGING THE RULES

OF ENGAGEMENT

by

HOLLY BROOKS ISSERSTEDT

(Under the direction of Elizabeth A. St. Pierre)

ABSTRACT

This study is an exploration of discourses that govern reading in an adolescent, peer-led book club. Using critical theory to inform my inquiry the purposes of this study are (a) to delineate the discourses of black adolescent women that operate in a social reading setting, (b) examine the importance of cultural capital and hegemony with regard to literary talk and engagement with text, (c) determine if a book club setting is an effective method for creating dialog between a white teacher and black students about issues of cultural difference.

The participants were 3 black women in their junior year in a public suburban high school in a large southern city. The data were collected by individual interviews, field observations, tape recorded book club meetings, photographs and student journals. The interview data establishes these students as readers and indicates their current and past engagement with texts. The book club was constructed as a way for students to interact with a text that contains themes parallel to their own cultural and social experiences in an environment in which they could talk about and engage with the text with others of the same or similar culture. The book club discussion demonstrates how adolescent readers use literature as a catalyst for moral exploration and construction of future selves when there is a safe space provided in which to discuss these topics.

INDEX WORDS: Book Club, Cultural Hegemony, Cultural Capital, Reader
                 Response Theory, Western Canon

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For my mother
Whose unyielding sacrifices provided me endless opportunity for scholarship that
she as a single parent was unable to pursue. To her I owe my love of language and
literature, my feminist conviction, and my education principles. Her tireless fight for the
oppressed inspires and informs my research and my teaching. These words could never
fully express my gratitude for all of the love and support that she gives me.
My heart overflows.

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With my thesis complete, I feel as though a heavy load has been lifted from my shoulders (at least long enough to set my sights on my dissertation) and I am breathing a bit easier. I would like to express my sincere thanks to all who helped me achieve this milestone. I trust that my reader understands how empty words can be when the heart is full. I would like to acknowledge:

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Throw ten photojournalists in front of a burning house, and I guarantee you'll get ten different pictures of that house. One of them will snap a wide shot of the whole fiery mess. Another might focus in on a single window, a singed teddy bear smoldering on its sill, while a third might get distracted by the young couple who, oblivious to the blaze, are making out under the streetlight in the far distance.

This is a work of nonfiction. But this is also my story, my slide show, my burning house. Enter it knowing that beyond a few name changes here and there, every flame is real.

Deborah Copaken Kogan, Shutterbabe

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: *Loading*

While there is perhaps a province in which the photograph can tell us nothing more than what we see with our own eyes, there is another in which it proves to us how little our eyes permit us to see.
Dorothea Lange[1]

Reading is a primary human activity that begins before we are aware of its enormous impact on our lives. In our formative years, reading is a social event; a building block for acquiring our language and a tool for making sense of the world around us.[2] Who among us cannot recall with sentimentality a favorite children's book or memory of bedtime stories? But as our reading environment changes, so too does our experience as readers. Once we enter the classroom, the experience of reading is transformed into a formal and sequentially structured process that is often viewed as "an instrument to develop higher order cognitive skills" (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001, p. 3). As a result, reading is no longer a spontaneous act of leisure, but rather a "complex process involving knowledge of often tiny and confusable, visual symbols, of the principles underlying an orthography, and of strategies for comprehension" (Verhoeven & Snow 2001, p. 2).

At this point, home and school reading may diverge into two, often unrelated categories. For many, home reading remains an informal, pleasurable, social act; while school reading is more rigid and achievement based, thus more academic in nature. By

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[1] http:/www.afterimagegallery.com/quotes.htm
[2] I read several books prior to beginning my study on the reading experience and the stages of becoming a reader. General information drawn from such sources as J.A. Appleyard, *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction From Childhood To Adulthood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Terry Eagleton, *Literary theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

the time readers enter high school, the width of this division can reach its maximum.[3] Reading inside the class may be entirely removed from reading outside the class. It is this separation that encourages students to "divorce what they do as learners from what they do as people" (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991, p. 219), especially when cultures vary sharply from one environment to the other.

In this study, I was interested in exploring social[4] reading of three adolescent black[5] women and how it compares to their academic reading experiences. In addition, what are the cultural conventions that operate within each event? Specifically, how does cultural capital or lack thereof affect a reader's participation with a text and subsequent book talk in and out of the classroom? Does the presence of the Western canon in high school English classes marginalize minority readers when they do not possess adequate capital with which to participate? Furthermore, in what ways can social reading be used as a source for initiating a dialog among readers about issues of race, class and gender that might otherwise be avoided in a classroom setting?

Background of the Study

Recently, I participated in a faculty book club with several members of the Language Arts department at the high school where I teach. The purpose was to read and evaluate books in an effort to expand the multicultural literature available to our students.

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[3] This conclusion comes from widely held views about schooling and the inherent practices of high schools to produce a controlled reading environment (often dictated by standardized testing pressures, curriculum standards, and philosophies that govern education) wherein, "The teacher controls the topic, speaker, and pace. The result is that students construct their identities as passive agents who merely react to the teacher's directions" (McMahon & Raphael, 1997, p.13).

[4] Also commonly referred to as "recreational reading."

[5] The participants of this study do not label themselves as "African American" but rather "black." In order to maintain the integrity of the study, this will be the term used henceforth to identify these students. In the interest of continuity, the term "black" will also be used as a general category in places where "African American" might appear in similar contexts outside this study.

Ironically, the selection committee (book club members) consisted of ten all-white, middle-class English teachers. However, the book list made up for the diversity our committee lacked.[6] Though two of the titles were approved as additions to our existing curriculum,[7] I made some unsettling observations during the experience. First, I became aware of how fearful these teachers were of teaching a book representative of a culture of which they had little or no prior knowledge.[8] Additionally, I noticed how critical the group was of teaching texts outside the literary canon. It was clear from the conversations that occurred during the book club meetings that the teachers were overwhelmingly comfortable with the more traditional texts that reflect their own social and cultural perspectives by their comments in defense of the current book list and by their apprehension in examining new titles. Some of the teachers were completely against modifying our existing literature curriculum and participated in order to voice their opposition.

This experience, along with a graduate course taken concurrently that examined issues of racism in adolescent literature, led me to examine the contents of the curriculum where I teach and question my own level of comfort afforded by that curriculum. I wanted to become an advocate for minority students with regard to literature instruction in my school and work to create a more inclusive English curriculum in my district. However, before I could do this, I needed to understand more about the academic and

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[6] Among the titles to be evaluated were *The Bean Trees*, by Barbara Kingsolver (1989); *Momma Day*, by Gloria Naylor (1988); *Monkey Bridge*, by Lan Cao (1997); and *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko (1977).
[7] Neither of the two titles was added to the reading list for the grade level I teach. The approved titles were designated as 9th and 10th grade additions specifically because these courses are designated as World Literature. Interestingly, multicultural books have not yet been evaluated for 11th and 12th grade, which are American and British literature courses respectively.
[8] I perceived that the participants were primarily interested in the social aspects of the setting and obtaining development units because of their apparent ambivalence toward the purpose of the meeting. The books chosen were coined "token" approvals so that the county office sponsoring the project would have tangible evidence that we had accomplished our goal.

social reading of minority students and the cultural capital required to participate in literary talk in both settings in order for my voice to be credible. Because it was not possible to study every minority group and their reading experiences, I chose to conduct my study with black adolescent females in hopes that I could transfer some of my findings to other minority perspectives.

Prelude to the Study

The idea for this study evolved after an analysis of the literature curriculum in the school where I teach, in response to questions that emerged from the graduate course, and from my participation in the faculty book club previously explained. I include the findings of this analysis here for several reasons. First, to illustrate the differences in genre between academic and social reading selections of the participants and to offer some history as to the kinds of reading experiences in which the participants and I had been previously engaged as teacher and students that define the book club in this study as a unique, multidimensional event. In addition, this information foregrounds my position of white privilege in the classroom as reflected by the curriculum and the school culture, thus further illustrating the motivation for this study. As Nodelman (1996) explains, I wanted to "surface" cultural biases implicit in the texts I teach in my English class.

> Just as the texts of a male-dominated society inevitably express a male view as if it were a universal one, and thus ask women readers to think like men, the texts of a white-dominated society inevitably express a white view as if it were a universal one—and thus, ask African American or Native American readers to think like whites. Consequently, another way of reading against a text is to surface its assumptions about race and ethnicity. To what degree does the behavior of the characters represent racial or ethnic stereotypes? (p. 126)

The current school approved book list for the grade level in the school where I teach consists of thirty titles (see Appendix D): twenty-two written by white males, six written by white females, and two written by non-white females (one African American;

one Hispanic). There are none written by black males. Interestingly, of the six books

designated as "multicultural" selections, four were written by white authors; *Slave*

Dancer, by Paula Fox (1990); *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*,

by Mark Twain (1981/1977); and *The Education of Little Tree*, by Forrest Carter (1987).

Of course there is a debate among some scholars as to whether white authors can

accurately portray a multicultural experience in fictional literature and if doing so is

culturally irresponsible (Taxel, 1986; Aiken, 1988; MacCann, 1972; Sims, 1984).

Upon review of this list, I was astounded by the obvious cultural inequities among

the selection, specifically the limited representation of the black experience. Paulo Freire

(1973) might define my discovery as an example of "cultural invasion" (p. 133), the

process whereby the dominant culture infiltrates the minority cultures with their values,

in this case, values present and perpetuated through high school literature.

> In this phenomenon [cultural invasion], the invaders penetrate
> the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's
> potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon
> those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by
> curbing their expression. (p. 133)

Mark Twain (1977) defined race as "fiction of law and custom." Many believe that this

"fiction" is being operationalized everyday in high school literature and must be

examined if racism is ever to be eradicated in the school curricula (Morrison, 1990;

Davis, 2000). Black critics of white literature believe curriculums that claim to be

"raceless" (Collins, 2000; Davis, 2000; Morrison, 1990) are particularly dangerous

because they "cancel out black identity and difference" (Davis 2000, xiv). Morrison

(1990) explains that it is irresponsible not to critique "racialized discourse" (p. 7) present

in Western literature. She contends, "a criticism that needs to insist that literature is not

only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (p. 12).

Following my examination of the titles in our literature curriculum, I reflected on my own ideologies as a white English teacher of mostly white literature in a predominantly white school. I attempted to deconstruct some of my own racial assumptions and stereotypes in order to establish my starting point. What I discovered was that I had never been in a situation where I was on the receiving end of cultural exclusion in my literature classes. Most of the books I read and discussed with my students were "white." Subsequently, I was always in a position of power and privilege in my classroom. It was this realization that inspired and informed this study.

Focus of the Study

In this interpretative study, I will record the conversations of a specific reading event of three black female 11th grade students who attend a suburban high school in a large southeastern city. I will analyze their conversation transcripts and journals in order to understand how they negotiate issues of race, class and gender in response to texts. The study uses literature as a method of initiating dialog about difference among participants in an adolescent book club. This study focused on the following questions:

1.) How do black females talk about books in a social setting and how do they compare that event to their experience as academic readers?

2.) What is the role of cultural capital and hegemony in literary talk and engagement with texts in these settings?

3.) How can the reading and discussion of literature in a book club setting enable participants to talk about difference and issues of race, class, and gender?

Ball (1985) writes of teacher/student research, "The landscape is different depending on the particular hill you choose to stand on" (p. 28). Consequently, the book club is not a perfect model for knowing exactly what would happen if a similar experience took place outside this context, but it does provide information to inform other settings; specifically, the high school English classroom. Also, becoming a participant of this book club at the end of the study, gave me valuable insight about what it is like to interact with a text and engage in book talk as a person in the racial minority, when the themes of the text run counter to my own social and cultural experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The theories of reader response that explain how readers interpret and talk about a text are important in understanding how the participants of this study constructed individual and shared meaning around a text. Louise Rosenblatt (1938) describes reading as a process that incorporates the reader's experiences, thoughts, and emotions, which will vary depending on the text and the context in which it is read. She believes that reading is both transactional and emergent and that the meaning of the work depends upon the reader's state of mind at the time of the reading and the reader's previous life experiences.

Stanley Fish (1980) believes that meaning exists not in the text but with the reader, or rather the reading community. He explains, "The reader's activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded not as leading to meaning but as *having* meaning" (p. 158). Fish's theory of social construction explains that knowledge is not objective but rather socially conditioned. What the reader thinks and "knows" is an interpretation made possible by the reader's experience and the social and cultural

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environment in which he or she lives. Therefore, the reader's response to literature is culturally informed, and readers with similar cultural experiences who talk about books will naturally form an "interpretive community" (p. 14) as illustrated in this study.

Also significant to this study are critical theories including cultural capital and hegemony that offer a framework with which to critique the findings of this study with regard to inclusive and transformative literature instruction in English education. Such theories examine institutions, such as public schooling that non-coercively perpetuate values of the dominant culture typically defined as middle-class white values and subsequently denies those outside of mainstream culture access to power (Apple & Wexler, 1978).

<div align="center">Significance of the Study</div>

As society continues to diversify, schools must re-examine how multicultural education is defined. It is not enough to simply advertise our cultural consciousness. Teachers must actively question existing curriculum and implement strategies that consider all ethnicities. Educators must create lessons that invite participation from every student, not just those privileged by our traditional curriculum if schools are to become multicultural institutions (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991). Literature instruction, though only one medium for inclusive education, is a powerful way to initiate dialog among students about difference. As discussed in this study, racial difference is historically underscored in literature discussions in many high school English classes.

Kutz and Roskelly (1991) incorporate Vygotsky's (1962) studies on human cognition when examining what it means to be a multicultural teacher, "[Vygotsky] insists on the dialectic between individual and society that develops thought and language" (p. 111). It

is not possible to separate students from their reality that exists outside the classroom. Knowledge formed inside the class is influenced by experiences outside the class. One experience continually informs the other, and it is unrealistic to think we can teach in a vacuum.

Freire (1973) discovered in his literacy study of Brazilian peasants that an important function of the educator is to become immersed in the community of learners and introduce teaching methods that connect learners with their individual lived experiences, which "cannot be done from the top down, but only from the inside out" (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991, p. 111). The book club model in this study seeks to accomplish this methodology in two ways. First, it creates a space to examine social book talk of black adolescent women and provides a comparative model for examination of the cultural capital required for academic reading and book talk participation. Secondly, toward the end of the study I am positioned "inside" the book club rather than as an outside observer to better understand the position of minority in a reading community.

Only when teaching becomes a collaborative effort between teacher and student does learning become a process by which to draw on the entire social and cultural experiences collectively available. In this way, literature instruction can be used to expand "active learning" of other cultures inside and outside the classroom (Freire, 1985, p. 85). This study illustrates how literature can be used as an instrument for expanding available perspectives among readers.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: *View Finding*

The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled.
John Berger[9]

Years ago when I first began using a 35mm camera, I distinctly remember the disappointment upon developing my first roll of film. The photographs were just squares of black—none of the images were discernable. I went home and closely examined my camera for any visible defects or improper settings. I found nothing. Then, it occurred to me that the reason my photographs were dark was I had not used sufficient light. This absence of light made it impossible for the images to be seen.

As I gained experience as a photographer, I began to understand the importance of light and the dramatic ways in which it can be used to illuminate not only the image being photographed but also the context in which the image exists. This technique, called *chiaroscuro*, an Italian word that literally translates "light dark," transformed my work as a photographer. I discovered that light could be used to surface those images, those details of images to which I most wanted to draw attention. By blending the values of light and dark, I could take an object and strengthen its depth and dimension.

Similarly, as I construct theory in qualitative research, I must decide where to focus the light and what to leave in shadow. The critical theory informing my work sheds new light on the images herein, and provides a greater sense of clarity and purpose, but it is that which remains in darkness that provides new possibilities for discovery. It is

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[9] John Berger. *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin (1972)

this mixing of light and dark, the known and the unknown, that perpetuates my state of inquiry beyond this study.

Plato's allegory of the cave from his dialogue *The Republic*, suggests that the search for knowledge and understanding is a long and arduous process but until we commit ourselves to find the light, we are trapped within our own limited perspectives. The importance of the allegory to this study lies in Plato's belief that there are invisible truths under the apparent surface of things that only the most enlightened can grasp (Bloom, 1968). Further, if we are to see the reality of the world in which we live, rather than a limited and shadowy representation of it, "it is essential that all society's members possess a clear understanding of difference. In order to develop such clarity, people need to be literate in multiple ways of perceiving and speaking about reality" (Leistyna, Woodrum & Sherbom, 1996, p. 9). One of the ways this is accomplished is by creating spaces where differences among ideology, experience, and language can be explored. Once this space is created, however, what are the theories available to understand the discourses that operate therein?

Text and Meaning

Examining the ways in which readers derive meaning from text is central to the understanding of this study. Rosenblatt (1938) was one of the early critics to articulate theories that defined reading as an integrated relationship between reader and text, an idea that challenged the theories of New Criticism that there exists a "correct" understanding and judgment of literature (Richards, 1929). Rosenblatt distinguishes between two unique modes of reading: (1) *efferent;* the desire to take something away from the reading; and (2) *aesthetic;* what the reader is "living through during his [her] relationship with that particular text" (p. 25). Sumara (1996) defines these two processes

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as a "form of cultural rewriting—a purposeful construction and reconstruction of thoughts and ideas that emerge from the transaction between reader and text" (p. 27). Rosenblatt (1938) favored reading events like the book club setting created in this study that allows the reader to respond naturally to the text without the constraints often imposed on the reader and the text in an academic setting.

