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MISSING STORIES, MISSING LIVES

Urban Girls (Re)Constructing Race and Gender in the Literacy Classroom

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In this critical ethnography, interpretivist methods were used to focus on the perspectives of African American, Latina, and Native American girls in an urban middle-school classroom to better understand how they constructed social identities of gender and race through their experiences with literacy. Because the enacted curriculum lacked critical awareness of the sociocultural contexts of gender and race, the perspectives of the girls in this classroom were largely missing from transactions with literacy. Consequently, girls' efforts to make intertextual links to their own lived stories were not taken up in meaningful ways. Transactions with literacy created a felt sense of fractured or compartmentalized social identities, and the girls in this study learned to separate their public, academic lives from their private lives. As a result, the girls did not take up the literature in ways that could potentially enable them to realize social and cognitive transformation in their lives.

Keywords: *literature; literacy; adolescent girls; identity construction*

This study explores how urban girls' constructions of gendered and raced social identities emerged from their negotiations with texts in a particular eighth-grade English classroom. The intent was to look across the perspectives of African American, Latina, and Native American girls to discern the meanings girls constructed from their transactions with texts and the ways in which their understandings may be linked to their perceptions of the larger social order. Although a feminist analysis of the relationship

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between literacy and the construction of gender continues to unfold in the education literature (Alvine & Cullum, 1999; Blake, 1997; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997; Gallas, 1998; King, 1998; Peterson, 1998; Schaafsma, Tendero, & Tendero, 1999; Smith, 2000), there is very little research that focuses on the ways in which a culturally or racially diverse group of urban middle-school girls negotiate literary texts in the classroom. By exploring how groups of girls of different racial/ethnic backgrounds participate in and understand literacy events in a particular classroom, we may more fully understand the differences in how girls' transactions with literacy contribute to and help shape their social identities. The specific questions that guided this study were (a) What sociocultural representations about female identity and gendered expectations emerge in the transactions with literacy events experienced by urban girls in a middle-school English class? (b) What meanings do girls in this classroom make from these gendered representations? In what ways do girls from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds take up and/or resist these messages? (c) In what ways are these girls' transactions with literacy events in the English classroom linked to their perceptions, insights, and understandings of the larger social order? Broadly construed, this study asks the questions, How is literacy constructed through social identity? and How is social identity constructed through literacy?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Within a particular classroom environment, teachers and students shape an understanding of knowledge, self, and community that is integrally connected to social, cultural, and historical structures already existing both within and outside of the classroom (Bakhtin, 1981; Bauer & McKinstry, 1991; Miller & Legge, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). It is through these structures that individuals learn a way of being in the world and a view of social reality. Language and literacy are two such social structures. Responding to and shaped by their experiences with language, literacy, knowledge, and patterns of interaction, individuals construct identities of gender, race, and class (K. Weiler, 1988). Throughout this study, I invoke literacy in this manner and frame it as a dynamic and dialogic event situated within an individual's lived experience and functioning as a critical component of the construction of one's worldview and developing sense of self (Luke & Gore, 1992; Torres, 1994).

However, for women, people of color, and other marginalized groups within society, this dialogic process of (re)producing social identities is not without risk. For example, research by feminist scholars in literacy and other disciplines supports the assertion that women's social construction of gendered identities contributes to women's oppression (Arnot, 1982; Brown & Gilligan, 1998; Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990, 1993; Davies, 1993; Gilligan, 1982, 1990, 1993; Kelly, 1995; McRobbie, 1978, 2000; Pipher, 1994; Roman, Christian-Smith, & Ellsworth, 1988; J. D. Weiler, 2000; K. Weiler 1988). It is significant that identity construction within particular social contexts (e.g., the literacy classroom) is part of the larger matrix of transactions between self and world. A closer look at theories of cultural reproduction and resistance will help to clarify the complexity of these transactions and their implications for the girls described in this study.

CULTURAL REPRODUCTION AND RESISTANCE

The work of the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971) and critical poststructuralists (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1981; MacLeod, 1995; Willis, 1977) is concerned with individuals' ability to critique and transform social reality and thereby counter hegemonic social structures. These theorists revealed schools as sites of cultural and social reproduction, but they also stressed that students do not passively accept oppressive social forces. Rather, individuals actively resist and contest these oppressive forces. Although individuals can and do consciously engage in resistance, the structure of school and the cultural hegemony that it maintains is almost always preserved. For example, in Cherland's (1994) study of girls reading fiction, Sarah expressed to her teacher her anger that answering study questions about literature came before her enjoyment of a particular book. Although she challenged what counted as knowledge, the situation did not change because ultimately her grade depended on her performance on these types of activities.

Further, Apple's (1990) work makes clear that schooling is an important means of reproducing culture. In fact, specific sets of cultural norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs—in short, ways of being in the world—are embedded in the ritual of schooling. The work of these scholars suggests the need for deeper understanding of the interconnection between lived experience and dominant social structures such as language and literacy. In the study of the relationship between literacy and gender, this is particularly relevant. Young women, as do all readers, bring to texts their social and cultural histories. At the same time, the texts they read and the talk that occurs around the reading of texts are constantly (re)structuring these social and cultural identities. In this way, transactions with literacy are social practices that are situated historically and socially and function in the production and reproduction of human subjectivity.

THE SOCIOCULTURAL DYNAMIC BETWEEN READERS AND TEXTS

This theory of cultural reproduction and resistance has significant implications for the dialectic that occurs between readers and writers and texts. The need to foreground a critical, sociocultural stance toward literacy is crucial when we consider that the talk and the writing that accompanies the reading of literature in traditional classrooms does not allow space for students' individual, subjective reading of texts (Applebee, 1996). As a result, students in these classrooms are often relegated to the role of passive consumers of cultural texts within a traditional and exclusionary literary canon (Applebee, 1993). These texts further the (re)production of specific cultural politics of gender, race, and class because this canon excludes the worldviews of women, racial and ethnic groups, and working-class people in favor of the ideological vantage point of the dominant classes in society. When no alternative realities are acknowledged, then a biased politics is promoted as dominant and legitimate in a New Critical approach to textual interpretation, and representations of self and world are already prescripted for students by dominant cultural texts and ways of reading (Corcoran, 1993).

The typical classroom setting, which embraces a discourse that involves entry into a system of masculine representation (Luke & Gore, 1992), is based on sociocultural patterns of identity that are rooted in male-sanctioned ways of knowing and doing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). Students, both male and female, are initiated into gendered subjectivities and social relations that inevitably replicate the colonization and domestication of women in our society. As a result, adolescent girls are presented with little opportunity to challenge a sociocultural discourse that often contributes to women's ongoing oppression. However, the important point I wish to make is that transactions with literacy can engage individuals not as passive recipients of text and culture but as coproducers of culture.

As the data in this study demonstrate, girls do find spaces within which they resist cultural codes represented in classroom texts and discourse. Cazden (1988) distinguished classroom discourse from conversation by referring to the former as "criteria for appropriate ways of talking in school, and even appropriate topics for that talk as well," (p. 16). Girls' resistance, however, is often caught up within a web of social matrixes and competing ideologies that complicates and problematizes girls' agency and developing sense of self. Transactions with literacy create sites of political and ideological struggle (Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1993; Davies, 1993; Finders, 1997; Sleeter, 1996). This is the case because individuals are not simply acted upon but they also negotiate, struggle, and create meaning in the literacy classroom (J. L. Collins, 1995; K. Weiler, 1988) and in the world (Willis, 1977). In fact, where readers or writers position themselves in relation to the texts they read and the meanings they bring to these texts are influenced, to a great extent, by their subjective lived experiences.

GENDERED IDENTITIES AND LITERACIES

Situated within texts are diverse social voices that take on different meanings for different readers (Bakhtin, 1981) derived in part from constructions of gender, race, and ethnicity. It is the transaction that occurs between readers' prior lived experience and understanding of the world, the language of the text, and the pedagogy around the teaching of the text that together shapes meaning and creates knowledge or ways of knowing (Rosenblatt, 1978) in the literacy classroom. This transaction is complex.

Critical education and literacy scholars who are concerned with gender (Alvine & Cullum, 1999; Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990; Fetterley, 1978; Finders, 1997; Kelly, 1995; J. D. Weiler, 2000) make a convincing case that gender is shaped, in part, by what we read and by the social and cultural context in which we read it. Readers and writers engage texts from the positions they occupy within the discourses of gender, class, race, and ethnicity (Barbieri, 1995; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997). According to Gee (1990), discourse associates language with particular ways of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can identify individuals as belonging to specific social groups. Discourse then becomes a way of taking on a particular social role that others will recognize. These social roles, in turn, moderate how we learn to think, act, and speak in all the various social roles we take on. However, it is often the case that individuals are not critically aware of how their social standpoints shape their readings of texts and the ways in which this interaction can work to (re)produce readers' gendered sense of self.

THE INTERRELATIONS OF GENDER AND RACE

Work by feminist researchers (Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Maher & Tetreault, 1998; Romaine, 1999) challenges analyses that essentialize women's experiences into a single or universal norm. Instead, these researchers speak to the complex gender, racial, and class relations that shape how we think and what we know as well as the concurrent social, cultural, and political realities of how women learn and understand the world. Family, school, friends, and neighborhoods can all present different and often competing codes of meaning. The ways in which girls take up and negotiate these meanings and construct their own gendered identities is contingent on the racial and ethnic groups with which they identify.

