VOICE, SOLIDARITY, RESISTANCE:
EXPLORING CRITICAL DISCOURSE AND CRITICAL LITERACY
PEDAGOGY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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This research is dedicated to the students who breathed life into it.

To those still with us and to one who has moved on:
Thank you for allowing me to add my voice to yours.
ABSTRACT

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This research, conducted with two sections of students enrolled in eleventh grade English Language Arts (ELA) classes at an urban, public magnet school, provides a critical narrative of one literacy teacher’s approach toward enacting a critical literacy pedagogy that seeks to advance principles of equity and social justice. Working from theoretical and methodological frameworks that value the roles that adolescents’ lives and selves occupy in the project of critical pedagogy, this study contributes a series of close readings of classroom discourse that focus on what occurs when one teacher researcher structures a literacy curriculum around the theme of the individual in society and then investigates the writing and talk that emerges. Analysis of discourse is conducted through a blended framework that incorporates lenses drawn from the traditions of critical literacy and critical pedagogy, literary criticism, and the social sciences.

Findings of this study reaffirm the value that critical approaches to literacy education can have for fostering students’ journeys towards development of a Freirean (2004) critical consciousness. Samples of classroom dialogue and student writing collected over the first
five months of an academic year capture students’ critical explorations of a) their own and
others’ identities and lived experiences, b) their past and present orientations towards literacy
and literacy education, and c) their negotiations over how to frame and express their private
and political selves. The story of teaching and learning at the center of this study extends
current work in the field of literacy education by capturing how students used opportunities
for discussion and writing to engage in negotiations over silence and voice, individuality and
solidarity, and complacency and resistance, all concepts that researchers have identified as salient
to the many challenges to and possibilities for projects in literacy education and critical
pedagogy. Analyses of these negotiations reveal the value that an analytic framework for
discourse analysis that integrates the concepts of passion, ingenuity, and voice can have for
teacher researchers in literacy education who aim to engage in critical interpretations of
classroom discourse as a pathway for improving the intellectual rigor of classroom practices
and for seeking social justice ends in education that honor adolescents’ identities and
capacities.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** .......................................................................................................................... iii

**LIST OF TABLES** ................................................................................................................. viii

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS** .................................................................................................. ix

**PART I – CALLING FOR JUSTICE** ..................................................................................... 1

Framing the Problem ........................................................................................................... 1

**CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTIONS: CONTEXT AND CONTRIBUTION** ............ 7

Location ................................................................................................................................. 7
Orientation ........................................................................................................................... 10
Community ......................................................................................................................... 11
Neighborhood (Contribution) ........................................................................................... 14

**CHAPTER 2 – LAYING THE GROUNDWORK: PRACTITIONER INQUIRY** ....... 17

Research Questions ........................................................................................................... 17
Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks .......................................................................... 18

*Adolescents and Literacy* .................................................................................................. 18
*Transformative Teaching and Learning and Critical Consciousness* ......................... 19
*Critical Literacy Pedagogy, Inquiry as Stance* .............................................................. 24

Methodologies .................................................................................................................... 29

*Practitioner Inquiry and Narrative Teacher Research* .................................................. 29
*Enacting a Pedagogy of Change* .................................................................................... 33

*Transcending textbook multiculturalism* ........................................................................... 34
*Contrapuntal pedagogies: Reading, writing, and research* ........................................... 37
*Memo writing and reflexivity* ......................................................................................... 40

*Processes of Sensemaking* ............................................................................................. 41
*Critical hermeneutics and inquiry as stance* ................................................................. 42
*Critical feminisms* .......................................................................................................... 45

*Communities of Practice* ............................................................................................... 48

Methods ................................................................................................................................ 50

*Setting* ............................................................................................................................... 50

*Data Gathering and Analysis* ......................................................................................... 54

*Phasing of teaching and research* .................................................................................... 54
*Lesson plans, professional documents, and archival data* ........................................... 57
*Student writing* .................................................................................................................. 57
*Classroom conversations* ............................................................................................... 59
*Course feedback instruments* .......................................................................................... 59

*Coda: Reading and Talking about Texts* ........................................................................... 61

*Reading supplementary texts* ......................................................................................... 62
*Reading multiple texts* ...................................................................................................... 62
*Reading from resistant perspectives* ................................................................................ 64

**CHAPTER 3 – STRUCTURING THE INQUIRY: TEXTS, READERS, AND CLASSROOM DISCOURSE** .................................................................................................................. 66

Discourse as Process: Negotiating the Roles of Texts in Analysis .................................. 66
Establishing a Thematic Focus ......................................................................................... 71
From Danticat to Johnson ..........................................................73

PART II – SHIFTING SANDS: NEGOTIATING SELF AND OTHER THROUGH THE TRANSACTIONAL SPACE OF TALK AND TEXT ..................83
Framing the Conversations ..........................................................83

CHAPTER 4 – SILENCE ↔ VOICE .............................................89
A Starting Point: Transaction, Interaction ...................................89
Readers Respond .......................................................................97
Confronting Silence? .................................................................105

CHAPTER 5 – INVIVIDUALITY ↔ SOLIDARITY .....................118
From Singular to Plural ...............................................................118
 Insider/Outsider Status ..............................................................122
 The Politics of Representation ....................................................133
 Coda: Towards Solidarity .........................................................144

PART III – CREATING DANGEROUSLY: “DISOBEDIENCE TO A DIRECTIVE” IN PROSE AND POETRY ..........................................................151
Re-framing the Conversation .....................................................151

For Whom, to Whom: From Recognition to Reinvention ...........154
 Recognition and Reinvention: Exploring the Personal and the Global ..............................................................154
 Critical Challenges to the Self ........................................................163
 Conceptualizing Voice: An Emergent Framework ......................176
 Passion ......................................................................................177
 Ingenuity ....................................................................................180
 Voice ..........................................................................................183

CHAPTER 7 – IDENTIFICATION, TRANSGRESSION, INCORPORATION: FINDING VOICE THROUGH IDENTITY POETRY ..........................189
Student ........................................................................................191
“Well-Behaved” Child .................................................................198
Black Dynamite ...........................................................................205
Coda: Seeking, Inspiring ..............................................................217

PART IV – CONTINUING COVERATIONS ....................................221
Reflecting and Moving Forward: A Meditation on the Quilt ...........221

CHAPTER 8 – COMPLACENCY ↔ RESISTANCE ......................225
Returning to Talk .........................................................................225
Working Towards Resistance .....................................................231
 A Discourse of Misrepresentation: The (Re)Emergence of the White Pedagogue ......................................................233
 The Role of the “Reader” in Defining the Struggle .........................246
 Speaking Resistance: A Message in Blood ..................................263
Coda: The Voices of Two Interconnected Narratives ..................288

CHAPTER 9 – REFLECTIONS: “PEDAGOGY AS TEXT” ...............295
LIST OF TABLES

1. Daily Teaching Schedule ............................................................... 51
2. Timeline for Data Collection and Analysis .................................... 55
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Classroom Configuration ............................................................. 52
2. Passion, Ingenuity, Voice ............................................................. 187
And with fall comes the students. There comes the fun of the performance, expression of the need to pass things on, the learning the students pass on to him, the hope for a better future for all. And he knows again that the suffering is worth something few enjoy: the children and the students provide a life filled with meaning and possibility.

-Victor Villanueva, Jr.
PART I – CALLING FOR JUSTICE

By a complex, confusing, and almost contradictory mathematical process, by the use of zigzags instead of straight lines, the earth can be proved to be the center of things celestial; but by an operation so simple that it can be comprehended by a schoolboy, its position can be verified among the other worlds which revolve about the sun, and its movements harmonized with the laws of the universe. So, when the white race assumes as a hypothesis that it is the main object of creation and that all things else are merely subsidiary to its well-being, sophism, subterfuge, perversion of conscience, arrogance, injustice, oppression, cruelty, sacrifice of human blood, all are required to maintain the position, and its dealings with other races become indeed a problem, a problem which, if based on a hypothesis of common humanity, could be solved by the simple rules of justice.

James Weldon Johnson

Framing the Problem

Trends in literacy education persist in advancing instrumentalist pedagogies that often fail to honor students’ identities, experiences, and histories by offering prescribed approaches to teaching that de-professionalize educators and fail to account for their abilities to develop curricula that are at once engaging, rigorous, and responsive to the students whom they teach and to the contexts in which they teach. This has been especially true of public education in urban high school settings, where standardization and high-stakes testing have largely governed the objectives for teaching and narrowly prescribed texts and curricular materials and timelines are often utilized to meet those goals. Existing research conducted on critical pedagogies has offered many possibilities for transformative, progressive teaching that serves to counter these negative trends, but we will continue to need and will continue to benefit from thorough investigations into what critical literacy pedagogies can look like in the context of the literacy classroom—especially from research conducted by practicing teachers.
The following practitioner inquiry is the product of a yearlong study conducted with two sections of eleventh-grade students in the high school language and literacy classroom where I taught. The core questions and goals that this research carries with it and the teaching that it captures emerge as one moment in a narrative reflecting a much longer nine-year journey in the secondary ELA classroom that led up to it and that was influenced by the intersection of my work both as a teacher and as a graduate student. The small research projects that I conducted as part of my doctoral coursework while I remained a full-time language arts teacher each played a formative role in my professional and intellectual development as an educator. To me, each one voiced its own small argument in support of the possibilities that a critical literacy pedagogy could hold for developing an activist citizenry of literate persons who seek to uphold principles of social justice, equity, and community.

In this introductory section, I present three key problems of practice that have been and continue to be of great significance to me as a practitioner, especially in the context of my work in the urban district where I taught when this research was conducted. They are significant in that each presents a call for action both in and out of the space of the English language and literacy classroom. Even though I no longer teach in the school that was the setting for the study that follows, these problems continue to define my practice. My orientation towards working in my current position in a relatively wealthy, suburban public middle school has not changed. As I conclude my write-up of this research almost six years after the data for it was originally gathered, its findings reaffirm for me the importance that I/we continue to work to develop approaches to critical pedagogy that are responsive to students’ lived experiences, that invite them to become actively invested readers and writers.
of their worlds, and that nurture their capacities for thinking critically about and enacting change in their personal, academic, and professional lives.

The first of these three problems addresses the de-individualizing of students through initiatives in education that claim to support the differentiation of instruction but persist in forwarding “pre-programmed curricula that promote the same pacing and instructional methods for everyone” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 71). While many educators attempt to enact critical pedagogies in their classrooms that support tenets of social justice and equity, teachers must work to develop the critical consciousness and reflexivity necessary to avoid re-inscribing methods of assessment and instruction that standardize the teaching of students. Part of addressing this problem requires that teachers seek to disrupt forms of education that support the de-contextualizing of the school as a site of learning and that position students as passive rather than active participants in society. Shor (1992) writes that this problematic trend can (and must) be addressed through the development of critical pedagogies that are grounded in deeply contextualized understandings of “what students know, speak, experience, and feel” (p. 202). Truly valuing the individual student means going beyond superficial attempts to diversify language and literacy education through what often amounts to “a textbook multiculturalism” that provides only truncated, touristic selections of writings by non-White, non-European authors (Giroux & McLaren, 1994). If educators hope to enact transformational, multicultural teaching in their classrooms, change-oriented pedagogies must be “context-specific and open to negotiation,” and teachers must be willing to “incorporate a more sustained analysis of the underlying dominant-cultural framework and connect [their]
theorizing more closely to [their] teaching practices” (Keating, 2004, p. 94). In short, teachers must (and can) do much more to challenge the inscribed borders of school and society and to value the individual identities of students by developing non-static, non-standardized, student-centered curricula and by taking a stance that is critical, reflective, and reflexive towards their practice.

On a broader level, a second problem concerns the ways in which current trends in organizational climate, structure, and culture in urban education persist in measuring students’ and teachers’ achievements, abilities, and intellectual capacities against data drawn largely from standardized testing instruments (Au, 2011, Knoester and Au, 2017, Morgan, 2016). The prevalence of this ideology and its attendant methodologies of assessment serve to de-personalize, de-localize, and de-contextualize language and literacy education. It undermines and works in direct opposition towards critical, social justice pedagogies that seek to educate students for active participation local/global contexts. In his discussion of the role that critical pedagogy, in particular, can play in countering this trend, Gruenewald (2003) looks to the pervasiveness in urban education of these discourses that quantify what ‘counts’ as successful in teaching and learning as being delimited by the scope of standardized instruments, which narrowly frame the role of schools as sites for the training of students for jobs in economically competitive environments. He argues that placed-based critical pedagogies that “contribute to the production of educational discourses and practices that explicitly examine the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education” are needed both to challenge the ways in which these discourses undermine the individual experiences of teachers and students. Such approaches can aid practitioners in
discerning “what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved” (p. 10) in education.

Finally, a third problem of practice that must be taken up concerns the need for educators to teach in ways that make apparent and problematic currents of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination that prevail in our schools and in society at large and that affect specific populations of students in specific contexts. Studies conducted in literacy education have shown that anti-discriminatory and social justice-oriented pedagogies and their attendant curricula can contribute important work to countering these discriminatory practices, particularly in high school classrooms (c.f. Bigelow et al., 2001; Christensen, 2000; Fecho, 1998; Waff, 1994). Central to teacher research projects like these is the recognition that the multiple, interconnected communities and networks of interaction in which citizens participate (i.e. school, home, public life, etc.) both influence and are influenced by each other. Teachers must draw upon this intersectionality and enact pedagogies that transform language and literacy classrooms into social spaces that resemble contact zones (Pratt, 1991) that support the contestation of knowledge about race, gender, culture, power, and privilege. Within the context of the high school English language and literacy classroom, teachers can make problematic these “issues of race and gender […] by providing the opportunity for students to learn about themselves through the investigation of their own textual lives as well as those of others” (Fecho and Allen, 2003, p. 238).

It is with these three problems in mind, which speak to the standardization of the student and of the curriculum and to the persistence of colonizing, discriminatory trends in education, that I embarked upon this research conducted with my eleventh-grade students. The critical narrative that has emerged from our year of working together bears out the
significance that these problems held for us as actors situated in the educational context of that literacy classroom who participated in readings both of the worlds of the texts we encountered and of our own. It speaks also to problems and possibilities for literacy education grounded in the principles of criticality and social justice.
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTIONS: CONTEXT AND CONTRIBUTION

To fully articulate how these problems of practice have provided the call for this research study, I employ a framework developed by Lytle (2000) that she developed through her review of the teacher research movement. The concepts of location, orientation, community and neighborhood stand as significant facets of my practice and provide a basis for the logistical, ethical, methodological, and epistemological considerations that guide this research. The italicized questions that introduce parts of these sections are adapted from course materials drawn from a graduate research course on practitioner inquiry taught by Lytle and her colleagues in the spring of 2010 (see Appendix A).

Location

Who am I to do this work? What is my positionality on a continuum from insider to outsider?

For the nine years leading up to the research for this dissertation, I taught multiple levels of high school English in urban classrooms in a major, northeastern US city. I spent the first two years of my professional life teaching in the magnet and International Baccalaureate programs at a large comprehensive high school. For the next eight years, and at the time when this research was conducted, I held a position at a small, magnet school for vocal and instrumental music situated in the same district. The school profile available through the district’s online directory service during that time (School Profile, 2013-2014) provided the following demographic information about the school: total enrollment across grades 5-12 was 515; 46.6% of the school’s population was classified as White, 25.6% as African American, 20% as Asian, 4.5% as Latino, 0.4% as American Indian, and 2.9% as
Other; 50.8% of the total student body was identified as Economically Disadvantaged. These statistics paint a unique picture of this school relative to many of that city’s larger, comprehensive high schools, especially with regard to its smaller size and less diverse racial/ethnic composition. Additionally, overall student attendance rates were well above the district average, the number of serious disciplinary incidents and suspensions were well below the district average, and state standardized scores in both reading and math across all grades were far higher (60-70% greater in some areas/grades) than the district average. The school had met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals\(^1\) every year since their implementation.

Beyond its importance as the site of my research and professional practice, my relationship to this school goes farther back to my own educational history as an adolescent. I attended this school for all four years of my high school education, and when I assumed the position that I currently hold, I took the place of the last remaining academic teacher in whose class I sat as a student. It is vital to mention this personal connection as part of the context for this study because when I first decided to apply for that position, I knew that it would be significant to my life as a professional beyond the stated duties of a classroom teacher. Although at the time I had not yet enrolled in doctoral work, I had already begun to consider the possibilities for pursuing a research degree that would allow me to conduct

\(^{1}\) A state-managed system of accountability established in response to the 2002 federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The target established as part of that system was for 100 percent of students in the state to achieve at or above the established “proficient” level in reading and math by the year 2014. Proficiency was measured using an annually administered state standardized exam used to assess mastery of the state’s academic standards.
systematic inquiries into my practice. So, when the opportunity arose to work in a school situated in the neighborhood where I grew up and populated by a student body comprised of adolescents from areas around the city, I knew that it would become a site of research and practice that would be both professionally and personally valuable to my work in reading, writing, and literacy.

As a teacher who has chosen to conduct research in my classroom, I occupy a dual role of insider/outsider but fall more heavily on the insider end of the continuum for a few key reasons. Having grown up as a member of the surrounding Italian American community and having attended this school with a number of my peers who were also raised in neighborhoods located close to the school, I was granted numerous points of access into the cultural norms of the school’s community and at least some initial acceptance on the part of its administration and faculty members. My equally powerful positioning as a self-described White, middle-class, heterosexual male in his early thirties (at the time of the study) who was pursuing an advanced research degree through an Ivy League institution further supported these affordances.