Other transactional theories significant to the book club experience recognize also the contributions of the reader, how readers simultaneously construct their own narrative through the text while they are reading (Faust, 2000; Fish 1980, Iser 1980, Smagorinsky, in press, Sumara, 1996). Meaning is constructed by both the reader's lived experiences and the conventions that emerge while reading (Smagorinsky, in press), which also counters the New Criticism theories that emphasize derivation of meaning from a close analysis of literature rather than the influences of a reader's human experience. Not only do the reader's past experiences determine what the reader will create from the work, but also immediate needs, priorities, and physical environment affect the connection of reader to text.

Several times during this study, participants compared and contrasted their social to their academic reading experiences. Slatoff (1970), who is theoretically aligned with Rosenblatt, suggests that examining a reader's response to literature is a much more difficult and complex proposition than examining the text alone, which may explain the reluctance of teachers at Jackson High School to alter their methods of literature instruction. The book club setting in this study provides a space for examining traditional methods of reading and talking about books often used in English education. Slatoff believes that it is almost impossible for readers to agree on an individual work of

literature considering the vast differences that exist among those readers. Furthermore, part of understanding a reader's response to text requires acknowledgement that emotion and intellect are not isolated properties. Thus, the psychological aspect of a reader's response must be considered.

Holland (1975) was also concerned with the psychological responses of the reader and how a reader's inner and outer reality contributes to the construction of meaning. He describes how a reader goes through several psychological processes during an engagement with a text including a transformation or catharsis that eventually leads to greater intellectual insight.

Theories of psychological response are particularly significant when researching adolescent readers because they use literature to hypothesize about situations in order to consider the adults they may become. According to Applebee (1978), adolescents have two responses to texts: analysis and generalization. Analysis occurs when the reader is only concerned with the mechanical structure of a text. Generalization, which is based on analysis, is an attempt to discover meaning about specific components within the text, such as theme, rather than simply deconstructing the individual parts. Literature response is a way for adolescents to articulate their perception of the world, as well as serving as a catalyst for social and moral development of future selves. Because adolescents can respond to a particular character or situation within the text, they can displace the actual emotion they are feeling, minimizing the personal risk when discussing text in a reading community.

Purves and Beach (1972) found that cultural values and socialization patterns in America influence adolescent reading interests and their responses to the texts they read.

Additionally, many literacy theorists believe that literature provides a feeling of emotional and psychological fulfillment for adolescents (Burton, 1966; Gill, 1980). Therefore, it is logical that adolescents need opportunities to engage in authentic reading experiences if they are to become life-long readers. However, so often English education privileges only certain adolescents as members of the reading community—those who "speak the language and posses cultural capital that more closely matches that of the mainstream" (Bartolome, 1994, p. 174).

<div align="center">Cultural Hegemony and Cultural Capital</div>

Cultural hegemony theory was developed by the Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci who proposed that dominant groups maintain power and protect common class interests through the non-coercive use of cultural institutions including through the use of traditional curriculum taught in public schools (Boggs, 1976). The notion of hegemony articulated by Gramsci and other Marxist theorists is the permeation in society of a dominant ideology. It is defined by Giddens (1997) as "shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups" (p. 583) that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations.

Cultural hegemony theory provides a framework for critiquing a traditional literature curriculum that often excludes minority participation and for examining ways to construct a more inclusive model so that all members of the learning community have an opportunity to engage and contribute. In one of his notebooks, Gramsci (1971) asks, "Is it better to think, without critical awareness…or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world" (p. 323). This study

uses literature to initiate dialog about difference and to critique socially and culturally influenced world views of the reader.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony calls for more than simply raising cultural awareness; it is an active process of consciously working to transform the existing system. Bourdieu's (1994) theory of cultural capital helps to understand how theories of hegemony work. Bourdieu examines power and control in relation to culture, and uses both to explain the inequities among cultures. The term "cultural capital" (or general cultural knowledge) refers to "capital" (similar to economic capital) that can be transmitted by inheritance and invested in order to be cultivated. It is the possession of this "capital" that makes groups of people "fit" or "unfit" for success (Apple & Wexler, 1978, pp. 34-43). Schools often propagate the class habits of the privileged class and reject other cultural dispositions. The cultural capital of the dominant class and ethnicity is often disguised as neutrality or autonomy.

In this study, the participants attended a predominantly white high school where predominantly white literature is taught. Subsequently, the women often lacked the cultural capital required to participate in literary discussions in the English classroom and therefore did not have the opportunity to assert linguistic and cultural competencies in their classes. The book club formed within this study provides a model for examining the significance of possessing adequate cultural capital when participating as a member of a reading community.

Summary

This study describes the many discursive systems at work when the reader transacts not only with the text, but with other readers. In a book club setting, the text serves as the "location for communal interpretation," also known as a "commonplace text" (Sumara, 1996), whereby multiple contributions change the individual's meaning of that text. In group reading, self understanding (identity) occurs during the process of engaging in relationships with others. As readers interpret themselves, they also interpret one another (Sumara, 1996). Thus, the reader's personal and communal identity is constantly changing as it is informed by his or her own and others' perspective. Past identities are redefined in light of new experiences.

In order for a reading community to authentically engage with the text and each other, readers must acknowledge "the inherent relationship among ideology, power, and language and, thus, between language and experience" (Leistyna, Woodrum & Sherbom, 1996, p. 9) that exists within that community. Once this occurs, readers will have a deepened awareness of the realities that shape their own lives and the lives of others.

In this study, I am interested in more than just a discussion of the issues surrounding multicultural literacy. My aim is to understand the power structures at work in reading communities and how that knowledge transfers to English education. By doing so, I can better determine what modification must be made in my own classroom to provide space for those voices that are not being heard.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY: *Focusing*

When I photograph, what I'm really doing is seeking answers to things.
Wynn Bullock[10]

The theories informing this study allowed me numerous possibilities with regard to data collection and analysis. I wanted to identify academic and social reading discourses specific to women, in particular, black adolescent women. I wanted to conduct a qualitative study in which I interviewed women individually and as a group about their engagement with literature inside and outside the high school English class and also observe their participation in a book club setting. Each aspect of the research design will be presented in this chapter.

Timeline of the Study

The study began in September 2001 with the selection of participants. Following participant selection, I conducted initial surveys on September 5, 2001 for the purposes of collecting data about the women's previous experience as readers and about their personal histories. Once the surveys were completed, I interviewed each participant from September 16, 2001 to September 21, 2001 in order to obtain data about their attitudes and experiences regarding reading inside and outside the classroom. Transcription of the data began on September 17th, following the first interview. The participants kept a reading journal beginning October 11, 2001 in which they recorded their reflections on the study. I collected the journals on March 15, 2002. The book club meetings were held on October 11, 2001, November 16, 2001, December 20, 2001, January 21, 2002 and

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[10] http:/www.afterimagegallery.com/quotes.htm

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March 8, 2002, respectively, at local restaurants. Data collection was completed on

March 11, 2002 when I conducted final follow-up interviews. I coded data throughout

the course of the study and began writing the manuscript following the last book club

meeting on March 8, 2002. The final draft of the study was completed on April 10, 2002.

Participants

The participants of this study were three 17-18 year old women in their junior

year at a large suburban public high school in a large southeastern city. In the school

where the study was conducted, the demographics are as follows: 71.3% Caucasian,

20.9% African American, 5.5% Asian, and 2.3% Hispanic.[11] I wanted to study African

American women because I feel that they are one of the more underrepresented

minorities in the high school literature I teach. I distributed 65 flyers to recruit female

participants for my study to students I was currently teaching or had taught in the last

year. I chose to solicit students with whom I already had a teacher/student relationship in

order to provide continuity inside and outside the classroom. In the interest of time, I

wanted to have already established rapport with my participants, and I wanted some prior

knowledge of their academic motivation and attendance to increase the chances of regular

participation and completion of my study.[12] The context of the study was only briefly

explained in the flyer, so I held an introductory meeting with all interested participants.

During the meeting, I explained the criteria for eligibility: (1) students must be female,

(2) students must be willing to read four novels and meet outside of class for a period of

one hour each month to discuss the readings, (3) students must have access to

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[11] These percentages were taken from the 2002 Student Demographic Report constructed by The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) committee which provides local accreditation.

[12] The flyer was distributed to all three categories of academic "leveling" as designated by my school (which included all but Special Education categories.) Grade Point Average was not a criterion.

transportation to the meeting site, the location of which would be mutually determined by the participants of the group, (4) students must participate in a survey of their experience as readers, (5) students must agree to be tape recorded, (6) students must agree to be photographed for illustrative purposes. I assumed that the photographs would provide additional data for the study.

A total of ten women expressed interest in the study based on the criteria for participation. Of these ten, three of the women agreed to participate upon hearing the detailed requirements of the study. All of the students who agreed to participate were included in the study. The women were acquaintances but did not label themselves "close friends." However, the women shared a common interest and enthusiasm for the study: reading and discussing literature.

Methods of Data Collection

Data collection took place over the course of five months (September 2001-March 2002). I began recruiting participants at the beginning of the first semester of school and collected data continually until three months into the second semester. After the participants were selected for the study, I gave them a consent form in a sealed envelope which they were to return to me at the time of their first interview signed by them as well as their legal guardian(s). I scheduled an interview appointment with each student when I hand-delivered each consent form. All of the interviews took place after school in my classroom. During the first meeting, I collected the signed consent forms, distributed an initial survey, and asked each participant to provide a pseudonym to be used throughout the study.

<u>The Survey</u>

The initial survey (Appendix A) was used only to establish a general reading history of each participant. I was interested in determining any similarities or differences among members of the group that might account for specific reading traits of each student, including motivation (Holdaway, 1979), social contexts (Bloome & Green, 1984), or tendencies for lifelong reading (R.C. Anderson et al., 1984). I was operating under the assumption that "the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity" (Delpit, 1995, p. 53).

<u>The Interviews</u>

I conducted two interviews with participants: one before the book club meetings began and one immediately following the final book club meeting. As I anticipated, the interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes. Prior to beginning the interview process, I created a general interview guide (Patton, 1990) in order to obtain consistent data among the participants. Though I began each interview with the same question and tried to maintain continuity from one interview to the next, I did tailor the questions to the participants' responses. I omitted two questions that seemed problematic after my first interview; these questions are noted in the interview guide in Appendix B. I felt as if this information would be better obtained though observation in the book club setting. Questions dealing with contemporary black issues in literature were not included in the initial interview but should have been. Therefore, I conducted a brief focus group interview (see Appendix C), a debriefing of sorts, at the completion of the study to obtain data on this topic. The session lasted about 30 minutes. Other than the two changes

noted above, no other modifications to the interview guide or the research design process were needed.

My reason for conducting an individual interview was to begin a dialog with my participants so that they were encouraged to reflect on their experience as readers inside and outside the classroom, and more specifically, to examine how these experiences were influenced by race, class, and gender. Additionally, I wanted to establish trust between myself and my participants to attempt to "minimize status differences" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 370) that inherently exist between student and teacher. In the initial interviews, participants were asked to produce a narrative about their engagement with literature and its importance in their lives. The tone was often conversational, though sometimes they spoke passionately about the injustice of the under-representation of black culture, specifically modern black culture, in traditional high school literature and the whiteness of the Western canon.[13] Of course it was impossible for me not to be their white English teacher as I listened to them talk.

Overall, the participants spoke easily and without reservation about their experiences as readers and about how they use literature to fantasize about their adult lives. Occasionally, I suspected that the participants censored their responses somewhat, perhaps anticipating that I would react as a teacher. However, this did not happen with regularity.

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[13] My participants referred to literature taught in the schools as "school books." I have taken the liberty of using its more academic label; Western canon. The "white books" described by these students are often critiqued by researchers concerned with equality in public schooling. Toni Morrison (quoted in Roediger, 1998) comments, "It seems that the canon of American literature is 'naturally' or 'inevitably' white. In fact it is studiously so. In fact these absences of vital presences in Young American literature may be the insistent fruit of the scholarship rather than the text" (p. 210).

The Journals

Students kept informal journals in which they recorded any thoughts they had during the course of the study. I did not set any parameters regarding their entries. I asked them simply to view their journals as notebooks in which to record any thoughts or feelings that emerged during the project. The participants began journaling on October 11, 2001. Two of the participants wrote long, detailed entries while the third wrote only limited responses. The content of the writing ranged from questions about the literature to reflections on the book club meetings. I collected the journals on March 15, 2002, about a week after the final book club meeting.

The Book Club Meetings

Reading groups are not a new phenomenon, though Oprah[14] might have been the first to create national media attention around their existence. Hartley (2001) traces group reading as far back as the Romans and hypothesizes that reading groups may have originated as a practical solution for sharing books or manuscripts before printing became affordable. Recent studies show that reading groups are gaining in popularity. "We may think of reading as something solitary and private—'a lone voyage,' it's sometimes called—but the impulse to share can be powerful" (Hartley, 2001, pp. 1-2).

Book clubs have varied definitions depending on their purpose, participants, and context in which they occur. Though adult book club research is limited, we know that very often they take the form of a "social interest group" or "literary society" (Hartley,

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[14] Oprah's Book Club began in 1996 when the famous talk-show host announced that she wanted to 'get the country reading.' Hartley (2001) found that the show receives 10,000 letters a month from viewers wanting to participate. By the time the show airs, 500,000 viewers have already read at least part of the book. Oprah is the most successful marketer in the history of publishing: Since the first Book Club aired, she has been responsible for 28 consecutive best-sellers (sales reaching 20m books), and has earned publishers roughly $175m. (4-5)

2001, p. 35). However, in recent years, educational researchers have investigated models of group reading; Literature Circles (Daniels, 1994) and Book Clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997) as a method for literacy instruction in the classroom. The book club in this study more closely resembles the first, though research in both categories is applicable.

The rationale for using this method of data collection was to observe students interacting with each other and the text. More recent research on adolescent reading has included the significance of recognizing literacy as a *social* event as well as an academic one (Bloome & Greene, 1984). Following the interviews, I met with participants (who will also be referred to as "members") to discuss criteria for book selection. Glesne (1999) suggests that the researcher should consider ways to include research participants in the research process (p. 86). Therefore, I wanted the members to select their own books for the study. The only criterion I required was that they choose trade fiction that would be quite different from the canonical literature of the English classroom.[15] I suspected that the members would not select books that could be read in school, those that meet the rigorous censoring process for approval by the school district. However, I thought most of the popular fiction that they might choose to read would still contain themes that would foster literary thinking.

The members decided on a democratic selection process in which each member of the group would choose one book and then they would together select the fourth. Sumara (1996) states, "Choosing this book over that is to choose one complete fabric of relations over another, for in pulling one thread of the curricular fabric, we alter the whole thing"

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[15] The study focused on works of fiction in the high school American literature class. I sought to study the participants with regard to similar genres of reading inside and outside the classroom.

(p. 6). Therefore, I felt it was important that the book selection be completely determined

by the participants. I did not at any time make suggestions or participate in this part of

the process.

Purves and Beach (1972) found that students choose books with characters and

events that are closely related to their own experiences. I have found in my years of

teaching that adolescents often draw from the experiences of the character(s) in the

novels they read; therefore it was not surprising that all of the titles chosen were by

African American authors.

All of the novels selected are listed by major book sellers under the category of

"African American fiction." The books selected were as follows (listed in the order in

which they were read): *Men Cry in the Dark*, by Michael Baisden (2001); *Between*

Lovers, by Eric Jerome Dickey (2001); *The Harris Men*, by R. M. M. Johnson (2000) ;

The Bluest Eye, by Toni Morrison (1970); *When You Look at Me;* by Undra E. Biggs

(1999).[16]

Members decided that they would read each book in its entirety and then meet to

discuss their reading. The book clubs met on October 11, 2001, November 16, 2001,

December 20, 2001, January 21, 2002 and March 8, 2002, respectively. In keeping with

the social nature of the book club, the women met at local restaurants to conduct their

discussions.

Except for the final meeting that is detailed in Chapter V, I was present but not a

participant. I usually sat at a table about five yards away from the group. From my

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[16] During the course of data collection, some key issues were raised that I wanted to address as an
addendum to the manuscript. As a result, I decided to add an additional book club meeting at the end of the
study in which I participated, and this is the text the group selected. The details of this addition are
explained in Chapter V.

location, I was not close enough to hear their conversations being audio taped, but I took field notes of the participant's body language, voice inflections, and silences. I hoped my presence would not be a significant source of distraction to the students because my goal was to have them engage in "exploratory" discussions (Barnes, 1993), and pursue their own questions while taking ownership of the conversation (Freire, 1973). I decided to sit apart from their meeting so their discourse would follow the natural ebb and flow of a social peer dialog. The only disadvantage I noted in retrospect was that I was not able to observe their facial expressions while they were talking. Facial expressions might have given me a better sense of the emotions they were experiencing during their conversations.