For example, P. H. Collins (1991) claimed, “For Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to reject controlling images and integrate knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women’s survival” (p. 95). P. H. Collins located three “safe spaces” wherein Black women can come to voice and resist objectification. One of these spaces exists within the voices of Black women writers. Reading literature written by Black women creates the intellectual and personal space to construct new worldviews as “an alternative . . . to [worldviews] embedded in institutional locations of domination” (p. 103). In a similar manner, the work of Fine et al. (1997), Frankenberg (1993), and Maher and Tetreault (1998) on the social construction of White women looked at the ways in which Whiteness circumscribed how White women look at themselves, others, and society. Frankenburg found that “women at times named Whiteness . . . as [a] distinctively ‘bad’ culture and an undesirable identity because of [its] link to systems of domination” (p. 192). However, some of the women “constructed Whiteness simultaneously as generic or normative and as an apparently empty cultural space.” In her interviews with White women, it became clear that these understandings of Whiteness had everything to do with class, race, and culture. Although Frankenberg does not discuss literacy specifically, her work points to “modes of knowing” that produce ways of understanding representations of self and others through social structures such as literacy.

What these analyses share in common is an exploration of how the intertwined effects of gender and race influenced women’s ways of thinking about self and others. Gender and race form a dialectical relationship that, along with class, make up social reality based on individuals’ perceived interconnection among these categories of American identity. In a particular classroom in a specific urban neighborhood school, therefore, the negotiation of meaning from text will not be the same for all girls in that class, even if they come from similar economic backgrounds. An African American girl in this same class is very likely to negotiate and interpret a particular literacy event in a way that may be significantly different from that of the European American girl sitting next to her or even from other African African girls in the same class.

METHOD

This ethnographic study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) links an interpretive analysis (Schwandt, 1994) of girls' transactions with literacy with a critical structural (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994) understanding of the ways in which their negotiations with literacy enter into the larger social order. First, I contextualize and interpret from their point of view the ways in which a diverse group of urban eighth-grade girls take up literate practice as shaped in their English classroom. Second, I critically examine the ways in which their transactions with classroom literacy may be linked to their perceptions, insights, and understandings of the larger social structure (family, community, neighborhood, and other social institutions) to which they belong and contribute to the production and reproduction of gendered subjectivities. This study is grounded within the emerging tradition of feminist methodology (Lather, 1991; Nielsen, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1993; Weedon, 1997). It foregrounds the subjective lived experiences and realities of women with the intent that by so doing, the power relations that serve to subjugate and oppress women will be made visible.

DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

In the fall of 1997, I began data collection (observation field notes, students' written work, teacher's lesson notes and handouts, and interviews with students and the teacher) in an eighth-grade English classroom at West Shore Middle School, a K-8 Native American magnet building in an economically poor African American and Latino neighborhood in a midsized city in New York State. A total of 97% of the 630 students enrolled in this school were recipients of the free or reduced lunch program.

I observed in two sections of this eighth-grade English classroom at this site approximately 3 to 4 days a week for 6 months. I conducted and transcribed semistructured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994) with as many as girls as possible from both classes to obtain individual perceptions about the literature they read, to understand their thinking and reasoning behind transactions with literacy in the context of this English class, and to learn something about their perceptions of their communities and other social groups with which they might identify.

Questions asked of the girls were intentionally worded to emphasize participants' feelings and perceptions of the literature they read and the events surrounding engagement with texts. Five girls were interviewed twice for this study who self-identified in these ways, including two African American, one African American and Puerto Rican, one Native American, and one Native American and Puerto Rican. For purposes of this study, when I wrote about an individual girl, I identified her as she self-identified in the interview. However, it is important to note that the teacher was not aware that two of the girls self-identified as belonging to more than one racial or ethnic group. Gabriela, who self-identified as African American and Puerto Rican, was construed as African American by the teacher and most of her classmates. Michelle, who self-identified as Native American and Puerto Rican, was construed as Native American by the teacher and most of her classmates.

I also conducted two semistructured interviews with the teacher, a White, middle-class woman of European ancestry, to learn more about her perceptions of West Shore, her choices for the literature she selected for students to read, her decisions about pedagogy, and her perceptions and observations of individual girls in the class. I want to suggest that there were two constraints that impinged on this teacher's pedagogical decisions, one of which she was consciously aware and the other she did not consciously recognize. The first constraint had to do with the increased pressure from her principal and other district supervisors to structure her teaching on the primary objective of preparing students for the state test. Mary made the decision early in the year to forgo the more student-centered teaching she had done in the past to acquiesce to her principal and to the test. The other, equally significant constraint was related to her unrecognized (re)production of a White, middle-class standpoint of identity from which she made curricular and pedagogical decisions. Both of these issues will be explored further in this article.

Data collection and analysis was ongoing and recursive (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as I looked across data sources for emerging themes and categories of analysis. Data were coded to identify and categorize key concepts and emerging themes. These themes were triangulated across data types and data perspectives for confirmation of interpretations. I first began to think about initial interpretations by recording notes and initial impressions based on field notes from the site. I engaged in a free-writing or journaling process as a way to aid tentative and preliminary themes to emerge in my own thinking.

Eventually, I moved from this process to the initial coding of the data. This was accomplished by reading through the field notes, classroom transcriptions, interviews, and artifacts. I made notes in the margins of the pages, "asking questions of the data" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). From this process, additional questions and insights emerged, and I used this opportunity to write simple vignettes or stories from the data that helped me to better conceptualize these questions and insights. As I worked through these stories along with my initial coding of the data, I began to recognize tentative classifications reflecting emerging themes. I developed these classifications into an outline by which to sort the data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) and group it into categories for subsequent sorting and analyzing. I studied this outline and began to draw a diagram that enabled me to look for the larger picture that emerges in the data, what Guba (1978) called convergence or figuring out what fits together.

As I studied this diagram and outline, it became clear that some of what I initially considered categories were really smaller units of analysis that belonged under broader category headings. I then went deeper into these smaller, discrete units by identifying in the data descriptive examples that suggested the subtleties within these categories and units.

Finally, I want to address an ethical issue that arose in the ongoing data analysis while I was still in the field. As initial findings began to emerge, it became increasingly evident that this teacher's practice, for reasons that will be explored in this article, served to unintentionally disallow girls' meaningful engagement with texts. In fact, the teacher herself expressed concern about her teaching. In several of our informal conversations, when our talk would turn to the lessons I observed, Mary would comment that because she was "worried about moving forward with the curriculum," she felt the need to "structure" and "control" students' learning.

Based on the analysis that was emerging from the data and the teacher's response to her teaching, we decided I would teach several lessons on the young adult, multicultural novel *Sing Down the Moon*. The idea was that I would demonstrate an alternative teaching strategy that would model some of the ideas we had discussed. We agreed that my plan for these lessons would involve teaching strategies (i.e., questioning during student discussion, writing assignment, and so forth) designed to draw on students' prior knowledge and experience as tools for making meaning of the text as well as to engage with the text in ways that allowed students to question or problematize characterizations and events in the novel.

Newkirk (1996) contended that "if the researcher notes teaching practices that seem ineffective . . . there is an ethical responsibility to work with the teacher to deal with problems the researcher and teacher identify" (p. 14). As the academic year progressed, on several occasions, Mary used these lessons as a model from which to plan her discussion on other literature and we talked about ways in which she might continue to plan more student-centered lessons while still addressing the school curriculum. It is interesting that the next school year, Mary left the classroom to become the director of a teacher center that allowed her to continue her professional growth.

RESULTS

In this report, I focus on those findings that best represent the range of ways in which the girls attempted to work through the social identities and dualities of race and gender in their lives. Specifically, I look at how the girls' lives outside of English class contributed to the tensions that existed as they attempted to work out their social identities in both their work with literature in their English class and their daily lives in the larger society. The girls' efforts to address the tensions they felt were part of complex and multilayered social transactions among the girls, their understandings of the literature, and the sociocultural and political constructions of the classroom and the school. To begin, I want to frame the girls' negotiations with literacy within the particular social context of learning in this classroom.

LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT: THE POLITICS OF THE PASSIVE VOICE

Analysis of the data revealed that the canon of literature in this class presented images of women and girls both in traditional, stereotypic ways (subservient, self-sacrificing, physically attractive, and gentle) and as strong, resourceful, and self-determined. However, what is of particular interest in this analysis is how the teacher and the girls took up these female images. Layered upon these textual representations, the pedagogical dynamic operating in the classroom deeply influenced the social environment for learning. When the girls took up classroom literacy events around the literature in the ways specified by the teacher, it was almost always with the objectives of memorizing themes in the literature, accumulating points by completing written assignments based on a predetermined structure for completing essays and other written work, or by making "appropriate" contributions to class discussions of the reading of the texts.

For example, while the class was discussing the play *Driving Miss Daisy*, Mary identified the themes of the play as "issues of prejudice, ageism, sexism, and racism." She asked students to write that "information" in their notebooks. Although these are themes that have the potential to aid students to think critically about their effects both on their own lives and their community, framing them as "information" negated the power of the literature to alter students' thinking. However, because Mary was teaching the play with the primary objective that students could write these issues as literary themes, as "information" to use on their state test, issues such as ageism or racism were not discussed through a critical lens.

After students wrote the themes in their notebooks, she then asked them take a few minutes to write down their thoughts on either ageism or sexism. This writing was followed by a teacher-led discussion on the question, "Do you think boys and girls are equal?" Again, there is good potential for transformative discussion on this question. However, listen to the conversation that occurred between Mary and two of the girls. Gabriela, who self-identified as African American and Puerto Rican, commented that boys and girls were not equal and explained that this was the case because girls get pregnant. Mary responded,

> *Mary:* This is not appropriate in a class situation.
>
> *Gabriela:* It's true!
>
> *Mary:* I know, but you know what? That's not appropriate. Gabriela, I don't want to embarrass you but that is not appropriate in a classroom. Okay? Who has some writing on why they think girls and guys are different? What did you write Emily?
>
> *Emily:* Boys and girls are not equal and are not meant to be in physical or emotional ways. It would be okay if Eve hadn't ate the apple. There's a big difference. Women are treated differently. They have no place but in the house.
>
> *Mary:* This is really good. So what Emily did in her writing is a very good way to put ideas into context. She thought about historical things like Eve and the Garden of Eden and then talked about what happened there and then started talking about what happens today.