At the same time, the unique quality that the site of this research possesses as a magnet school which draws many of its students from neighborhoods that are spread across a large, urban city positioned me as an outsider to the everyday lives, experiences, and cultural norms of many of my students. As I work to develop a pedagogy that seeks to make students’ lives and experiences central to the teaching and learning that occurs in the classrooms where I teach, a related goal of this research has been to develop a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted qualities of my own identity as an educator and the roles these play in my professional practice.
Orientation

*What is this research about/for? Why conduct it? To what extent is it collaborative/participatory?*

Enacting a pedagogical stance towards teaching that positions students as knowledgeable readers, researchers, and evaluators of their worlds has been fundamental to my practice as an English language arts teacher. I harbor deep concerns with an ongoing lack of institutional focus in public education on developing curricula that encourage students to draw connections between texts that they encounter in the classroom, their lives, histories, and identities, and the variety of local/global issues that impact the communities in which they live and interact. Rather than inviting students to engage in critical investigations of those issues, interests, and ideas that hold importance to them, to their families, and to the myriad communities in which they do and do not hold membership, many approaches to literacy education continue to support the development of passive learners trained to follow culturally exclusive (Berchini, 2016; Gangi, 2008) and culturally colonizing (Bomer, 2017) courses of study. The curricula that guide such approaches often serve to position students as outside observers of a sanitized, objectified world captured through a limited literary scope this is largely framed by White, western perspectives. Failing to design curricula that value and support adolescents’ identities, that provide opportunities for students to become active and critical participants in their worlds, and that make explicit and problematic fundamental inequalities in society means that schools and districts may miss out on the opportunity to provide their students with programs of study that can be simultaneously academically rigorous, richly diverse, and socially and culturally responsive and transformative. When framed in ways that conform to a small set of guiding interests that bear little relevance to and a lack concern for the particularized lived worlds of students
sitting in classrooms in districts across the nation, public education risks de-intellectualizing, de-personalizing, and de-democratizing what it means to teach and to learn.

It is my intention that this dissertation will offer teachers a critical narrative of one educator’s attempts to actively counter these shortcomings in his own teaching through the enactment of critical literacy pedagogy. I seek to develop deeply contextualized understandings of the role that such a pedagogy can play in shaping the educative, communal space of the classroom by exploring the interactions that occur between and among students, the teacher, and texts.

Community

*What is the social organization of my work? What are the communities to which I belong?*

Morrell (2008) argues that students must come first and foremost in the myriad considerations that teachers researching their own practice make as they design and enact pedagogies and research methodologies at their sites of practice. And as teacher researchers deliberate over the frameworks and practices that we bring to this work, we must be cognizant of the fact that we do not practice, write, research, or live in isolation. Indeed, “The local…is not a narrow given or solely the domain of the particular, but rather constructed and reconstructed to further a range of possibilities for the imaginative organization of new kinds of communities” (Lytle, 2000, p. 709). Lytle forefronts the protean quality of these relational networks, and her words remind us that we must consider the impact that our research will have on and for the variety of constituents whom it may touch both directly and indirectly. Keeping this stance towards community present in my thinking has been pivotal in making sense of my relationship to my site of practice and to
the audiences for this research, and I discuss at various points during my analysis of student discourse the influences that this study’s student participants have had on me, on my practice, and on how I view the pedagogical choices that inform and are informed by my work with them in the classroom.

Conversely, I also consider the potential impact that my teaching and research has had on my students’ lives as participants in this study. As I attempt to communicate in this research, the writing and talk that my students produced has deeply affected how I understand my practice by making apparent how significantly my teaching impacts their experiences as learners. As a high school English teacher, I have made a conscious effort to come to my practice with a reflexive eye towards assessing the influence I have on students’ lives and learning. This has meant taking a stance that resists conceptualizing education as a uniform discipline marked by a set of rigid practices that students must master. Instead, and as this research evinces, I have come to understand that the value that I ascribe to my students’ work is laden with my own subjectivities and grounded in my experiences in and outside of education. Although standardized methods of accountability, rigid metrics, and objectivist notions of epistemology have certainly been forces at play in my life as a practitioner, my intention has and continues to be to resist having those become primary influences in the teaching that goes on in my classroom. And I perceive that part of my ongoing, active resistance to allowing pedagogical imperatives such as those compromise my teaching requires becoming comfortable with the necessary uneasiness that accompanies this positioning and acknowledging the generative force that it contributes to this study. Embracing dissonance as a means toward the development of provisional understandings about teaching has been the location from which I have approached the generation of
knowledge since I began working in the language and literacy classroom. It was nurtured and
refined during my work as a pre-service teacher in graduate school, and it has been
fundamental to the pedagogical approaches I have taken as a practitioner in the high school
language and literacy classroom.

I have formed a number of strong individual and group-based relationships with
faculty members with whom I work on a daily basis as well as with outsiders with whom I
share my professional experiences. These are founded on nuanced, intersecting philosophies
of pedagogy and epistemology. One of the most rewarding aspects of teaching—aside from
the work that I am privileged to do each day with a younger generation of learners—is the
opportunity to work collegially with individuals both at and away from my site of practice,
both those who are intimately invested in the work being done at my school and those who I
call upon as supportive, “critical friends” (Anderson and Herr, 1999). I see these participants
as essential to this study (especially when it comes to processes of sense-making about my
practice), since they have helped make apparent the affordances and limitations of the
pedagogical approaches that I enact. When I consider what it has meant to position myself
as an educator whose work in the district where I teach may often go against the grain of
accepted norms of practice, I know that this practitioner inquiry will most likely find both
friends and opponents, but I welcome and take as the goal of teacher research the necessity
of navigating conflicting discourses about what education can/should look like. I recognize
also that such an approach requires the close examination of the roles that networks of
power, class, race, and political and economic capital play in this exchange.
Neighborhood (Contribution)

Who am I talking to? Why/how does this matter?

This dissertation takes as its audience the various members (students, faculty, administrators, parents, researchers) who occupy the intersecting communities of practice mentioned above, the most immediate of these being other educators, administrators, and researchers whose ongoing practices support tenets of equity and social justice. However, I see this research as equally relevant to those individuals who may not see the utility in qualitative forms of research, especially when it comes to insider research into one’s own practice. One of the major challenges in this work lies in the problems of communicating methodological and epistemological processes through writing. In her article about the possibilities that engaging in “deep talk” around data can have for knowledge building Himley (1991) argues that “[language itself, used reflexively, is the means to expand, deepen, and complicate understanding” (p. 60). The narrative that occupies the heart of this dissertation is both detailed and complicated and necessarily provisional in its findings, and it is precisely these aspects that make it both epistemologically rich and realistic to the uncertainties of educative practice.

The level of engagement with texts—classroom readings, student writing, and transcribed classroom talk—that conducting this study has introduced as a methodology to my practice both exemplifies and presents a response to the notion of “inquiry as stance” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009), an orientation that positions inquiry as a way of being in the professional life of the practitioner rather than as a one-shot research agenda. Many of the educational neighborhoods in which our students and fellow teachers live and interact devalue in subtle and overt ways the laborious, the thoughtful, and the deliberate (Giroux,
1988b). Quick statistics and reactive policies have become the hallmark of ‘sound’ and ‘replicable’ research at both the school and district levels. The development of deeply contextualized understandings of students and their lives, such as those that have characterized the work of practitioners like Himley and her colleagues at The Prospect School (1991), demands a paradigmatic shift in the ways in which schools are framed as spaces for professional learning. As educators look to the neighborhoods in which we hold membership, especially those inhabited by the students we teach, we must ask the questions, What can be done to reverse this trend? How can we nurture a love for the deliberate and the deep? How can we encourage attentiveness beyond the momentary in world that lives at the speed of light? These are problems not only for the university researcher and classroom practitioner, but for all of us if we hope to encounter each other fully in terms of our humanity—to acknowledge, as Carini expresses it, “the presence of human capacity” (2001, p. 20) containing a depth and individuality that transcends simplistic and fast codification and description. I have done my best in the write-up of this study to provide my readership with a heightened sense of what it means to value the complex lives of practitioners and students and of the necessary tentativeness and provisionality inherent to the generation of knowledge founded in deep talk centered on the work of the classroom. In that sense, I hope and intend that this research takes on an ethnographic quality for the reader. Neighborhoods, their members, their locales, their interactional qualities defy fast and easy description and categorization. Writing, deep talk, and collaboration is at the heart of the interpretive foundation on which the epistemic quality of this study stands, and the concept of neighborhood with its connotations of closeness, familiarity, and community inform both its theory and methodology.
This dissertation will find its greatest contribution to the growing body of teacher research in its ability to support and extend the work undertaken by ever-broadening networks of educators who engage in deep, systematic inquiry into their practice. I seek to secure wider circles of validation for the positive outcomes that many of the researchers mentioned above have already shown this mode of inquiry can have on the academic and social lives of students, the professional lives of their teachers, and the learning environments of classrooms and schools. This can only be achieved by documenting the ways in which teacher researchers can engage in teaching and learning that positions students, colleagues, and other partners as agents of change by honoring the multiple, intersecting, and divergent ways they interact in the context of school and its related communities.
CHAPTER 2 – LAYING THE GROUNDWORK: PRACTIONER INQUIRY

Research Questions

This practitioner inquiry into critical literacy pedagogy takes as its stated goal the furthering of principles of democratic education, civic engagement, and social justice and has developed from my yearlong teaching of two sections of eleventh grade ELA classes. The questions that guide this study focus on the ways in which classroom discourse (writing and talk) that evolved from my own and my students’ participation in those classes can stand as a significant unit of analysis for understanding the nuanced ways in which one approach critical literacy pedagogy might address the problems of practice outlined in the previous chapter. The primary questions that guide this research ask,

1. How can classroom discourse that focuses on issues related to race, gender, social class, and other cultural, historical, and societal factors contribute to a teacher’s ability a) to understand how adolescents’ identities and lived experiences contribute to the teaching and learning that occurs in a language and literacy classroom and b) to develop responsive curricular choices that support students’ academic interests and proclivities while meeting the educational goals set forth at the state and district levels?

2. What is the nature of the social engagements that occur when students are invited to take up critical issues related to the self and others in the context of the ELA classroom? What themes and concepts surface from an examination of classroom discourse?

3. How might the development of an emergent, critical narrative of teaching support the professional development of literacy educators who seek to better their practice through sustained inquiries hosted in their own classrooms?
Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Adolescents and Literacy

Essential to my framing of what it means to enact a critical literacy pedagogy in the high school English classroom is the premise that the wealth and diversity of literacies, histories, and identities that adolescents bring to the language and literacy classroom far exceed the demands of narrowly framed courses of study that convey discrete sets of literacy skills that must be learned in order to achieve success in the school. Vasudevan and Campano (2009) argue that in many cases adolescents are at risk in schools where “the expansive sense of self that many youth are experiencing in their out-of-school lives is being constricted or homogenized” (p. 326). Their review of a substantial body of research on adolescent literacies indicates the need for educators to develop ways of teaching that value the particularized identities, histories, and cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds of students as well as the personal interests they bring to the literacy classroom. To do so means actively countering the kinds of classroom practices that delimit literacy and learning to sets of pre-defined, myopic educational objectives. Resisting this trend requires the development of pedagogies that undergo continuous change, that position literacy in ways that forefront its ideological character and contested nature, and that resist attempts to draw dichotomous boundaries between out-of-school and in-school literacy practices (Street, 2003; Hull and Schultz, 2002).

This positioning necessitates a view of literacy learning as “complex, issue laden, and open to inquiry” (Fecho, 1998, p. 88) as well as a more capacious view of adolescents as active agents who guide their own education and who have a great deal to say about the
value that reading and writing have in their lives and work. In their study of the ways in which adolescents describe their own literacy practices, Massey et al. (2009) found that of the 26 students they interviewed, 81% listed receiving a grade as the primary reason for successfully completing reading and writing assignments in school; few mentioned experiencing enjoyment when assigned reading and writing. Instead, their findings indicated that several significant factors contributed to adolescents’ willingness to engage in literacy practices in the context of school, two of which included student choice (both with regard to reading materials as well as to approaches to and objectives for writing) and the character of student-teacher connections. At the heart of their conclusions rests an insistence that to develop responsive pedagogies that serve the particularized groups of adolescents we teach, educators must first “learn about our own students rather than relying on what others have said” and work to foster stronger connections with them by understanding their interests and providing more choice in the work we assign (Massey et al, 2009, p. 62).

Educators who hope to address two of the problems I’ve outlined in Chapter 1 (i.e. the de-individualizing of adolescents and the de-valuing of their roles as active participants who possess a great deal to offer with respect to the guidance of their literacy education) must abandon monolithic, instrumentalist views of literacy in favor of choice and flexibility, take on the roles of teacher researchers who systematically investigate our teaching, and develop richly articulated understandings about the lives and identities of students we teach.

*Transformative Teaching and Learning and Critical Consciousness*

The ability to enact pedagogies that view adolescents as powerful actors and honor the wealth of knowledge they possess about what is personally, professionally, and
academically valuable to their lives is greatly mediated by the ways in which educators position themselves relative to the students they teach. Likewise, the teacher-student relationship cannot be understood without consideration for the ideological frameworks that teachers bring to the development of critical pedagogies. Understanding what it means to conduct practitioner inquiry in a high school language and literacy classroom requires that a conceptual groundwork be laid which accounts for the teacher as researcher and as practitioner as well as for the pedagogical goals relative to this particularized identity.

Campano (2009) offers the image of the emergent professional as a way to conceptualize what it means to occupy a single identity that embodies that dual role of teacher and researcher. The development and maintenance of this identity requires that educators attend to a tripartite set of orientations. These include: 1) nurturing deep and sustained interest in the richly contextualized lives of his students, 2) having the vulnerability necessary to call into question and disrupt taken-for-granted identity constructions and knowledges about practice that can become normalized and lead to professional stagnation, and 3) possessing a relational social identity that allows for the ongoing re-contextualizing of the educational space via the continued building, maintaining, and re-building of relationships with members of a variety of constituent groups across the personal and professional landscape. Campano’s characterization of the identity of the emergent professional works as a critical counterpart to that of the student in that the two occupy equally powerful roles central to the literacy classroom. In that educative context, students and teachers gain the capacity to educate each other in mutually transformative ways through powerful sets of interactions that Campano characterizes as a process of “relational knowledge building” (p. 120).
Giroux’s (1988b) concept of the *transformative intellectual* frames the roles of teacher and student in ways complementary to Campano’s emergent professional. Through this identity construct, Giroux defines the stance of the practitioner in practitioner inquiry as embodying a broad set of pedagogical goals that support social justice and democratic aims for literacy education. Writing in his forward to Giroux’s text, Peter McLaren provides a concise rendering of the commitments essential to envisioning the teacher as a transformative intellectual. These include: “teaching as an emancipatory practice, the creation of schools as democratic public spheres; the restoration of a community of shared progressive values; and the fostering of a common public discourse linked to the democratic imperatives of equality and social justice” (Giroux, 1988b, xviii). When applied to the work of the classroom, these precepts frame teaching and learning as an ongoing process of critical co-authorship supported by a stance that positions students and educators as equally powerful intellectual agents working together for social and political change in the space of school and in broader contexts of local and global societies.

Like Campano’s emergent professional, Giroux’s transformative intellectual positions the student as the central figure in education and calls for a more equitable distribution of power between teacher and student, a balance that can be struck through the furthering of critical discourses both within and beyond the space of the classroom. Giroux argues that to affect this kind of substantive change in education, schools and their teachers must be willing to enact “a pedagogy of cultural politics…that makes problematic how teachers and students sustain, resist, or accommodate those languages, ideologies, social processes, and myths that position them within existing relations of power and dependency” (1985, p. 35). The value of this pedagogy, as Giroux explains it, is the responsibility that it
places on teachers to support students in developing the “critical, political consciousness” (Giroux, 1988b, p. 48) needed to participate fully as active citizens seeking the transformation of society for the betterment of all its members. However, as open and democratic as this project may appear, the pedagogy of liberation that Giroux offers is not unproblematic, and a fuller examination of the fundamental premise of this agenda offers an important caveat as well as a way forward with respect to the power negotiations inherent to this work.

Critical consciousness or conscientização, a term first coined by teacher, educational philosopher, and activist Paulo Freire “refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (2004, p. 35) and has been discussed, critiqued, re-conceptualized, and re-framed in numerous ways across a variety of educational contexts. Victor Villanueva’s application of this concept in his autobiographical text Bootstraps (1993) provides one opportunity to trace a problem of special concern to educators who seek social justice and emancipatory ends for their practice: the danger of taking on an authoritarian ideological stance that approaches didacticism and indoctrination and is antithetical to the necessarily dialogic quality of Freirean approaches to conscientization. In his discussion of ethnographic research conducted with an African American poet, activist, and teacher who claimed to have based his practice on the writings of Freire, but whose methods he describes as “explicitly propaganda” (1993, p. 60), Villanueva makes clear the risk that critical pedagogues face of pushing an ideology through the power of one’s position. The tendency to indoctrinate rather than to educate must be rigorously accounted for by anyone engaged either in teaching or in practitioner research, but it is especially problematic for those who seek to
make the classroom a site for social action and political change and who, like me, already hold positions of great privilege given their race, ethnicity, and gender orientation.

Villanueva’s analysis raises the question of how educators and practitioner researchers can develop pedagogies that honor Freirean and Girouxian traditions of transformative change without taking on hegemonic qualities that bear similarities to those political agendas they seek to disrupt.