The purpose of the book club was to allow me to collect data about the ways in which the members read and talked about books; specifically how the readers "support greater understanding of texts" (McMahon & Raphael, 1997, p. 51). In addition, I wanted to observe the social dynamics of their reading community, including but not limited to, observations of race, class, and gender. I instructed the members to begin tape recording as soon as they were seated. I asked them to record everything that transpired including the social exchanges at the beginning of the meeting (i.e. initial greetings and casual opening conversation not related to the book or components of the meeting.) After the first few minutes of each meeting, it seemed that the tape recorder was all but invisible as the members became engaged in the discussion.[17] Each meeting lasted anywhere from 90 to 120 minutes. The members rarely digressed from subjects not

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[17] There were a few awkward minutes of conversation at the beginning of each meeting that I attributed to the member's "awareness" of the recording device. After a few minutes, the members seemed more relaxed and by the end of the discussion, they would often comment that they had forgotten about the recorder. On several occasions, a member would say something like, "I hope we did not swear! I forgot all about the recorder."

related to a topic derived from the text. Even when one of the members would go off on a tangent, the conversation would gradually work its way back to the novel. The discussions were consistent with adolescent social behavior in which the members occasionally "over talked" each other and their voice inflection changed as their excitement level increased. They often interrupted one another when they expressed strong feelings about a character, situation, or theme. I did not observe any one member dominating the discussion, nor was there a member who contributed significantly less than the others. Additionally, each member was present at every meeting. In general, the book club meeting provided rich data, and each meeting was unique because the texts they discussed were different—the more controversial the topic of the text, the more controversial the discussion.

On the final meeting, held on March 8, 2002, I entered the group as a participant rather than an observer. I added this final book club meeting in response to questions that emerged during the course of data collection. In order to obtain adequate data for addressing these questions, I felt it was necessary for me to become part of the book club. I made no changes to the format of the meeting. The specifics of this decision and a description of the meeting are explained in Chapter V.

Photography

Sontag (1977) reminds us that we photograph what we deem important (p. 28). Photographs derive meaning from the context in which they are taken. The images are silent narratives about what is occurring in any given moment. They freeze exactly the contents of the scene. Recently, qualitative researchers have begun to recognize photography as a valid method of data collection in which there is much to be gained in

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the evaluation of "visual culture" (Mirzoeff, 1999). Collier and Collier (1986) suggest the camera is an instrumental extension of our senses as researchers, one that can record abstraction. One of the advantages of visual information is that it is another way we can communicate to others that which cannot be sufficiently communicated in written language (Walker, 1993). For example, there were many times during the study in which was unable to see the facial expressions of my participants that were captured on film. Collier and Collier (1986) give countless examples of how photography is used to provide evidence for a literal truth. The critical theories grounding this study leave open the possibility that there is not one objective reality; therefore, photography serves perfectly as another method for inquiry. Though the images themselves cannot explain anything, they do invite deduction, speculation, interpretation, and analysis (Sontag, 1977).

During the course of the study, I carried my camera every time I was anywhere the participants might be. I wanted the opportunity to observe them through the lens of the camera, often when they did not know I was watching. I had their permission to do so. I used a high-powered zoom lens so that I could remain a comfortable distance from my subjects without being noticed. During one meeting, I waited a few minutes before making my presence known so that I could watch them in action before they were aware of me. Though the women gave consent to be photographed under these circumstances, I was surprised when Kara and Lisa asked me at the end of the study, "Why did you decide not to take any pictures?" They were very surprised when I produced the twelve roles of film I took of them during the study.

My original purpose in using photography was to learn more about how my participants acted when they were not in the role of "research subject" or "student." However, I discovered something unexpected as I was developing the film. In the lunchroom, the bus line, the courtyard, the parking lot, and in the halls between classes, the women carried the books they were reading for the study. Sumara (1996) describes a similar occurrence in his study of group reading, "our commonplace location was comprised not only of our private readings and public sharing of those readings, but of the space of time between those readings" (p. 162). The study was bleeding into the routine of their daily lives. The photographs documented the obvious power of reading and its role in the lives of these women.

Data Analysis

I used several transcription conventions described in Glesne's (1999) text. For example, I devised "major clumps" and "subclumps" of data to facilitate a more concise method of separation of central themes. I also created analytic files as defined by Lofland (1971) for the purposes of tracking the "social processes under investigation." This method was especially helpful in organizing quotes from participants. I transcribed all tapes word for word. I was interested in both content and the nature of their conversation. Therefore, I documented any laughter, measurable pauses, and volume and tone changes during transcription as well as all recorded talk. I began transcription following the first interview and continued transcribing immediately following the collection of new data. I divided the tapes into two series that were "interviews" and "book clubs" to avoid any mixing of data during transcription. I listened to each tape

twice before beginning transcription to become immersed in the data. I used the same transcription conventions for all tapes.

<u>The Process</u>

During the months of data collection and transcription (October 2001-March 2002), I recorded thoughts about and responses to the study in a written journal and on microcassette tapes that I carried with me almost everywhere I went. In the journal, I wrote down questions, issues, and possible strategies for writing the study. I used the microcassette recorder to record similar thoughts when I could not write (for example, while I was driving to work in the mornings or walking on the treadmill.)

As part of my journaling process, I considered the assumptions I brought to the study and the ethics of using my own students as participants in this study. I assumed that the students would continue to behave in a way that did not violate our teacher/student relationship but also assumed they would, during the course of the project, take ownership of the study and feel less inhibited around me. I monitored my own subjectivity throughout the project and also noted unusual behavior from participants or incidents that made me uncomfortable. For example, I noted several times when I perceived participants to be overly conscious of my presence or believed they gave contrived responses intended to impress me. Because these girls were also my students, I carefully avoided any conversation about the project with them during regular class periods. I paid particular attention to any instances when our dialog felt too intimate and renegotiated my approach. I tried to establish rapport with my participants without forming emotional friendships (Glesne, 1999, pp. 102-103). In other words, I

did not allow the personal dialog of our conversations during the study and the relaxed nature of the book club meetings to extend into the classroom setting.

Once all the interviews and book club meetings were completed and the tapes transcribed, I began to review the 260 pages of transcription. On the computer, I used color-coded highlighting to mark chunks of data I wanted to revisit. When I had read every page through once, I printed the document and read it again making marginal notes and preliminary code designations above the text. On a separate Excel spreadsheet, I used the page numbers of the transcripts to organize data into major categories. I used the same codes for the participants' journals and their interview transcripts. My research questions guided data analysis; that is, I coded data that addressed those questions. I paid particular attention to the ways in which the setting seemed to influence conversations, because I found the social setting of these meetings particularly important to the outcome of the study.[18] Once coding and analysis were complete, I began writing the final manuscript.

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[18] The restaurant appeared to foster what I will call an "Oprah" discourse. When I overheard participants mentioning these meetings to friends, it was always with language that glamorized the event. I got the feeling this "meeting over dinner to discuss a book" was also perceived as a time for the women to step out of their adolescent roles into an assumed adult role in a social setting.

CHAPTER IV

REPRESENTATION: *Developing*

*Photography, as a powerful medium of expression and communication, offers
an infinite variety of perception, interpretation and execution.*
Ansel Adams[19]

For the past eight months, I have felt like a troubadour strolling the halls of my

school trying to sum up the grandeur of this study into a comprehensible sound bite. But

attempting to do so minimizes the complexity of the project and compromises the

integrity of my findings. My topic made administrators and faculty nervous. Race is just

not a word that is used inside the walls of this school. During one conversation, one of

my colleagues even suggested in a whispered voice, "Why don't you just concentrate on

literacy? Wouldn't that be so much safer than racism?" Safer? What exactly did she

mean by "safer"? It never occurred to me that I might be in danger. The reaction from

my students who knew about the study was just the opposite. They would linger after

class to ask me questions about my research or would observe with interest a book or

journal article related to the study sitting on my desk. For them, race is not a four-letter

word to whisper behind closed doors. It is a real and powerful force in their lives. *Their*

nervousness comes when we attempt to sweep it under the rug or pretend it doesn't exist.

I often wondered how long it would take these students to become victims of denial—

products of social conditioning who believe it is not "safe" to disrupt the status quo and

bastardize cultural norms with the language of resistance.

These inquiries by my colleagues made me acutely aware of the ways in which I

negotiated my role as teacher, researcher, and southern, middle-class, white female

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[19] http://www.afterimagegallery.com/quotes.htm

during the course of this study. It was exhausting to be forever changing my hat, and yet one role always bled into another. I would often step outside myself and examine how my own ideologies affected my responses to those who watched me with skepticism. I have trampled on sacred ground here. I have questioned the unquestionable.

This study is a glimpse into the lives of three black high school women whose responses are not representative of their entire race, class, or gender, and yet their narratives cannot be discounted as unique. Within their story exists significant opportunity for understanding these findings as they apply in relation to a larger context. To explore the experiences of these women is to simultaneously examine practiced pedagogies of high school literacy instruction and multicultural education.

This study is not an attempt to rewrite the laws of traditional education nor is it a lecture from a soapbox. It is an aside to an already existing dialog—another chapter in a book already written. Multicultural literacy is hardly a new idea. But in the re-examination of that which is familiar, we discover that there is still so much we have overlooked, so much we have assumed, so much we must question. This study is a road re-traveled. Chapter IV is a documentation of this passage.

The Members

In the broadest sense, narrative is anything told or recounted; more specifically, it is something told or recounted in the form of a story or a tale. Kutz and Roskelly (1991) define narrative as it is applicable to this study.

> Narrative—as represented in the stories we tell all the time, in all of our conversations—is the most basic form in which we interpret and in effect, create the world. In telling stories and recounting events, people select from the flow of experience a sequence of elements perceived as related and important. Through that selection of events, through the words used to reconstruct them, as well as through explicit statements, people demonstrate what they believe events mean

and why they're significant, and that demonstration constitutes their interpretation. (p. 241)

The women of this study constructed narratives that enabled engaged dialog to occur (Rosenblatt, 1978; Rabinowitz, 1987; Sumara, 1996). This narrative, which is "the result of discursive praxis rather than something that has ontological or epistemological priority" (Sumara, 1996, p. 122), is the process of establishing a sense of self or identity. Kerby, as explained by Sumara (1996), believes identity, which is constituted by language, is an interpretive activity rather than simply a reflection of the past.

> The meaning of any memories of the past that are re-presented through language of narration are never fixed or final, but are continually re-written in light of present circumstances. The excavation of the past within the context of the present, because it is always an interpretation, is a selective and imaginative activity…Our sense of personal identity is not something that develops through a process of accretion where new experiences are simply piled up on top of old ones. Instead, identity is constantly in the process of being written through the narrative interpretations we give our remembered past, our lived present, and our projected future. (pp. 122-123)

Narratives constructed by the participants were influenced by how they have been culturally and socially situated. Many of the stories these women shared had never before been told. Their interest in this study was in large part a desire to have their voices heard and documented. All of these women had a story to tell, they just had no forum in which to tell it and no one to record it. Therefore, I became, in a sense, their biographer.

Dana

Dana was born and raised in the suburban area of a large southern city where the study takes place. She is the middle of five children. Her biological mother and father married when she was six months old and divorced when she was thirteen. Both of her parents

are college graduates. Her mom is a government employee. Her father was a crack addict from the time Dana was seven. Dana currently has no relationship with her biological father, his whereabouts unknown. Dana lives with her mother and two younger siblings. She has one brother in college, and her oldest brother is serving time in federal prison for dealing cocaine. Her mother, who Dana claims is the most influential person in her life, encouraged her to read from a young age. Dana believes that her love of reading comes from her mother. She says, "books were the one thing we always had, no matter how bad things ever got, we could always, just, you know, read."

Kara

Kara was born in a small town in Pennsylvania but moved to the southeast when she was eight. Her biological parents married when she was four months old and divorced when she was two. Her mother remarried when Kara was three. She is the oldest of four siblings. Neither of her biological parents graduated from college, and both her mother and step-father are self-employed. Three years ago she reconnected with her biological father whom she had not spoken to since her parents' divorce. She says her maternal grandmother is the most influential person in her life though she has a close relationship with her mother. She believes that she independently discovered her love of reading, "I have always been a reader. Books have always been my salvation, my escape. It is not that my existence is unpleasant, but in my eyes there is always a higher level of perfection. That is what I look for in books."

Lisa

Lisa, an only child, was born in California where she lived with her biological mother until she was nine months old at which time she was removed from the home and placed

in foster care. Her biological mother and father never married. Her biological father, who had relinquished parental rights at birth, adopted Lisa when she was three and they moved to the southeast. Lisa's father married when she was four and she lived with her father and step-mother until three years ago when she moved in with her paternal grandmother and aunt. Lisa says that her reading, which began as escapism, is an important part of her life. She explains, "I used to spend most of my time locked in my room with my nose in a book to avoid my step-mother. After awhile, reading just became part of who I am."

One Block from the Country Club

The study takes place in a suburb outside a large southern city. The three women of this study attend Jackson High School,[20] which currently enrolls about 2500 students in grades 9-12 and is approximately 72% white. The school is situated within several upper to middle class housing developments and is one block from an almost exclusively white country club neighborhood. It is ranked one of the most affluent public schools in the state.[21] The political atmosphere of the school, maintained by administrators, is conservative in nature and reflects the values of the predominantly white, Bible-belt community it serves.

Social and Academic Reading

Adolescent reading generally occurs in two spaces: academic and social. Though one may be both an academic and a social reader, discourses in the school setting vary from those in the social setting. Another distinction is that social reading is an unconscious process, while academic reading is a conscious one (Kutz & Roskelly,

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[20] A pseudonym is used to protect the participants of this study.
[21] This comes from on-line data that report demographic information and socioeconomic ranking of this school (determined by household income and percentage of "free lunches")

1991). An academic reader must consciously work to understand the text in order to be successful. Academic reading is a structured, performance-based event in which students are led to find the meaning of the text. In many cases, the academic reader has no voice in text selection and must complete specified activities (chapter summaries, writing assignments, quizzes, etc.) during the reading process. School reading is often teacher-led rather than peer-led, frequently with predetermined objectives (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991, pp 189-202). Social reading is more often an activity of leisure that has no fixed purpose or assessment.   It is important to recognize, however, that both experiences are defined by the individual reader.

A social reader engages with a text as a pleasurable experience without the constraints imposed by academic reading. However, meaning from any text is derived from past and present reading experiences. One of the growing trends in academic and social reading is group reading: the private reading of a common book and the public discussion of that reading among peers (Hartley, 2001).

Culture and Curriculum

There are various theories about how meaning is constructed and to what degree social and cultural experiences influence the way we learn.   As the pendulum swings between opposing ideas about how knowledge is formed and to what degree our social and cultural experiences affect that formation, public school curriculum and teaching methods reflect the changing political climate of education. Though diversity is certainly advertised as a priority in public education, many schools continue to promote multiculturalism using a "one size fits all" curriculum.

Piaget's (1959) theories of cognitive development explain that in many ways revolutionized educational thinking is largely an examination of how children use language "egocentrically" to understand the physical world. Vygotsky (1962) challenged Piaget's theories of development claiming, "they are not laws of nature but historically and socially determined" (55). Thus, acknowledging the cultural differences of children is an important part of understanding how they learn. In a comparison between the two theories, Kutz and Roskelly (1991) noted the influence of these theories on modern public schooling as follows:

> The social context that provides the language for thought is also a cultural context—one in which things are perceived and represented in special ways, laden with meaning and values. Piaget's world, the world of Western scientists, focused on the physical universe and valued particular kinds of thinking—and this focus determined what Piaget saw. Vygotsky, in a post revolutionary Russian society where major upheavals of class and society led to questions about how social change shaped people's thinking, added new questions to those Piaget had asked. Because he was asking different questions, Vygotsky saw much that Piaget hadn't seen. (44)

In many ways schools seem to be designing curricula that accommodate diversity and individuality, but it cannot be overlooked that public schools are still largely institutions enforcing the political and social order of dominant culture. Freire's (1973) contention that education is tailored for the privileged few is still applicable today, and schools are "reproductive sites that smoothly provide the knowledge, skills, and social relations necessary for the functioning of the capitalist economy and dominant society, public education no longer provides the tools for critical thinking and transformative action" (xi).

Generally speaking, high school English/Language Arts curriculum consists of grammar, literature, reading, and writing instruction in no particular order. This study

focuses specifically on the literature portion of that curriculum as it applies to the three women of this study. Literature instruction makes up the largest percentage of their high school English curriculum, and of that percentage, approximately half are supplementary[22] novels classified as canonical literature. The language of the high school curriculum "standards," or "objectives" has been modified several times to "serve both political and administrative ends" (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991), but the English content has changed very little since my school opened over a decade ago.[23] Newer approaches to literature instruction such as reader response and alternative assessment are evident in updated textbooks in the English classroom. However, even though the instruction models have changed over the years, the literature itself has remained about the same.

The lack of representation of black females in canonical literature is troubling for the women of this study. Finders (1997) found in her study of adolescent girls and their literacy practices that, "seeing roles and relationships in print documented one's social position" (p. 23). Because the literature taught at Jackson High School is largely within an "androcentric literary canon, men are able to see themselves (or possibilities of themselves), while women are forced to become Other—to adopt a male persona, to see themselves as male, and to participate in an experience that can never be theirs" (Obbink,

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[22] Novels that are included as part of the curriculum in addition to the literature textbook.
[23] This information from interviews of teachers who had been there since the school's inception.