Emily, a European American girl who had spent much of her young life living in homeless shelters with her mother, responded to the teacher's question in a way that was in keeping with the teacher's sense of appropriate engagement with literacy. Emily's success and Gabriela's lack of success with classroom literacy is a good example of how literacy is more than just a set of discrete skills but rather functions as a social practice replete with ways of talking, interacting, thinking, valuing, and believing (Gee, 1990). In this example, Emily's comments were acceptable because they were in keeping with a traditional middle-class understanding of sexual inequality. She situated the roots of inequality within the Bible and in her comment, "They [women] have no place but in the house," she addressed the public-private dichotomy of White, middle-class women's place in the social order. These are perfectly "safe" topics because they are very much a part of the larger, dominant discourse on sexism and gender inequality. The irony embedded within this literary event is that the teacher's purpose for writing, reading, and talking was to think about sexism. The teacher had also told students that one of the themes of this play was racism. It is interesting that although Emily's response was acceptable in the discourse environment of this classroom, during one of her interviews, she confided that “our [U.S.] history makes me kind of ashamed to be a White because pretty much all we’ve done is bad.” However, the conflicted notions of the students about women and race had no opportunity to be worked out equitably.

Although a teacher-led pedagogy merits concern, to not consider her rationale would be to oversimplify what, as it turned out, was a crucial part of understanding the cultural, social, and political context of literacy in this classroom. Just as Mary positively acknowledged “appropriate” contributions such as Emily’s, she also corrected students’ talk or writing if she considered that either was “not appropriate,” as was the case with Gabriela. When asked during one of her interviews why she made a distinction between “appropriate” comments and those that were “not appropriate,” she explained that she thought it was important that she help students determine notions of what was appropriate because

> junior high is a very important time for establishing values. . . . If they can see how people act in the world, not only within [their] families, [they can see] the correct way. If we don’t let kids know what’s not appropriate . . . how will they know? Because a lot of times, in their homes, it’s okay.

Mary’s desire, then, for her students to engage “appropriately” with literature derived not from a felt sense of cultural superiority but from a desire for her students to acquire what she believed were the necessary and appropriate social and cultural tools for engaging the world. However, Mary conceptualized what was “appropriate” and what was not by assessing her students’ transactions with literacy and language against her own unrecognized standpoint (Fine et al., 1997) as a White, middle-class woman of Irish descent. She saw the teaching of literature as a way for students to learn “appropriate” ways of being in the world, but she did not recognize that what she construed and taught as “appropriate” was embedded within an unconscious and unproblematized ideology and value system that operated as the social norm (Frankenberg, 1993). In fact, literary texts, including multicultural texts and stories about women and women of color, were taught as a means of transmitting the cultural “information” that was congruent with her subjective worldview, and she believed that this information would empower her students to learn “the correct way” of being and acting in the world. Mary did not recognize the ways in which her language reproduced her own cultural values and beliefs and excluded the perspectives of the culturally and ethnically diverse group of girls in her classroom. Consequently, when she believed she was enacting a curriculum and a pedagogy that was empowering her students, by and large, the contrary was the case.

One outcome of a class that required little more of students than copying down appropriate “information” found in the literature was that the purposes of reading, writing, and classroom activities worked to distance girls from any authentic ownership over school-based literacy or claims to their own voices. Instead, participating in literacy events became little more than a way to accumulate points, and individual voice gave way to a White, middle-class view of what constitutes “appropriate” talk and knowledge in the language arts classroom. Emily characterized English class as “taking tests, listening, taking notes, and not putting your head down [on your desk].” Together, these representations of literacy and the ways in which the girls transacted with the literature and the teacher are critically important because what teachers focus on in classroom literature deeply affects what girls learn about the nature and purposes of literacy and, by extension, themselves and the world around them.

For example, an analysis of the classroom discourse in one lesson reveals how Gabriela, who self-identified as African American and Puerto Rican, attempted to resist a teacher-centered interpretation of text. Gabriela, born in the Bronx, was a vivacious 13-year-old. She enjoyed fashion and dressing up and on occasion spent time in class brushing her hair or looking into a pocket mirror. Based on her comments in her interviews combined with these activities in class, it was clear that she understood her physical body as a source of power in her life and even on one occasion came into class and asked her teacher, “Ain’t I looking sexy today?” During the course of a typical week, Gabriela would alternate between paying attention and participating during class time to almost completely disengaging and laying her head down on her desk. It is interesting that on many of the days she chose to disengage, in the same class, she had previously attempted to critique representations of experience found in the text and had met with disagreement from the teacher when Mary attempted to correct what she perceived as Gabriela's incorrect reading. The following section is illustrative of how the transactions between Gabriela, Mary, and the text worked to create a sense of classroom literacy as inauthentic to her own experiences and understandings.

"IT DON'T MAKE ANY SENSE"

Mary brought in several love poems for her students to read 3 days before Valentine's Day. These poems ranged from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 19th century poem "How do I love thee?" to the very contemporary Black female poet Nikki Giovanni and her poem "Housecleaning." As students entered the classroom from the hallway on the day they were to discuss these poems, they chatted among themselves as they found their desks, sharpened their pencils, quickly ate candy, and threw wadded-up paper into the trash. "Ladies and gentlemen," the teacher began, "please find your seats and stop the talking." Mary began the day's poetry readings with a short narrative from her own personal history. Mary included her own stories because she believed that this was one way to teach her students "appropriate" codes of conduct and ways of being in the world. Again, her objective was meant to empower her students for productive lives outside of the classroom. As she told me, she told stories when she felt "there was a value connected to it," as in the following example:

Mary: Ladies and gentlemen . . . when I was your age and in high school and college, I would fall in love with someone and maybe he thought he was in love with me, but things didn't work out. And I'll tell you why you go through that: because eventually, you want to know exactly the kind of person you want to marry. So you almost, like, experiment. Not in a bad way . . . I just got a bunch of poems together that are on the theme of breaking up and what you do when you break up.

[Mary asks for individual volunteers to read one poem aloud.]

Mary: So take a minute and read over the poem you will be reading in class quietly. If there are any words you don't know, raise your

> hand. . . . You may jot down any ideas you want on the poem because one of these poems might be a good poem to use when we have to compare a poem to an essay [on the exam]. [At this point, students silently read the poems before each poem was then read aloud by a student volunteer.]

One of the poems students read was “Where Have You Gone?” by Mari Evans. The narrator in the poem is lamenting a lost lover who took not only the sun, the light, and the stars but also the rent money. As the student read the poem aloud, Gabriela exclaimed, “That don’t sound right!” Mary explained to Gabriela, “Well, it may not make any sense, but it’s what poets do to express how strong a feeling is.” She then attempted to bring Gabriela’s attention back to the lines of the poem as a way of making her point clearer. “Let’s go back to the first stanza. What did she say she would miss in the first stanza?” Mary continued to refer to the symbolism of the light and the stars by directing Gabriela and her classmates to specific lines in the poem and asking them to explain what the poet meant. Gabriela, her finger pointing to the poem, a look of consternation on her face, and in a somewhat more exasperated tone, still insisted, “That don’t sound right!” Mary ignored Gabriela this second time and eventually moved to the line of the poem that did make sense to Gabriela.

> *Mary*: [In a tone of voice inviting students to respond by referring to the next line in the poem] “Not only is she going to miss him because her heart is broken . . . ”
>
> *Gabriela:* [Incredulously] He took the rent money!
>
> *Mary:* Exactly. . . . He put the rent money in one pocket and her heart in the other. Now, do you see what a poet can do then? A poet can express things without just saying, “I’m going to miss you. My heart hurts.” No. They talk like this. They say, “Are you aware that with you went the sun, the light, what few stars there were?” Do you understand that the poet will use images to express feelings?

By telling students that the poems “are on the theme of breaking up and what you do when you break up,” discussion of the poems invariably centered on a singular thematic interpretation. In addition, engagement with the poems was unintentionally reduced to an academic exercise when the purpose for reading the poems was identified as "good . . . to use when we have to compare a poem to an essay." Although the girls did not question the teacher's authority in identifying for them the theme of this particular poem, they did, however, make repeated attempts to (re)construct the experience of breaking up as represented in this text. For example, Gabriela did not hesitate to question the text when she repeatedly took up and challenged its version of experience.

Some may interpret her responses as simply indicative of not having a sophisticated enough understanding of poetic devices. However, in an interview with her, when asked what about the poems did not make any sense, Gabriela explained,

> I don't believe in love really. I understand the love that my mother gives me and that my family gives me. But I don't like the word [sic] "I love you." Because I love you brings a whole lot of broken hearts and memories, and I don't like reminiscing on anything.

According to Gabriela, then, what did not sound right was the experience and representation of romantic love as it was portrayed in the poem and as interpreted by the teacher. That is to say that based on what she knows of romantic love, this reading of the poem, presented as the correct interpretation, did not make any sense.

However, Gabriela was never permitted to voice her thoughts about the poem beyond her initial exclamations of "that don't sound right" and "it don't make any sense." From the class discussion, there was no way for the teacher or the other students to learn what did not sound right to Gabriela and, more important, why. In Mary's response to her that "it's what poets do," she assumed that Gabriela was talking about the figurative and symbolic language in the poem. As a result, her perspectives grounded in her experience were silenced and never put forward for consideration and reflection. Gabriela was not provided the opportunity to engage with the text and with the other students in a conversation about her or others' understandings of the poem. Instead, students were instructed that the way to make sense of the poem was to "look at the poem. Look at the first stanza. Look at the second stanza" while the teacher reread the poem to them.