In a later chapter of *Bootstraps*, Villanueva offers one approach that educators might take to advance this activist agenda in their classrooms while accounting for the risk of re-inscribing the hegemonic ideologies that they seek to dismantle. The expectation that systemic inequities can be countered rapidly through critical literacy pedagogy can be detrimental to the work of the classroom. It can result in teaching practices that serve to transmit educators’ own political agendas rather than to encourage the development of pathways toward critical analysis of these constructs drawn from the minds and hearts of their students. As Villanueva observes,

> The war of position is a protracted war. Hegemony will not be countered in one semester or in one quarter or two…But we can begin the dialectical process necessary to a counter hegemony. We can play out our contradictions as deputies of hegemony and as subversives, agents of tradition and, with our students, potential agents of change. We can follow Gramsci’s example: *promoting critical dialogue within a cultural literacy*. (1993, p. 138, emphasis added)

As indicated by the phrase “with our students,” the commitment to reflexivity that Villanueva advocates reinforces the importance that teachers seeking to advance critical, transformative pedagogies maintain the dialogic quality of classroom discourse that tempers the powerful position they hold as instructional leaders. These educators must come to realization that although they may have developed what they see as well-framed notions of
the political directions that teaching and learning in their classrooms should take, these trajectories must be accounted for with students through the deliberative, relational work of the classroom.

According to McLaren (1995), a similar principle applies for qualitative researchers. Just as teachers must continually work to ground their practice in the subjectivities, histories, identities, and cultures of their students, so must researchers remember to account for the fact that their observations and criticisms reflect the historically and culturally bounded “regimes of truth and zones of conflict” from whence they spring. “Such an awareness,” McLaren argues, “helps to keep the ethnographer-as-critic honest and always open to self-criticism and helps to prevent her ideas from becoming transpersonal and transhistorical and vulnerable to avant garde messianism” (1995, p. 294). Conducting a practitioner inquiry into a critical pedagogy that follows the philosophical traditions of Freire and Giroux requires a double reflexive duty on the part of the teacher researcher: the need to account for re-inscribing power inequalities that operate both in the pedagogical motives and classroom practices that drive instruction and in the methodological design that supports the researching of those practices.

*Critical Literacy Pedagogy, Inquiry as Stance*

The focus of my research centers on practitioner inquiry into a very particularized form of educative practice, what I and others identify as *critical literacy pedagogy* (Enciso, 2011; Jewett and Smith, 2003; Lesley, 2001). In this section I discuss my reasons for employing this hybrid term and for paring it with *inquiry as stance* as connected concepts that convey accompanying theories of action. When brought together, these conceptual strands describe
the overarching focus of my research, my orientation towards teaching and learning, and the
impact that my framing of these terms will have on this study.

Bob Fecho (1998) draws a connection between critical literacy and critical pedagogy
and their bearing on teaching and learning when he writes, “If critical literacy is the goal,
then critical pedagogies can be devised that will effectively direct students and teachers
towards that goal. In other words, critical pedagogies represent the means of working within
classrooms that enable learners to continue as critical learners outside the classroom” (p. 85).
The operational relationship that Fecho’s description renders between process and goal
stands as a starting point for the way in which I envision the two terms coming together as
critical partners. However, a definition of critical literacy instruction offered by Morrell
(2008) comes closer to what I term critical literacy pedagogy because it forefronts the
fundamental inability to separate the goal of critical literacy from critical pedagogical
processes. Morrell writes,

> Critical literacy instruction needs to be fundamentally concerned with the
consumption, production, and distribution of texts; counter-texts that not
only name the workings of power, but critical texts that serve as the
manifestation of an alternate reality or a not-yet-realized present that only
enters into the imagination through the interaction with new and
authentically liberating words that are created by writers as cultural learners.
(2008, p. 115)

Morrell’s definition captures the necessarily provisional nature of any prefigured literacy
objectives that may stand as the anticipated goals of critical pedagogy. Since critical literacy
instruction, as Morrell defines it, involves a dialectic process of tentative meaning-making
mediated by the creation of critical texts that counter existing ones and indicate new ways
forward, pedagogies that support this process of ongoing textual development must undergo
the same continuous change as do the texts themselves. Any to claim to study critical literacy
must also involve the study of critical pedagogy; the two exist in a state of functional, organic interdependence. The process embodies the goals, and the goals define and drive the process.

But what does this process look like in the everyday space of the language and literacy classroom? Through a theory of action they term *inquiry as stance*, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) describe the nature of the work of practitioner researchers who seek to systematically and critically investigate the teaching and learning that occurs in their literacy classrooms. In their discussion of the term ‘stance’, they describe it as “a continual process of making current arrangements problematic; questioning the ways knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated, and used; and assuming that part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change” (2009, p. 121). This position (stance), which privileges ongoing inquiry, resists stasis, and thrives on movement, change, and generative dissonance, works well in concert with the provisional pedagogical nature of a critical literacy pedagogy. Thus, inquiry as stance bears implications not only for research methods and methodology, it is also central to conceptualizing the teaching that supports this study.

Making inquiry the stance from which pedagogical practices spring is an approach closely connected to the work of a few other researchers whose work has been influential to my teaching and research in the high school language and literacy classroom. Dennis Sumara’s (1996) theory of curriculum as *embodied action* provides an argument for curricular design as a continuously recursive pedagogical process marked by a vision of forward progress grounded in the *haps* of the classroom, those “moment-to-moment unpredictable experiences that contribute to our remembered, lived, and projected experiences” (p. 176).
When considered alongside Morrell’s framing of critical literacy instruction as a pedagogical practice that flourishes on ongoing processes of disruption and renewal, Sumara’s embodied action orientation reaffirms the vital importance that educators seeking the development of critical pedagogies maintain sensitivity to the paths of discovery indicated by the daily work of the classroom. When considering the value that practitioner inquiry holds as a pedagogical stance towards literacy instruction (as do Cochran-Smith and Lytle), Sumara’s framing of the role of the hap invites teachers to develop with greater and greater facility the methodological tools and analytic sensitivities of empirical researchers. For only by paying consistent, close attention to the subtleties of classroom life, only by adopting an inquiry stance towards teaching, can practitioners engage in the kind of innovative work required of attempting to enact a critical literacy pedagogy.

Working in conjunction with the development of this critical, pedagogical sensitivity are the educative acts that help to move the work of the critical literacy classroom forward. It is one thing to be attuned to those classroom events that offer invitations for change, but the teacher must also be willing to act, often in bold and controversial ways to honor those moments. O’Reilley’s (1993) figuring of the educator as artist and agent of protest and her insistence that the work of the classroom be framed as a creative, humanist project driven by a social justice agenda provides one image of the kind of work needed to advance a critical literacy pedagogy. She writes of this critical, artistic work, “Good art…respects the participants, rearranges reality, opens new moral possibilities, disorients, and resolves contradictions. A good ‘protest’ should do the same; otherwise, nobody is thinking, nothing is changed. It’s bad art. Worse, it may be a species of violence” (p. 98). Like those of Giroux, Campano, and Sumara, O’Reilley’s words remind educators and researchers of the crucial
role that teacher identity plays in the critical literacy classroom. Educators must pay close
attention to the ways in which they position themselves as creative agents for change and to
the instructional methods that convey this critical pedagogical orientation. Her metaphor of
protest as a form of artistry is of particular value to the establishment of a democratic culture
in the classroom. It positions both the teacher and her students as participant artists in the
classroom who stand on equal ground as creative contributors to this work.

O’Reilley, Sumara, Morrell, and Cochran-Smith and Lytle all challenge practitioners
to engage in work that is responsive to the individual identities, histories, cultures, and interests
of their students and responsible to an overarching ethical framework that makes activist,
social justice work the province of the language and literacy classroom. Each of the above
approaches to critical literacy and pedagogy, to curriculum development, and to teaching for
social justice harmonize on multiple levels with the underlying principles of Cochran-Smith
and Lytle’s (1999) knowledge-of-practice conception of teacher learning which holds “that
teachers across the professional life span play a central and critical role in generating
knowledge of practice by making their classrooms sites for inquiry, connecting their work in
schools to larger issues, and taking a critical perspective on the theory and research of
others” (p. 273). The phasing of this dissertation necessarily frames it as a time-bounded
inquiry into methods and practices that occur over during the first semester of an academic
year, but this study should not be seen as a one-shot application of the preceding web of
social justice and pedagogical concepts. Taking an inquiry stance towards one’s practice
requires that educators construct for themselves a professional positioning that makes
processes of inquiry central to their practice across the lifespan of their careers.
Methodologies

Gathering and interpreting data for this study considers my dual role as teacher-researcher. These processes are built upon sets of frameworks, teaching practices, and approaches to assembling data that sit at the convergence of four methodological areas essential to doing the simultaneous work of teaching and researching. The first two of these are practitioner inquiry and narrative teacher research, which I frame for the purpose of this study as a set of intersecting genres that govern this research in and on teaching. I then discuss specific approaches aimed at enacting pedagogy of change in ELA classrooms and point to three theoretical strands (hermeneutics, inquiry as stance, and critical feminisms) that have influenced my processes of sensemaking. I conclude by emphasizing the methodological importance that communities of practice will hold in these processes.

Practitioner Inquiry and Narrative Teacher Research

The mode of inquiry through which I conduct, describe, and theorize my practice draws from three key research genres: practitioner inquiry, teacher research, and narrative inquiry, the goal of this study being the development of what I describe as a teacher research narrative. Through this methodological and epistemological approach to inquiry, I seek not only to document and better understand my current practice as a literacy educator, but also to simultaneously enact new approaches to critical pedagogy that are responsive to the identities, histories, and academic needs of my students and that support the tenets of social justice and democracy. Looking to the shared qualities of these three genres and developing a hybrid term to classify this inquiry into practice helps clarify how the methods that I have undertaken in this study both support and are informed by the major concerns that govern
the conceptual/theoretical frameworks that provide the foundation for this dissertation (i.e. understanding adolescent and student identities, teaching for social justice in the literacy classroom, and contributing to a growing body of teacher research on critical pedagogy).

Practitioner inquiry with its overarching objectives of generating provisional forms of knowledge in/of/for practice (Lytle, 2000) that inform the ongoing work of practitioners in the field fits the character of this research and supports the forms of inquiry necessary to respond to the research questions that drive it. Because the context for this study involves teaching in a high school English language and literacy classroom, teacher research not only describes its methodologies and its methods, the focus it places on the practitioner at work indicates the potential contributions it can offer to a growing community of literacy teachers who seek to better their practice by conducting their own sustained inquiries into teaching and learning. Finally, narrative inquiry captures how the pedagogical approaches to literacy education upon which the study is built connect to the methodology for documenting, interpreting, and communicating the “story” of the research.

The concept of narrative has become fundamental to my work in teacher research both as a way of conceptualizing how best to communicate my research and as an approach to curricular design that responds to the identities and academic and social wants, needs, and concerns of my students. Conle (2000) observes that as a methodological approach to representing data, narrative works to support a teacher researcher’s ability to “safeguard the personal, the particular, the temporal, the experiential, and the moral quality of the phenomena under study” (p. 52). Likewise, and as I discuss with greater detail below, the openness and provisional qualities essential to narrative modes of write-up, which resist *a priori* statements of what can be known prior to the chronicle of the research and the
embedded rounds sensemaking essential to its telling, align well with approaches to practitioner inquiry and teacher research that value rich, complicated, and ongoing renderings of one’s practice. Authentic “stories” of research center on the practices in which students and teachers engage and are organized by a kind of narrative “arc” guided by a progressive stance towards teaching. As Conle points out, “What counts in narrative inquiry is the meaning that actions and intentions have for the protagonist” (2000, p. 52). However, in the case of this study, there is no single protagonist. As the teacher researcher conducting it, I certainly occupy a central role—at times possibly too central (a problem that I take up at points in this study), but the students who have contributed their work and words to this research each hold equally central protagonist (and antagonist) roles. My aim in this study has been to narrate the discourse of the literacy classroom (which can be conceptualized as occupying the setting or context for the story of the research) in a way that captures the comingling of goals and conflicts in which my students and I engage as actors in a shared stage. And as with any narrative, there must be some conclusion. Regarding this, Conle offers a perspective that melds nicely with the provisional, progressive orientation of practitioner inquiry by characterizing the power that “experiential stories” have for bringing into view “possible futures” (2000, p. 56). She points to the capacity that the sharing of narratives has for helping students to see their own stories in the contexts of those of their peers as a way to inform how they understand and interpret their “plans or actions”. This has great relevance to the work of the teacher researcher and to my goals in this study because it is through the lens of my students’ stories, which emerge in this dissertation via oral and written discourse, that I have developed a better understanding of my own plans...
and actions (pedagogy) and contemplate “possible futures” for my work and for literacy teaching and learning more broadly.

Lytle (2008) presents a concise rendering of the role that narrative can play in research conducted by teachers who stage inquiries into their work with students through an essay in which she explores the notion of what it means to “better” one’s practice. In that piece, she reflects on her reading of a memoir by general surgeon Atul Gawande titled *Better: A Surgeon’s Notes on Performance* (2008) in which he presents several narrative vignettes about the medical profession and its methods and explores how medical professionals have found ways to innovate and improve upon the practice of medicine. Much of what Lytle and Gawande indicate about the value of practitioner inquiry involves telling rich, complicated narratives that are built upon and serve to advance systematic inquiry into specific problems of practice.

In short, describing the genre of this dissertation as a *teacher research narrative* grounded in practitioner inquiry encompasses 1) the intersections between the research and teaching that have generated the data set for this study, 2) the concepts and theories that inform the teaching and research practices upon which the study has been built, and 3) the contribution that my research bears for my work with my on students and for larger spheres of literacy research and practice across a variety of audiences. Engaging in this process entails a methodology of a heuristic nature, one that begins with questions about teaching, progresses through frameworks for and methods of teaching that have been informed by my own and others’ teaching and research, and ends with provisional findings in the form of new sets of questions on teaching that may indicate new methods and frameworks.
Enacting a Pedagogy of Change

The most significant methodological element that informs the design of this action-oriented research concerns the daily teaching methods and practices that have provided the groundwork for the generation of classroom discourse and that have elicited those questions, assertions, and interpretations that lead to its eventual findings. Embedded in the conceptual/theoretical framework for this study is the insistence that curricula that flow from traditions of critical literacy pedagogy must account for the identities, histories, ethnicities, and cultures of the variety of actors (teachers, learners, parents, faulty members, etc.) who contribute to the world of school and to the work of the literacy classroom. Design methodologies that support this framework include a) constructivist notions that argue for fluid and responsive curricula like Sumara’s (1996) concept of currere, an approach based on his larger theory of reading as embodied action, b) theories about place-based critical pedagogies that stress the important role educators play as creators of current and future spaces that actively challenge dominant, colonizing, and hegemonic cultural constructions (Gruenewald, 2003), and c) teacher research projects that focus on those identities (teacher, student, and teacher-researcher) that must be developed, cultivated, mutually supported, and valued in order to move education forward in responsive and progressive ways (Campano, 2009). Concerns about ways of teaching embedded in these (i.e.

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2 Sumara notes that the Latin verb currere, which when translated means ‘to run,’ bears relevance to any educator who “understands that the path of curriculum is ‘laid down while walking’ and that this path will bend, wind, and turn depending on the particular ways relations among students, texts, teachers, and contexts develop” (1996, p. 175).
flexibility, location, culture, identity, movement) have been central to my methodology for conducting research through/while teaching. Cutting across all of these exist calls for literacy educators to a) champion authentic forms of multicultural literacy education, b) become invested in the active disruption of hegemonic trends through critical literacy pedagogies of reading, writing and research, and c) systematically chronicle the impact that their practice can have on their identities as teachers and on their emerging approaches to teaching.

Transcending textbook multiculturalism

Said’s (1979) discussion of orientalism holds great relevance to the persistence in contemporary literacy education towards the fragmentation of students’ identities, the distancing of the self in relationship to some “other”, and the maintenance of colonizing forces mediating the relationships between various cultures and nations. A Eurocentric partitioning of the world supporting Said’s observations of a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 2) persists in schooled forms of literacy instruction through the powerful reification of the East as a thing to be ‘admired’ remotely and the positioning of non-Westerners as outsiders who influence the literary canon from afar, at best. Both of these aspects are readily apparent in the continued use of published textbooks to guide instruction across the high school years that often position Anglo-Americans as the primary geographical, cultural, and political referents from which to discuss other parts of the world. When non-Western “other” ethnic or cultural groups happen to be discussed (often in order to supplement a canonical Western author whose work is included in the anthology), their histories are more often than not reduced to a single colorful (pun unintended) page that is stylized to represent the culture of the people and that contains three or four paragraphs about the author’s life and the major historical events that
influenced their work. In the case of textbooks present in the district and school where I was teaching when this study was conducted, these authors’ works were sometimes accompanied by a “connection” to another White, Western author as a frame of reference for making sense of that writer’s work.

Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) locates the deeply problematic nature of these touristic approaches to multicultural education as embedded within the term *multicultural* itself and argues that as a conceptual construction, it reifies and delimits how we understand culture and cultural interaction and re-inscribes essentialized colonial identities. As he writes, “The very prefix ‘multi’ implies discreet but clear and lasting boundaries between ‘this’ culture and ‘that’ culture or the other that are both conceptually and empirically untenable and that fail to describe the complex lived dynamics of cultural change.” (2012, p. 43) If, as Gaztambide-Fernández contends, the term “multicultural” risks supporting the drawing up and maintenance of social, political, ethnic and national boundaries, and we then consider the application of that concept to the composition of a “multicultural” textbook, it is not surprising that these anthologies take on the same border wall qualities as teaching texts. As a White, American male of Western European ancestry who is also a native speaker, reader, and writer of English, it is impossible for me to imagine how many of my students who do not share my privileged history view the presentation of literature in textbook form and of the literature textbook as a genre. Over the past thirteen years spent teaching in public schools, numerous students have expressed resistance and disappointment over the framing of cultural and national identities in these textbooks. One of the most strident of these
students, Nyah, occupies a central position in this study. And yet, my own limited understanding of my students’ reactions mimics, in a way, the watered-down portrayal of history and culture that occludes the development of richly contextualized understandings of many of the non-White, non-Western writers who have created powerful works throughout history and of the socio-political structures, histories, and geographies that have influenced their work. As Said writes, “ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied” (1979, p. 5), and it is precisely these aspects of the story that are often left unexamined in textbook narratives. More often than not, they risk being replaced by a framing of knowledge that equates truth with the “nonpolitical”, with claims to understandings that equate to “scholarly, academic, impartial, above partisan or small-minded doctrinal belief” (Said, 1979, pp. 10-11).