1992, p. 39). As a result, females will often withdraw from classroom literature discussions. Therefore, the black women of this study whose representation in literature is even more limited than black males or that of their white counterparts are doubly silenced (Proweller, 1999).

Since the early 1990's, scholars have been debating *political correctness*, *multiculturalism*, and the status of the *Western Canon* across the United States (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997, p. 283). Proponents of canonical literature (Bennett; 1984; Bloom, 1994; Bloom, 1987; D'Souza; 1991; Siegel, 1991) believe that the Western canon is representative of the "educational values that must be defended" (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997, p. 288). They believe that to question those "values" is to threaten the very foundation on which our nation is grounded. Conservatives who support the Canon also allege that movements such as feminism and multiculturalism are tearing apart the social fabric of our society (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997, p. 299). Bernstein (1994) and Siegel (1991) believe the destruction of the Western Canon and the traditional values it upholds was instigated by French historians, namely Foucault—"the new orthodoxy owes its most immediate inspiration to Michel Foucault" (Siegel, 1991, p. 34)—for challenging the education principles of New Criticism.

Others, however, argue that "causes of the alleged death of the Western Canon and its traditional curriculum, has rarely been this simplistic" (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997, p. 289). Cope and Kalantzis (1997) suggest that instruction of canonical literature is a complex issue that should not be dismissed at face value. They believe that schools should re-evaluate the notion of a universal curriculum thereby "allowing the Canon to be open to disruption, debate and revision" (p. 322). When this occurs, there will be a space

to examine literature for any absences or exclusionary processes and to begin responding appropriately to the needs of our diverse school culture.

Multiculturalism is not just about the fragments. It is a process in which the fragments and the dominant mutually define and operationalize the cultural events that fall under the categories of race and ethnicity. With a new epistemology, the exotic will appear ordinary and the critical question of cultural diversity will be central to all our identities and existences, not a marker of distance and marginality (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997, p. 323).

As classrooms become increasingly diverse, schools must adapt to accommodate all students, not just those who fall within the mainstream culture. Over the years, some education critics have argued against changes to the traditional educational norms claiming that diverse social and cultural influences contribute to the decline in the quality of education in America (Kutz & Roskelly, 1997, p. 9). Critics who believe that diverse populations do not warrant modification of traditional curriculum models have had a profound effect on public school curricula, specifically in the area of literature instruction. Hirsh's (1998) *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* was one of several publications that sparked controversy over school curriculum reforms and resulted in widespread pessimism about the current state of education, particularly English education. Hirsh

(1988) claims it is possible to retrieve "an original, intentional meaning of the literary text" (Sumara, 1996, p. 33), and this idea challenges theories that textual meaning is socially and culturally constructed. Hirsh (1988) proposes a return to a monocultural curriculum, and his rhetoric has shaped high school English curriculum such as the one examined in this study:

> Although mainstream culture is tied to the written word and may therefore seem more formal and elitist than other elements of culture; that is an illusion. Literate culture is the most democratic culture in our land: it excludes nobody; it cuts across generations and social groups and classes; it is not usually one's first culture, but it should be everyone's second, existing as it does beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood, and region. (21)

Hirsh's (1988) model is problematic for the women of this study if we believe the meaning they construct from text draws on their lived experience and if the literature they read in the English classroom provides no space for that to occur. Does limited opportunity to make those connections also limit one's engagement with the text? What cultural capital must readers possess in order to participate fully in literary talk? Kara, Lisa, and Dana seem to indicate that their lived experiences are of significant importance in their reading and discussion of literature, as in the following conversation about an autobiographical novel they read in class this year.

> Dana: When we read that book, [*All Over But the Shoutin'*][24] in Mrs. Isserstedt's class this year, I could…I could really relate to what was happenin' in that book. I could really *feel* what it was like for him [the narrator] to have to, you know what I'm sayin', overcome. Struggle to get what he wanted. It was like nothin' was going to keep him down. I mean, do you understand what I'm sayin'? I felt like I knew that character. Like he was me or somebody in my own family.

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[24] Bragg, R. (1997). *All over but the shoutin'.* New York: Pantheon Books. This was a book approved for my classes to read after several months of resubmissions of paperwork to the county curriculum director. It was not, however, added to our school's book list.

Kara: I know what you mean. That was the first book I really liked that I read in school. The first one I could really, really…well, see what he went through. It's just like the dramas of my family…you know…he was talkin' about real life drama in that book.

Dana: I could just see my momma in that book, you know when she bought him those cowboy boots, when umm, when…when they didn't have any money. I remember time when my momma bought us stuff and she was still wearin' old dresses so we could have it.

This dialog suggests that the young women make personal connections with the text, in this case from their own experiences with class struggle, which reinforces Dewey's (1997) observation that experience influences the way we read.

> The conceptions of situation and of interaction are inseparable from each other. An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment, whether the latter consists of persons with whom he is talking about some topic or event, the subject talked about being also part of the situation…or the book he is reading. (pp. 43-44)

Therefore, how can we ignore the social and cultural experiences of the reader as a significant component of literature instruction?

White Consciousness

Just as schools in general are not neutral, neither is English instruction or the literature we teach. "Its dominant models and methods arise in a larger social and political context, and in a larger culture" (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991, p. 93). Though there has been much research to indicate that literacy is strongly connected to cultural power (Heath, 1983; Ohmann, 1976), traditional models of literature instruction that ignore power relations are nevertheless prevalent in public
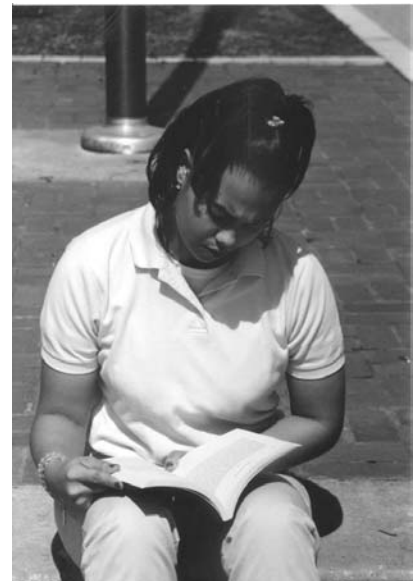
schools. Ohmann (1976) cites New Criticism as the basis for the traditional models still in use. Kutz and Roskelly (1991) explain "this approach [New Criticism], where the teacher is the one most likely to know the 'correct' meaning, reinforces authority-based, fact-centered schooling" (94).

This problem is compounded by the fact that canonical literature is still overwhelmingly reflective of white culture; thus, only students familiar with that culture can ascertain the "correct" answer. Furthermore, these texts continue to perpetuate the "idea of a monolithic homogenous black identity and experience" (hooks, 1994, p. 78). When the text and authority are white, and the correct meaning is predetermined by white ideology, what limits are automatically imposed on students who are culturally unprepared to respond? Who does not possess enough cultural capital to contribute? Consider the following example in which Lisa spoke about her experiences in a high school English class:

> Lisa: I mean, think about Mr. [Smith's] class from last year. He umm just stood up there and asked all those questions about that book we were reading, but he knew better than to call on any of the black folks. He knew we, you know, wouldn't give him the answers he was lookin' for. You would never see him call on one of us. Like, say for instance, umm, well, you know, what about when he would ask a question about one of the characters. It would just be stupid to ask some black person about the actions of a white character. We couldn't relate to that. And, you know, they were *always* white characters. You catch what I mean?

Students are often inhibited when differences of culture are not acknowledged during literature discussions. The teacher's questioning made Lisa think that because she was not white she could not contribute. In situations such as this when the literature instruction is teacher-led and achievement-based, the teacher often calls on those students who can respond "correctly." If the inquiry is culturally constrained, the respondents

might be limited to members of that culture. This teacher may not even be consciously aware of how he alienates minority students. The danger, of course, is that students who feel as if they have no contribution will become passive, non-participatory learners.

> Lisa: After awhile, I just stopped paying attention to what he said. I like to read and all, but what was I going to do all that work for if I couldn't say what I thought about it? I knew he was never goin' to ask me my opinion, so I just tuned him out. You know what I'm saying? I could put my head down in class and he wouldn't ever say, Kara, sit up. He would never call my mom and say, "Kara' failing my class." But, you can better believe he was noticing the white kids. I mean, they *had* to participate. But, it's like, he didn't notice one bit if I didn't. It was just a different situation for his white kids. He expected a lot more out of them. I guess there is just a higher, umm, what do you call it? Oh, like a higher standard for them.

Kara remarks in her interview that the reverse is equally powerful. Lisa felt disregarded because of her race, whereas Kara felt singled out.

> Kara: I don't really like being the token black person at [this school] either. Sometimes the teachers think you just only know about umm, what should I say, being black, I guess. I, mean, I know a lot of stuff. Not just stuff about black folks. It's like one time, umm, I can't remember how we started talkin' about it, but we were reading this poem called *Harlem*. Musta been in ninth grade. I don't know, maybe it was, umm, tenth. I can't remember. Anyway, Ms. [Jackson] started askin' some of the black people if they'd ever been to Harlem and like could we tell the class about it. [Pause] What did she think? All black people have been to Harlem? I mean, I, I haven't really been anywhere but here. And anyway, maybe, maybe by some chance some white people been to Harlem, too. It *is* a free country, you know.

Both instances seem to communicate that race determines, if not limits, who can respond to which pieces of text and the questions they can answer in the classroom.

Even in classes where a different approach to literature instruction is used, the teacher must be aware of how his/her own power communicates "dominant values" (Roemer, 1989) through the curriculum even when theories of reader-response are used. During one of my interviews with Lisa, she explained an instance when this occurred.

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Lisa :   …in one of my classes, well, umm, I really felt like the teacher tried to include us [black students] when she talked about literature, she didn't really seem prejudice or anything, but I mean, she was always saying, well, you know, what she thought about everything. Like with the books we read, I mean, like [laughing] she would just roast you if she thought you were wrong… [laughing] You could say anything you wanted to about the book as long as you didn't, umm, well, say anything that…as long as you didn't disagree with what she said about it.

In this case, it seems the teacher opened the discussion to all of her students without overt racism and was receptive as long as the responses did not run counter to her own interpretation of the text.

All of the participants appeared to have a strong command of what is expected in their English classes and knew how to participate in literature discussions even when they did not feel connected to the text. Lisa commented in her interview that, "I know what kinds of things you are supposed to say in those [English] classes, I know what the teachers are looking for. You just get used to saying what they want to hear to make good grades." Sumara (1996) says that "this formulation shows how closely the phenomenon of the counterfeit response to the literary fiction is connected to the ficitonalizing (counterfeiting) of personal identity for presentation in the school classroom. One cannot present an invented response without constructing an invented identity" (p. 222). This "fictionalizing" can either be a forged or withheld response to the literature discussion, both of which are discussed in this study. Either way, there is an absence of authentic engagement.

In almost every discussion of academic reading, the women communicated that their participation in class was inextricably linked to how interested they were in the discussion topic, how comfortable they felt responding, and whether or not the teacher and other students validated their comments.

Missing in Action

Gee (1990) believes that in group participation, such as in English classes where class discussion occurs often, individuals construct an "identity kit" that serves as a guide for interaction. This kit includes acceptable behaviors, language, conduct, and appropriate roles for the class. Students become experts at assembling this kit by the time they reach high school, particularly with regard to literature discussion. Students "direct and modify language and behavior" (McMahon & Raphael, 1997, p. 11) as an assimilation strategy. When students feel they have no language and therefore no contribution, the contents of their kit is diminished and their voice devalued.

> Lisa: Sometimes, I really feel like I have something to say. Sometimes the books we read just get me all stirred up. But, then I hear what, umm, all the other people are sayin' and I realize that we are just not on the same page. You learn just to keep your mouth shut.
>
> Holly: Why don't you feel like you could say what is on your mind?
>
> Lisa: I don't know. It's just you get good at knowing what the teacher wants and there are times, I mean not all the time, but sometimes you just don't want to say what you think, and you know if you do, people will think you are crazy.

Lisa seems to echo Annette Henry's (2001) research findings that "black girls do not hold a strong sense of identity in the classroom or express personal points of view or a strong sense of self and purpose that allow them the self confidence to engage with the classroom topics" (69).

Often, this "theme of silence" (Freire, 1998, p. 87) stems from the limited presence of black culture in the books they are discussing. It suggests "a structure of mutism in face of the overwhelming force of the limit-situations" (Freire, 1998, p. 87). When the discussion was outside their realm of experience, it appeared the women questioned the credibility of their response and did not feel racially qualified to participate. Other times, their silence was a form of resistance.

> Kara: Think about what we've read this year. Okay. Let's see. *The Crucible*, *Ethan Frome*, umm, what else….*All Over But the Shoutin'*, I know I'm skipping around but, *The Great Gatsby*. There is not a single black character in any of those books. Much less a black woman. I mean, I know what you are suppose to say in English class, but why would I want to participate when, umm, why would I *want* to say anything about those books that don't have anything at all to do with me and my life?

When Lisa and Kara could not see themselves or their culture in the literature they read, they chose not to contribute to the class discussions. Black literary scholars argue that acknowledging the black presence is vital for achieving cultural literacy (Roediger, 1998; Morrison, 1990; Ewell & Menke, 2002). Morrison (1990) explains, "the contemplation of the black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination" (p. 5).

Twenty Nine Days a Year

Several times during the course of the study the women expressed their outrage over the commercialization of Black History Month. Jackson High School marked the event with bulletin boards, black history "moments" in the morning announcements, and lessons that emphasized black culture. Their feeling was that it was not enough merely to designate one month to discuss black culture and read literature by black authors. The

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women overwhelmingly felt the school positioned these activities as, Kara explained,

"obligations." Lisa commented that, "one month does not compensate for excluding us

the rest of the year."[25]

Kara: I mean we only get 30 days…

Dana: Twenty nine days…and if you take out the weekends…

Kara: Twenty nine days to be included. I don't understand why it is just not an everyday thing. It's like, "Okay, you can have February, but that's it." Why are we not talkin' about and readin' about black people every month?

Lisa: I know. I mean, we should be over that whole "Black History Month" thing by now. I mean, really. How many more times can we *possibly* talk about, umm, MLK?

This practice of designating one month to the oppressed rather than devising ways to

make it a twelve month inclusion is consistent with Freire's (1998) position that the

dominant class manifests its "need to divide in order to facilitate the preservation of the

oppressor state" (p. 125). As long as blacks can be recognized in isolation, the power of

the oppressor is not threatened.

Multicultural Education

I was interested to learn how these women defined multicultural English

education. I wanted to know how they felt about the way black culture is currently

incorporated in their English classes and describe how it might be changed or improved.

Peter McLaren (1994) describes two types of multicultural education commonly

practiced in public high schools: "conservative multiculturalism" and "left-liberal

multiculturalism" as opposed to the "critical multiculturalism" described by Fine, Weis,

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[25] I really struggled with some of their comments because, until this time, it had not occurred to me that these activities were perceived negatively or as an isolated event. This was certainly a moment when I took pause to reflect on the many ways that my "whiteness" obstructs my view.

and Powell (1997). The former "tends to exoticize 'otherness' in a nativistic retreat that locates difference in a primeval past of cultural authenticity" (McLaren, 1994, pp. 45-74). The latter, defined as an assimilationist structure in which an "invisible norm by which other ethnicities are judged" (Fine, Weis, and Powell, 1997, pp. 248-249), seems to be most reflective of what is taught at Jackson High School. Lisa talks about a lesson she interprets as multicultural education:

> Lisa: Right now, we're reading a multicultural book. We're reading *Huckleberry Finn* now….b-o-r-r-i-n-g. I mean, it's black people I guess. But, not real black people.
>
> Holly: Okay. What is the difference between "black people" and "real black people"?
>
> Lisa: The stories I like are about real black people, or black characters with black names.
>
> Holly: Jim's black.
>
> Lisa: So? I wasn't a slave. I don't know any slaves so I can't relate to that.
>
> Dana: Who's Jim?
>
>   [laughter from the group]
>
> Lisa: Jim is the slave that's…never mind.

This is a humorous example of how the character of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* is perceived when presented as the quintessential black character in American literature amid white characters and white plantation life. Pamela Perry (2002) classifies this as a kind of left-liberal multiculturalism that places blacks "into tightly bound fictive
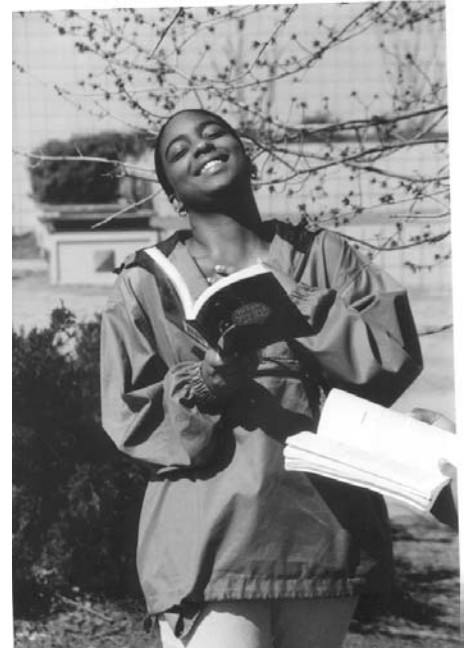
identities that reproduce notions of inherent, durable, and unbridgeable differences between people" (pp. 196-197). Later in the conversation, Lisa also commented that even when there is a black character, that character is usually male, "and it's not like there are any black women in that book. Well, maybe as a maid or something."