In addition to Mary's belief that it was in her students' best interest that they engage only in appropriate transactions with literacy, another explanation for Mary's emphasis on constructing a single theme was, as mentioned earlier, the extreme pressure she felt to make pedagogical and curricular decisions regarding her teaching with an eye toward the external authorities she was accountable to—namely, her principal, the district, and the pressures of state testing and assessment. As she told me, "I feel so overwhelmed by what I'm suppose to accomplish that I don't have much flexibility to do some of the things I planned." This pressure seemed to work in tandem with her unexamined cultural and social framework, which she projected onto the literature and onto her students. As a result, she never moved her teaching too far afield from literacy assessments that were more concerned with the efferent reading of literature rather than the aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1978). That is, the focus of the reading was on the information to be acquired rather than "on what [the reader] is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25). Consequently, Mary limited Gabriela's potential to take up the literature in a meaningful way by directing her attention away from what she understood to be significant and moving her toward the more traditional, text-based focus on the poet's use of poetic devices to construct the poem. What was lost in this text-centered, teacher-based reframing was any possibility for Mary and her students to construct understandings of the narratives embedded in the poems themselves through a discussion beginning with their own personal connections to the poem.

Although it is not possible to know what the conversation might have been if Mary had asked Gabriela to talk about how she felt about the fact that the rent money was gone, based on what I learned about Gabriela's reality outside of school, I would like to propose one possibility. In her interview, Gabriela pointed out that she was raised "with no money." In fact, she relied on her boyfriend to give her money. When he came over, she frequently asked him, Can I have some money? You've got to give me some money or I won't talk to you. I'll be mad. "So then, he'll give me money or whatever." Lest we think of Gabriela's intentions as purely mercenary, I want to make clear that in her neighborhood, getting enough money was a struggle for most everyone. When asked to describe her neighborhood, this was the first thing she said:

> Well, there's a lot of drug dealers. Hang out on the corners, do what they do. That's the way they've got to live these days. Without no degree or high school diploma, it's hard to get jobs these days. In order for the men to stay alive in our neighborhood, they hustle. That's how they eat these days. Every penny, every dime go to eating.

Furthermore, in interviews with Gabriela, she expressed deep ambivalence about prospects for her life now and in the future:

> I would like to finish school so that I can get what I want and live bigger than I am and get my mother out of the ghetto. Now, I don't want to sell drugs. But if I don't make it through school . . . it makes me have to [sell drugs] just to get my mother out of the ghetto. . . . Well, my dream is to become a fashion designer. . . . Matter of fact, New York City is where I really want to go. That's where I'm going to college at. At New York Institute for Fashion. I'm going there for that. . . . Sometimes, I think about being a stripper, but sometimes I don't.

Gabriela related two powerful narratives about life in her neighborhood and the prospects for her future as she understood them. These stories, if there had been dialogic space to tell them in the context of the class discussion of this poem, would have enormous potential to aid her and the other students in class to think deeply about many of the issues and concerns they saw as relevant to their lives. As it was, however, many of the girls, and almost exclusively the African American girls, often called into question the teacher's selection of texts and her interpretation of themes and events within the texts. I am not referring to the healthy skepticism that is often part of a dialogic exchange of ideas. In fact, when during a vocabulary lesson, Mary asked students to use the word *skeptical* in a sentence, Lettrice, an African American girl, announced to Mary, "I'm skeptical." "Of who?" Mary innocently asked her. "Of you," Sharina replied. As will become clearer in the next sections, the girls in this class resisted and called into question the representations of gender and experience they read in the literature. Yet, ultimately, their questioning did not lead to a critical examination of those representations.

"SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE [THE STORIES] ARE MAKING FUN OF US"

Kristy, who self-identified as a "full-blooded Native American Mohawk," was tall with long dark hair and braces. She was very quiet in class and dressed simply in blue jeans, tee shirts, and sneakers. She was, as she told me teachers in her school expected her to be, "nice, polite, and smart." Kristy's activities and identity outside of school were very much centered on Native American ways. She spent much of her time at the Long House, and she was taking lessons to learn to speak and write the Mohawk language. Kristy thought of herself as a poet, and in fact, she was very proud that a poem she wrote about her grandmother had been accepted for publication in a New York State student anthology. She wrote her poem, "Ak Sot Ha, My Grandmother," alternating stanzas in English and Mohawk, perhaps as representative of her sense of living in two worlds. During her second interview in June, Kristy revealed that she and her friend, an older Native American woman, had planted a traditional Native American garden incorporating "the old ways" of planting and sowing. Together, they were learning the traditional Mohawk meaning behind each of the plants in their garden. As the following comments during her interview made clear, through her experiences outside of school, Kristy had learned that there are cultural and historical stories about Native American people that were left out of classroom texts.

> I used to like to read about Abraham Lincoln. But when I heard about what he did to some of the Native American people, I kind of hated him then. Like, they don't tell you what he did. They just tell you the good stuff, really. I found out when we were protesting in Albany. We were protesting there, and I was listening very closely. There were a lot of people there, and it was noisy. And they were saying that they killed 32 Native Americans [during the time of Lincoln]. And that half of them didn't even do anything. And at the end when they died, they holded [sic] hands and sang.

During Kristy's second interview, she said that the piece of literature that stood out the most for her was the play *Driving Miss Daisy*, which is the story of the evolving friendship between an elderly Jewish woman and her African-American chauffeur.

> *Kristy:* I liked it [the play] because it tells how it was before. How people were and everything. They had the Martin Luther King part where he spoke.
> *Interviewer:* How come you liked that part?
> *Kristy:* Because I never heard it from him before. Heard his voice. I've heard of him, but I never heard his voice.
> *Interviewer:* Is there anyway that . . . what Martin Luther King said relates to the struggle of your own people? Does it remind you in any way?
> *Kristy:* It just reminds me of slavery and everything. It wasn't just Blacks. It was yellow people and red people too . . . that were like slaves.
> *Interviewer:* In what ways were red people like slaves?
> *Kristy:* We were put in boarding schools and not [allowed] to follow our religion and everything. Abusing us if we used [our] language. Cutting our hair. Making us forget our religion and everything.
> *Interviewer:* What do you think about those things that happened? How do you feel about those things?
> *Kristy:* I feel like, "Why did they do that?" That's all I want to know. Why?

At 14 years old, Kristy's identity as a young Mohawk woman had begun to be shaped by her evolving awareness of the ways in which her identity was caught up in the larger sociopolitical structure. Although during the course of the school year, the students read several Native American stories, Kristy had little to say about this literature during class discussions. As follows, I present a slice of classroom data to illustrate one class discussion, which occurred in April, on "The Medicine Bag," a Native American short story that was included in the students' literature anthology textbook.

> *Mary:* How many people in here are learning the Native American traditions? Who are you learning them from?
> *Kristy:* [Raises her hand.] My friends.
> *Mary:* That's right. You go to a Native American church. Different cultures are probably so integrated, we lose culture. Culture is what we eat, how we dress, our values, the music we listen to. The Native

Americans had to retrieve their culture because of it being systematically taken away. It's similar to Black Americans.

Damien (a male African American): Kristy, what kind of music do you listen to? [Kristy does not answer Damien.]

Paul (a male African American): Beating drums.

Mary: You have tapes [of Mohawk music], don't you?

Kristy: Yes.

[At Mary's instruction, a student continues to read the story aloud.]

Paul: Do you know what that means, Kristy? [Referring to the words *Hau, Takoza* in the story.]

Mary: [Mary answers for Kristy.] No. Kristy knows Mohawk. This is Sioux. Continue reading, Kristy.

[Kristy reads.]

Mary: So, do Native Americans show affection in public [referring to a scene in the story]? No. Is that true now? No. Now Native Americans like to show affection very publicly. [Mary asked these questions and then immediately answered them herself.]

[Other students take turns reading aloud.]

Mary: What might fainting be a foreshadowing of [referring to scene where grandfather faints]?

Paul: He's going to die.

Mary: Be aware that when something like this happens, it usually signals something else is going to happen.

During her interview, when asked what she felt about this and other Native American stories she read in class, Kristy said that she thought they were "kind of fake. . . . Sometimes I feel they're making fun of us. They don't know anything . . . and it makes me feel bad. . . . And I feel angry because they don't know anything about it." My sense is that Kristy's anger was born out of a distrust of the mainstream society's general ignorance of Native American cultures. For example, when her eighth-grade class went on a field trip to a nature center, the woman guide at the center held up a Native American face mask. Kristy told me that a sacred mask should never have been shown in that public manner because to do so was disrespectful. She also talked about how she is often asked if she knows the rain dance and then has to explain that she is Iroquois and it is the Navaho who do rain dances.

However, Kristy was never able to articulate her own critical and resistant reading of texts. She felt frustrated when she read Native American stories in English class because she believed that much of what was presented as objective information was, in fact, one-sided and untrue. Kristy had learned from her experiences outside of school that there were missing voices and perspectives in much of this literature, and it angered her and made her “feel bad.” In my interviews with Kristy, I admired her commitment to bring to the center of her daily experiences the Mohawk way of life. I cannot imagine the dissonance and incongruity she must have felt attempting to reconcile a perspective that had become integrated into her sense of self with the representations she read and heard about both in English class and in the larger society. Likewise, I was impressed by the level of personal and political agency she demonstrated in attending the protests in Albany and her ability to connect the plight of Native American peoples to those of other disenfranchised groups. However, in English class, Kristy’s voice disappeared. Her identity as a young Native American woman, an identity that was meaningful in her life outside of school, was nowhere to be seen or heard in her English classroom. When I asked Mary to describe Kristy, it is not surprising then that this was her perception: “She is very poor. She has a learning disability. She’s just a typical Native American girl. Very reticent. But I thought she wrote really good papers. She really would not articulate verbally. Kristy isn’t very bright.”