The widespread acceptance within schools and districts of textbook-style readings and (re)writings of cultural and political history constitutes Gramscian hegemony in its purest form (Kenway, 2001), with academia’s wholesale purchase (literally) and delivery of a singular ideology. This is anything but progressive, multicultural education. As Jimmy Santiago Baca (1994) acknowledged about his own marginalization in literacy education as a mestizo adolescent of Mexican heritage, “I had become the co-author, with society, of my own oppression. The system that wanted to destroy me had taught me self-destruction. I had become my own jailor and racist judge, my own brutal policeman” (p. 35). Baca’s story of

3 See Chapter 4, “Confronting Silence”
coming to literacy involved the (r)evolution of the self—a series of actions that constituted the reframing of his identity within the confines of society in ways that supported the eventual transformation of those frameworks. And his narrative raises important methodological questions for the teaching and research supporting this dissertation, namely: How are my students being taught to purify, suppress, or altogether erase the truths of their identities? How can I develop a richly articulated understanding of how they frame their own identities? How can I imagine approaches to multicultural education that critically examine textbook constructions of linguistic and cultural identity? What does this look like in terms of reading, writing, and assessment?

Contrapuntal pedagogies: Reading, writing, and research

In their discussion of how postcolonial theory can inform practices in the literacy classroom, Singh and Greenlaw (1998) offer the concept of a contrapuntal pedagogy as one approach to countering the unproblematic positioning of Eurocentric texts and ideologies. They suggest that teachers engage with students in reading and writing that goes “against the grain” in order to “complicate and dismantle the basis for the negative contrasts so prevalent in orientalist pedagogy” (p. 196). Enacting this form of critical literacy in the classroom requires that teachers have the freedom (and the will) to move beyond the mandated curriculum to make the literacy classroom a textually rich place where conflicting worldviews can be discussed openly. Essential to this work stands an approach to practice that “involves establishing a dialogue between two or more works, so as to have students generate readings and writings about each that use both to help describe and question inscriptions of power” (Singh and Greenlaw, 1998, p. 196). Yet the circumscribed pedagogical reality for many teachers in public schools is one that consists of a standardized curriculum and measures of
policed accountability that can prevent many educators from engaging in this kind of cross-
textual work. The possibilities that a contrapuntal pedagogy can have for teachers to develop
a curriculum that presents a series of counternarratives that augment, rather than replace, the
prescribed course of study offers a possible starting place for working simultaneously within
and against this system. While the goal of transformative multicultural education should
arguably be to move completely beyond these oppressive forms, educators can take a nod
from the work of an individual like Baca who has shown that working to alter current
realities in small but positive ways can lead to larger systemic gains. In my classroom,
establishing the groundwork for this approach to teaching was supported by my compiling
of an in-class lending library of more than 700 titles from writers across the globe with the
goal of providing opportunities for students to explore and share these works and to write in
response to them. My experience has been that several students took great advantage of this
resource, and the teacher who has since taken my place in that classroom has expressed to
me that students continue to utilize the classroom library in dynamic ways.

Another significant aspect of moving away from oppressive forms of pedagogy
involves recreating the teacherly self, reframing student and teacher identities and working
towards pedagogies of openness, critique, and possibility. This second, connected issue
related to multicultural education addresses what it means to do the kind of work in literacy
classrooms that fosters the development of the antideterministic self, an approach to
teaching and research explored by Vasudevan and Campano (2009) through their research
on adolescent risk, which sits well in juxtaposition with Singh and Greenlaw’s contrapuntal
pedagogy. Vasudevan and Campano observe the transformative possibilities inherent to
cultivating a stance grounded in “a belief that ‘another world is possible’ and that literacy
practices are part of the human labor to create that new world” (Vasudevan and Campano, 2009, p. 336). Their discussion of the creation of The Writers House, a school founded on the principle that students possess the creative genius to “fashion identities and theorize the world in an ongoing process of becoming” (2009, p. 337), offers one way into curricular development that is transformative for students and teachers alike. Engaging in this kind of professional work requires that educators adopt a more capacious sense of their own and their students’ identities as practitioners and take serious stock of what it means to develop ongoing understandings about their own practice. As indicated by Campano in his description of the literacy practices and inquiry processes that supported the work of the House, engaging in this kind of work demands a great deal of creativity and investment and the provision of multiple opportunities for students’ intellectual development. Some of the ways in which this pedagogical approach was made manifest in the work of the House included

- implementing more culturally engaged literature; weaving the arts, such as drama, into the literacy curriculum;…[and] inviting the students to conduct inquiry into issues that have immediate relevance to their own lives, such as economic abandonment and inequality; working with area writers and poets to introduce the school to local literary traditions; and mentoring the students to create their own nonfiction and informational texts derived from original research. (2009, p. 337)

Vasudevan and Campano emphasize the need to develop curricula that are reflexive and that respond to the cultural backgrounds and personal histories of the individual students enrolled in an academic program. They argue for the creation of “alternative learning spaces” (2009, p. 341) where teachers and students can engage in work free of the limitations of traditional forms of education and remediation, which often fail to attend to the creative and intellectual capacities of children and adolescents. They discuss, for instance, New York’s alternative to incarceration program (ATIP) where one student engaged in a
process of positive re-labeling that enabled him to conceive for himself the identity of writer, rather than failure. Their work is guided by the notion that transformative pedagogies are those that foster hope, where positive identity formation can lead to large-scale social transformation.

Memo writing and reflexivity

The work of Hindman (2001) suggests that processes of embodied writing can assist in the development of social justice goals for literacy education by supporting critical pedagogical reflexivity. She argues that a shift in the discourses of the classroom are needed to enact change, and she focuses specifically on the ways in which writing the personal back into academic discursive practices has the potential to challenge the “authoritarian inscriptions of self, knowledge, and power” (2001, p. 89) maintained by the conventional wisdom of academic literacy practices. In her discussion of the transformative power that writing, or “embodied rhetoric” (2001 p. 92), had for her during her own struggles with alcoholism and of the identity work that accompanied her ongoing attempts to compose a better life for herself, Hindman develops a theory of writing that forefronts its transformative possibilities. For educators, using personal modes of writing to rejuvenate practice and to identify new pedagogical paths can work to transform practice because those compositional processes involve the “authorization of material conditions” (2001, p. 101) that impact their individual lives and can assist in revealing ideologies and frameworks that bear the potential of being restrictive and/or positive in nature.

Engaging in this mode of writing necessitates high levels of self-reflexivity. Reaching that condition of criticality requires that teacher researchers honestly appraise the often-difficult realities unmasked through this compositional process and “surrender [their]
analytical need to be right and/or absolute in [their] understanding of how language (and life) works” (Hindman, 2001, p. 101). Hindman finds that the discipline and responsibility required of this process aids the transformative work of social justice education because engaging in close analysis of personal writing reveals novel approaches towards intervening in the oppressive systems to which all of us conform and calls attention to the “gestures” and “motives” that govern the approaches we take (2001, p. 102). Even more significant to the immediate lives of literacy educators is Hindman’s acknowledgement of the ways in which this mode of writing has helped to her to gain perspective on the sources operating behind restrictive power structures. Unpacking the levels of hegemonic domination that affect the work of education helps to make more apparent the ways in which teachers are not alone in their work and points to the possibilities for forming alliances that can help to transform professional practice in positive ways. As she notes, “The discursive tools of recovery writing have been crucial to recognizing myself personally and professionally as part of a larger social network, as well as (or sometimes rather than) an individual target of an individual enemy” (2001, p. 106). The work of Hindman and of Vasudevan and Campano indicates the possibilities for re-conceptualizing the literacy classroom as a site where reading beyond prescribed textual histories and conceptions of the self can foster teacher and student identity work grounded in equity and possibility.

Processes of Sensemaking

The theoretical traditions of critical hermeneutics, inquiry as stance, and critical feminisms have contributed greatly to processes of sensemaking and interpretation in the field of literacy education and research, especially with respect to student and teacher
identity. Embedded within each are concerns for a) the ways in which participant, student, teacher, and researcher identities influence and are influenced by a multitude of contextually contingent factors—factors relevant to the ways in which these actors are positioned by and position themselves in relationship to society, culture, and history; b) the power of the individual to impact in significant ways the larger worlds of school and society through dialogue and the production of texts; and c) the inability of any single description or claim to truth to be able to fully capture individual identity or reality. In this section, discuss how these perspectives on sensemaking build upon one another and indicate methodological approaches for my work as a teacher-researcher who seeks to better understand what it means to enact critical literacy pedagogy in a high school ELA classroom. I apply a sociocultural lens to my discussion of these traditions, one which understands “literacy to be socially constructed and mediated by the social and cultural contexts in which meaning making occurs” (Vasudevan and Campano, 2009, p. 313), and I take an approach to sensemaking that forefronts the provisional nature of truth and that values an ongoing, recursive, and dialectical process of analysis that places individuals as “always in the middle of things” (Weick, 1995, p. 43).

Critical hermeneutics and inquiry as stance

One contribution that critical theory offers to a discussion of interpretation and sensemaking centers on an ongoing discussion of the value of and between philosophical and critical hermeneutics in research epistemology and methodology (see Gadamer, 1990; Schwandt, 2000; Ricoeur, 1990; Kincheloe and McLaren, 2003). The distinction most often drawn between these two strands hinges on the question of whether the nature of a particular interpretation of data hinges on an analysis of the past (philosophical) or looks
toward enacting future change (critical) (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). In light of the current movement in qualitative research towards forms of inquiry that focus on action and change as the intended outcome (e.g. action research, teacher research, and practitioner inquiry), it makes sense that current research methodologies in the field of literacy (like those supporting this study) embody some of the principles of critical hermeneutics. Simon and Campano (2015) find that practitioner research methodologies, particularly those conducted in the field of literacy studies, draw inherently from hermeneutics and argue for a reclaiming of that tradition in literacy research because of the interpretive value it lends to investigations grounded in concepts of hybridity, cosmopolitanism, superdiversity, emergent bilingualism, and coloniality that “imagine literacy teaching and learning beyond assimilationist models, and value the practices, histories, languages, and knowledges of our student populations” (p. 480). Simon and Campano also discuss several areas of research, including whole language, reader response pedagogy, and critical literacy, whose theoretical and conceptual underpinnings either have roots in hermeneutic processes of sensemaking or engage methodological and epistemological frameworks and process that are essentially hermeneutic in nature. While critical literacy and reader response are two areas within the field with which I engage closely through my analysis and interpretation for this study, across all of these, Simon and Campano identify several aspects of the hermeneutics that resonate with the approaches to sensemaking that I take. These include: valuing dissonance as a catalyst for progressive change, looking to varieties of interpretation as a counter to positivist ideologies, maintaining the situatedness of knowledge generation, countering superficialities inherent to a ‘best practice’ approach to teaching, honoring the deeply human quality of interpretation as ongoing and dynamic, and supporting the taking of a stance of inquiry.
As discussed above, *inquiry as stance* (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009) has gained support by a number of researchers in the field as a framework for conceptualizing the study of literacy and learning that positions human sensemaking as a process of continual critical negotiation over the problematic phenomena of lived experience. It is a stance that a practitioner carries across a professional lifespan and one that cannot be simply adopted or put away for the purposes of an isolated research project. I reference it again in the context of a discussion of methodology, because central to the kind of knowledge generation embodied in its epistemological and methodological approach is the concept of the hermeneutic cycle, a dialectical process of meaning making that involves “the back-and-forth of studying parts in relation to the whole and the whole in relation to parts” with no identification of a final goal that can sought “as the activity of the circle proceeds with no need for closure” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2003, p. 445). If researchers in the field of literacy education hope to develop nuanced understandings of how students learn, of how they communicate this learning via writing and speech, and of the way their observations then relate to the material and ideological conditions influencing these processes, it is essential that they come to this work with the understanding that these observations will always be partial and more often than not will lead to more questions rather than answers. Teacher researchers must be willing to “assume that the meaning of human experience can never be fully disclosed—neither to the researcher nor even to the human who experienced it...[that] language is always slippery, with its meanings ever ‘in process,’” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2003, p. 449). Smaller inquiries conducted as part of my graduate work in literacy education, which focused on issues including the failure of standardization to effectively remediate literacy in schools and the inability for *a priori* statements of truth regarding the
nature of literacy learning have to affect substantive change in existing educational systems (see McGroarty, 1996; Coles, 2003; Gutierrez et al, 2009) have been aided by applying a critical hermeneutic lens and maintaining a stance of inquiry. Doing so has helped me to unmask problems fundamental to my teaching (and potentially to education, at large) and has suggested ways in which to innovate and enact change in response to these. The same has been true with regard to bringing these theoretical strands to this study.

Critical feminisms

The work of critical feminist scholars forefronts the importance of accounting for student and teacher selves and the role that identity plays in knowledge generation in classrooms, especially with regard to a resistance to generalizability in qualitative research. One way into this conversation is to conceptualize literacy classrooms as having the potential to take on the quality of contact zones “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991, p. 4). This culturally-based framing of the space of the classroom is further complicated when we consider that simply acknowledging the many identities, experiences, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds represented within a single classroom cannot serve to adequately honor the individual complexities of its participants. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) note, the classroom can become fertile ground for explorations of “the many relationships—classroom, school, and community—that bear on how [participants] make sense of teaching and learning” (p. 280), and critical feminist theorists build upon this relational quality of the classroom by arguing that any claims to commonality or solidarity “can be identified only in relation to specific projects and specific contexts” (Gore, 1993, p. 47). The risk of grouping individuals together by any criteria—be it race, gender, ethnicity, culture, age, appraised
ability etc.—and thus essentializing the identities of these individuals, presents a constant challenge to teachers and researchers who seek to make sense of the ways in which pedagogical approaches have the potential to support or impede critical forms of education.

Thus, developing and sustaining a critical feminist consciousness bears several implications for action-oriented teacher research. For this study, approaching data collection and analysis from a critical feminist stance has required consideration for the ways in which my identity construct(s) inform curriculum development, classroom practices, and research methodology. Working from such a framework makes apparent the deeply problematic aspects of deliberations over text selection, thematic ordering of instruction, lines of inquiry and research paradigms, the overarching organizational structures that guide the trajectory of the class, and approaches to class discussion and dialogue. And making sense of one’s position(s) of privilege and/or oppression serves to further complicate this process.

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992) captures eloquently what this has involved for her as an educator when she writes:

The terms in which I can and will assert and unsettle “difference” and unlearn my positions of privilege in future classroom practices are wholly dependent on the Others/others whose presence—with their concrete experiences of privileges and oppressions, and subjugated or oppressive knowledges—I am responding to and acting with in any given classroom. My moving about between the positions of privileged speaking subject and Inappropriate/d Other cannot be predicted, prescribed, or understood beforehand by any theoretical framework or methodological practice. It is in this sense that a practice grounded in the unknowable is profoundly contextual (historical) and interdependent (social). This reformulation of pedagogy and knowledge removes the critical pedagogue from two key discursive positions s/he has constructed for her/himself in the literature—namely, origin of what can be known and origin of what should be done. (p. 115, emphasis added)

Just as a critical hermeneutic theory of interpretation requires that the teacher-researcher abandon the notion that there can exist any single approach to practice that is knowable outside of the contextualized moment of action, Ellsworth’s voicing of a critical feminist
pedagogy of “the unknowable” suggests that researchers must come to terms with the fact that any claims to knowledge about the various “selves” that occupy the space of the classroom are equally as problematic and require sustained inquiry and continued reflexivity.

Dennis Sumara (1998) indicates how the above processes of sensemaking can come together in the context of the literacy classroom by blending the hermeneutic tradition of interpretation with reader-response theory as a way to locate the intricacies of understanding identity both as it is represented through a text and as it emerges in the space of the classroom in response to the reading of texts. Building on a poststructuralist notion of identity as “the remembered, the lived, and the projected relations of our daily experience” (p. 205) and based on his own work in the language and literature classroom, he argues that the identities of readers are continually reorganized as a function of the act of reading. Sumara then extends the reader-response concept of the “the poem” as an event marking the confluence of reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1964) by suggesting that this moment is neither ephemeral nor unreadable by another, but instead stands as an identity artifact or location “for the interpretation of past, present, and projected identities” (Sumara, 1998, p. 206).

Sumara’s theorizing of the connection between identity and text supports the hermeneutic tradition in that the identities that he claims are all the time being re/deconstructed through reading and speaking in a particular classroom community challenge the interpreter to continually re-envision what can be known through inquiry processes and to employ ad hoc a shifting set of methodological approaches in order to chronicle this fluctuation. From a critical feminist perspective, this image of a fluctuating identity whose characterization is ultra-contingent upon the changing work of the classroom
and beyond serves to reaffirm the need for educators to engage in ongoing processes of reevaluation of the self both in terms of their own their students’ identities.

**Communities of Practice**

Understanding the methodological choices that have governed my work as a high school literacy teacher involves an acknowledgment of the ways in which various communities of practice inform and are informed by this research. Making sense of the role that community plays in terms of methodology clarifies the ways in which this daily work is anything but an individual endeavor and reaffirms the notion that the findings of this study can only be understood through a multi-layered rendering of practice that accounts for larger, organizational aspects of secondary education.