Certainly, the period of history in which Huckleberry Finn is written is a consideration, but the women of this study feel strongly that this portrayal of black people is a limiting, often insulting form of multiculturalism in light of black progress since the novel's publication.

Kara: It is *our* culture, I guess, but we don't identify with that black culture. It is out of date. Things do change, you know.

Holly: Okay. How could we update it?

Kara: I need somebody who is talking about what I'm talking about in those books. Someone that I know, or at least have seen. I need to feel [pause], like I have a voice in the story.

Holly: Tell me about that.

Kara: Just something that at least lets the white people know who we are now. At least about me or somebody I know. That sounds like somebody I know.

Holly: So, if we were to represent modern black culture in our literature that we teach in school rather than what we teach now, what would it look like?

Kara: It would look like you would have a few more people sitting up in class. We, we would pay more attention if we were there. There will be several white students, Hispanic students, who won't be able to identify. We might be the only ones talking, but umm, I think a book that was written about black people or written by a black author you know from a black person's perspective would be, be a start. I mean, we could at least have some sort of a, what do you call it, balance.

Kara's proposal for balance does not advocate teaching racial neutrality or colorblindness. Rather, she suggests teaching literature that is similar to the "critical

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multiculturalism" model described by Fine, Weis, and Powell (1997) that would build a sense of community, rearticulate "difference," and redistribute power in the classroom. This way, each person's cultural capital expands discussion possibilities. In order to become multicultural institutions, schools must not view cultural capital as a means of devaluing minority students. Makuakane-Dreschsel (1999) explains, "by ignoring non-dominant culture and knowledge, faculty will only continue to promulgate students' low sense of worth and academic ability" (p. 51).

Finding Safe Spaces

It is not unique that adolescents form friendships with others of the same age, race, class or gender. But in high school, especially a predominantly white high school, these friendships are often more than just a socialization practice. They are the barometer of the cultural and racial climate of the school. In Landsman's journal *A White Teacher Talks About Race* (2001), she explains her observations of this division.

> For years I have worried about the separation visible at lunch time in our school. I have though that if I could only stand here and observe a room full of tables where students mingled, black and white interspersed with Native American and Asian, I would have known we had accomplished some important goals in our country. This always seemed to be the official line. The litmus test of integration. If we integrated the lunchrooms, we would have successfully broken through racial barriers and have arrived in my utopia. (p. 60)

This separation often goes unnoticed by members of the majority in a predominantly white high school. But for young black women already struggling to be

noticed, social relationships they form with other black women are a means for constructing "safe spaces" within the high school in which they can "affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (Collins, 2000, p. 102).

Karla Holloway (1995) describes a similar setting wherein she found one such "safe space" within a book club setting. She viewed this experience as a place to have racial oppression validated by other black women for whom racism was also a reality (p. 31). Collins (2000) explains that "this issue of black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in black women's lives" (p. 103).

<div align="center">Without Boundaries</div>

The term *social reading*, as opposed to *academic reading*, suggests that it is a pleasurable experience and perhaps even a desirable one. Academic reading is more restrictive because it is "situated within a culturally and historically affected and conditioned space that we call 'public schooling' (Sumara, 1996, p. 31), while social reading is often more liberating because it is not linked to accountability or assessment. The differences between the two can be dramatic. Billy Collins (2001), American Poet Laureate, gives this example in an interview with George Plimpton for the *Paris Review*.[26]

> "A poem I wrote was published in a college textbook. And after the poem there were these 'study questions.' I didn't have a clue! There's a huge gulf between doing and then being accountable for what you do. It's like going up to a guy who's trout fishing in a stream, wading out there and asking, 'What do you think of the overfishing of the tuna? Any thoughts on the history of fish?'" (pp. 204-205)

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[26] *The Paris Review*, #159, Fall 2001, http://www.theparisreview.com/back/tpr159.htm.

Though textual analysis is certainly an element of both academic and social reading, analysis of social reading is more multidimensional in scope because it is typically peer-led rather than teacher-led. Therefore, there is no controlling authority figure directing that analysis. As a result, book talk—the types of conversations that occur inside and outside the class—are notably different (Heath, 1983; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). Kara distinguished book club conversation as "talk without boundaries."

The women of this study used books in a variety of ways. For all of them, reading was a significant part of their leisure time. During their first book club meeting, the girls had a spontaneous conversation about how they used books to initiate friendships and establish commonalities with other black women. Also important was the sharing of books, which was an ongoing event.

> Kara: I remember when we were freshman and all coming in and meeting each other. Well, I never went to the middle school with everyone, so I needed a friend.
>
> Lisa: Me, too. Bad.
>
> Kara: So, um we would just all get together and swap books. It was like "So and so bring this book tomorrow." And I know I used to get in trouble.
>
> Lisa: I know what you mean. In class, it was always like, "Put that book up!"
>
> Kara: So, I mean, I was always reading. Were ya'll?

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Dana: I come over to [Leslie's] house every Friday. She is always on the phone. So, I just look over the bookshelf. For me, its just readin'. I like readin' so why not? I mean that's always the way it is with us. If I read a good book, I give it to her.

Sumara (1996) would say that the sharing of books is a gesture of giving—a way of allowing others to experience the pleasure of reading.

Reading Ourselves

Rosenblatt (1938) says that "vicariously experiencing the life of a character in fiction or participating in another's emotion expressed in a poem may enable the reader to bring into consciousness similar elements in his own nature and emotional life" (pp. 191-192). In this way, the women of this study were constantly constructing and reconstructing identities through the text. In every aspect of this study, the women conveyed that, in their lives, reading is serious business. As Sumara (1996) explains, "reading doesn't just change the way we think and act; it affects, in every way, who we are" (p 6).

In the early stages of the study, a great deal of time was spent on book selection. Each of the participants chose one book to be read by the group. This was a painstaking process with much deliberation. All of the novels chosen were written by black authors. The women made no comments that led me to believe they were purposefully avoiding works by white authors; it was just understood that they all wanted to read black fiction. When I asked them to reflect on their selection process at the end of the study, they seemed surprised by my question. It was as if the idea of choosing novels written by white authors never even occurred to them.

Kara: Huh. I guess I never really thought about it. I just assumed we all wanted to read black books.

Lisa: I guess we could've read some white books. I didn't, I don't know why we did that. It's not, it's not, Okay, there is nothing wrong with white writers. I think it's just not my preference to read, umm, white writers. But, I mean I like some white writers. I mean, I really like the book *Malice*, that's um, a white writer.

Dana: Uhhuh. I really like that one, too. I have that book.

Kara: Yeah, I read that one, too. Okay the book is good and all, I swear it is, but she just doesn't really, you know, have the same stuff, deep stuff as the books we read for book club.

Lisa: I feel the same way

Holly: So what is the difference?

Kara: It just doesn't grab me in the same way.

Dana: Yeah. It don't have the same, it's just not the same.

Holly: Explain what you mean when you say, "It just doesn't grab me"

Dana: Okay. I'm gonna compare two books, like *Malice* and *The Harris Men*. *Malice* was good and she describes everything to a "T," but I mean, it's not my everyday thing. It would be something like, it's not something that, you know, I can relate to in my own life. I can enjoy it, but it's not the same thing.

Kara: Or it's not…it's not something that I've gone through or something a family member of mine has gone through like in *The Harris Men*.

Lisa: I think what we're all sayin' is, and what Dana just said and what Kara added I can wrap that up with sayin' like, I like reading other things, but most of the time you'll catch me reading a book…with a black author. I read to be in the story, umm, how can I say this, I want to read about myself somewhere in there.

It is common for adolescent readers to choose realistic fiction because they want to "think about their own lives in relation to those presented in the text" (Sumara, 1996, p. 28). The women sought books that allowed them to position themselves within the story in order to contemplate the "conflicts and circumstances of their present and future

lives" (Smith, 2000, p. 36). Walkerdine (1990) observed that, for female readers in particular, the satisfaction derived from reading fiction comes from the experience of connecting with the text and identifying with the characters on an emotional level.

Not a Day Goes By

One of the most significant discoveries of this study was the frequency with which these women talked about reading as an act, a daily function in their lives. In all the book club meetings, there was at least one mention of how they were currently using books. No other topic was discussed with the same regularity.

Dana: I don't even eat lunch at work, I'm always just readin'.
***
Kara: The other day, I was in Child Development, and [Ms. Johnson] called me outside and said, "Look, I see you reading all the time, and I understand but you can't read in my class."
***
Lisa: Oh, girl. I was just so tired yesterday. I mean, I could not put that book down! It was like, I know I need to go to sleep, but I just could not stop.
***
Kara: That book was like 300 or 400 pages and I finished it in two days!
***
Dana: Other mornin' my grandma came in my room and I'd been asleep and it was like three o'clock in the morning and I was up reading *Mystic*. She said, "Dat's why you can't get up in the morning, you be up readin' all night!"
***
Kara: I have read that book like five times. I don't know what's wrong with me! I just cannot get enough. I'm skippin' lunch today to go read.
***
Dana: I just have to be able to get in my reading' time. Not a day goes by when I I'm not thinkin' about what book I gonna read next.

This seamless pattern between reading and living echoes Sumara's (1996) claim that, "reading is not a virtual experience; it is caught up in life itself" (p. 1).

The View From Here

Throughout this study, the women indicated that one of their primary purposes for reading socially with other black women was to examine contemporary issues they faced in their present lives.   Lisa said during her follow-up interview that she thought the books they read reflected the "black view of the world." Sims (1982) defines this literature as "culturally conscious" (p. 103) because it reflects the lives of Black Americans as told from within the culture rather than from the mainstream culture as is often the case in much of the canonical literature read in schools.   Yagelski (2002) argues that the act of reading, termed "local acts of literacy" (p. 7), has an important role in social identity construction. These acts are "complex, sometimes overlapping, often conflicting discourses within which people function everyday, within which they negotiate the constraints and challenges of contemporary life, within which they make the small decisions that can determine how much control they exercise over their lives" (Yagelski, 2002, pp. 7-8). The following are excerpts taken from the women's journals.

> Kara: Book club is not like any other experience I have ever had. Most people would say we spoke *to* each other, I would say we spoke *with* each other. There were things that were shared in our meetings made you understand a person, how they think, how they feel, how they came to be who they are. Those are the things that make you love a person—when you can see the beauty in all of us. That is the gift of language.[27]

> Dana: I like to read in the book club setting because I can analyze the books with my friends and think about how the situations apply to my life. This way, we can all talk about what we would do if we were in the same situation as the characters.

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[27] I was moved by the writings in Kara's journal. Her journal was constructed similar to a personal diary documenting the phases of the experience. I felt Kara was almost poetic in her expression of how the book club enriched her life and transformed her perspective.

An Improved Image

One of the resounding praises of these novels (collectively) was the authors' rejection of negative black stereotypes, specifically those of the African American male.[28] Because the women of this study discussed at length their version of the "ideal man," the group paid particular attention to how the authors constructed black male characters. Though the women generally acknowledged that many black males are still, as Kara remarked, "socially ill," they wanted the literature to show "black men doin' well."[29]

> Kara: I really like how this book, you know, portrayed the black man.
>
> Dana: I know. I get tired of always hearin' about black men dealin', committin' crimes, doin' jail time, beaten' up on women…always runnin' around on they girlfriends. Sometime you want to hear about the good side of men.
>
> Kara: I thought it was really cool how he was…big, but he didn't like use it.
>
> Lisa: Yeah.
>
> Kara: Like he wasn't an athlete or he wasn't runnin' the streets. He had three successful businesses and was like doin' well. He had money, but not too much, he was smart, and he wasn't like always trying to find the easy way out. And, I mean, he treated her [the female character in the novel] really good.

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[28] I realized after reviewing the transcription, that there were four novels the women noted for their positive portrayal of black men. Interestingly, these novels were written by black male authors. The only novel they read written by a black female had only one black male character who was an attractive, wealthy, crack dealer (who had already served prison time) and who physically abuses the main black female character. Even more interesting is that this was the overwhelming favorite of the five novels read during the course of the study.

[29] Ironically, the women criticized one author for making the black protagonist "too good to be true." Kara wanted the characters to reflect "a man that really exists, not a perfect man." Their interpretation of "perfect" varied, but they did agree that "too much money and power" was "unrealistic." I wondered if this was because they did not believe that a black man could achieve that level of monetary success or if they just felt those were just not the men they envisioned for their future.

<u>Cultural Compatibility</u>

During their discussion of *Men Cry in the Dark* and *The Harris Men,* the women explored their view of interracial relationships during conversations about white characters in the book. The dialog was laden with racial and gender stereotyping that they used as criteria to evaluate and determine acceptance or rejection of the character.

Lisa: What about the white girl? Christy, Christy was her name?

Kara: I think she was portrayed as a really, she wasn't like other white girls, no cheerleader type or anything…

Dana: She was portrayed as a regular person. Not like a Barbie doll girl.

Lisa: She wasn't dingy, she wasn't an airhead or nothin', she was okay, you know?

Dana: She was really kinda cool. I could see myself hangin' with her.

Kara: Yeah, she was *downhome.* She wasn't like, like people would expect…like I mean…I mean for somebody who was not, you know if you wouldn't have heard the description, I don't think you would know she was white.

At another meeting, the conversation of interracial relationships surfaced again. This time, it led them into talk about their views on befriending white women and dating white men. I noted from this conversation that more allowances were made for white men who might be dating possibilities, while white women were held to a much higher standard. Only women who rejected their stereotype of "country club girl" and were not "white to the core" were considered as possible friends.[30] This was surprising considering that feminists have reported black women generally reject white men as romantic partners (Collins, 2000; D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988; hooks 2000; Marshall,

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[30] I worried during these conversations that the women were careful of their responses and cognizant of my reactions. It was difficult to know how much of what they said was modified or censored because of me.

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1994). Collins (2000) points out that, "traditionally, freedom for black women has meant freedom *from* white men, not the freedom to choose white men as lovers and friends" (p. 162). While these women did not disclose any interracial dating relationships of their own, they did not dismiss the possibility.

Dana: That white girl in the book, she was just so…what is the word?

Lisa: Ethnic?

Dana: Oh, that's the word! Ethnic [laughter from the group]. She was just *so* white. The hair, the music, the way she talked.

Lisa: And then jus, just her whole attitude you know, her whole personality.

Kara: But that leads you to the question that I said, I mean is that all people or just like…because I've never really had a view on the interracial dating scene. But I mean, I dunno, it just seemed…

Dana: It, it's not a bad thing, cuz, I'll tell you, anybody'll make you happy, no matter what color they are.

Lisa: Yeah, I guess that's true. It just all depends on the person I guess.

Dana: That's how I view it, that's my view, it ain't never been no bad view cuz I feel nobody should be judged by their color.

A Change of Heart

With the second novel, the girls migrated to the topic of lesbianism as they discussed Dickey's *Between Lovers*, which evidently caused some debate among its black female readers. I have no doubt that this controversy made this novel an attractive choice for the book club. I sensed some apprehension about their willingness to admit their curiosity about reading a book with lesbianism as one of its themes. It was as if choosing to read the book, with knowledge of its lesbian content, was admitting their acceptance of homosexuality.

Kara: I think the next book we should read should be *Between Lovers*.

Dana: Okay. What's it about?

Kara: Like, like it's real stuff.

Lisa: There she goes again.

Kara: Okay. It's like situations just like…you couldn't believe. I hear it's really shocking and well, It's basically about a woman and, well, she has a relationship, [Pause] falls in love with another woman.

Lisa: A lesbian? Oh, gross!

Dana: That, I just don't understand. I'm serious, that's uh, an abomination of God!

Kara: Never mind. Maybe we shouldn't read it.

Dana: Well, it's your choice. We can read it.

Lisa: That seems weird. But, we can read it.

Collins (2000) describes the stigmatism of lesbian relationships and why they are especially threatening to heterosexual black women as follows:

> Black lesbian relationships are not only threatening to intersecting systems of oppression, they can be highly threatening to heterosexual African-American women's already assaulted sense of self. Certainly the homophobia expressed by many black heterosexual women is influenced, in part, by accepting social beliefs about lesbians. For Black women who have already been labeled the Other by virtue of race and gender, the threat of being labeled a lesbian can have a chilling effect on Black women's ideas and on our relationship with one another. (167)

Collins' interpretation was a recurring theme throughout their book club discussions, and their response to the issue of lesbianism evolved during the course of the study. After reading the book *Between Lovers*, the subject resurfaced several times in subsequent discussions. By the end of the study, their positions were markedly different

from their initial reactions. Here the members discuss a scene in the book where the two

lesbian women are engaged in a sexual act.

Kara: In this particular situation, I was readin' the book and it was just the way they expressed emotion, in the way that they interacted. That was kinda like, different from anything else.