I want to put forth the idea that the girls’ sometimes skeptical responses to the literature and to the teacher, as portrayed by Gabriela and Lettrice, and their silence, as characterized by Kristy, were directly related to the purposes of reading, writing, and other literacy events in this classroom, as characterized by this teacher’s view of what literacy should accomplish for these urban girls. Although it is true that students’ silent stance can be construed as an initial engagement with texts, they also need to be provided with both the critical tools and a classroom environment that enables them to move from initial silence to a place of sustained questioning, reflecting, and ultimately constructing meaning from the text. In the context of this classroom, the girls’ skeptical and silent stances often resulted in further distancing from any authentic ownership of literacy.

Many of the girls sensed that the literature they read and the ideas that were extracted from the literature as “universal” themes represented views of the world that did not come out of their experiences. Often, the teacher's rationale for requiring students to read certain pieces of literature, whether multicultural or more traditional literature, was based on her belief that the literature she selected contained information that would assist students in successfully completing state exams; over and over again, this was the reason she gave students. For example, in April, approximately 2 months before students were to take their second state-mandated test, she told them that the reason why they were reading "Medicine Bag" was because "there is some good information in there that I think you can write about."

In such a context for teaching literature, "information" that was presented as containing "universal" themes had the unintentional effect of discrediting the girls' lives and their social identities as significant sources for narratives and stories (Bruner, 1986). However, the girls did not simply acquiesce to the absence of their lives in the work of the class. Significantly, the various ways in which the girls attempted to work through the conflict they felt were caught up within a web of complex meanings and contradictions. Their efforts to work through tensions in social identity did not necessarily resolve what I came to understand as fractured social identities—a sense of individual self that was split between public and private identities. Rather, caught within the singularity of a dominant patriarchal literary canon taught from within the confines of the teacher's White, middle-class identity, literature served to fracture and deepen the divide between representations of self and the public discourse of schooling and academic literacy.

The significance of this finding can best be exemplified through the exploration of several important themes I will discuss in the remainder of this article, all of which are deeply connected to the overall concept of discontinuity and contradiction as it existed among the girls, the teacher, and the texts. They are as follows: (a) girls' efforts to locate a missing sense of a raced self in the context of school-based literacy, (b) girls' replication of patriarchal gendered readings that create false agency and dualistic identities, and (c) girls' resistance to appropriation of their own lives and stories in the context of this English class.

SITUATING SELF IN THE CONTEXT OF RACE

How girls took up a sense of raced identity, both in and outside of the classroom, and how they perceived the influence of race on the possibilities for their lives was significant to the ways in which they transacted with and understood classroom literacy. To contextualize this analysis, I first present an instance when the girls' efforts to problematize race were resisted in the teacher's objectives for learning and discuss the implications for girls' raced identities. Next, I present the story of one of the girls and the way in which she took up and enacted issues of race and racism in her life and suggest how her understanding influenced the meaning she made of the literature. The connection between the teacher's resistance and the girls' stories is an important one. Where girls located themselves as raced individuals influenced how they took up the teacher's resistance to race, and together, these had deep implications for the sociocultural and sociopolitical construction of knowledge.

"I CAN'T HAVE A DISCUSSION WITH THIS CLASS": RESISTING RACE, RESISTING GENDER

To exemplify, I return to the discussion around the short story "Medicine Bag" because it is a good illustration of the social dynamic between Mary and the girls as it relates to race. Specifically, the discussion demonstrates the girls' attempts to enter the text from the standpoint of race and gender and Mary's felt need to not speak of either of these issues, particularly race, and to not engage the text as a tool for critical analysis. Consequently, when class discussion turned explicitly to talk about race, racism, and social identity, there was little space for a meaningful discussion on these related issues, even when the girls attempted to foreground their own concerns about race and identity as a way to connect to the literature. In this example, the divergent purposes for literature and literacy that existed between the teacher and the girls perpetuated the ongoing discontinuity and contradiction among the girls, the teacher, and their mutually exclusive transactions with literacy.

In the portion of the discussion presented as follows, students took turns reading "The Medicine Bag" aloud and Mary would stop the reading for comments and discussion during key points of the text. If it was not their turn to read, several of the girls carried on quiet conversations. Lettrice hummed and pretended to beat time on an imaginary drum. In this excerpt, Mary had just made a comparison between the importance of traditions in Native American and African American cultures. In her comments, she referred to African Americans as "Blacks."

Melissa (a female African American): We aren't Black. We're African American.

Gabriela (a female African American and Puerto Rican): Only Black people can say "Black people."

[Mary did not acknowledge these comments. The class continued to read the story, which was about a Native American grandfather passing on his medicine bag to his oldest grandson, as was the tradition. Gabriela interrupted the reading to ask a question.]

Gabriela: How comes it's all for the men?

Mary: What do you honestly feel about that?

Anthony (a male African American): I like that.

Lettrice (a female African American): Adam was made first!

Melissa: Girls make children!

Gabriela: How come the pictures in the Bible are all White?

Mary: Historically, Jesus was an Arab.

Melissa: In church, there's two pictures of Jesus: one with straight hair and one with nappy hair.

Lettrice: In the Bible, it's nappy.

Mary: If you want to know what Jesus looked like, look at an Arab person. Should women be excluded from cultural traditions?

Anthony: I really don't care what they do!

Gabriela: White people act like Black people. . . . Some Americans give us a bad reputation. Ninety percent of the world's White people can get along with other colors.

Mary: Do you feel that it's okay to exclude women?

Melissa: No one should be excluded.

Gabriela: If we're all equal, why is there the KKK?

Anthony: I hate White people!

Mary: Stop! I can't have a discussion with this class. Just raise your hands and don't interrupt. The question is "Should women be excluded from cultural traditions?"

Gabriela: But that's not the question we want! We already told you. Now can we get back to race?

With only a few minutes remaining in the class period, Mary asked students to gather their belongings and get in line by the door so that they could walk to the cafeteria for lunch. Although Mary began the discussion around issues of culture by comparing two ethnic groups, her intent was to talk about culture in the static way she had defined it for the students during an earlier class when she told them that culture is expressed through such things as how you dress and the food you eat. When Gabriela refocused the discussion around sexism, Mary's question, "How do you honestly feel about that?" was an important and useful one. However, when Mary commented on the role of tradition in Native American and African American cultures, she did not intend to talk about the political or social construction of race, racism, or sexism. From her perspective, whether a particular cultural or racial group is named Black or African American seemed insignificant. Situated within her own cultural values and beliefs, Mary was unable to look through the perspectives of the girls in her class. However, in Gabriela's and Melissa's ways of thinking, what they are named by the dominant culture is significant because they were, at least partially, aware of the discontinuity between labels cast on them by the dominant "Other" and their own sense of racial identity. During an interview with Gabriela, she distinguished the difference between Black and African American as follows:

> Well, we've been raised regularly. Now, it would probably be that they'll say Black people are the most ignorant people or the most broke people. As in with no money. And we've been taught and raised that we were all niggers back in the days. So, we basically want to be called African Americans, so now we have our respect. Being Black, some of us say it means ignorant. We don't like being called that because we're not fully Black. We're not the color of a Black crayon. It's African American. That means to be a different race but not to be an ignorant person.

Melissa, in her interview, explained why she believed the distinction to be important as follows:

> *Melissa:* When a person of a different race will call me Black or nigger, I get offended. We don't call the Native Americans Indians. They

stress that in this school so much. And when it comes to us, we're Black. We should be called African American.

Interviewer: If I say I'm White, well what does that mean? . . . But if I say I'm Italian American . . . you know something more, right away, about me.

Melissa: Because when you say Italian American, you think Italy. But if you think White, you could be from anywhere. When you think African American, you think Africa. So you know something about the person.

For Gabriela and Melissa, insisting on a distinction between Black and African American became a means of exercising choice and agency in naming themselves. In fact, Melissa viewed success in school as a major factor in her ability to exercise that agency. Melissa told me that her mother does not want "[anything] to interfere with [her] schoolwork" because "she wants me to become somebody." This is similar to Gabriela's view of school. Recall that earlier she told me she would like to finish school so that "I can get what I want and live bigger than I am and get my mother out of the ghetto." In Gabriela's comments, she made clear her awareness of the sociopolitical dynamics of race. For her, "being Black . . . means [being] ignorant," and she rejected that social construct. For Melissa, being African American connected her to a cultural heritage that was not based solely on the color of her skin. In these ways, using their voices to lay claim to their identity played a powerful role in the experiences and expressions of the girls' culture. In this example—voice, the use of language for a purpose—became a means whereby urban girls such as Gabriela and Melissa articulated and defined their cultural and racial identities by resisting the labels placed on them by dominant others, in this case, their White teacher. Gabriela's and Melissa's insistence that others view them as African American and not as Black can be seen as part of their struggle to construct an internal identity that is consistent with and not contradictory to an external identity. In other words, *Black* was a language signifier for others' conceptions of African American identity, one that was not a part of their self-identities.

However, in this classroom episode, Mary was not prepared to attend to the ways in which cultural identity was closely associated with racial identity and a conception of self for her students. She was not equipped to interrelate the text, the classroom discourse, and the way in which girls were taking up the text and the discourse in a manner that allowed them to work through the sociocultural and/or sociopolitical issues that many of the girls identified as important in their lives. As a result, rather than literature and the discussion around literature serving to engage students in a problem-posing dialogue that contributed to meaningful and constructive interrogation of texts and society, most students felt that the text and the classroom discussion were insignificant and perhaps even antithetical to what they deemed as relevant and important in their own lives.

The enacted curriculum of this class did not acknowledge the ways in which race was implicated in the gendered lives of the girls in this classroom. Consequently, girls were often left with only their own individual efforts as a means to work through issues of raced identity and its implications as a construct for understanding self in relation to texts. As the following stories will show, how girls attempted to address race in their lives both inside and outside the classroom was not the same for every girl. The intersections of race, gender, and identity for the girls in this particular site took the form of not only confronting and challenging inauthentic representations of self but also of accommodation, where accommodation was a means of resisting negative gender and racial stereotypes (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1982). The next story illustrates Lettrice's struggle with tensions between race and academic success. As her story demonstrates, in some ways, Gabriela's and Melissa's struggles were not unlike Lettrice's own efforts to redefine and resolve others' constructions of the Black self.