Liberman and Miller (2008) provide a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which learning communities or communities of practice (CoPs) can support professional learning from a “research and development perspective” (p. 8). Their work presents a detailed study of several learning communities hosted in a wide range of contexts and bounded by a variety of organizational structures and communicative forms. Most salient to my own study is their discussion of the concept of *capacity* and their observation that essential to the process of innovation and forward progress for these CoPs has been teachers’ capacities to “do knowledge work and engage with theory and research as well as with practice.” In doing so, “They become skilled at making connections among their profession/their teaching practices, and the learning of their students” (2008, p. 18). Functioning in ways similar to critical hermeneutics, maintaining these dialogic processes with other practitioners is essential to continued sensemaking and knowledge building. Active disruption and
affirmation in the form of honest exchanges about the realities of teachers’ work can help to unsettle accepted practices and procedures and to improve and sustain the work of the group.

Building on this approach, Ball and Cohen (1999) focus on the concept of disequilibrium and argue that in the most productive learning situations “critique would be valued and…teachers would be expected to argue with others and with themselves and to explore arguments among plausible explanations or approaches” (p. 14). The maintenance of this state of continued and intentional disruption requires that the field of knowledge about what it means to teach would remain a contested space and new ideas would continually challenge comfortable assumptions about the “right” way to proceed. Ball and Cohen observe that politeness has become the dominant mode of dialogue in leadership groups, and they argue that teachers must “learn to combine intellectual aggressiveness and a willingness to take risks with a humility about the incompleteness and uncertainty of their own ideas” (1999, p. 14).

One aspect of the profession that may be particularly difficult for literacy educators to discuss in unsettling ways within the space of the professional learning community is the issue of curriculum design and implementation. My own experience has shown that although many teachers who are required to follow a standardized curriculum of study are willing to describe candidly the difficulties they have encountered in their individual classrooms when trying to adhere to a one-size-fits-all approach, many may feel a sense of powerlessness when it comes to local curriculum design and how to best meet the needs of the individual students they teach as well as the demands of the district. Research on communities of practice foregrounds the ways in which intentional and casual involvement in these groups can
foster formal and informal interactions among educators that have a lasting impact both on
the teaching that occurs in ELA classrooms and, more significantly, on the ideologies
informing the pedagogies that drive practice. For this reason, it is vital that the methodology
supporting this study honors opportunities for sensemaking embedded in those
communities of practice that operate within and in connection to the research site.

**Methods**

**Setting**

Because I discussed overall demographic information for the school where I teach as
well as its geographic location in Chapter 1 (see “Location”), I will use this space to focus on
the schedule of teaching, preparation, and meeting times that comprised my daily roster (see
Table 1) and on the physical environment of my classroom.

Although the magnet school that became my site of practice of this study was
relatively small in terms of the overall size of the school’s population, I taught all sections of
eleventh and twelfth grade English. This included two sections per grade level with an
enrollment of anywhere between 20 to 33 students in each. There were (and still are) only
two teachers assigned to teach English for the entire high school population. Students across
the high school are tracked according to academic levels in mathematics—some students
enter ninth grade having already taken Algebra 1, while others have not. This distinction
governs the division of students into two cohorts, or “sections”, each of which moves as a
single unit to attend all of core academic classes; hence the numeric designation between English sections in Table 1. 4

Table 1: Daily Teaching Schedule

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>12-1 English</td>
<td>11-2 English</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>CSAP</td>
<td>12-2 English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>11-2 English</td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>11-1 English</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>12-1 English</td>
<td>AMA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>11-2 English</td>
<td>12-2 English</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>11-1 English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>12-2 English</td>
<td>11-1 English</td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>11-2 English</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>12-1 English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>11-1 English</td>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>12-1 English</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>12-2 English</td>
<td>11-1 English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is evident in my schedule, I had ample time during the day dedicated to preparation, and this was usually spent either working in my classroom or interacting with other faculty members in and around their classrooms or in a variety of common spaces in the school. Three types of meetings were scheduled on a weekly basis. Comprehensive

4 In previous papers completed for doctoral coursework, I examined the cultural and academic implications of this system of tracking, and I anticipated that it would be a key aspect of the setting for this study.
Student Assistance Process (CSAP) meetings were dedicating to handling casework for
students with various types of individualized educational plans (IEP) and to discuss other
academic and/or behavioral issues regarding students who had been referred by members of
the faculty, staff, and administration. This was often a time when parent meetings were
scheduled to discuss individual student progress. Academic Music Academy (AMA)
meetings were organized according to grade-group and attended by teachers from the four
major disciplines (Math, General Science, Social Science, and English) to discuss curricular
planning, disciplinary issues, and any other concerns. During AMA periods, I met with
colleagues who taught in the eleventh and twelfth grades. English department meetings took
place during first period on Monday mornings and were attended by my ninth and tenth
grade counterpart and me. In those, we discussed various issues related to pedagogy and
curricular development and often used
that time to read and grade, pausing to
discuss salient issues. In a sense, this
became an active reading, grading,
research, and curricular development
period for the two of us.

I chose to alter the physical setting of
my classroom from the traditional
malleable arrangement of individual
desks to a stable conference room configuration of long tables with accompanying chairs
(see Figure 1). My reason for doing so was grounded in the notion that establishing a more
collegiate atmosphere in the classroom might have significant payoffs in terms of student

![Figure 1: Classroom Configuration](image)
engagement and professionalism. Students were not assigned seats and were free to shift their positions in the room on a day-to-day basis, although most students did seem to find specific seat or area of the room that they occupied for at least one academic year. Often, students were required to move around the room to complete small-group work and project-based assignments, and the stable physical nature of the room did not appear to severely limit them in this regard. Because the school is equipped with several larger physical spaces including a theater, cafeteria, mezzanine, and outdoor courtyard, if a particular activity or unit of study required it, larger areas were available for use in these circumstances with little restriction.

Additionally, my classroom was outfitted with a Promethean Smartboard that I used on a daily basis to supplement my teaching. This and a large whiteboard were the two major interactive spaces for writing available in the physical classroom. (The traditional blackboards present in the classroom are used mostly to post documents and announcements.) Against one wall of the classroom sat a series of bookshelves that housed the classroom library, a collection of several hundred texts spanning a variety of genres that came both from my own private collection and from the salvaged remains of our defunct school library. As I mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, this was the newest edition to the physical space of the room and an attempt made by me to diversify the literary holdings of the space.
Data Gathering and Analysis

Phasing of teaching and research

In the following sections I discuss the phasing of my research and provide some substantive description of elements of the data set for this study, which includes a variety of materials drawn from my work in the ELA classroom. To effectively triangulate findings, I work to develop a balanced rendering of teaching and research artifacts across the narrative of my write-up. Table 2 outlines the phasing for this teacher research study. It captures how and when data was gathered and the levels of interpretation that it underwent at various points over the course of research and write-up. Immediately following this timeline is a series of brief discussions of each of the forms of data mentioned in it along with details regarding the ways in which these have contributed to processes of sensemaking in this study.

The first column of Table 2 provides dates for the phasing of this study, which covered a full academic year of pilot work and an academic year of research. Columns two and three of the table indicate the two major categories that contribute to the data set for this study: practice-based data drawn from professional documents, plans, and ancillary teaching materials and discourse-related data that includes writing and talk generated by and in conjunction with students.

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55 While a full year’s data was gathered for this study, the final scope of this dissertation focuses on one semester’s worth (the first half year) of teaching.
The paradigm for qualitative research from which this practitioner inquiry draws follows loosely from the tradition of narrative inquiry and capitalizes on the affordances that narrative offers in terms of its flexibility and attention to ongoing cycles of analysis and interpretation (reflexivity). This narrative approach to data gathering and analysis is reflected in Table 2, which captures how this tripartite approach can be traced across the various phases of research and write-up.

Table 2: Timeline for Data Collection and Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pilot Phase</th>
<th>Practice-Based Data Gathering</th>
<th>Student Feedback &amp; Experiential Data</th>
<th>Writing, Reflection, Coding, &amp; Synthesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Sept. 2011 – August 2012 | • Compile digital records of lesson plans  
• Assemble course documents (handouts, readings, Smartboard presentations, etc.) that will support ongoing teaching  
• Develop planning notes on the thematic ordering of course content that will guide the study | • Compile feedback instruments related to students’ experiences in the classroom  
• Hold informal conversations with instructors, staff, students, and committee members about goals for teaching and research | • Complete dissertation proposal (March, 2012)  
• Complete necessary work for IRB (May, 2012) and SDP clearances (June – August, 2012) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Quarters 1-3 of academic year</th>
<th>Practice-Based Data Gathering</th>
<th>Student Feedback &amp; Experiential Data</th>
<th>Writing, Reflection, Coding, &amp; Synthesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Sept. 2012 – April 2013 | • Compile digital records of all lesson plans  
• Archive all course documents (handouts, readings, Smartboard presentations, etc.)  
• Archive organizational | • Distribute feedback instruments to all students at the completion of units to guide teaching, research, and data analysis (minimum of one per quarter) | • Ongoing document analysis of student writing samples (including quarterly narrative compositions) and archive all written feedback given to students |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 2: Quarter 4 of academic year and summer of 2013</th>
<th>Phase 3: Early Data Analysis &amp; Write-up</th>
<th>Phase 4: Final Data Analysis &amp; Write-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compile audio and other digital media</td>
<td>Compile audio and other digital media</td>
<td>Ongoing coding and write-up; narrowing of research focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compile digital records of all lesson plans</td>
<td>Distribute feedback instruments to all students at the completion of units to guide teaching, research, and data analysis (minimum of one per quarter)</td>
<td>Complete dissertation and defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archive all course documents (handouts, readings, Smartboard presentations, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archive organizational documents related to planning, meetings, and professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compile audio and other digital media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compile audio and other digital media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distribute feedback instruments to all students at the completion of units to guide teaching, research, and data analysis (minimum of one per quarter)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compile digital records of all lesson plans</td>
<td>Begin summative analysis of student writing samples, lesson plans, and other archival data drawn from the first three quarters of the year</td>
<td>Ongoing document analysis of student writing samples, lesson plans, and other archival data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continue ongoing document analysis of student writing samples and archive all written feedback given to students</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compose weekly researcher memos (1-3 pages each)</td>
<td>Weekly researcher memos</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing document analysis of student writing samples, lesson plans, and other archival data</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Weekly researcher memos</td>
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<td>Ongoing coding and write-up</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Complete dissertation and defense</td>
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</table>
Lesson plans, professional documents, and archival data

In terms of the daily organization of work in my classes, syllabi distributed to students at the beginning of the fall semester as well as lesson plans submitted to the school’s administrative team indicate with greater details the range of practices that occupy the time and space of students’ coursework (see Appendices B and C for samples of these). These documents are fundamental in conveying a rich description of the teaching and learning that occurs in my classroom. In addition to formal writing assignments that students submitted to me, I often posted classwork directives, notes, reminders, and supplemental documents on the class’s digital Edmodo forum (see the following section for further discussion of this utility) to support student learning. I anticipated that these, along with other handouts, reproducible documents, district documents, emails, and digital Smartboard presentations might become part of the data set for this project, and indeed, a handful of these artifacts have.

Student writing

As forms of assessment, students in both sections submitted several written pieces over the course of the year—what I termed ‘commentaries’ (a name borrowed from my work as a teacher in the International Baccalaureate diploma program at my previous school)—in response to the readings we covered. Generally, these were turned in on a weekly basis and the questions and prompts that guided them took the form of posts on assignment threads that I initiated. As stated on the Edmodo company website (http://about.edmodo.com/), their aim was to provide “a safe and easy way for [students] to connect and collaborate, share content, and access homework, grades and school notices…[and] to help educators harness the power of social media to customize the
classroom for each and every learner.” Over the four years leading up to this study, I engaged in a trial and error process of implementing a variety of different digital networks for publication, sharing, and assessment of student writing into my teaching and found Edmodo to be the most user-friendly, secure, and robust of these in terms of its interface and the amenities it provides to teachers, students, and parents.

Unlike the prompts and questions found in the district textbook, the questions I posed rarely asked students to perform literary analyses of readings that emphasize rote identification of rhetorical/stylistic elements. Although our in-class discussions of readings consistently raised questions about these fundamental literary and rhetorical elements, my approach to textual analysis emphasized the organic ways in which these have functioned compositionally in oral and written traditions. My teaching fore fronted how we incorporate elements like tone, irony, figurative devices, etc. as devices that enable us as readers, writers, speakers, and listeners to think about, talk about, understand, and craft linguistic expression.

Students enrolled in my classes were required to write in a variety of modes and genres across a spectrum of prose and poetic forms. I attempted to intersperse prompts that supported the standard forms of analysis that might appear on an AP literature exam or other standardized testing instruments with those that invited students to draw on their abilities as poets, storytellers, and artists equipped with skills in literacy across a variety of media. A primary goal of my teaching has been to bring the multifarious talents of my students to bear on the work of the literacy classroom, and I argue that the fruits of taking this stance are communicated with fidelity through the student writing that appears in this study.
Almost all graded writing submitted for my classes was published digitally through Edmodo forums. Not only did this allow me to keep archives of the work that my students submitted, it also provided me with the ability to effectively communicate in real time with them regarding their writing through written exchanges in a message board format. Additionally, as with the physical configuration of tables in my classroom, requiring that juniors and seniors in high school gain proficiency in submitting their work in typed form via the use of an online digital platform was part of my attempt to instill in them the kinds of professional and scholarly practices that would serve them as they moved beyond the secondary education classroom.

**Classroom conversations**

Student talk in the form of a series of 18 recorded classroom conversations comprised the primary source of the data for this study. Portable digital audio recorders were used to capture classroom conversations held on a variety of topics across the year, and the complete set of these audio recordings was transcribed in full as part of my cycles of analysis and memo writing. The final narrowing of scope of this study meant that I incorporated only a fraction of these conversations into my final write-up. The purpose of including these as part of my research design was to gain detailed understanding of the multi-voiced student discourse that occurs almost daily in the ELA classroom.

**Course feedback instruments**

One way of building an understanding of the experiences of my students was to develop periodic feedback instruments that invited students to respond in written form to the ongoing work of the class. The questions and prompts that comprise these centered on
tracking students’ individual experiences in the work we were engaged in as part of the class along with their stated needs and proclivities as literacy learners. Given the research questions that guide my study, the problems of practice that I sought to address, and the pedagogical orientation that I brought to my research and teaching, this aspect of data collection was significant to understanding the ways in which my students’ explorations into issues of race, identity, class, and gender via the literature they read and the written work that they create might intersect and influence their lives, life paths, and ongoing research, academic, and professional interests. The protocols that I constructed for these instruments asked students to consider the interconnected qualities between past and present learning in the ELA classroom and their identities as students and citizens. While specific questions and prompts were contingent upon a particular unit and its accompanying texts, some broader questions included: How has reading this text influenced the ways in which you understand your own racial/gender/ethnic identity? What questions about identity and society has the work you’ve completed so far raised for you? Has this work gotten you interested in any areas of personal concern? What was most valuable to you about the reading and writing you’ve completed for this unit? What would you change? What readings did you find most/least interesting/valuable? What was most challenging about this work? While I have not incorporated responses provided by students to these instruments as part of my analysis of spoken and written discourse for this study, they were of great use to me in my practice in the classroom.
Coda: Reading and Talking about Texts

The following review touches briefly on empirical research on critical pedagogies in high school literacy education and focuses on the ways in which the concepts of critical literacy and critical pedagogy get taken up in the context of the English language arts (ELA) education. A fuller and more nuanced review of literature is embedded within the critical narrative that comprises the data chapters of this study. In those, I discuss research studies and critical essays that address the themes and lines of inquiry that have emerged in response to the teaching and learning at the heart of this research. However, to gain some foothold on the wealth of information on this topic and as a prelude to the narrative that follows, this section focuses on two key areas essential to the day-to-day work of ELA classrooms: reading and talking about texts. For each of the following subsections, I indicate a handful of studies indicative of the kinds of teaching that this dissertation may have the potential to support, extend, and challenge.

In his review of classroom practices that support critical literacy instruction, Behrman (2006) provides a useful thematic organization for covering some of the major pedagogical approaches that educators have taken toward teaching practice grounded in the tenets of critical literacy. Three of the six categories of research that he examines in his review concern the use of texts and approaches to hosting discussion about them in ELA classrooms as the starting points for the development of critical perspectives in adolescent learners. These include a) reading supplementary texts in order to encourage student inquiries into larger social issues that may be overlooked in canonical texts, b) reading multiple texts to develop an understanding that “authorship is a situated activity” (p. 493) that draws on the cultural, historical, social, economic, political, and ethnic fabric of the time...
and location when a text is created, and c) reading from a resistant perspective as a means of highlighting the importance that stance and identity construction (both the author’s and the reader’s) play in the acts of interpretation and sensemaking.

**Reading supplementary texts**

Bean and Moni’s (2003) research into critical literacy focuses on the importance of text selection to critical literacy pedagogies and on the possibilities that young adult literature holds for hosting conversations that honor the complexity of adolescent identity development and that foster critical discourse around works of literature. Their work offers a useful framework for understanding the role that ethnic identity plays in adolescents’ contemporary social interactions. They discuss ethnicity as a “mode of experience rather than characteristic that individuals or groups possess” (p. 624) and examine how specific approaches to structuring in-class discussions can be tailored to respond to the instability, fluidity, hybridity, and self-authorship essential to postmodern ethnic identity. These include developing structural prompts, making apparent subject and reader positioning, addressing the silencing of voices and perspectives in texts, and inviting students to create alternative constructions of identity through their work in the ELA classroom. They find that when enacted alongside a text drawn from the canon of YA literature, these approaches serve to support critical dialogue in ELA classrooms about the issues that are of greatest concern and relevance to adolescents.