Lisa: Yeah, it makes you think, "Oh, Okay." You know what I mean? It was just so sensual…so romantic…so beautiful. Not disgusting like you would think. I think it, it opened my eyes to a different type of…

Kara: Sexuality. Like from *their* point of view.

Lisa: It's like, we make judgments about it, which we shouldn't do. They are still people. Still sisters.

Dana: Yeah, cuz that…that's my downfall cuz I do always judge. I mean, when it come up, I guess I can be pretty outspoken, but as far as…my auntie's gay. And she knows I always say to her, "whatever makes you happy."

Kara: But, see that's the thing. This is what I've grown to know. Like when people say "whatever makes you happy." That's not, that can't possibly make anyone happy. You know, what they're faced with. So how, why would anyone choose that, and knowing what they're going to be faced with? So, the fact is that homosexuality just might not be a clean cut answer---you know what I'm saying?

Lisa: I guess people just shouldn't be so closed hearted. You just never know. I mean, that book made it seem like it was just like any other kinda love.

Dana: Mmmm. Yeah. I know.

Kara: I think we could give some insight into that it's just not a cut and dried issue and we really shouldn't be and that you know we are too immature in our, growth as human beings to even make a judgment about it.

Dana: I don't want to admit it, but, but I'm sorry I said all that at the beginning. I guess it's just not me, but that's no reason to…to…judge. Maybe I'm having a change of heart.

Their changes in attitude toward lesbian relationships, as described in the novel

Between Lovers and, within the larger context of society, indicate their willingness to

recognize the oppression of other black women. The novel led them to explore what they could not experience in real life. As Woolf (1957) observes, "the novel starts in us all sorts of antagonistic and opposed emotions. Life conflicts with something that is not life." This "change of heart," or the realization that all oppressions are not equal (hooks, 2000, p. 59), is also a reconstruction of Dana's identity brought about by reader response theory.

<center>Creating Future Selves</center>

During the book club meetings, the women used novels to create narratives about their future lives. Almost every conversation contained a dialog in which they discussed their desires for career, marriage, and family. As the meetings progressed, the conversations became more intimate and they appeared to take greater personal risks. The moments of awkwardness and apprehension lessened as their level of comfort with each other increased. I suspected their willingness to disclose their feelings and speak candidly about their hopes and fears was directly related to the trust that formed over time within the community. It appeared their reading enabled them to safely and vicariously explore situations they had not yet encountered (Smith, 2000) and be validated by the other women.

<u>Marriage, Family, and the Perfect Man</u>

Throughout the study, the women had multiple conversations about their desires for marriage, family, and finding the "perfect man." They appeared to be situated in the traditional discourses of marriage in which women marry to be "taken care of" by men.

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This was surprising, considering that in many ways this discourse conflicted with their conviction that they were "independent women" with college and career plans (Matthews, 1987). Foucauldian (1981) theory suggests that this contradiction in discourse is evidence, that even as these women recognize the limitations of marriage, the operation of power still produced the desire for that state. The following exemplar indicates the relationship between power and desire described by Foucault.

Kara: I liked her [the character in the novel]. She was, you know, really sassy and independent.

Lisa: Yeah. She was doin' fine without a man.

Kara: That really made me think. [Pause] I don't need a man mentally.

Lisa: Me neither. You know, I like to just have him around, you know, for sex or just have him on my arm and show him off.

Dana: My mother always told me, you can do bad by yo self. You don't need no man, and she's like you can make it by yo self. A man is just there to help you out.

Kara: Uhhuh.

Lisa: But, I mean it is nice…to have a man. To be taken care of and loved.

Kara: I know. I mean, how much fun are you really having alone?

Dana: You just gotta find you a man that let you have your life and still love you and be a good husband to you.

There was not much discussion on where they might "find" this man, but there was no shortage of discussions about who he would be if actually located. From what I gathered from their conversations, the ideal man would be physically attractive, emotionally attentive, sexually competent, gainfully employed, and willing to participate in parenting their children. There seemed to be a general optimism that this man existed.

Lisa: His house was huge…he was the brutha we are all gonna have. You know he was all light skinned with those dreads. He was waiting there in the hot tub. Ummm…just the way that book described him. Oh girrrrl…he had it goin' on.

Kara: That's gonna be *my* man.

Lisa: You know it girl. Smart, beautiful, and rich. One who can take care of you in style.

Interestingly, discourses of marriage rarely intersected with discourses of motherhood. Motherhood was viewed as its own entity apart from marriage and men. Even though the women were hopeful that there would be a man in the picture, this scenario was not all or nothing. Though the group often expressed concern about obstacles they might face as black female adults, motherhood was not one of them. It was discussed as a certain, exclusively positive event. This is consistent with hooks' (2000) findings that historically, black women do not name child-rearing as a hindrance to their freedom as women.

Lisa: Now, I don't care what happens. No matter what, you have unconditional love for your child. That man may turn his back on you, but nothing is going to keep you from taking care of your child.

Kara: I know. My babies are gonna know that I am there for them. I might not have the perfect job or life or whatever, but that won't keep me from being a good mother.

Dana: That's what I learned from my momma. You know, she, no matter what happened was always looking out for us kids. I'll be the same way, [pause] my children will be proud uh me.

The discussion above occurred within the context of a literature discussion. The text was the catalyst for the dialogs that ensued. These discussions illustrate possible ways of exploring how fiction provides access to the discourses that constitute gender and meaning in the lives of these women (Weedon, 1997).

Sisterhood

Of all of the observations drawn from this data, the one I least expected occurred

toward the end of the study preceding the final book club meeting in which I was a

participant. The women had strayed from their book talk and were lamenting the close

of the study. Kara initiated a dialog about the final book club meeting.

Kara: I can't wait to read this next book. But, really I just can't wait to read it
        with Mrs. Isserstedt.

Lisa: Oh girl. That is just goin' to be too cool. I don't think I've ever even
        talked to a white person who had read any black books. It's gonna be
        interesting to see what she says about it.

Dana: It's like, for the first time we get to teach her. A white person is actually
        gonna try to know something about what we're about. I mean…uh, who
        we are.

Kara: I wish it was like that in school. I mean, a little more give and take. I
        think if white girls at our school, could like, understand where we are
        coming from, we might, you know, be more united instead of the way it is
        now.

Dana: I know! I like readin' with all you, but it would be, like trippin' to read
        these books with the white perspective.

Kara: I can't wait…when is this meeting with her? Does she have the book yet?

What surprised me about this conversation was that up until this point, their

comments led me to believe that the reigning

benefit of the book club was the racial

exclusivity of the group.   I assumed that what

they enjoyed most about the experience was the

absence of white women. I was further

surprised by the suggestion that this kind of

reading in school might connect them with their white peers. Davis (1990) wrote in her

anthology, *Women, Culture and Politics*, "today we can no longer afford to dismiss racist influences that pervade the women's movement, nor can we succumb to the belief that white women will be unable eternally to grasp the nature of the bonds that link them to their sisters of color" (p. 27). It is my hope that continued inquiry through reading communities will provide a space for reconstruction of race relations, particularly with regard to women.

Summary

Let me take one long last look, before we say goodbye.
Don Henley[31]

In this study, my purpose was to explore the social reading of three black adolescent women and the ways in which culture affects their engagement and talk about a text. I wanted to use reading as the medium for furthering discussions of race, class, and gender. I wanted to create a space for women to speak about their experiences as both social and academic readers and the role of reading in their lives. The narratives that I collected from these women allowed me to support my assumptions that (1) canonical literature often excludes minority voices when readers do not have the cultural capital with which to participate fully and (2) literature is a significant, meaningful component in the lives of these women particularly in regard to identity formation. Allowing the women to compare both their academic and social reading experiences allowed for an appraisal of benefits and limitations within each environment that might somehow provide insight as to how to bridge the two and make each more meaningful to the reader and the reading community therein.

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[31] "The End of the Innocence," GEFFEN RECORDS; June 19, 1989

The book club setting was a compelling illustration of how readers engage with texts when they see themselves in that text and feel comfortable responding to the text with other readers. The study illustrates how women use literature and the discussion of literature to negotiate complex life issues with other women. It demonstrates what is possible when a reading environment creates a space that honors personal responses, individual interpretations of text, interpersonal communication, and an examination of multiple cultures and ethnic groups. This reading community, unlike those often found in English classes, was one of equality, cooperation, and collaboration (O'Brien, 1991). This is particularly important considering that "a young black woman can graduate from many of our schools without having the slightest hint that she is shaping the world" (Landsman, 2001, p. 30). Therefore, the "safe spaces" they create for themselves "foster the conditions for black women's independent self-definitions. Thus, much more is at stake here than the simple expression of voice" (Collins, 2000, p. 111). Many times during the study, I wondered if it would be possible for academic and social reading to co-exist so that one experience informs the other. Foucault would call this juxtaposition a *limit experience*; one that attempts to reach the other, the outside, by restructuring the categories of both events to provide new understanding (Miller, 1993). If so, there would be more continuity between in school and out of school reading experiences.

As is characteristic of qualitative research, I have not reached a universal conclusion but have allowed the narratives of particular subjects in a particular setting to "speak for themselves" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 10). Dewey (1997) says that "every closure is an awakening, and every awakening settles something" (p. 169). Perhaps the discovery of that awakening comes later. While the theoretical framework informing the study

allowed me new categories for critiquing the arguments presented here, it also provided a space to experience the uncertainty that comes with researching those with whom I am intimately connected in the place where I exist. This experience has moved me toward the edge of ideas that are unsettling for me as a public school teacher in a predominantly white high school, and I hope this research will provide me with a new lens through which to examine my own philosophical and pedagogical positions as an educator.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION: *Lasting Images*

*Searching is everything - going beyond what you know. And the test of the search is
really in the things themselves, the things you seek to understand. What is important is
not what you think about them, but how they enlarge you.*
Wynn Bullock[32]

In spending the past eight months collecting the data that formed this study,

Chapter 4 models the "realist tale" (Van Maanen, 1988) common to qualitative research.

However, in reflecting on my personal notes from this project, I became particularly

interested in writing an autoethnography.[33] I wanted to create a personal narrative

describing how this experience looked through my eyes. I divided my autoethnography

into three sections. First, I reflected on my own experience as a reader to more clearly

establish the history from which my interests for this study emerged. Then, to

authenticate my voice as a researcher, I decided to immerse myself in the existing

structure of the project and end my manuscript with a first-hand account of the

experience. I wanted to investigate myself as a member within the social context of this

study.   In doing so, I wanted to reflect on my "whiteness"[34] and the cultural biases that

shaped my interpretation of the data and formed the questions that will persist well

beyond this study. I accomplished this by adding a fifth book club meeting so that I

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[32] http:/www.afterimagegallery.com/quotes.htm

[33] I used an authoethnographic model developed by Carolyne White (1996) which she termed *mystory* to investigate my own social constructions of ethnicity and my interaction with the women of this study (quoted in Glesne, 1999, pp. 181). This seemed to be the best method for examining my role in the larger context of the cultural setting allowing for a more complex sociological narrative rather than just a "confessional tale" (Van Maanen, 1988).

[34] I use the term "whiteness" sparingly and am cognizant of bell hook's comments in *Teaching to Transgress*, "White women who have yet to get a critical handle on the meaning of "whiteness" in their lives, the representation of "whiteness" in their literature, or the white supremacy that shapes their social status are now explicating blackness without critically questioning whether their work emerges from an aware anti-racist standpoint" (104).

could participate as a member. Finally, I completed the project with an artistic

representation of my data; a photo journal displayed throughout the manuscript

documenting the journey of this study as a tribute to the women who helped me to "see

with new eyes."[35]

<div align="center">Double Exposure</div>

It was Christmas day, 1976 and I was 5. My dad was furiously searching for spare flashes for his Kodak Instamatic camera. The living room was a maze of crumpled wrapping paper and ribbons. My dog was sniffing around the Christmas tree hoping I had been careless in dismantling my stocking. "Finally," Dad said, "I've got it!" He snapped the flash into place and held it up to take the picture as I stood in my nightgown still rumpled from sleep amid an explosion of toys. He pressed the button, the shutter closed; the flash popped. That lived experience forever connected with the images burned onto that film. Images that would one day help me remember, teach me a few things about myself and the world, and tell the story of my life. I did not know it at the time, but that would be my last Christmas in that house, and the last year we would be together as a family.

It was a warm night in April, 1976. Shadows from the overgrown trees in our front yard danced against the wall opposite my bed. As the branches swayed in the wind that whistled through the window casings, I sat straight up in my twin bed, wrapped tightly in my yellow bedspread deafened by the sound of my own beating heart. When my bravery had run out and I could take no more, I walked quietly to the end of the hall, relieved to find the light still on, and knelt at the top of the stairs. Careful not to be noticed, I watched my Mom curled up on our sofa, knees up, engrossed in the pages of her book, pausing only occasionally to adjust her black, cat-eye glasses. I found solace in those late night moments when childish fear pulled me from my bed.   I would stare down into our living room wondering what was written on the pages of that book that kept my mom from sleep night after night. It would be years before that scene became my own and my love affair with literature began.

I would say that I was destined to become a photographer. From a young age, the camera was a perpetual source of mystery and amazement. My dad gave me a broken Polaroid before I ever had my own camera.   I would sit on the floor, turning it over in my hands, pushing all the buttons. Though I knew it did not work, I still carried it around the house with the greatest care. Even then, it was a treasured possession. As I grew older and was responsible enough to handle a "real camera," I was fascinated by the intricacies of its bodies and the systematic operation of its process. I liked to collect those rectangular images. To sort through them, examine them like a deck of cards. I liked the smell of the film and the way my dad stored it in our refrigerator, though I did not know why. I liked the look of the exhausted flash, collapsed behind a square of plastic. I think I fell in love with cameras even before I fell in love with photography.

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[35] Marcel Proust (1871-1922)

I would say that I was destined to become a life-long reader. In my home, reading was always a priority. Our shelves were heavy with books and the collection was continually growing. From a very early age, I loved the presence of books: the way the pages felt between my fingers, the way they smelled when they were new, the crack of the binding when they were opened for the first time. I loved the way the words sounded as my mother read them aloud. I had many childhood books that I would meticulously stack and restack on the floor of my room. I guarded my beloved collection furiously when other children were around; I was generous with my toys, but not my books. I would sit for hours in my small yellow rocking chair, flipping though those books, marveling at the bright pictures and foreign words on the page. I think I fell in love with books even before I fell in love with reading.

On my seventh birthday, I received a Kodak Instamatic X-15F Camera. It was a basic snapshot camera which used a flipflash rather than the bulky attachment flashes.   It had a brightline viewfinder and lever film wind. When I untied the ribbon and opened the box, I knew that my day had finally come. The possibilities were endless. I was no longer dependent on others to photograph my stories. I was now a photographer.   I was, "have camera, will travel." The world looked new through the lens of that camera. On my lonely days, I could hide behind the viewfinder and imagine a different reality.   I could situate myself within that 3x5 frame and advance past my moments of despair. As I watched life from that vantage point, I began to notice that I was not so different from those around me; humanity was strangely connected. For the first time, I was "seeing" more than just that which was before me.   This, the first of my cameras, is still among my archives and would be the last 126-film Instamatic produced by Kodak in the USA.

The first book that I really remember reading by myself was *Charlotte's Web*. I received the hardbound edition for my birthday when I was in the second grade. This was the first "big book" in my collection of "children's books." It had "lots of big words" and almost 200 pages. I no longer had to depend on my mother to read the "hard books" to me. I was now a reader.   I distinctly recall the experience of reading and rereading this book over the course of several years. I developed so strong a bond with the characters in this novel that the story still echoes in my psyche some twenty-five years later. I think if I had to name one pivotal piece of literature in my life, this would be it. It was the aftermath of my parents' divorce, and I recognized a kind of sadness within the pages of that book that was not unlike my own. Though I could not identify it as such at the time, that story helped me to understand that separation and loss are part of living and those situations which cause us pain are often outside our realm of control. Now, for the first time, I was able to take the events of my life and connect those with literature. I could now use one to inform the other. That tattered, dog-eared copy is one of the few books from my childhood still resting on my bookshelf.

In the years that followed the acquisition of my first camera, I experimented with different styles of shooting; often changing my subject matter. For a while it would be trees, then household items, then strange bugs that inhabited our yard. I carried my camera different places I went and took pictures of strangers; women whose faces were

worn like leather, children asleep in their strollers, men who sat reading their paper in suit and tie. I was beginning to discover the complexities of the physical self and the impact of the visual. It was a language to be interpreted. And it was a powerful language—one scene could delight me and the next one could disturb me. Like all languages, photography was often ambiguous. I could closely observe my unsuspecting subjects through the lens of that camera, but I could not tell what they were thinking or how they felt as I watched them from a distance. Thus, the identity of my subjects was partially constructed by my own imagination. These images, the ones burned on film and in my memory, became part of me.

During my elementary and secondary years, I experimented with different kinds of reading, often changing literary genres. For a while it was series novels like *Nancy Drew* and *Little House on the Prairie*, and then later it was romance and historical fiction. There was even a time when I exclusively read short stories. I would delve into the lives of these characters, seeing them as real as if they were in front of me. My imagination supplied any physical details that the author omitted. I was beginning to discover the complexities of the emotional self and the impact of textual language. The words on those pages could make me laugh out loud one minute, and then break down crying the next. Often the text blurred with reality. I found myself, at times, living vicariously through my books. I read these texts as I read the world and used them to shape my understanding of relationships and life's experiences.[36] Each one, in some small way, became part of me.