"SHE DIDN'T WANT TO SHOW HER FRUSTRATIONS BECAUSE SHE WANTED TO BE A NICE YOUNG GIRL": THE PERILS OF CONTRADICTORY UNITY

Lettrice, an African American girl, came to West Shore after having been expelled from another school. She came to this school with a reputation for getting into trouble. In English class, Lettrice made her presence known through her assertive, garrulous, sometimes manipulative, and sometimes hostile demeanor. She was often moody and quick to anger and usually did not hesitate to express aloud what she was feeling. Mary referred to Lettrice as an “in-your-face Black girl [who] breaks the authority” [of the school and a teacher-centered classroom]. However, Lettrice was also an honor roll student and maintained a 92% average.

Over time, I began to understand that Lettrice straddled two roles or identities in the English classroom. Although she maintained the outward demeanor and behavior of a student who had little regard for the teacher-centered literacy events of this English class, I began to notice that, in fact, she kept very detailed notes during class, asked questions when she needed something clarified, and almost always turned in her assignments. As I thought through the significance of what I originally construed as a duality for Lettrice, I began to see that rather than a duality, what I was witnessing was more a complex dialectic between competing forces in her life. On one hand, Lettrice’s academic success was a way to resist the dominant society’s minimal expectations for African American students (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1982). However, perhaps Lettrice felt a dissonance between her desire for academic success and her desire to maintain her identity and sense of community with the African American girls who were her friends in this class. These friends, for the most part, were those girls who sought validation and affirmation through behavior that often violated school norms through low attendance, talking in class, not doing schoolwork, or refusing to obey school rules.

A particular occurrence during English class seemed to exemplify the core of Lettrice’s identity struggle to maintain membership in multiple and opposing social groups. One morning, Lettrice arrived early for class, well before the other students, and sat at her desk with tears in her eyes. I asked her what was wrong, and she told me that another teacher (a White woman) had accused her of saying a “cuss word” in class and the teacher was going to call her grandmother and tell her. Lettrice angrily denied cussing. She threatened that she was going to punch the teacher in the mouth and said she did not care if she was kicked out of school.

After a few minutes, class began and Lettrice continued to sit at her desk with tears in her eyes, a defiant look on her face, her arms crossed in front of her. Within a short time, Lettrice loudly announced to the entire class, “She called me a nigger.” Yolanda, another African American student, asked incredulously, “Who?” Lettrice named the teacher. Mary disregarded Lettrice and this exchange, so Lettrice walked up to the front of the room and told Mary directly what had happened. Mary told Lettrice that she did not believe this teacher would ever say anything like that. Lettrice insisted that she did and added that the offending teacher had also told her to “go and have a baby.”

Whether this teacher was guilty of Lettrice’s accusations, I do not know. However, this incident, with Lettrice’s angry insistence that another teacher had called her a “nigger” and told her to go and have a baby, may signify Lettrice’s growing consciousness of the way in which a segment of the dominant population negatively views her and other poor, urban, African American girls and the concurrent frustration she felt around this unjust stereotype. Lettrice’s story brought to the forefront of her teacher’s and fellow students’ attention the social inequities and injustices with which, perhaps, she herself was struggling, namely, a construction of female African American identity rooted in others’ misperceptions. The story Lettrice told is a story of perceived inequity and stereotyping. It is not insignificant that Lettrice chose to be sure that everyone in class, and Mary in particular, heard her story.

As I connect this incident to the larger sociocultural and political context of this classroom, it appears that Lettrice’s decision to tell this story and to be sure that her teacher acknowledged it signified a challenge of sorts, in a way, the throwing down of a gauntlet. Lettrice confronted Mary, a White, middle-class woman, with a story that portrayed Lettrice as a poor, African American girl. Telling this story brought out into the open this duality and, by so doing, gave voice to how construction as “Other” by the dominant society essentializes identities of race and gender. However, as in other classrooms that do not acknowledge the political overtones of race and racism, there was no space within which to open a critical dialogue of the issues Lettrice had laid open (Miller & Trzyna, 2000).

In light of the story she told and the context in which she told it, it is possible to consider that the anger and hostility Lettrice frequently displayed in class, of which this incident is an example, may have been embedded in the dissonance with which she lived, a sense of insider-outsider. In my months of visiting the class, I witnessed Lettrice's struggle with trying to balance academic success while maintaining a sense of community and identity with other African American girls in the class. Lettrice's closest friends in class were not on the honor roll as she was. In fact, most of the girls with whom she regularly associated were failing or on the verge of failing English. However, this was the group of girls with whom Lettrice regularly ate lunch, and Lettrice socialized with one of the girls in this group outside of school. In other words, Lettrice seemed to be attempting to negotiate for herself a racial identity that would accommodate her sense of self as an academically successful student and maintain her identity as a member of the community of a particular group of African American girls in this class. Lettrice was "compelled to commingle two divergent lives" (Fordham, 1993, p. 15). It is possible that she understood at some level that society did not easily assimilate the social identities of an academically successful, poor, urban, African American girl, a girl who is able to do well in school and at the same time maintain membership in the social and cultural community with which she was most comfortable. Lettrice seemed to be caught in the tension of a dominant and authoritative social order that forced her into two competing and fractured social identities, neither of which by themselves were meaningful representations of her sense of self (Ogbu, 1982).

In her reading of the literature, Lettrice's frustration often manifested itself in her interpretations of the female characters. For example, this is how she perceived the female character of Bright Morning, the Native American protagonist in *Sing Down the Moon* who Lettrice described in her interview as "helpful to people . . . nice. She did good deeds for people. She was a nice person." Lettrice then went on to speculate as follows:

Lettrice: [She] probably was sad and angry because she was humble and kept it in herself. She didn't want to show her frustrations because she wanted to be a nice young girl.

Interviewer: What do you think about her doing that? Being humble and not expressing?

> *Lettrice:* I think it's good because if she would have expressed it, she probably could have hurt somebody or something.

Although in the novel Bright Morning does, indeed, often revert to the traditional female role of expressing humbleness and humility, she also displays anger toward the White men for what they have done to her people and acts deliberately and consciously to resist their efforts to force her village onto a reservation. However, nowhere in the novel does Bright Morning's anger explicitly manifest itself as the desire to cause harm. Instead, Bright Morning channels her anger toward her determination to hold on to her way of life. Lettrice's interpretation that Bright Morning suppresses her feelings to avoid hurting others emerges, possibly, from her own inner struggle and her understanding that her life choices and identity as a young African American woman are, to an extent, controlled by others in much the same way that Bright Morning's existence is controlled by the White soldiers.

The stories of Gabriela, Melissa, Kristy, and Lettrice suggest the complexity inherent in the intersection of gender and race and its inextricable link to how girls understood literacy. What is of concern here is how girls' understandings of the relationship between race and social mobility played an integral role in the relevance of classroom literacy to their lives. The teaching of literature, particularly multicultural literature, has the potential to assist all students—White students and students of color—to learn about racism in such a way that it allows them to work through feelings of anger, guilt, denial, and other emotional responses and move toward a critical and reflective dialogue. However, this is likely to occur only if students are able to "empathize with characters grappling with racism and then connect that experience to their own real-world perceptions and analyze how those perceptions are shaped by institutional forces" (Beach, 1997, p. 83). However, in the learning environment of this classroom, students were not encouraged to offer individual, subjective responses that would facilitate this type of learning. Rather, students were evaluated based on their knowledge of literary conventions, their ability to identify literary themes, and to provide text-based interpretations.

This focus on the transmission of literary facts and artifacts had implications for the girls beyond issues of race. Girls were caught up in the tension that evolved among the multiple and competing voices they heard in the varied texts they read (Bakhtin, 1981). As observed so far, girls did not learn to interact with literacy in ways that enabled them to try out and express voices of their own. As a result, their readings of literature that presented women in traditional, stereotypical, and often sexist roles along with literature that portrayed more self-determined women were caught up for the girls in unresolved conflicts over how to construct meaning from the multiple and divergent voices represented in those texts. By closely looking at the case of one girl and her relationship with classroom texts as well as with popular texts, the implications for the ways girls' transactions with literacy contributed to the construction of gendered subjectivities becomes clearer.

THE ALLURE OF AGENCY AND THE DESIRE FOR ROMANCE: A STUDY IN DISCONTINUITY

> *Michelle:* The Holocaust, the Underground Railroad, slavery—that interests me.

Michelle self-identified as Native American Seneca and as Puerto Rican. She was on the eighth-grade honor role and received good grades in English, but she felt the stories they read and the writing they did in class were boring and that "the topics and the books [the teacher] picks out are stupid." In her interview, she explained that English class would be more interesting if she could write essays on "current events" rather than writing essays, as she described it, for "practice" (for state exams).

In the analysis of the interviews conducted with Michelle, I was intrigued by her thoughts regarding the female characters in the literary texts she read in English class and the way she thought about these characters in relation to her own lived experience and those of some of her girlfriends.

Interviewer: Just in general, the girls and women in the stories you read in [in English class], if you get a sense of them in your mind, how do you feel about them?

Michelle: They were cool, but some of them, like Bright Morning [*Sing Down the Moon*], she didn't get it. She always thought that Tall Boy [Bright Morning's boyfriend and eventual husband] was just so superior to her, and he wasn't. And that made her stupid.

Interviewer: For the ones who are cool, can you tell me what made them cool?

Michelle: They had courage, and they stood up for what they believed in. That's cool.

Interviewer: Let's talk about Ruby Bridges. Do you remember what that story was about?

Michelle: About the girl she went to school and stuff.