**Reading multiple texts**

Creating opportunities for students to read multiple texts around a unified theme or line of inquiry has also become a hallmark of number of studies in the field of critical literacy
and critical pedagogy and has shown promise for investing students in larger social justice concerns. Clarke’s (2006) research into students’ literature circle explorations of voice in literary fiction and popular culture indicates the variety of genres and textual formats that educators can bring to bear in this kind of work and the value that these have for developing students’ critical thinking skills while enacting a pedagogy that promotes tolerance and a respect for diversity. As a literacy consultant who assisted in the planning and delivery of content in a sixth-grade classroom, Clarke developed a unit on voice with the hope “that students would not only become more conscious of how their voices are indicators of their identities but also recognize and value others’ voices and listen to those that are often marginalized or silenced” (p. 56). Working from a theoretical framework that drew on the traditions of Freire and Macedo’s writings on democratic and emancipatory goals for education and on the development of critical consciousness in students, she incorporated selections from narrative fiction, historical fiction, YA literature, pop culture writings and films, and poetic works to develop a pastiche of texts portraying a rich assortment of voices. Students’ discussions in literature circle groups were driven by prompts intended to guide them through close readings of these texts and analysis of their content. These included questions about issues of power, gender, class, ethnicity, racial identity, authorial intent, and audience all unified under the interpretive lens of voice. Clarke is careful to describe this kind of work as necessarily incomplete and instead focuses on its ability to lay the foundations for students’ ongoing cycles of inquiry and investigation into social justice issues through their readings of texts. In doing so, she aligns it epistemologically with the provisional qualities of critical pedagogical traditions.
Reading from resistant perspectives

Hines’ (1997) research forefronts the possibilities that critical pedagogies hold for developing interpretive classroom communities that invite students to read from multiple perspectives. She provides a series of brief vignettes depicting teachers in secondary and post-secondary literacy education who have approached teaching texts and hosting discussions about texts from four pedagogical orientations/critical literary traditions that are at times divergent and complementary (new criticism, reader-response, social justice, cultural criticism). Hines’ study indicates the range and diversity of approaches towards literacy teaching that value the overarching principles of what she terms reader-centered cultural criticism, an inquiry-based pedagogical framework that “invites discussion of personal, social, cultural, and textual matters in communities where the teacher makes interpretive priorities and practices explicit through his or her discourse” (p. 118). Like the research studies reviewed by Behrman (2006), the practices captured in Hines’ research provide some examples of the ways in which close analysis of the lexical elements of a text can offer access to increasingly deep levels of sensemaking when coupled with dialogue around gender, race, ethnicity, class, and a variety of other social issues.

Finally, a teacher research project like Diaz-Gemmati’s (1999) study, which captures explorations into racism and prejudice hosted in conjunction with eighth graders’ readings of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, further supports the affordances of reading from resistant perspectives. This research is particularly salient for those who intend to conduct practitioner inquiries into critical forms of pedagogy because it highlights both the benefits and the risks of engaging in this kind of work. The hard questions that her students raise about the rationale behind her teaching practices and the subsequent
unsettling of her own identity constructs that she identifies having occurred at multiple points during her research speak to the challenges that this approach to literacy education poses for everyone involved. However, as she notes, the payoffs far outweigh the risks. Although the classroom necessarily takes on the characteristics of an unstable, candid space where tensions and eruptions become the mainstay of discussion, literature provides a common ground or medium for addressing these social justice issues and negotiating these dissonances.
CHAPTER 3 – STRUCTURING THE INQUIRY: TEXTS, READERS, AND CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

Discourse as Process: Negotiating the Roles of Texts in Analysis

The guiding framework that supports the analyses I present in Parts II and III of this dissertation considers the roles that authored texts occupy in the language arts classroom as literary artifacts, the roles that the teacher and students hold as discussants of those texts, and the role that written and spoken discourse, as a unit of analysis, occupies as the rendering of a creative process that can provide insight into teaching and learning. This model draws theoretical footing from cognitive pragmatic approaches in critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Chafe, 1987; Wilson, 1998; de Saussure, 2007) and positions readings and readers as relational entities in the literacy classroom, each of which contributes to an ongoing process—or discourse—of sense making. My readings and interpretations of writing and talk aim to show how performing critical metanalyses of discourse can reveal the workings of the relational processes through which teaching practices, theories of practice, curricula, texts, and those actors who participate in the literacy classroom interact and can thus give way to larger descriptions and understandings of what it means to enact a critical literacy pedagogy.

The orientation that I take towards this CDA framework borrows both from reader response theories that frame the transactions between reader and text as a “triadic relationship” between sign, object, and interpretant (Rosenblatt, 1986) and from poststructuralist theories like those of Derrida that conceptualize a text as a “contested terrain in the sense that what it appears to ‘say’ on the surface cannot be understood without reference to the concealments and contextualizations of meaning going on simultaneously to

Taken together, these three theoretical strands frame the following process for conceptualizing the roles of text, reader, and discourse: The text provides the original context (the field/landscape/locus) for dialogue through which participants in the literacy classroom pose competing arguments and interpretations (discourses). The negotiation of these ideas/questions/connections shape a new text-in-process, the critical discourse, which contributes fresh layers of meaning to the original text. The ongoing combinations of these texts—the source text and the discursive “poems” that interpretive actors create (Rosenblatt, 1986)—constitute a new, hybrid discourse that, in turn, engenders fresh interpretations and further critical discourse. As de Saussure writes, “utterances are never processed without the preceding utterances forming a context, that is, a set of elements which, together with the current utterance, lead to the deduction of inferences, in turn entering further deductions when processing the next utterance. As such, the understanding of a discourse is nothing more than understanding the flow of utterances composing it till the end” (2011, p. 786). This dialectic process, marked by an ever-emergent discourse that develops through ongoing iterations and evolving meanings, progresses forward and continues onward for however long the dialogue is sustained.

Given this model for discourse as process, it is necessary to consider how literacy theorists have framed its two primary contributors: texts and discussants. In the context of the literacy classroom, the curricular texts themselves, as understood though transactional theories of reading and reader response and cognitive pragmatic approaches to CDA, can be conceptualized as pedagogical guideposts. They act as the foundational contextual components for discourse in that they embody a material set of ideas and rendered,
“secondary worlds” (Benton, 1992) through which teachers and students, as readers, construct new meanings through writing and speech. Framing texts as such, as markers in a metaphorical “road” or “path” down which teachers and students travel as they engage daily in teaching and learning, dovetails with Sumara’s (1996) concept of currere, the approach to curricular design based on the notion of laying a path while walking that I discussed in Chapter 2. This framing of texts forefronts the importance that their selection plays in the anticipated sequencing of the curriculum, in the topics and themes that have the potential to emerge, and in how each of these contribute to the overall goals and questions that guide the course. As I discuss the readings that I explored with students over the course of this study and analyze the discourse that emerged in response to them, I consider how sequencing and thematic interplay raise pedagogical questions and reveal understandings about how texts function as entities in the literacy classroom and the contributions they make in support of critical literacy.

Shifting focus slightly to the role that texts play in informing pedagogy (and critical pedagogical aims, in particular) research indicates the importance of considering their role as elements in a transaction between reader and text and to make the study of that relationship a focal point of analysis. Rosenblatt (1986) offers further assistance in defining the aspects of that transaction by drawing upon the pragmatic and aesthetic philosophies of semiotics. She writes,

The physical signs of a text (aural or visual) have acquired meaning, have become words, in a triadic relationship, involving, as C. S. Peirce phrased it, sign, object, and interpretant, or, as the psychologists phrase it, sign, object, and “organismic state.” The sense of a word is not simply its public, lexical meaning but “the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word.” For the individual, the verbal signs carry both public, socially accepted, decontextualized linkages between sign and object, and private, kinaesthetic, affective, cognitive colorings. (Rosenblatt, p. 123)
In my analyses, I consider Rosenblatt’s characterization of the aesthetic transaction as a useful heuristic for developing understandings of how the discourse of the literacy classroom can help to reveal some of the public and private qualities that she identifies as fundamental to the nature of this “organismic state”. I argue that systematic reflection on classroom discourse through this lens can provide teacher researchers with a methodology for developing nuanced understandings about the pedagogical decisions they make.

As is the case with all practitioners working in a discipline, teachers as developers of curriculum, facilitators of discussion, and participant discussants undergo continual change. The evolution of the practitioner draws influence from educational degree-granting programs and structured professional development opportunities as well as from the day-to-day influences that students, colleagues, and professional communities have on the stances, methodologies, and practices teachers bring to their work. This professional, pedagogical growth occurs across teachers’ careers under varied contexts (e.g. grade level, geographical location, school format) and is influenced by social, cultural, ideological, political, professional, and literary traditions and norms, all of which define the “identity kit” (Gee, 2001) that embodies their act of teaching. As Gee write about his own work as a linguist,

> Every act of speaking, writing and behaving a linguist does as a linguist is meaningful only against the background of the whole social institution of linguistics, and that institution is made up of concrete things like people, books and buildings; abstract things like bodies of knowledge, values, norms and beliefs; mixtures of concrete and abstract things like universities, journals and publishers; as well as a shared history and shared stories” (2001, p. 1).

But Gee’s notion of “speaking, writing, and behaving a linguist” has relevance not only for understanding the intersecting roles that the teacher occupies as developer of curriculum, facilitator of learning, and bearer of a pedagogical Discourse (note the capital “D” which
distinguishes it from “discourse”), it also serves to characterize the work of student participants in the spoken and written discourse of the classroom. The writing and speaking in which ELA teachers and their students engage as they participate in the literacy classroom shape the trajectory of the course by laying the ongoing groundwork for teaching and learning. This discourse is often initiated by the instructor through the selection of texts and the framing of questions and goals, but as the work of the classes progress, both teacher and students impact the path that process takes through their participation in an emergent dialogue (oral and written) around texts. As they do so, and through their influence upon the texts and talk that enter the space of the classroom, they function—because of the varied and shifting positions of power that they hold—as critical interpreters through which the variety of anticipated and unanticipated moments in the developing discourse are refracted. The moments themselves function like haps (Sumara, 1996), uncharted touchstones, that may come in the form of questions raised by students, ideas they put forth, critiques or connections they voice, or moments of difficulty that they encounter and that indicate the need for additional teaching around a literary concept. For literacy educators, if attended to, these “haps” can provide ways for making sense of what occurs in the classroom through a hermeneutic process that can help suggest curricular choices that are responsive to the concerns and interests of students.

To be effective as a pedagogical stance, the methodologies that drive instruction must reflect what this reflexive process should look like in terms of the daily work of the literacy classroom. Teaching and learning must be designed to allow for the same ongoing cycles of sensemaking around texts in ways that are systematic and aimed at using the classroom discourse to build new meanings and to suggest new trajectories for moving the
Critical reflection over the discourse that emerged through this study has raised questions about what other paths I might have explored with students across this year of teaching, the value and impact of those texts we did cover, the paths we did explore, and the conversations and writing that developed from those, and larger issues related to the goals of teaching and the powerful role that the teacher occupies as an actor in the literacy classroom.

Establishing a Thematic Focus

The overarching theme that guided the selection of readings and the teaching and learning that form the foundation for this study focused on how writers have communicated what it means and has meant to be an individual living and working in American society. The approach for how this would be covered, including the texts that would be read and the kinds of questions that would guide our exploration were disseminated to students and parents via a class syllabus distributed at the beginning of the school year and presented to families at a back to school evening meeting that is traditionally attended by almost all parents of our students (see Appendix B).

My intention in crafting a syllabus for the course (not a practice generally characteristic in courses at the high school level) was to provide students and families with a sense of the larger questions that I anticipated we would explore. These included investigations into why writers write, how writers communicate their stories and perspectives to particular audiences, how writers’ works convey personal and group-based cultural ideals and goals, and the role that we, as readers, play in exploring, interpreting, and assigning value to writing. Noticeably absent from the syllabus is a discussion of sets of core standards or
literary concepts to be covered; noticeably present is an intentional selection of texts from writers hailing from a cross-section of gender orientations, cultural and ethnic groups, and economic backgrounds. My experience as a teacher has taught me that it is less impactful to indicate in a syllabus that we would be addressing ‘theme’ or engaging in ‘character analysis’ or analyzing works to better understand a concept like irony (all of which is certainly true) than it is to discuss the kind of larger sensemaking based on a thematic framework that we would be engaged in as critical readers of literature. I also have found that taking this approach implicitly guards against the sense that when we read literature in an academic setting we are partaking in a rigidly structured, but facile examination of discrete literary devices and tropes. Such an approach to analysis presents the rhetorical elements of writing as “things” to be located and identified rather than as aspects of a complex and creative compositional approach that an author brings to the communication of ideas and experiences. My fronting of the larger questions we would explore alongside a preview of the texts we would read was also intended to present fairly explicitly to students and parents my orientation towards social justice and the kinds of critical questions I would raise through my participation in the work of the literacy classroom.

As stated in the opening chapter of this dissertation, the primary questions and concerns guiding this research were aimed at valuing the identities of students, challenging the inscribed borders of school and society, making a school a site for the contestation of knowledge about race, gender, culture, power, and privilege, considering the intersecting roles that cultural and educational contexts play in how we teach, and examining the problems and possibilities for critical literacy pedagogy. These concerns have informed the thematic organization of the data chapters that follow, and thus while the narrative of
the research is ordered chronologically, its structure also reflects an emergent organization of theme and story and is intended to provide a critical rendering of teaching framed by the exploration of a set of texts and the classroom discourse that developed in response to those. My approach aims to provide readers with the experience of being positioned within the classroom from what amounts to a kind of third-person limited point of view that affords them the ability to bear witness to the discussions that occurred, to read and digest texts that were produced, and to work through a process of sensemaking alongside me, the teacher researcher. I have attempted to the best of my abilities to fore front students’ voices as they emerge in the discourse of the literacy classroom and to balance those with my own emic voice as teacher and etic voice as researcher.

From Danticat to Johnson

During the 2011-2012 school year, I began to plan how I would structure my eleventh-grade American literature course for the coming year. Some of the anchor texts that I selected had been part of my teaching repertoire for at least two to three years, but I also selected a handful of shorter texts that I had not previously brought into my teaching, as well as two new long-form prose works, Edwidge Danticat’s Create Dangerously, which was the One Book, One Philadelphia title for the 2012-2013 academic year and Close Range, by Annie Proulx, whose work I had been reading privately. The One Book, One Philadelphia program hosted by the Free Library of Philadelphia provides teachers working at partner schools with a free classroom set of one title selected annually by the program along with companion texts for different age groups and hosts a series of events and programs centered around the selected title in an aim to support literacy development in public education, the use of public
libraries, and city-wide discourse around a shared text. For the past few years, I had taken advantage of the availability of this complimentary class set of books and had convinced my principal, who was very supportive in purchasing materials for our students, to order a second class set of books so that both sections of my English classes could read the chosen title simultaneously.

I generally resisted reading the new One Book title prior to my teaching of it because I enjoyed having a fresh experience with the book along with my students. I felt as though reading a text alongside my students for the first time also provided a balance to those anchor texts that I had re-read and re-taught each year. Experience had taught me that my teaching of these first-time texts often benefitted from the fact that I had come to them without the critical perspectives sourced from prior readings with students, from the canon of scholarly criticism, and from my private readings and interpretations. This kind of accumulation of perspectives was characteristic of my teaching and re-teaching of novels like Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* or Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, both of which I also selected as texts to teach in the upcoming year and which I had taught many times previously. When reflecting on the number of discussions that I had over the years and the number of written analyses I had read in response to texts such as those, I had begun to realize the extent to which my own teaching of them had become colored by the historical accumulation of interpretations and questions that arose from my prior work with them. Of course, having an extensive teaching background with a text stands as a powerful tool for literacy educators and does not necessarily place limits on the openness of the teaching or restrict the development of fresh perspectives. However, I found when reading and discussing a text for the first time with students, I was more inclined to take a stance of
inquiry and exploration that I imagined might be more closely in line with their experience as readers.

In *Create Dangerously*, Edwidge Danticat blends memoir and essay forms to discuss her own life and work and the lives and work of other Haitians and members of the Haitian diaspora in America with great depth and through powerful prose that is at the same time beautiful and horrible, subtle and raw. Danticat unifies her writing according to an overarching theme that explores what it has meant for her and for other Haitians and Haitian Americans to engage in acts of creation under the dangers of political oppression, poverty, and civil unrest. As she commented during a 2010 speech (WGBHForum), a goal of her work in *Create Dangerously* has been, simply put, to chronicle “how some people come to their art”, words that resonate with my own journey as a teacher researcher. Engaging in the reading, writing, and talk at the center of this research and thinking deeply about my work, the work of my students, and the relevance that this research might have for others in the field of literacy education carries with it a similar goal of understanding how each of us comes to our art. When considering how I would use my teaching of Danticat as a foray into more formal investigations and analyses of the elements of literature and composition, I decided that our focus would begin broadly with a consideration of compositional techniques that emerge from our reading of her writing. This would be driven by a series of prompts for writing and discussion that focused on identifying moments in her book through which she explores her identity as an author and as a member of the Haitian diaspora, her goals as a writer, and her handling of audience. My anticipation was that this would lead to explorations of larger themes and arguments regarding race, class, politics, and creative production, and that I could then use students’ writing and talk to begin to gauge
their skills in text-based analysis, their strengths in reading, writing, and spoken discourse, and their interests in the topics and themes she raises in her novel.