When I was in high school, I inherited an old Canon AE1 camera. Nothing about its operation was simple. It did not have the ease of my Kodak automatic. It had a manual zoom which made focusing difficult. It had manual film loading and rewinding that without careful attention would expose and ruin my film. Everything about it was labor-intensive and often frustrating. I took several classes and spoke to many novice photographers who guided my learning. When I could comprehend the fundamental principles of the camera's operation, I began to understand the relationship between light, exposure, and depth of field. I developed a more critical eye and widened my range of inquiry. Even though the process was demanding and required rigorous adherence to procedure, I still had interpretive power and creative input with regard to my work. During my years experimenting with this camera, I acquired a complex photographic vocabulary that carried with it a certain amount of authority in the field. Though in the beginning I did not immediately see the benefit of manual shooting, I have since come to recognize this experience as invaluable to my growth as an artist and my accomplishments as a photographer. This knowledge served me again when last year, I was given a 1940's vintage Leica for my birthday which has helped me improve my photojournalist work.

When I entered high school, I began reading canonical literature in my English classes. Nothing about it was simple. My first exposure was required summer reading that did not resemble any of the books I had enjoyed in middle school. This "classic literature" had difficult words, complex characters, and confusing plots. I often struggled to

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[36] Freire as interpreted by Kutz & Roskelly (1997, pp. 194).

understand even one paragraph of text. The process of reading became a dissection of sorts -- breaking the text down into manageable pieces to understand how the parts worked as a whole. Even though this approach was tedious and at times monotonous, I learned to question and read critically. I still had interpretive power even within the structure and rigidity of this reading method. Some gifted English teachers guided me through my years of high school literature and the arduous task of literary analysis. During my high school reading, I acquired an expansive literary vocabulary (more commonly called "cultural literacy"[37] which carries with it a certain amount of societal authority. After a few years of academic reading, I began to understand the benefit of canonical study, even though in retrospect, much of it was problematic. The experience of reading difficult and unfamiliar texts served me well again when I went to back to graduate school three years ago.

During college, I packed up my manual camera and purchased a fully automatic Nikon. Once again, I could just shoot. I spent my first year with that camera photographing a range of material. I never worried about lighting, overexposure, or aperture. I did not have to reference my camera manual or think about my settings. I had a renewed appreciation for automatic conventions. Though I had no regrets about my years using the Canon, I enjoyed the freedom the Nikon provided. During that time, I also studied the works of several other photographers and discovered that photography is really an individual's response to the subject. Even when four photographers are standing in the same spot, shooting the same scene, with identical cameras, there will be four, often drastically different, interpretations of that scene. I realized the richness of that diversity the value of multiple perspectives.

College provided a chance for me to let go of the teacher-based literature instruction and focus on a multitude of new reading experiences. Once again, I could just read. I spent my freshman and sophomore years taking a broad selection of courses with titles like *Southern Literature*, *The Mystery Novel*, and *Death as a Genre*. I had no regrets about my canonical scholarship, but I enjoyed choosing my own literature again. I had the freedom to read outside the boundaries of the canon. My personal reading also reflected my changing interests and personal awakening. During my junior year, I had my first experience with "group reading." It was a modern poetry class and we met twice a week to discuss our readings at a local restaurant. I was amazed when I discovered how differently each of us read the same poem and the influence of our life experiences on our interpretations. My own reading was enriched by the responses of the others in the group. I think that all of us left that class aware that we had glimpsed something precious and rare—the building of a literacy community. Something not easily explained.

There was a year in my life when I put my cameras away. I reached a point in my job where I no longer had the leisure time to spend on my art. My priorities shifted and I buried myself in the demands of my work. After a few months, I stopped looking at the world with a photographic eye. My vision narrowed and was mostly just a literal interpretation of what I saw. I did not think of myself as a photographer anymore. And like any other language that you no longer use, I began to forget. One evening, I was

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[37] E.D. Hirsh (1988)

driving home from work and the sky shone a brilliant shimmer of pink light while the sun sank slowly behind a dense forest. It was one of those moments when suddenly I felt wide awake and completely clear of mind. I realized that it had been almost a year since I had carried my camera in my car to capture a scene like this one, and even longer since I had taken pause to notice the beauty around me. Without my camera, I did not "see" the same world. Part of my soul and one of my most significant passions was packed away in my camera bag, gathering dust. I unlocked my door, not bothering to remove the key, and went straight to the closet to resurrect my camera and restore my sight.

There was a year in my life when I stopped reading for pleasure. I reached a point in my career when I put aside many of my leisure activities to concentrate on my work. After a few months, I lost touch with the publishing world and could no longer say what books were selling or what new author had just emerged. I did not think of myself as a reader anymore. I read my bills. I read my insurance statements. I relied on radio for current events and canceled my subscription to the newspaper. At night, when I would usually curl up with a book, I would instead sit in bed, mindlessly channel surfing. One night on a plane coming home from a meeting I sat next to a woman who was engrossed in her book. I did not recognize the title or the author. I suddenly could not remember the last book that I had read or how long it had been since I had purchased a book. I felt this hollowness. I had given up an integral part of myself with those books—the heart of me. I realized that without literature in my life, there would always be a void I could not fill. It was a Friday night when my plane landed in Atlanta. I drove to Barnes and Noble and spent over an hour browsing the aisles. I could have bought the entire store, but settled on four titles; the first of which I finished at 4:00am that morning.

I am a photographer. It is a piece of the tapestry of my life. It is an important part of my identity without which I am not complete. Photography is a life long process—a journey with no destination.

I am a reader. It is a piece of the tapestry of my life. It is an important part of my identity without which, I am not complete. Reading is a life long process—a journey with no destination.

Seeing It In Black and White

Nearing the mid-point of the research project, I had collected rich data but was not completely satisfied. I still had no idea what it was like to be on the receiving end of literary exclusion. This realization led me to consider my position of power in the classroom. In doing so, I became intrigued by what might happen if I could situate myself within a context that allowed me to participate in a group reading experience

outside my cultural comfort zone. Thus, at the end of the study, I participated in the final

book club meeting with my participants in which we read and discussed a piece of black

fiction.[38]

 I met with the participants after school on January 15, 2002 to negotiate the

specifics of the book club meeting that I would attend. We mutually agreed to conduct

the meeting after school on March 8, 2002, allowing enough time to order, distribute and

read the novel. In keeping with the conventions of the previous book club meetings, we

decided to meet at a local restaurant and conduct our discussion over dinner.

 I also wanted to keep the format of the meeting as close as possible to those they

had already completed. Therefore, I felt the participants should choose the book for our

project. I asked them to select a book that they might read if I were not present. I sensed

immediate skepticism at this suggestion. Kara finally spoke up, "Umm. Mrs.

Isserstedt… I'm just not sure you would want to read what we've been reading. Maybe

you should pick the book." I explained to them that my purpose for participating was to

become part of their existing social reading culture, which included reading novels that

contributed to the creation of that culture. I was unsure if their apprehension was a

reaction to fear of revealing the content of what they were reading socially or simply

awkwardness about discussing black literature with me.[39] I worried, also, that the girls

viewed me as a "cultural tourist" (Lewis et al, 2001, p. 319), and so I made every effort to

communicate that though I was conducting research, I was still interested in what I could

gain on a personal level by reading this book and being part of their discussion group.

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[38] The novel selected was written by a black author and is listed by major book sellers under the category of "African American fiction."

[39] It occurred to me that they were worried about generational differences as well as cultural differences and modern fiction is inherently more risky in content that what we read in class together. I reminded myself that I was still in a position of authority as teacher and adult.

Once I had addressed their concerns, they settled on the title, *When You Look at Me*, by Undra Biggs (1999), which Kara said "they had all been dying to read."

On the day the books arrived, I had my copy sitting on my desk at school, and I overheard one of my black students, not one of my research participants, say to one of her black classmates, "That's weird that Mrs. Isserstedt's readin' that book. She must not know what it's about." I wanted to ask her what she meant, but my question was not appropriate at that moment, and I had vowed not to venture outside my pre-established data collection restraints. Ironically, that comment proved to be foreshadowing of the eventual unraveling of my many closely held assumptions about the social reading of high school students, particularly black females. I expected this experience to increase my own racial awareness and disrupt particular norms derived from my own racial biases, but I never expected all that transpired during this event.

The Reading: The First Three Weeks

Just five pages into the novel, I began keeping a glossary of terms with which I was not familiar so that I could understand references in the text. I was surprised that there were so many word and phrases that I had never heard before reading this book.[40] There were several references that I simply could not decipher from the context in which they appeared, and I added them to my list with question marks. I always assumed that as a high school teacher who spends a great deal of time walking the halls, lunch room, and parking lot, I was familiar with most of the slang or culturally specific references

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[40] I tried to consider all factors which may account for the language barrier including cultural, social, racial and generational differences.

students use in their social conversations.[41] Wrong. Suddenly, I was lacking the necessary cultural capital necessary for understanding the text.

I began my reading assuming my participants had chosen a "safe"[42] novel since they would be discussing the text with me. Wrong again. Purves & Beach (1972) found that students choose books with characters and events that are closely related to their own experiences, but I was surprised to discover the book was laden with explicit sex scenes and language.[43] I wondered whether this content was specific to novels targeted to all adolescent girls or primarily black adolescent girls. I noted early in the study that other black female students were also carrying this book around school. I investigated some of the books popular among my white female students,[44] and in terms of sexual content, there was just no comparison. It was not so much the frequency of sexual references that I noted, but rather the language used to describe the scenes. There also seemed to be significantly more profanity in the books targeted to black adolescents.

As my reading continued, I thought the black experience being described in this book could not possibly be the same as that of my black students. By the time I finished the book, I had enough comments and questions to fill fifty audio tapes. This was most certainly a reading experience like no other, and I felt a bit like a traveler in a foreign land who does not speak the language or have any knowledge of the culture.

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[41] Whatever I once thought I knew about the social language and behavior of students I discarded as obsolete.

[42] A novel that would receive a "G" or "PG" rating at the movies; (limited sex, violence, adult themes and profanity.)

[43] I could not recall any books from my own fiction collection, mostly white authors, that was quite this explicit. This is why I questioned whether it was a cultural difference.

[44] I randomly compared five books popular among my black female students and five books popular among my white female students. Most of the avid readers that I teach (ones who consistently have a pleasure book with them in class) could easily agree on what books were being "passed around" or were "popular" at the time of my inquiry.

The Book Club Meeting: Week Four

When I arrived at the restaurant, book in hand, I was expecting outrage over a book that so poorly depicted women and negatively stereotyped the black community. Much to my surprise, the women were hardly able to contain their excitement claiming "This is the best book I have ever read," "Oh, girl this book was the bomb," "I have already read it again" (see Appendix E for book summary). We settled on a table, set our tape recorder to "record," and wasted no time getting started. The first few minutes of the recording are unintelligible because of overlapping talk (Gay & Abrahams, 1972), but after a while, the group settled into a more natural rhythm of conversation. There were a few awkward moments when I engaged, but those moments soon subsided.

Reading with Purpose

Appleyard (1990) suggests that there are differences between how adolescents and adults read fiction. He claims that adults read for escape, information, guidance, and ideas for solving life problems, while adolescents "generally expect to be able to identify with the main character and, even if they are contained in fiction or fantasy settings, expect them to be realistic" (as interpreted by Sumara, 1996, p. 206).[45] Some of the earliest praise of this novel from the student participants was the personal connection they felt to the protagonist, Tamlyn.

Holly: What was it that made this book such a favorite?

Kara: This is life. Real life. I mean, I could relate to what Tamlyn was going through with Hassan, and her, uh, family, and all that.

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[45] I acknowledge here that my reasons for reading in this particular situation differed from my non-research related reading of fiction.

Dana: And it was good because it didn't sugarcoat it either. It told it straight up, you know. The reality of life.

Holly: So, do all of you know this character?

Lisa: Oh, honey. Yes! I know about fifty Tamlyns [laughing]

Kara: I work with her right now.

Dana: Oh, girl, this is my cousin. Already has two babies and is only eighteen. And um, I mean, that just the way it is.

I had to admit that I had not encountered a Tamlyn either as an adult or as an adolescent. In fact, I only knew of one girl during my teen years who became pregnant and that was after graduation, the summer before my freshman year in college. The girls discussed this character as if she were a member of their own family or a trusted friend. In conversation, they defended her, felt empathy for her, and offered advice on her behalf. From the first few minutes of the meeting, it was obvious that my students were deeply engaged with this novel and emotionally invested in the welfare of the main character.

Throughout this study, and in this final meeting, the women indicated that one of their primary purposes for reading socially was to examine contemporary issues they faced in their present lives. Rosenblatt (1938) says that "vicariously experiencing the life of a character in fiction or participating in another's emotion expressed in a poem may enable the reader to bring into consciousness similar elements in his own nature and emotional life" (pp. 191-192). In this way, the women of this study were constantly constructing and reconstructing identities through the text. They never discussed a

situation from the text in isolation; it was only as it related to their own present or future lives, as the following conversation illustrates.

Kara: I think if I were in this situation, I would have to draw the line there.

Dana: There is no way a man is going to beat me down. My boyfriend, husband, whatever is going to know that that just ain't part of the deal. No ma'am. Not for this girl. If some boy be even actin' like he gonna try that stuff with me, I'd already be down the road.

Lisa: You know, that's the truth.

Kara: And I know if that were me, my family wouldn't be puttin' me out like that.

Dana: Thata been me, my momma woulda knocked that boy down a notch or two. You know what I'm sayin'? She would have taken care of *that* situation herself.

In instances where the text provided "transformational spaces" (Sumara, 1996), we discussed how our cultural experiences produced different responses to the text. This interrelational dynamic of sharing responses as a group allowed us to formulate our own "truth" within the context of the discussion resulting in "a newly woven fabric of relations and experiences" (Sumara, 1996, p. 80).

The women expressed their desire to "find themselves in the story," and I attempted to understand how those stories were constructed. The women "explored agency as they compared their lives and possibilities with the characters in the novel" (Smith, 2000, p. 30), while I sought to analyze their responses drawing on my own cultural conventions.

Holly: How common is it in your world for abuse to be so public and so it seemed, to be so matter-of-fact.

Kara: Very [group nodding and commenting in agreement].

Holly: I might say that abuse, though I know it occurs, is more private in the white community. I always think about a wife beater being a person you would least expect.

Dana: That's a everyday thing in our world. I mean, we don't put up with it, but you hear about it happenin' all the time.

Holly: Really? When you say all the time, can you name someone who has been abused by their spouse/boyfriend lately? Someone you know.

Kara: [laughing] It's not, like happenin' to me….

Dana: Not me either, honey, but black men just hustlin' sometimes.

Lisa: We take care of um, though…you know what I mean?

[laughing from group]

Dana: That's right, honey.

Holly: What do you mean?

Kara: Some of that stuff is just taken care of at home. There is no police gonna do one thing if a black woman calls and say, um, her husband beatin' her.

Holly: I find that hard to believe. Abuse is abuse.

Dana: You say that, but you white. It ain't the same for a black women.

As we moved through the conversation, we constructed new meaning influenced by our own responses and the contribution of others. As we shared our developing interpretations, new ideas were formed and old ones were discarded.

In many cases, they assumed that I had certain cultural knowledge pertinent to the topic at hand and upon realizing that I was lost, would backtrack and explain their responses. As the meeting progressed, the women appeared more aware of cultural references that I might not be privy to and asked me if I needed clarification. It was *I* who lacked sufficient cultural capital. Toward the end of the meeting, I had a much better working knowledge of some of the cultural codes to which they made reference that eluded me earlier in the discussion.

Stereotypes as Necessary Evil

I assumed that the other participants would be just as disturbed by the negative black stereotypes just as I was. Their reaction was, in fact, the opposite. "The legacy of struggle constitutes one of several core themes" of the black experience (Collins, 2000, p. 27). Collins' observation was never more prevalent than in the novel we read together. Before the book club meeting, I would have said that this book had no value for any reader because it perpetuated stereotypes many blacks are working hard to overcome. The group offered this explanation:

Holly: How can you say you like this novel, when it clearly paints a very negative picture of the black community. Look at all the stereotypes this book seems to confirm.

Kara: That's true. Um, I mean, I can see why you would say that, but sometimes it's good to read both sides of the story.

Holly: What do you mean?

Kara: There are two sides to the black community. There is still struggle, teenage pregnancy, dealin', and um family dramas, and all that. There's

successful black people, too, and it's good to talk about those stories, but this is more…well, what is happening most of the time.

Holly: You mean to tell me that most of the time, black teen girls have two babies before they graduate from high school, are kicked out of their parent's house, and are living in a housing project on welfare?

Dana: No, not always. But, the stuff in this novel is real. Maybe not every little thing, but there are guys like Hassan everywhere. You know, guy who did time for dealin', now he's out, and before you know it, he's back dealin' again, even though he said he gonna make a better life.

Holly: And Tamyln?