Interviewer: Yeah, she was the African American girl who integrated the White school. How did you react to Ruby Bridges?

Michelle: I thought she was cool.

Interviewer: What made her cool?

Michelle: That she had enough courage to go face all them White people.

Interviewer: Can you make any connections from your own life to the characters you read about in English class who are cool? Are there any connections to the way life really is or to your own experiences?

Michelle: No.

Interviewer: Okay. So there's a never time when you're reading a story for English class and you think, "I've had an experience kind of similar to that?"

Michelle: Like that happened before? Like that? If I'm reading and it's like, oh gosh, I knew somebody who did that or something like that you mean?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Michelle: Oh, yeah. The Eros, Aphrodite thing [referring to "The Arrow and the Lamp"]. When she [Eros] had to fight for her boyfriend.

Interviewer: So what were you thinking?

Michelle: When Robin [Michelle's girlfriend] had to fight Rio [another girl] for a guy.

"The Arrow and the Lamp" is a Greek myth about a beautiful mortal woman named Psyche. Word of Psyche's beauty reaches the goddess Aphrodite who, in a jealous rage, curses her to a life of misery. Eros, the equally beautiful son of Aphrodite, marries Psyche but is invisible to her. Eros warns Psyche that she must trust him unequivocally and never attempt to gaze upon him. Psyche's sisters, jealous of her happiness, convince her to betray Eros and look at him. When she holds a lamp up to his face, Eros abandons her. To win him back, Psyche agrees to perform a series of dangerous tasks assigned to her by Aphrodite. When she successfully completes these tasks, Eros, recovered from his anger, makes her immortal and they live together forever.

In this interview excerpt, it is apparent that Michelle most admired those female characters who demonstrated courage and stood up for what they believed in and that she had little regard for characters such as Bright Morning who, according to Michelle, felt that her husband was superior to her. However, as she also mentioned, the female characters who were most identifiable with her own experiences were not the "cool" women who stood up for their beliefs but rather were those women who had experiences similar to those of Psyche, who endured countless tribulations and dangers to win back the man who had abandoned her. Significantly, Psyche was not a character who had Michelle's respect. The following is another passage from the same interview:

> *Interviewer:* What did you think about Psyche?
> *Michelle:* She's weird. That boy [Eros] wasn't even cute, and she was doing all that stuff for him.
> *Interviewer:* If he was cute, should she have done that stuff?
> *Michelle:* No . . . because it ain't worth it.
> *Interviewer:* What would you have done instead?
> *Michelle:* Say, "See ya later buddy!"
> *Interviewer:* If Psyche was a friend of yours and came to you for advice, what advice would you give her?
> *Michelle:* I'd tell her don't come asking for help from me. He wasn't even cute. He might have been nice to her, though.

Michelle clearly did not empathize with Psyche's desire to win back the love of Eros. In fact, she seemed to suggest that Psyche should have displayed more self-respect and realized that Eros "ain't worth it." Although Michelle, at some level, resisted the patriarchal ideology embedded in this myth, she did not move her somewhat resistant feminist reading of the story outside of the text itself. She did not take her belief that Eros "ain't worth it" with her into the lived world. Instead, what she brought with her about this story is the way in which the relationship between Psyche and Eros brought to mind how her friend, Amber, fought another girl, Rio, over a boy. Michelle did not see how the gender roles and patriarchal power relations in this myth replicated themselves in her own life and the lives of her friends, although it was these exact gender roles and stereotypical female portrayals that she condemned in the literature.

It is interesting that when self-selecting stories to read outside of those required for English class, Michelle and Samantha, another Native American girl and Michelle's close friend, actively sought out stories about strong women whom they admire.

Interviewer: I'm wondering what you think would happen in English class if you read more stories about girls and women?

Michelle: Then the boys would get sick of it. But it would be good if it was a topic that I like or that I was interested in. Like, if we're reading the book that Samantha and me are reading right now. Then it would be cool.

Interviewer: What book are you reading?

Michelle: Number the Stars. It's about the Holocaust.

Interviewer: Are you reading it for another class?

Michelle: No, we're just reading it.

Interviewer: What do you like about the book?

Michelle: It's interesting, but it's sad what they went through.

Interviewer: That's interesting because you think that's a good book and a true story about what happened to the Jews and the Holocaust in World War II. But yet, a story about Bright Morning and the Long Walk and what happened to the Navaho people is boring.

Michelle: Umm hmm.

Interviewer: Can you explain why that is?

Michelle: Because it's cool. Like the movie *Sophie's Choice*. How they were captured and written on with their tattoos and stuff. What they had to go through. They were told they were going to take a shower, and they got them to the gas chambers. . . . That interests me. Like the Holocaust and slavery and the Underground Railroad. That stuff is cool because it's like how they wanted to prove their point that they're people and they shouldn't be doing that, like Harriet Tubman and them. Bright Morning worries about her stupid sheep and Tall Boy. That's boring.

Interviewer: So let me throw this out and see what you think. So maybe that's the difference between reading *Sing Down the Moon* and reading *Number the Stars* because you really don't see Bright

Morning as a very courageous person. . . . But the characters in this book [*Number the Stars*] you see as more courageous. Would that be accurate?

Michelle: Umm hmm. If I was her [Bright Morning], I'd get away from wherever they were captured. I'm not going to just walk when they're telling me to walk somewhere else I don't even know. I'd just turn around and [run]. See you later buddy! [Michelle repeats this phrase for the second time.]

Michelle's interview sounds a major theme of this study, which is the discontinuity between characteristics some of the girls most admired in the female characters (courage, self-reliance, and integrity) they read about and their sense of the potential for those possibilities and personal attributes existing in their own lives and identities. Michelle seeks out stories about strong women whom she admires (e.g., Harriet Tubman and women who endured the Holocaust), but she does not recognize herself in these women and does not attempt to integrate these female identities into her own sense of self. However, she does critique Psyche's desire to get her man back as not "worth it" and she suggests that Psyche should have told Eros, "See you later buddy!"

Her ability to offer this somewhat resistant reading suggests the struggle and possibility inherent in her reading. It is as if she partially incorporated two scripts, or roles, about femininity. One role is that of the courageous women Michelle admired in some of the literature that she had read both in and out of school. Although some of these women were not fictional, Michelle more easily connected her experiences to the experiences of goddesses in Greek mythology. It is significant that in the class discussion on this myth, the teacher explained that myths are read today because they contain truths about the human experience. It is as if the experiences and worldviews of these mythological women, unproblematized by the teacher, were in some profound way more "real" to Michelle.

In fact, Michelle's identity and sense of place as a Native American girl cannot be removed from the history of persecution and injustice that the Seneca people endured and continue to endure, even if she herself did not recognize the ways in which they are inextricably linked. When she said that she could not make any connections from her own life to the courageous women whom she read about and whom she calls “cool,” I am, once again, overcome by the missed potential for literature to help Michelle develop a more transformative worldview.

In listening to Michelle talk about female characters she admires in the literature she read juxtaposed against her own experiences and her choices about which texts to read, it is evident that the ideological discourses of love and romance have a stronger hold on her expectations than do stories about liberty or human rights. What becomes clear is the way in which stories of women who exhibit courage and self-determination are interrupted by culturally dominant stories that continue to cast female characters in a narrowly constructed patriarchal manner with dependence on men and romance at the center of female attention. In this way, gendered, discursive positions serve to produce and reproduce femininity. However, as a close analysis of Michelle’s comments revealed, this reproduction is not necessarily passive. Accommodating to these gendered subjectivities is not necessarily a coherent process. Michelle and other adolescent girls struggle with the different and contradictory discourses available to them and adopt only a partial version of femininity as it is offered in more traditional texts.

Because literacy is a sociocultural construct, it needs to be seen through the layering and intertextuality of lived experience that shapes and constrains girls’ knowledge and the gendered ways they learn to participate in society. What Michelle has to say about the ways in which she takes up the texts she reads both in and out of English class demonstrates that she does not merely absorb the values of progressive or multicultural texts, particularly when the cultural representations of women in these texts are not supported by society’s notions of femininity. Michelle’s inability to transcend stereotypical gendered values and ways of being in her own life has important implications for literacy in the urban, English language arts classroom. It emphasizes the need to move away from a text-centered, New Critical approach to reading and toward helping girls to deconstruct gender representations in texts.

Because girls were taught literature from a formulaic model that did not question or resist patterns of male dominance and power or traditional models of love and heterosexual relationships, girls had little by way of which to understand the struggles in their own lives.

Texts and readings of texts for these girls seemed to be embedded in an unconscious dualism between traditional representations of women and more libratory models. I maintain that this representation and the girls' inability to work through it suggests the need to see how it is possible to begin to create text and readings of text that move girls toward an awareness of the possibility for multiple subjectivities. Listening and validating the stories girls bring to class as part of their lived experiences and subjectivities is one way to accomplish this goal.

This study suggests the complexity of the intersection between the literacy classroom and the lived experiences of these urban girls. Examples of this complexity abound. Recall that Melissa used discussion of literature to take back her right to name herself when she proclaimed, "We aren't Black. We're African American." Lettrice used the language arts classroom to resist a preconstructed social identity placed on her by others. Gabriela attempted to speak out when the poems the class was reading did not speak to her own reality. Kristy used literacy outside of the classroom to reclaim her cultural heritage and to take a politically active stance. Not one of these girls was ready to surrender the stories of their lives to others. They resisted and contested being named by others. However, in the structure of this literacy classroom, these attempts to maintain agency in their own lives often led to the tension between the girls and their teacher. Because Mary did not see the ways in which transactions with literacy mediated issues of identity, power, conflict, and control both in the classroom and in the larger society, she could not see how her practice of literacy challenged the girls' conceptions of identity and knowledge.