Based on the abbreviated preview of *Create Dangerously* that I performed when I received my classroom set in the spring of 2012, I was encouraged and excited to have the opportunity to teach Danticat’s text for several reasons. First, because it would bring to our study of literature perspectives from a female, Haitian-American novelist writing about what it has meant for her to live, work, and create at the intersection of American and Haitian societies, a perspective that was not one I had previously explored with students. Second, I imagined that Danticat’s words would bear contemporary relevance given many of my students’ recent exposure to Haiti through media coverage of the January 12, 2010 earthquake that struck the country. The 7.0 magnitude quake killed over 220,000 individuals, left almost 2.3 million homeless, and brought with it an epidemic of cholera and displacement that continued to plague Haiti at the time when I was teaching Danticat’s text. For many of my students and for many Americans, prior to that natural disaster, Haiti more likely that not existed on the periphery—if not well outside of—their spheres of interests in world politics. I felt that bringing a work like Danticat’s into my classroom was both relevant to this historical moment and important to my goals as a literacy educator. In particular, I anticipated that it would dovetail with my desire to de-centralize a curriculum that traditionally fore-fronted Western White male voices in its core texts, often while claiming diversity by presenting non-White, non-Western voices as “supplemental” texts or by presenting those perspectives as some kind of alternative, opposing, or “other” voice
rather than as the dominant perspective to be explored. By positioning Create Dangerously as an anchor text in my course, my goal was to contest just such an approach to curricular design. However, as I anticipated and found, a major challenge of doing so would require actively accounting for and confronting the tendency of privileged outsiders to read the lives of “the other” in ways that would re-inscribe the colonial White Western gaze that has so often characterized the pedagogical framing of teaching works produced by indigenous members of a particular nation or ethnic and cultural group (McLaren, 2018). As my data indicates, there were some moments of success in this regard, but my teaching also left a long way to go. Analyses that I present of my own participation in some of the discussions we had around the issues and topics raised by students during our discussion of Danticat present clear indicators of where I fell short and of those missed opportunities for actively countering such stances that might have been possible had I facilitated more focused dialogue and critical analysis around our own positioning as readers of her work and my role as a teacher of it.

6 Such was true, for instance, of my past teaching of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness alongside Chinua Achebe’s critical essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness” and his novel Things Fall Apart. Although I emphasized how Achebe’s writing can act as a critical lens for unpacking both explicitly and implicitly the racist and colonialist underpinnings of Conrad’s novel, in retrospect I never did enough to decentralize Conrad as the focus of our discussion and to construct a more balanced curriculum to explore perspectives on Western colonial expansion as it has been written about from a variety of authors of diverse backgrounds. Thus, the focus (and the power differential) remained in favor of the White male, and I felt complicit in many ways in having re-inscribed (hopefully to a lesser extent) the same colonial gaze towards the Other that is pervasive in Conrad’s novel.
Finally, because a major consideration guiding the design of the course included accounting for the fact that I would be meeting these classes of eleventh-grade students for the first time, I sought to gain some understanding of the histories, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and individual perspectives that they would bring to the literacy classroom. Danticat’s focus on the artist creating seemed to hold immediate relevance as a starting point for that work. What artists would comprise these classes of students? What would influence the ideas they would put forth and the works they would create? Equally powerful in this regard was the notion of “dangerous” creation. Fundamental to the project of critical literacy as it has been defined by many of the teachers and researchers who have sought to engage it as a pedagogical orientation is the notion that dissonance and criticality lie at the heart of its power to disrupt existing power frameworks (Morris, 2016; Peterson and Mosley Wetzel, 2015). Referencing the writings of Camus, Danticat argues that to “create dangerously” involves “a revolt against silence, creating when both the creation and the reception, the writing and the reading, are dangerous undertakings, disobedience to a directive” (2010, p. 11). In my research, I draw upon Danticat’s stance that dangerous creation involves active resistance towards silence, defiance of the risks inherent to the creation and reception of art, and a countering of those forces that aim to constrain and delegitimate what can, should, or must be created (the notion of “disobedience to a directive”) as a framework for understanding what it has meant for me and my students to read her and others’ words and to create our own.

Following our completion of Create Dangerously we moved into a unit during which we read excerpts from A Small Place by Jamaica Kincaid, Kincaid’s prose poem “Girl”, and Sherman Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian. We used Kincaid’s texts to
extend our discussions on Danticat by exploring samples of two additional literary forms, jeremiad and identity poetry, through which Kincaid conveys the identities and experiences of individuals living in post-colonial Antigua. In *A Small Place*, Kincaid presents a powerful, prolonged lamentation on and excoriation of a legacy of economic destruction, cooptation at the hands of the tourist industry, and government corruption that followed British colonial rule in that country. In “Girl” (see Appendix D), Kincaid presents a multi-voiced work first published in *The New Yorker* in 1978 that I framed for the class as a “prose poem” in which one speaker, who can be interpreted as a matriarchal figure, provides practical and moral advice and models proper behaviors in an attempt to educate a second speaker, a young woman (ostensibly the “girl” who lends the work its title). Students would go on to compose their own prose poems modeled after Kincaid’s, three of which form the basis for the analysis I present in Chapter 7. For our reading of *A Small Place*, I asked students to identify topics that Kincaid explores in her writing and to construct at least one working statement of theme that might be asserted about her text. We then used class sessions to debrief on what they developed. I incorporated this activity as a kind of formative assessment to gauge students’ levels of facility with identifying and explicating thematic content in a work.

With Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, we continued the thematic trajectory of the year and our focus on the positive and problematic aspects of what it means to live as an individual in American society as we read his young adult novel, which chronicles in vivid detail a year in the life of Junior, a Native American adolescent male raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation who chooses to attend an all-White high school off the “rez”. Alexie’s first-person narrative offered students a chance to delve more deeply into analysis of plot structure and the elements of style (e.g. diction, syntax, structure, and in
the case of Alexie’s novel, the blending of text and illustration) and to explore how Alexie employed those compositional techniques to convey his characters’ traits, motivations, and internal and external conflicts. Students then authored their own short memoirs and engaged in cycles of writers’ workshops around those.

As we transitioned into the second marking period of the year, students engaged in a study of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* that culminated in a dramatic reenactment of his play. This unit had become a mainstay of my eleventh-grade literature classes over the past five years, and I continued to honor the tradition of taking the month or so prior to the winter break to dedicate to Miller’s play. I did so first, because of the positive ways that classes of students had responded to this dramatic work over the years, second, because the play in its staging and personnel lends itself well to a whole-class performance, and third, because I feel strongly that we have the tendency in high school language arts to incorporate too few works of drama and opportunities for dramatic performance in our curricula. Additionally, as a magnet program, for the performing arts, our school focused on vocal and instrumental music but housed no drama or dance program, and my students possessed a variety of dramatic talents that deserved to be honored in the context of their academic work. Through our reading and performing of *The Crucible*, students explored the interpersonal and political workings of its early colonial setting and conducted research both on late seventeenth century New England and on the era of McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare of the 1950s that inspired Miller, who was himself blacklisted for failing to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), to author it. We also viewed a filmed staging of the play as well as interviews conducted with Miller in which he discusses his craft and the cultural and political landscape against which he wrote his play. the work that we had
completed thus far with respect to plot, theme, and character was brought to bear on our reading and dramatic performance of *The Crucible* since it required students to consider how each of these elements of literary composition would inform their portrayal of one or more of the play’s characters.

My hope was that our readings of Danticat, Kincaid, Alexie, and Miller would provide students with a pastiche of writing composed by a small, but representative group of modern writers who have composed works in and about America that touch on subjects and themes which establish an historical and literary context for our contemporary lives as American citizens and intellectuals. James Weldon Johnson’s work would be the next in that progression, and the conversations that students had in response to reading his *Autobiography* (a shorthand for its title that I will use often going forward) show a marked progression from those they had around Danticat. If, taken as a political term, we use “progressive” (as I do) to indicate an agenda or political orientation that seeks radical change and reform based on democratizing principals of social justice and equity, then the discourse and analysis that I present in Chapter 8, which covers our conversations over Johnson’s *Autobiography*, captures, in my mind, the spirit of that progressive agenda.

As indicated above and in the syllabus for this course (Appendix B), we would go on to read four additional core texts during the second semester of the year, *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald), *Death of a Salesman* (Miller), *As I Lay Dying* (Faulkner), and *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (Proulx), as well as two short stories by David Sedaris, and a number of smaller, supplemental texts. As part of my data gathering for this study, I recorded and transcribed (in full) several classroom conversations held in response to Fitzgerald, Miller, Proulx, and
Sedaris and gathered student writing composed in response to all of those. But as I began cycles of analysis, it became clear that I must limit the scope of the study to include only data drawn from Danticat, Kincaid, and Johnson. The level of depth required of what I consider to be thorough analysis of the representative fragments of classroom discourse I selected for inclusion in this study proved too great to allow for a broader representation from the complete data set. While I regret not being able to include discourse that emerged from the remaining readings, I submit that what has been incorporated into the five data chapters that follow constitutes a richly contextualized research narrative that provides a compelling argument for the value that the discussions we held and the writing students composed have for responding to the goals of this inquiry into critical pedagogy.
PART II – SHIFTING SANDS: NEGOTIATING SELF AND OTHER
THROUGH THE TRANSACTIONAL SPACE OF TALK AND TEXT

She pushes the bounds to create something beautiful. She respects the opinions of critics but wishes not to silence her own thoughts. She is mature and civil. She is sensitive. She is smart and understanding. That is the person I believe her to be. Summed up into one word, she is an artist. That is her identity. Not a public enemy. Not a representation or misrepresentation of a culture. Not an immigrant. Art isn’t defined as foreign; it is universal. Art isn’t where the artist is from. It is the emotion the artist puts forward. I may be reaching, but art is the artist because it is created from what the artist feels, thinks, and knows. That’s what comes through in her writing; what Danticat feels, thinks, and knows. It is the statement that she is making. It is art itself.

Adrienne, excerpt from a written reflection on Danticat

Framing the Conversations

Across this research, I distinguish between the two classes of student participants by identifying them as Section A and Section B. It is important to note that these letter designations bear no relevance on ability levels. As I noted in Chapter 2, students enrolled in my classes were tracked according to their math course placements, but the school implemented no leveled tracking of humanities or science classes. Students in my two sections of eleventh grade Language Arts were heterogeneously rostered with no bias based on past academic progress or on assessed ability in reading, writing, and literacy.

The excerpts from classroom dialogue focusing on Danticat’s Create Dangerously that appear in these chapters were recorded after both sections of students had engaged in small group discussions that focused on short, written reflections completed in response to their reading of her work. Discussion groups were organized based on student choice from a
series of prompts that I authored to guide their reading (students who chose to respond to
the same prompt were grouped together). The prompts to which they responded included:

- What images of what society is and/or the possibilities for what it might become
does Danticat portray in her writing?
- What aspects of Danticat’s identity come through her writing? Choose a moment (or
two) where you feel like you were able to understand her through her writing and
discuss.
- Choose one issue related to the lives of those living in the diaspora that Danticat
addresses in her writing. Has reading her words changed your perspectives on that
issue?
- How does Danticat achieve a sense of realism in her writing? (Be specific about
techniques she uses.)
- Pick a question about identity that Danticat raises in her writing. What answer(s) (or
reasons for the lack of answers) does she offer?
- To whom is Danticat writing? For whom does she write?

During small group discussions, students were instructed to structure their conversations
according to the following guiding questions:

1. What were some of the major ideas/arguments in response to the prompt that group
members developed in their writing?
2. What passages were most important in supporting those arguments? (Make note of
page numbers for reference purposes.)
3. What questions, issues, etc. came up either during your writing or during your
discussion that you want to bring to the larger class conversation?

The discussions that followed were loosely organized around these prompts, which were
used as topics for talk, and members of student groups reported to the larger group what
was discussed in their sessions. As I incorporate the words of specific speakers into these
chapters, I am often explicit in providing my readers with demographic information that
ranges from basic to more nuanced based on what information I have about that student.
and the relevance that that information bears on what they have said. Because of the personal nature of the content of much of the student talk that appears in this and subsequent chapters, many aspects of these students’ identities emerge in rich and nuanced ways both explicitly through moments in their lives that they choose to share with the group and implicitly through the interpretations, questions, analyses they offer in response to the readings they performed. Part of my goal in making sense of the critical interpretations and responses that my students contributed to the class and to this research is to interpret how the interplay among these speech acts renders a tapestry of classroom discourse upon which literacy teachers and researchers can develop takeaways regarding what it means to engage in discussions of literature from a critical pedagogical stance.

During most of the class discussions that we had in response to our readings, I took a series of running notes on the class whiteboard and/or Smartboard. Those notes were intended primarily to support my students in their analyses by modeling for them what one version (my own) of notetaking in response to reading can look like. Keeping a running record of what was said also helped me to visually digest how the various ideas, questions, and interpretations that we put forth might connect to each other and raise new questions, ideas, and interpretations. I often incorporated some traditional approaches to structured notetaking and idea mapping (e.g. “T” charts and Venn diagrams) into my board notes, but I

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7 Names of all participants in this study have been altered to protect anonymity. Full transcripts of class discussions appear in Appendix F. Line and page numbers indicate where in Appendix F those excerpted direct quotations may be found.
rarely distributed handouts with pre-formatted graphic organizers to students. One aspect of this ongoing notetaking included transcribing any handwritten board notes into a digital record and providing students with online access to those notes to support their analytic work. As we moved further into the year, I decided to backlog these notes in my lesson plans for the prior week as a way of keeping track of what was said in the classroom. The passages students referenced and the analyses they provided could then act as a reference guide for opening subsequent discussions with a recap what was previously addressed. For example, in our work with Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, these notes were of particular use as we sought to track how passages constituting critical commentary on “the race question” that Johnson embeds within in his novel become a way for him to explicate his own theory or theories of race. Often, we would turn back to earlier sets of class notes during a discussion as we drew connections between one section of Johnson’s novel and another. Regarding my teaching practice and research, these notes have provided a useful roadmap for identifying emerging themes and lines of inquiry my students were developing through their readings and discussions. They proved helpful in planning future lessons and have provided a chronicle of what occurred during these conversations that has

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8 I knew that students had received those kinds of materials in their prior ELA classes and in other humanities courses in which they were currently enrolled, and I did not get the sense that the majority of my students struggled with notetaking. However, I am sure that some students might have benefitted from those aides, and it would be worthwhile to investigate the impact that my decision not to provide those to students may have had.

9 See Lesson Plan for Week of 2-18-13 in Appendix C for an example of these classroom notes.
aided in the process of reflecting on my practice and making sense of the student talk upon which those notes were based.

After cycles of reading, re-reading, and critical reflection on transcripts of classroom conversations, it became evident to me that our discussions of Danticat and Johnson over the first half of the year had become a space for ongoing debates over specific sets of concerns connected both directly and tangentially to the texts we were reading. These concerns centered largely on issues related to race, culture, and identity, and on the relational forces operating between and among individuals and groups. From the intersection of these two foci emerged conversations and writing through which students debated issues that touched upon themes dealing with three sets of paired concepts: 1) *silence* and *voice*, 2) *individuality* and *solidarity*, 3) *complacency* and *resistance*. I have come to regard the process of navigating the earlier set of these critical discussions on Danticat as akin to negotiating shifting sands underfoot and argue that as we moved through the first semester of the course, working from Danticat on to Johnson, one can detect in our conversations and in the writing that students authored an overall progression increasingly towards the latter of each of these pairs of concepts (e.g. from silence towards voice, from complacency towards resistance). However, the narrative arc of the journey was by no means linear. Instead, each curricular text presented new challenges for us as readers, and in the following chapters I incorporate data drawn from conversations had in response to both texts as well as analytic commentaries written in response to Danticat and prose poems modeled after Kincaid’s “Girl” to identify the ways in which our discussions and students’ compositions contributed to the negotiation of these paired concepts. I began my write-up of these chapters by framing my research narrative around where, when, what, and how those concepts emerged
through spoken classroom discourse. My analytic focus then centered on the relevance they bore to our literary analysis of these works, on the role they played in our reading and sensemaking, and on the ways in which they influenced and were influenced by our transactions with and interactions around these texts. Across the chapters that follow, I argue that the emergence of these paired concepts, each of which have been explored by other social science researchers studying reading, writing, and literacy, indicates several possibilities for the value that structured conversations and invitations for writing framed by texts and prompts that address social justice issues can have for the project of critical pedagogy in the high school English language and literacy classroom.
CHAPTER 4 – SILENCE ↔ VOICE

A Starting Point: Transaction, Interaction

A significant focus of my first discussion of Create Dangerously with students from my Section A class hinged on the questions: To whom is Danticat writing? For whom does she write? The conversation that followed touched on issues related to authorship, intent, and representation and developed into a deeper deliberation over a writer’s ability to connect with or influence a reader and those factors that most significantly impact how readers respond to texts. While students’ talk centered on Danticat and her work, it ultimately led them to focus on their own past readings of literature in the context of school and their past and present responses to those experiences. Some of the questions that seem to operate beneath the surface of their discussion ask, What can we understand regarding the nature of the relationship between reader and writer? What role do texts play in this relationship? What relational possibilities exist? What power do texts have to nurture solidarity or breed division, to silence or to counter silence? To what extent is the reading of a text contingent upon external conditions and contexts (i.e. other actors, cultural forces)? How can reading literature that raises questions such as these become an invitation to explore our own positionalities as readers and the responses that we have when encountering texts?

Something to note: I structure the narrative of the research across chapters such as this one, which centers on student talk, by first presenting the discourse as it unfolds along with some general discussion and framing of it. I then transition into deeper levels of interpretation and discussion over what it has to offer epistemically regarding critical pedagogy. In this respect, I acknowledge that my write-up may read as being a bit front-
loaded at times; however, I find this technique to be useful for three reasons: it places student discourse at the fore of the narrative, it provides a complete picture of the discourse upon which to then develop understandings, and it captures more authentically the reflective processes of this research.