Lisa: Yeah, her, too. I mean it ain't all party and roses. This is reality and I think about how I would have done things differently if I'd been her, but then again, you just don't know what you would do, really.

I expressed my concern over the damaging effect of books like this that seem to perpetuate negative black stereotypes outside the black community. The women agreed but also admitted the story is still a reality of their culture, even though they believed many black people, including themselves, aspire to break free of these stereotypes. Part of me wanted to deny that the themes in the book could be a reality for these women. I wanted this book to be the exception, not the rule. But, according to the students, the storyline is more probable than not. Kara said, "You can't just ignore what's real because you wish it weren't true. You can't just walk around with blinders on, I mean. It is still going on around you." Each girl in the group could name a dozen or so teens with children (in many cases, more than one): All knew at least two people in recent memory

who had been "put out of the house" by their parents after becoming pregnant, all described having their own pregnancy scare or abortion, all personally knew someone or had a family member doing time in federal prison for dealing drugs, and all knew several women in their lives who had been physically abused by a man. I began to see the oceans separating our cultural realities. None of their stories were regular occurrences in my world as a teenager or as an adult.

But the issue is really that I live in a different world, a different culture. Their lives will never be my own. If they were willing to discuss openly the less glamorous side of the black culture, why did I have so many hang-ups? In part, I think it is because my own ideologies restrict what I am willing to accept as "real." My tendency, though I work diligently to resist it, is to deny the existence of anything that threatens my own value system. I didn't want to believe that the experiences described in this book could be a reality for my students. Delpit (1995) says it is not uncommon of white, middle-class educators to be fearful of cultural difference, but I was more than fearful. I was sad.

> Nowhere [in education] do we foster inquiry into who students really are or encourage teachers to develop links to the often rich home lives of students, yet teachers cannot hope to understand who sits before them unless they can connect with the families and communities from which their students come…to learn to value the experiences of other groups. (p. 179)

Language Acquisition

At times, the text was difficult for me to follow. Many sections of dialog that contain words, phrases, and an ordering of words were unfamiliar to me. It was not just my comprehension of the novel that was problematic; it was also aesthetically challenging to read. My processing of the words was like playing staccato notes on a

piano; there was no flow.   The students seemed to have no difficulty at all and were willing to teach me how to "talk the talk."[46]

Delpit (1995) argues that "one of the most difficult tasks we face as human beings is communicating meaning across our individual differences, a task confounded immeasurably when we attempt to communicate across social lines, racial lines or cultural lines" (66). I relied on the students to translate parts of the text as well as their own responses during our book club meeting, so that I had the language needed to participate in the conversation.   During our exchanges, the students and I developed "linguist diversity" (Delpit, 1995, p. 69) that helped us negotiate meaning in our dialog.

Holly: They describe him as a cold blooded MacDaddy that "all the girls are jockin'." I'm confused. Does that mean women want him or not?

Kara: Yeah, that a good thing. It means, like, he can have anybody he wants.

Dana: [nods agreement] It's like he don't take nothin' off nobody and that make all the girls want him.

Lisa: Girls be wantin' something they can't just snap their fingers and get.

Holly: OK, I see. So Tamyln was leery of him from the start?

Kara: Yeah, I mean, she saw the handwriting on the wall.

Motivation and Cultural Exchange

When readers engage with a book that piques their interest and provides opportunity for self actualization, readers take ownership of their literacy (Au & Asam, 1996). In addition, I believe that my participation was an even greater source of motivation for ownership than the text alone, because they were able to share that ownership with me. Sumara (1996) explains, "Because we desire it ourselves, and

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[46] I could not help but wonder if they had ever felt this way when reading a "white" book in our classroom.

because pleasure is meant to be shared, we wish others to participate in similar experiences" (p. 43). This sharing is particularly powerful when cultural exchange is part of the process.

Our book club meeting was a myriad of superlatives. It was lively, entertaining, serious, emotional, and passionate. The one hour meeting turned into two, as we pulled from the novel of our own lived experiences, constructed future selves, and shared our social, generational, and cultural perspectives. I observed that our differences were a source of intrigue and inquiry. I derived humor from discovering all I didn't know about the modern black adolescent experience explored through the venue of the book club, and the students seemed to enjoy teaching me. The ebb and flow of our conversation allowed us to approach issues of racial difference naturally and without pretense. In fact, it was this emergence of difference that constituted what I would call the heart of our discussion. Consider the following exemplar of my attempt to understand a situation from the novel:

> Holly: Is this triangle between these two women unusual? This just seems like such a strange arrangement to me.
>
> Dana: This… This is a classic example of the baby-mamma-drama. What we been trying to tell you about.
>
> Holly: The what? Baby-mamma-drama?
>
> [laughing from the group]
>
> Kara: Lisa, she doesn't know what that is. You gotta help her understand. You have to explain it to her. I mean, white people don't know what that is.

This was only one of several places in the discussion where the group had to stop and explain something to me from the text. However, I sensed these interruptions, rather than exasperating the students, gave them a sense of authority. This reversal of power seemed to foster mutual respect. The give and take promoted trust within the group and bonded us as a community of readers with a shared purpose. Kutz & Roskelly (1991) describe how this situation might transfer to the classroom:

> In the multicultural classroom the teacher shouldn't think of herself as the only informant in the group; she can draw on the knowledge of others in the classroom community who know more than she about other ethnic groups or races. Learning for them, she shows herself to be a learning member of the group, and she shows them that they have something to teach as well. (116)

I took mental notes on how this might apply to my own teaching practice and the value of sharing multiple perspectives.

Reflections

At the end of our meeting, the women and I had a casual assessment of our project. It was a way for us to reflect on what we learned from the experience. It was apparent by the ease of our conversation that we had made strides in breaking down some the cultural barriers that separate us as people and readers. We speculated about how our book club might operate in the classroom.

Holly: What do you suppose this would look like if we did this in our class?

Lisa: I think it'd look like you have a lot more people involved in the class.

Kara: That's because we lose interest whenever, we, like, don't identify, we don't care. I think I would care more about the white books if I knew that there were some for us, too. And I don't mean Langston Hughes, and um, all that slavery stuff.

Dana: I think, you know, the whites might really like it. I mean, it's not stuff they see everyday. I kinda like white books sometimes….You know, I have some white friends, so it's okay.

Holly: But do you think there are books that accomplish that that can be taught in school?

Dana: There's got to be something better than, you know, all that stuff in the literature book. Why can't we just read something written this decade? It's just stupid we keep reading all that ancient stuff.

Kara: I think, it'd work. I think we could do this in school. I mean, it couldn't be this book or anything, but there is some out there I'm sure. It would be a start.

Often, the reading and discussion of literature is viewed as a fixed property with no attention paid to the contested cultural or social politics therein. However, just within this study it is apparent how limiting a reading experience can be without considerations made to differences of race, class, and gender. In addition, this study shows the need for verisimilitude within a reading community that provides space for difference. There is no way to create a one-size-fits-all model for reading.

> Multiculturalism is not, therefore, to suggest the juxtaposition of several cultures whose frontiers remain intact, nor is it to subscribe to a bland "melting pot" type of attitude that would level all difference. It lies instead, in the intercultural acceptance of risks, unexpected detours, and complexities of relation between break and closure. (Minh-Ha, 1991, p. 232)

Whether inside or outside the classroom, a space must be created where these risks can be taken, where each voice is heard, and each difference validated.

Further Implications

Stewig (1994) poses the question, "Do we value children asking questions about topics that interest them, or do we only want inquiry with which we as adults are comfortable" (p. 189). The curriculum we teach in our classrooms is rooted in the assumption that adolescents, by their nature, are harmed by the presence of the language, sex, and "adult themes" that constitute most modern fiction. Therefore, it is not surprising that classroom literature remains limited to the literary canon or similarly conservative selections. I suspect that an examination of music, books, movies, television shows and internet sites popular among adolescents would illustrate that adolescents are used to reading texts that adults consider harmful. Though this study could make a case for the benefit of teaching some modern literature in high school, to do so would require reconstructing the social and political ideologies on which traditional education is grounded. Is there room for compromise? Is it an all or nothing proposition?

Bogdan (1992) poses the following question to educators: What literature should be studied? Why should it be studied? And…how should it be taught? Though this is a multidimensional question with no easy answers, I believe that high school literature should include some novels, albeit modified or abridged selections, that represent the culturally rich student population, not simply literature describing their cultural history but the world in which they *currently* live. One of the goals of multicultural education is to promote tolerance of other cultures as well as to help students to embrace the diversity that exists within their school and community. Literature offers a unique space for students to discuss cultural difference and promote unity.

Worth a Thousand Words

I loved to go out and shoot in strange places, to talk to the types of people I'd never meet were it not for the excuse of the camera. I loved the heft of the black metal in my hands, the way it feels like a weapon. I loved to press the shutter, to freeze time, to turn little slices of life into rectangles rife with metaphor. I loved to find the one that best summarized a particular lived moment.
Deborah Copaken Kogan, (2000)

Photography, the central metaphor for this project, is a significant part of my study and my contribution as a researcher. The use of this metaphor is more than simply a juxtaposition of two seemingly unrelated processes. It is a means of allowing the reader to "see beyond the things immediately in front of her" (Kutz & Roskelly, p. 234). It was a way for me to write a story within a story by "forcing the interpreter to imagine both the second and third element in the construction" (Kutz & Roskelly, p. 234). The metaphor of photography is another model for exploring the plurality of meaning (Weedon, 1997).

Photography, like any other art form, reflects further the uncertainty of visual representation. In Foucault's (1966) influential book, *The Order of Things*, he examines *Las Meninas* (The Maids of Honor, 1656) by Spanish painter, Diego Valasquez. In the painting, the artist is working on his canvas, only the back of which is visible. In the front and center of the painting is the princess Margarita and her maids. On a mirror, hanging in the background, are the faces of the King and Queen looking at their reflection in the mirror—or at us the viewer. Other than their reflection, the King and Queen are not visible to the observer. This painting, like the photographs of this study, evokes the reciprocity of seeing that which lay before us, in effect, interpreting its language. Are we looking at the painting, or is it looking back at us?

Conclusion

German writer and poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves" (p. 42). As an educator, I often fall into the trap of feeling as if research is an opportunity to "fix" what is broken. I have found that no satisfaction ever comes when I am focused on the solution. Throughout this project, I made it a priority to try to love the questions themselves and accept the ambiguity that is an inevitable component of qualitative research. For now, I remain comfortably confused but with a greater understanding of myself as a reader, a teacher, and a researcher. Hopefully, this study provided a new lens for seeing academic and social reading as a continuum whereby the perspectives of all races, classes and genders only enrich and strengthen the reading community.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Initial Survey

Questionnaire: Please complete the following information.

1. Age: _____

2. Do you consider yourself a social reader?

❏ Yes
❏ No
❏ Uncertain

3. Were you read to as a child?

❏ Often
❏ Occasionally
❏ Never

4. Did you enjoy reading as a child?
❏
❏ Always
❏ Often
❏ Occasionally
❏ Never

5.   Do you enjoy reading in school?

❏ Always
❏ Often
❏ Occasionally
❏ Never

6. Do you feel that you comprehend what you read?

❏ Always
❏ Often
❏ Occasionally
❏ Never

7. Are you more likely to read if you can choose your reading material?

❏ Yes
❏ No
❏ Uncertain

8. Have you ever participated in a social reading group?

❏   Yes
❏   No
❏   Uncertain

9. Have you ever had a discussion about a book with a friend or parent?

❏   Yes
❏   No
❏   Uncertain

10. Do you consider yourself to be social around your peers?

❏   Always
❏   Often
❏   Occasionally
❏   Never

11. How often do you read for pleasure?

❏   Never
❏   Occasionally
❏   Often

13. Have you ever kept a reading log or written about your reading?

❏   Yes
❏   No
❏   Uncertain

14. Why did you choose to participate in this research project?

15. Is there anyone in particular that influenced you as a reader?

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Biographical Information:

1. Where were you born?
2. How long have you lived in Georgia?
3. How many siblings do you have?
4. What can you tell me about your family?
5. Are you parents social readers?

Reading Experiences

6. What are your most memorable reading experiences as a child?
7. How do you use reading as an adolescent?
8. Tell me about your experiences reading in high school English classes.
9. What do you think about the literature you have read so far in your high school English classes?
10. What are your favorite books you have read in high school English classes? What are your least favorite?
11. What types of books do you typically read for pleasure? *
12. Have you ever participated in a book club?
13. Do you ever discuss books with friends or family members?
14. If yes, how do you "talk" about books you read? *
15. What are the differences between your social reading and your school reading?

Racial/Gender/Class Information

16. Do you feel that race is an issue in your school?
17. What is the racial make up of your close friendships?
18. Do you feel there are any advantages or disadvantages to being female in your high school?
19. Do you feel there are any advantages or disadvantages of being black in your high school?
20. Do you feel that there are class divisions at your school?

[* denotes questions that were omitted]

Appendix C: Post Interview Guide

1. How do you define multicultural education?
2. Do you feel that there is multicultural education being taught at Jackson High school?
3. How was the book club experience different from your regular social reading? How was it different from your school reading?
4. Do you think modern literature should be part of the high school curriculum?
5. Do you have any reflection on the book club or the study itself?

APPENDIX D: Approved High School Literature List

Title	Author	White Males	White Females	Black Males	Black Females	Other Minorites
A Farewell to Arms	Ernest Hemingway	◆				
A Raisin in the Sun*	Lorraine Hansberry				◆	
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*	Mark Twain	◆				
All My Sons	Arthur Miller	◆				
Ballad of the Sad Café	Carson McCullers		◆			
Billy Budd	Herman Melville	◆				
Bridge of San Luis Rey	Thornton Wilder	◆				
Celestial Railroad	Nathaniel Hawthorne	◆				
Civil Disobedience	Henry David Thoreau	◆				
Death of a Salesman	Arthur Miller	◆				
Education of Little Tree*	Forrest Carter	◆				
Ethan Frome	Edith Wharton		◆			
Grapes of Wrath	John Steinbeck	◆				
House on Mango Street*	Sandra Cisneros					◆
My Antonia	Willa Cather		◆			
O'Pioneers	Willa Cather		◆			
Of Mice and Men	John Steinbeck	◆				
Our Town	Thornton Wilder	◆				
Pudd'nhead Wilson*	Mark Twain	◆				
Slave Dancer*	Paula Fox		◆			
Something Wicked This Way Comes	Ray Bradbury	◆				
The Crucible	Arthur Miller	◆				
The Glass Menagerie	Tennessee Williams	◆				
The Great Gatsby	F. Scott Fitzgerald	◆				
The Heart is a Lonely Hunter	Carson McCullers		◆			
The Jungle	Upton Sinclair	◆				
The Last of the Mohicans	James Fenimore Cooper	◆				
The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail	Jerome Lawrence	◆				
The Red Badge of Courage	Stephen Crane	◆				
The Scarlet Letter	Nathaniel Hawthorne	◆				
Total		22	6	0	1	1

*Denotes multicultural literature designation

APPENDIX E: Book Synopsis

Biggs, U. (1999). *When you look at me.* Riverdale, MD: La Caille Nous Publishing
    Company.

Tamlyn Blake is seventeen and pregnant with her second child when she moves into the
Domtar Courts housing project in Trenton. She doesn't want to be there, but her parents
made it clear that if ever she had a second baby out of wedlock, she'd be out of the house.
Abandoned by the father of both her children, and with support she doesn't always feel
from her sometimes abrasive, tough-loving mother, Tammy sets about the tasks of living
on her own, raising her children, and earning her high school diploma and then her
Associates Degree. Soon after moving into the projects she discovers Hassan Colbirth,
cool, cocky and handsome, an up-and-coming drug dealer who refers to his goods as
"product," can revel in the adrenaline rush of a shakedown, but listens to his mother with
respect and worries about the health of his son by a high school girlfriend. Tammy and
Hassan dance from attraction to passion and passion to love, until they confront the
realities of life on their very different paths. While Hassan is taken with Tammy in a way
he's never quite felt before, he doesn't swear off other women, either, which causes him
more than a little trouble when both Tammy and the mother of his son find themselves
pregnant - by Hassan - at the same time. The tough, city drug dealer lacks the courage to
confess the situation, a sin of omission that soon comes back to haunt him. Committed to
education, unafraid of Hassan's raw physical power or the loss of the cars, clothes and
jewelry his drug money can buy, Tammy remains determined to build a better life. Much
as she loves him, much as she wants her children to have a real father, she won't allow
Hassan or his lifestyle to compromise her own goals.

When You Look At Me makes short work of more than a few stereotypes: Tammy's use of
welfare as a tool to get her life together is painful and frightening to her. When her
younger daughter declares her ambition to get on welfare and never hold a job, Tammy
comes close to despair and musters everything she has to convince the four-year-old of
how wrong she is. Hassan is less of a thug than a kid, as immature as a lot of 23-year-
olds, more frightened by the notion of abandoning his children than he is of anything
happening to him on the street. His mother doesn't approve of the way he makes his
living, but has no intention of walking away from her son, and makes it clear to everyone
that all of Hassan's children - her grandchildren - are going to play together one day, no
matter what feuds their parents may have started between themselves. Family is
important to all of these people - family is the strongest theme in the book.[47]

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[47]Synoposis taken from www.trentonwrites.com