DISCUSSION

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE AND MEANING MAKING

The stories of how diverse girls experienced and understood literacy events in this classroom and the relation of these understandings to gendered identity give insight into the role of academic literacy in the lives of urban girls. In this section, I will discuss what I construe to be the significance of these insights and their implications for girls' social identities in the English classroom.

In this classroom, literature was taken up as a cultural artifact from which girls received "information" that was presented as containing "universal" truths and ways of being. Such an approach to literature was not helpful in offering them alternative ways to express their voices. Instead, some girls learned to adjust their voices to the dominant voices represented by the text and by the teacher. In those instances when girls did call into question the representations of reality that they read in the literature, these first steps toward a critical response to texts were construed as inappropriate or as misreadings. By and large, those girls who did resist certain cultural representations in the literature were perceived as troublemakers or as disruptive. Ironically, in this way, their transactions with literacy, which may have led to a developing sense of self as strong, assertive, and independent young women, were seen as deviant. On the other hand, girls such as Kristy, who were relatively silent and, in their silence, were perceived as conforming to the purposes for literature and literacy, risked being construed as "reticent" and "not very bright." Either way, the girls in this class had begun to internalize that the price for academic success involved the muting of one's own voice (Fine, 1989, 1991) and accommodating the status quo.

The urban lives the girls brought into the classroom were not taken up as significant in the construction of knowledge and meaning, and this deeply influenced the ways in which they engaged with the literature as well as with their teacher. This "missing link" (Miller, 1998) to the lived reality of their lives had significant implications for the girls' perceived value of school-based literacy as a tool for social and personal transformation. Girls searched for meaningful identities among the multiple and competing voices of texts, teachers, friends, and other influential social relations. Theories of the social construction of identity and knowledge problematize the notion that classrooms can exist as one community or can function within a singular community identity. Instead, nested within the dynamic of classroom interaction, many communities exist, comprising diverse and often conflicting voices.

Bakhtin (1981) suggested that these communities interanimate each other. That is, they enable individuals to look through the perspective of another to develop the dialogue of critical thinking.

For Gabriela, Kristy, Melissa, Lettrice, and Michelle, their sense of themselves and their way of understanding their relation to the world constituted a dynamic social process. Cultural messages they received through texts, family, friends, and their teachers served both to position the girls in certain ways and to lead them to think, feel, and act in certain ways. Each girl also engaged in forms of resistance to some of these broad cultural forces. This dialectic of negotiating social identities was complicated not only by the individual situations of the girls but also by their various responses to these situations. For example, on one level, Michelle resisted the patriarchal ideology in the myth she read. However, she did not see how that same ideology worked to produce social relations in her own life. Whether in efforts to situate self in the context of race or working through the discontinuity of agency and romance in the texts they read both in and outside of class, girls actively sought to situate themselves within multiple discourse communities.

In fact, each of the girls was engaged in the beginnings of a dialogic consciousness as they sought to reconcile the fractures that compartmentalized various discourse communities in which they participated. Recall Gabriela's and Melissa's anxiety over the teacher's naming of African Americans as "Black" and Kristy's feelings of anger over representations of Native Americans in some of the literature she read. When the girls called into question representations of reality in the texts they read and the experiences they lived, they were voicing the stirrings of critical thinking that potentially could lead not only to social and political transformation in their lives but also to cognitive growth and transformation. However, they were not presented with opportunities to develop the dialogue that would serve to interanimate these various discourse communities. In large measure, this was because their teacher, unaware of how her own subjective standpoint influenced classroom literacy, was less aware of these multiple discourses than were her students. Consequently, the interdependence of students' public and private discourses was not appreciated as a powerful tool for meaning making in the literacy classroom.

CRITICAL INQUIRY AND NARRATIVE VOICES

The ways in which students are asked to transact with texts implies particular values and beliefs about the nature of readers and their relations as subjects of texts and as subjects in the world and, ultimately, about meaning and language itself. Consequently, students need to learn to locate the texts they read as well as themselves within larger social contexts. They need to be able to critically inquire into the interconnectedness of social conditions and social identities and into the texts that represent different and competing cultural perspectives.

Students are autonomous individuals who are not completely determined by the culture within which they live, but on the other hand, they are not completely "free" from the dominant ideologies that shape that culture. They are capable of and, in fact, they do negotiate, resist, and act within the multiple discourses and languages that shape their lives, just as Lettrice did. The democratic potential of opening discursive space for fostering student awareness of the multiple, sometimes conflicting language for understanding texts and social issues (Trzyna & Miller, 1997) exists in a valuing of the voices students engage to act on their lives. Perhaps, for example, the power of literature and story could be engaged to help Lettrice negotiate the social tensions of identity that she felt. As Miller and McCaskill (1993) pointed out, students need to engage in discussion, writing, and other dialectical activities supported by knowledgeable teachers who prompt examination of knowledge constructed from multiple social and cultural perspectives. If Mary had a critical understanding of how her own values and experiences modified, shaped, and (re)produced dominant relationships of gender, race, and power, she would have been better able to help these girls move from the echoes of a critical consciousness into a more sustained, reflective dialogue with texts and with others. In the process, it is possible for girls such as Gabriela, Kristy, Lettrice, Michelle, and the others to discover the power of their own stories and their own lives as they are situated within their raced and gendered identities.

CREATING DIALOGIC SPACES FOR GENDER AND RACE

Girls need to be able to see themselves and their lives in the texts they read. As the findings in this and other studies indicate (Blake, 1997; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997), girls confront an academic literary canon and a classroom pedagogy that often does not legitimate their understandings of themselves and their perspectives of the social world. As a result, the girls in this study learned to separate their public and private lives. In multiple and complex ways, they often disengaged from literature and silenced their own voices to accommodate dominant perspectives. For adolescent girls and perhaps in particular for poor urban girls who are negotiating issues of race and class as well as gender, adolescence is a particularly stressful time for shaping and acting out social identities. Often, girls use the words of others to begin to define their reality and sense of self and to constitute and reconstitute their social identities (Finders, 1997; Pipher, 1994).

When students engage in the telling of stories of personal experience in response to what they have read, they are telling histories of self that are connected to questions of gender, race, and class. Many have argued for reader-response approaches in the classroom, and this study supports that need—to a point. A reader-response approach to literature emphasizes the uniqueness of students' backgrounds and encourages them to develop their own individual and authentic responses to texts (Bleich, 1988; Langer, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1984). This type of engagement with literature is an important first step toward democratizing the teaching of literature. When discussing literary works in ways that validate students' prior experience and knowledge, students "become engaged in constructing meaning from text and then in articulating those meanings to others through the filter of their own cultural and ethnic heritage" (Knoeller, 1998, p. 20). However, reader-response approaches by themselves are limited in their ability to address the issues raised by this study. They do not, for example, attend to the social determinants underlying the kinds of life experiences Gabriela narrates in her stories of growing up in the ghetto. Therefore, I suggest that personal narrative be turned outward to a broader theorizing of experience. This involves understanding that literature is not written or read in a social or cultural vacuum. Rather than focusing on authoritative interpretations of text, pedagogy needs to turn to inquiries into texts as personal, social, and cultural constructions (Rogers, 1997). In this way, students and teachers "look up from their private and shared responses to study how a poem is part of a larger enterprise . . . to trace texts out into the world" (Willinsky, as cited in Rogers, 1997, p. 97).

CLASSROOM LITERACY AS A LANGUAGE OF CRITIQUE, SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION, AND HOPE

A curriculum of critique supports a democratic ideal of citizens who not only have the ability to act as agents of their own lives within political and social systems but also can critique the systems themselves. Although individual girls such as Gabriela, Kristy, Michelle, and Lettrice resisted the social and cultural claims embedded in the literature, they did not have the social or cognitive tools to foreground their alternative or resistant readings in class in such a way that they could make visible the ideological and structural forces that positioned them as marginal.

In their book *The Unknown City*, Fine and Weis (1998) presented an ethnography of the lives of poor and working-class adults in two large northeastern cities. Amid the narratives of despair that punctuate the lives of the participants in their study, these young men and women found "unsuspected places within their geographic communities, their public institutions, and their spiritual lives, to sculpt real and imagined spaces for peace, communion, personal, and collective work" (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 252). From within these "free spaces" (Boyte & Evans, 1992, as cited in Fine & Weis, 1998), young women and men "enter into new identities, create new alliances [and] . . . speculate on their place in the larger project of social change and consciousness" (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 253).

I envision the possibility of creating democratic classrooms that are "free spaces" for education and that produce individuals who have begun the work of creating the lived experience of empowerment and transformation within the traditional social structures of school and schooling. However, this kind of transformative work must first begin with the teacher education programs that prepare our classroom educators. I mentioned earlier that the girls in this classroom did not have the social or cognitive tools to foreground resistant readings of text. In part, this was because Mary, herself, did not possess these tools.

CONCLUSION

Giving girls skills to comprehend literature is not the same as teaching them to understand the "why" of literature in the context of their personal and social experiences (Hynds, 1997). As Heath (1983) contended and this study supports, students need more than literacy skills. They need to develop literate behaviors and to see themselves as literate persons. What can be learned from a deepened understanding of urban girls' transactions with literacy and its implications for their construction of gendered identities? I propose a pedagogy that connects the study of literary texts to the larger relationships of power and knowledge within the culture. As the girls in this study demonstrated, reading is not simply an abstract skill but rather is a social action that occurs in specific social circumstances. An enacted curriculum that attends to this social dynamic offers the best hope for literacy's potential to act as a catalyst of social and personal transformation.

This study provides an understanding of the ways in which urban girls negotiate and transact with classroom literacy. As educators, it is our moral responsibility to provide girls an opportunity to express their voices so they can learn to resist and construct cultural meanings found in texts. Literacy plays an important part in the construction of gender and race because it shapes our identities and provides us with a way of being in the world. Continuing to deepen our understanding of literacy as a social practice is essential work toward a more just and democratic society.

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