At a point not far into my first discussion with students from Section A, Aria opened a line of inquiry into audience and representation by referencing her group members’ discussion of the prompt that asked to whom or for whom Danticat writes in *Create Dangerously*. She commented that her group had agreed that Danticat was most directly invested in writing to represent those artists who risked great danger in creating transgressive, activist works, for those “people who knew the risks of reading a book like this and the risks of writing a book like this. That’s what she wrote it for, so that she can reach out to people who have the same passion as her and so they can like—it can motivate them to like take a chance and to know that they can speak out.” Parker responded immediately to this by pointing us to Danticat’s opening chapter and quoting a passage in which Danticat presents what is arguably the central theme that drives the essays that comprise her book: “Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them.” (2010, p. 10) In response to Parker, I directed the class a bit further down the same page

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10 See Appendix F, “Class Discussion, 9-20-2012 (Section A): Create Dangerously”
11 African American, female student
where Danticat writes, “Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, we may also save someone’s life (or mind) because they have given us a passport, making us honorary citizens of their culture.” At the time, my intention in supplementing the quotation that Parker selected with one that resonated with me was to honor Aria’s initial comment, which touched not just on the “risks” associated with reading activist or transgressive works, but also on the goal of “reach[ing] out to people” to create positive change. I wanted to strike a balance between Parker’s reference to the risk that an individual may take in reading those texts with Danticat’s hope that texts, as travelers across time and geography, may also have the power to save readers with whom those texts find resonance.

In retrospect, what struck me most at the time about this passage is Danticat’s proposition that readers, in picking up books written by authors from another place and period, might make those writers “honorary citizens of their culture”. In characterizing them as such, Danticat identifies a kind of interactional identity work and exchange process associated with the production and reception of texts. A process through which the author, as the renderer of the persons, histories, and cultural norms a text bears, becomes a visitor in the land of the reader. My role thus far in the discussion had been primarily one of note taker and facilitator, and I did not elaborate at the time—as I have here—on my reasons for
referencing the passage that I did. At the time, the most that I was able to say after referencing it was, “That’s an interesting idea that a writer can make you an ‘honorary citizen’ of a culture. You know?” Evidently this notion had also resonated with Frazier during his small group work, and he raised his hand and called the class’s attention to a point later in the same chapter that focuses on the work of Dany Laferrière, a journalist who was forced into exile during the Duvalier regime and whose novel Je suis un écrivain japonais (I Am a Japanese Writer) Danticat discusses with some detail. In theorizing what it means for a writer to create dangerously, Danticat looks to the words of Laferrière’s fictional author, who states that when asked whether he was a Haitian, Caribbean, or Francophone writer he would remark, “I would always answer that I took the nationality of my reader, which means that when a Japanese reader reads my books, I immediately become a Japanese writer” (2010, p.15). Frazier found the connection that Laferrière’s narrator claims between author and reader to be particularly evocative of the kind of connection that he imagines exists between Danticat and her readers.

12 Something important to note in this regard is that generally, the conversations that comprise the data set for this research tended to be fast-paced and were characterized by multiple students raising hands at once to ask questions or pose ideas. Occasionally, students would engage in cross-talk and side conversations. As much as I encouraged students not to raise hands and instead to wait for natural pauses and conclusions as markers for turns in speech, most of my classes relied upon me to mediate the conversation by calling on speakers. This might also have been a function of me positioning myself at the board in the front of the room as note taker.

13 White, male student.

14 Frazier will return to this same passage in the context of a debate over the extent to which readers are able to gain access to and connect with the world of the text.
Frazier: So, by writing, you know, they want to tell—I guess she [Danticat] wants to
tell her story. And she would agree with him [Laferrière] that, you know, regardless
of who is reading it, there—kind of there’s a cross—there’s kind of a connection
between reader and writer even though they don’t actually interact. Like through the
book, you know, even if it’s written in a completely different culture…someone else
will…[trailing off]

Me: [pausing in response to him while I write on the board] I’m putting something
separate here [indicating a new bullet point]. So, like writing can connect cultures? Or
can connect people and cultures?

Frazier: Yeah.

Frazier’s suggestion that author, text, and reader can be understood as entities
engaged in an exchange through which cultural connection is possible resonates with Iser’s
(1978) conceptual framing of the repertoire of the text—the social, cultural, and historical
norms that it embodies—as a landscape that has been made manifest by the author and that
is then “realized” by its readers, who bring with them their own cultural, historical, and
experiential background. From this stance, the transaction that occurs between reader and
text gives way to the creation of meaning (the “poem”) that is individual to the reader but
dependent upon the text through which the influence of the author is conveyed in the
patterns of signs that comprise it (Rosenblatt, 1964, 1986). Conversely, and as Danticat
notes, Laferrière’s notion of a stark divide between the author as originator of a text and the
reader as situated in a particular destination references the theoretical work of Barthes, who
argued for the utter separation between author and reader, literally for the “death of the
Author”, proclaiming that “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures
and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place
where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the
author” (1977 p. 148). Frazier’s comment that there exists a “cross” or “connection
between reader and writer even though they don’t actually interact” challenges Barthes’
negation of the author and hits more closely to Rosenblatt’s later writings, where she describes how “[t]he reader’s to-and-fro process of building an interpretation becomes a form of transaction with an author-persona sensed through and behind the text […] The closer their linguistic-experiential equipment, the more likely the reader’s interpretation will fulfill the writer’s intention.” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1077, emphasis added).

Looking to reader response theories and reflecting on Rosenblatt’s conceptualizing of the author-persona proves useful for making sense of the parallel Frazier draws between Laferrière’s narrator’s claims of “[taking on] the nationality of the reader” and the necessary but involuntary “connection” that Frazier imagines must occur between Danticat and her readers. When considered through the lens of reader response, Laferrière’s claims of being transformed by the reader and taking on a new identity is something very different than the Barthesian notion of separation. A shift to the creation or re-creation of the writer by the reader does not constitute the negation of the author’s existence; instead, it reframes that existence and re-contextualizes it in ways contingent upon both the author-persona conveyed through the diction of the text and the identities of its readers. A re-focusing of attention on the author invites readers to consider more closely the ways in which the writer has been transformed (rather than negated) by her readers, and this is particularly useful to a discussion of Danticat and her writing, since a major project she undertakes in writing Create Dangerously deals with the relationship between writer/creator and audience. As Rosenblatt indicates, it is the closeness of the “linguistic-experiential equipment” that exists between author and reader that has the potential to dictate how a work might be taken up in intimate ways by the latter, even when there appears to be little apparent connection between the cultural, ethnic, geographic, or historical backgrounds of the two (as Laferrière notes was the
case in his youthful readings of Goethe, Whitman, and Shakespeare, among others).

But this potential a text might hold as a medium for some level of transaction between author and reader also bears with it the risk of pain or threat and the distancing of the two, as Danticat herself found to be true in the ways her own author-persona was received by her critics. Amir, another participant in the Section A discussion, seemed to pick up this and responded to Frazier’s comment by pushing back, saying “I don’t know if I agree with that, right? People—connecting people and cultures. Because, I mean I see how you get that, but I also see how—but it also can like—it can separate people and put people like you said, like in exclusive places, and like—and…I don’t know, I just don’t get that…”

As I continued to take notes on the board, I responded, “Okay, so let’s say “writing can connect or separate…So then maybe we need to explore—I mean I think you may be seeing her focusing on both?” Nyah then interjected, asking whether she could ask Amir a clarifying question about whether he [Amir] felt as though separation was “always a bad thing”. But Amir resisted characterizing it as either positive or negative. Instead, taking a kind of Barthesian stance towards her question, he stated, “It’s up to the person that’s the upset person—not, it’s not up to—you know what I’m saying? Like the writer can write whatever he wanna to write, bwaaww it—one person reads it […] ultimately that’s like her [the reader’s] feelings that’s gonna be hurt or not—I mean that she’s gonna separate from whatever.” Amir’s comments reveal a very real concern regarding the legitimacy of claims to

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15 African American, male student
16 African American, female student
authorial intent: the rejection that texts in and of themselves can hold some latent, embedded intentionality that affords them the ability to achieve a projected effect or impact. Amir does seem to believe, given his claim that writing can cause separation by positioning some in “exclusive places” inaccessible to others, that literature possesses power in and of itself as a textual product. However, his stance appears to be that the author neither bears nor can claim responsibility for how it is taken up by the reader. This raises questions about what factors and contexts might affect the transaction of reading and the relationship between reader and text, something that these students will address in the coming minutes of the class.

The above moments of dialogue, beginning with Aria and Parker’s framing of the conversation by focusing on author, audience, agency, and risk and moving into Frazier’s thoughts on Danticat’s relationship to her readers and Amir’s insistence that the capacity for a text to unite or to separate is dependent solely upon the stance that the reader takes towards it all serve to illustrate the capacity that a writing like Danticat’s can have for inviting students to engage in discussion over fundamental questions about the nature of reading, writing, and literacy. While the dialogue that emerged was initially framed by a selection of prompts that I created to guide the small-group conversations that preceded this larger discussion, the prompt these students chose to explore, which dealt with representation and audience (to whom and for whom the writer writes), led to more fundamental questions regarding human agency and the possibilities and limitations that creative works can have as activist projects. Although the fragments of text discussed above are just brief moments of talk drawn from a much larger conversation, the close reading I’ve attempted to present thus far suggests how teacher research that focuses on classroom discourse in the literacy
classroom has the potential to provide a space for critical reflection on pedagogy at multiple levels. For me, the process of reading and sense making associated with conducting teacher research has involved engaging a set of dual analytic strands: developing a deeper understanding of Danticat’s writing through literary analysis and interweaving that discussion with interpretation of the discourse that emerged from shared analytic and reflective conversations with students. I argue that this melding of textual analysis and critical reflection on pedagogy stands as an essential process and a benefit of engaging in practitioner inquiry in the literacy classroom, since the two constitute fundamental aspects of language and literacy instruction. Moving towards the larger epistemological goals of practitioner inquiry, these analytic and reflective strands must be coupled with research methodologies that include iterative cycles of transcription and reflection attendant upon structured inquiry. With regard to the short discussion above, the natural focus of the analysis that emerged landed within the realm of reader response. In later discussions, my focus shifts to include other theoretical frameworks and lenses, including theories on race and immigrant-native relations and writings on silence, silencing, and solidarity (to name a few). However, what remains constant across the remaining chapters of this research is my use of this blended approach to analysis and reflection as a way to render through the space of the page the process of making critical my pedagogy and to theorize more broadly about progressive goals for literacy education.

Readers Respond

Turning back now to my discussion with students from Section A, the shift that the conversation then took towards personal reflection on one student’s prior literacy
experiences further indicates the ability that deliberation over the relationship between author, text, and reader can have for inviting analytic discourse on larger issues related to literacy teaching and learning and the complicated dynamics surrounding curricular text selection, cultural representation in the canon, and intersectionality.

In immediate response to Amir’s comment that the identity of the reader and the individual discourse(s) that they bring to their reading of a text constitute the primary factors influencing how that reader will respond to a work—that the author can have no control over how a work will be received, Nyah offered the following:

Nyah: Cause I know all sixth grade we read like Jewish books, and I felt so out of the loop when we would read those stories.

Me: Hmm. Okay…what was that—where do you think that feeling came from?

Nyah: Well, it—I loved—I love [names her teacher at the time]—probably one of my favorite teachers, but she—the—we read Jewish books—we read 10000 many Jewish books—and we did like Jewish projects, so it was just a little like ‘I don’t get it.’ Like I get the importance of it, like that. I didn’t really care that much—no I cared about the uh—I’ve always cared about the Holocaust, like I think that’s such a horrible thing. But the book—and we were supposed to make—we had to make this box and put like stars in it and stuff, and I was like ‘Okay?’ [with affected exasperation] And some people were like, ‘Yeah! I got all this stuff at home!’ and I’m like ‘I gotta go buy it. I don’t have a—a like that little hat [referencing a yarmulke] in my house.’”

At the time when this research was conducted, one of the curricular texts taught either in seventh or eighth grade in our school was Elie Wiesel’s Night, which is one of the texts Nyah references here. I have never taught that level of language arts, nor have I taught Weisel’s novel. So, in responding to her, I focused mostly on the emphasis she placed on the number of texts she claims to have read that year focusing on Judaism or the Holocaust (what she expressed as “10000 many Jewish books”) rather than on the cultural disconnect she
expressed having felt with the teaching and assessment that accompanied her reading of it. I asked whether her dissatisfaction was primarily with a perceived lack of diversity in the literature she was reading. Her response seemed to address not only a question of the diversity of texts read, but a larger issue related to a lack of representation that she was feeling with the body of literature she had been assigned to read for several years as a student in this school. Taking up first my question regarding whether she felt as though the issue was based in a lack of diversity in assigned readings Nyah responded,

Yeah, I think I had—this is the first class, you can ask Layla. Soon as we was like you were giving us a Haitian book and an African American book, or something—cause one of my friends was like, ‘Oh, you’re actually happy now reading a book for—’ I was like, ‘Yes.’ Because last year—I mean none of our authors—all of our authors were White. It was just so annoying. [turning to address a student in the back of the room whom she has heard say something inaudible on the recording] Shut up, Logan, cause I can hear you all the way from over here, and I’m just saying. That I think— [other students jump in with comments] I was just saying that I think an author of a—I want to read something from a author that’s not just White. I’ve been doing that since I’ve been in [this school]. It’s like a little sickening. That’s all.

My response to Nyah was to say that I could probably speak a bit to why it might be that she was reading almost solely White authors, but I knew that exploring with any depth the complicated history of the Western canon and the persistence of a Eurocentric orientation towards the teaching of literature in America would require much more than what I could offer in that moment. Additionally, several students had raised their hands in response to Nyah’s comments, and I wanted to facilitate dialogue rather than launch into a discourse on
curricular issues in America. I called on Scarlett,\textsuperscript{17} who chose to frame her comments by referencing the discussion prompt which asked students to explore how Danticat had created a sense of realism for the reader in her writing. Scarlett’s reading of Nyah’s observations focused on the disconnect that Nyah expressed having felt with texts that were not representative or written by people like her, namely persons of color. However, Scarlett chose not to address the issue of race and instead sought to shift the conversation to a question of technique.

Scarlett: “I think that because she is—like, Nyah was saying—like sometimes you can’t find and connect, but if the writer has really good technique, sometimes they’re able to bring you to that place. I mean I’m obviously not Haitian, but I felt like when I read [Danticat’s] essays and her stories that I kind of experienced it too because she was super descriptive, and she was like—she made sure she told you about some superstitions and how they relate to culture. And if a writer is able to do that, then you can kind of find more of a connection.

Hearing this, I asked Nyah to weigh the two possibilities by considering both the extent to which a lack of diversity in the texts she had been asked to read had negatively impacted her feelings towards the literary canon established by the school and the extent to which “it had something to do with the texts themselves and […] either the job the writers were doing as writers or your, you know, response to them as the reader of their writing? You know—and you don’t have to answer that question, but that’s I think a question also that’s being raised [in our discussion] about whether or not you connect with a text—that it may be about who we are and—” Nyah immediately interjected, challenging the premise of my suggestion by asserting, “It’s who I am!” Nyah clearly was not interested in debating

\textsuperscript{17} White, female student
whether the quality of the writing itself had bearing on the disconnect she had been feeling for several years between her identity as a Black American and the White Western literary canon that from her perspective had dominated the English Language Arts curriculum. In response to Nyah’s emphatic tone, a good portion of the class erupted in laughter—a reaction that seemed to be fueled by genuine surprise and approbation for the strength behind her words and not out of ridicule or entertainment. I responded to her with an emphatic “Yeah!” However, that’s as far as I went in the moment in voicing my support of her perspective. I instead continued to attempt to strike a balance between Nyah’s and Scarlett’s viewpoints by commenting that “it may also be about the quality of the writing too, and stuff like that. I mean that’s a possibility.” Following my lead, Nyah hedged slightly and referenced *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a book written by a White woman and dealing largely with the lives of a White protagonist and her family that she did enjoy in spite of it being part of “what I’m forced to read in school.”

At this point, Frazier raised his hand and brought the conversation back to Danticat and the passage I referenced towards the top of our discussion in which she quotes Emerson as stating, “We, as we read, must become Greeks, Romans, Turks, priest and king, martyr and executioner; must fashion these images to some reality in our secret experience, or we shall learn nothing rightly” (2010, p. 14). Extending his earlier analysis of Danticat’s discussion of Laferrière and the concept of the author taking on the nationality of the reader as a function of the varied cultural and historical contexts under which they might be consumed, Frazier now shifted our focus to the role of the reader. He pointed to the Emerson quotation as an argument for the potential that a text might have for facilitating a connection between the individual, the author, and the subject matter of the text if the
reader brings a certain intentionality and openness to making that connection. Below, I
cite Frazier’s words and the dialogue that followed at length because it comes at the very
end of the class period and captures both the flow of the conversation and the ways in
which the discussion crystallized and concluded.

Frazier: I understand how you can see—like look at something that you know is
different, or from a different culture or whatever, and you know, be more inclined to
read something that’s closer to your perspective, but at the same time, like it’s talking
about here [indicating Danticat’s book] when you read it’s important to kind of, you
know, think about it in terms of a writer. Or, you know, how—that’s, that’s the way
I like to—I mean it says you “must become Greeks, Romans” whatever, you know,
because that’s—you know, if you’re going to read, you should try to think about it
from the perspective of, you know, where the writer is coming from and not only
necessarily your own perspective on it.

Me: Yeah, all right, so the point Frazier is raising is that part of what it might mean
to read is to become [someone interjects from the class] no, not to become the
writer, but to become sensitive to who the writer is and to the culture—and to try to
become engrossed in that culture. I think the point that Nyah is raising is that if
you’re not exposed to a diversity of writers and cultures—or not, not that—if you’re
not exposed to writers who have anything [sic] to do with who you are and that’s all
you ever get, you know, then it’s very hard to develop that way—that, that level of
engagement, maybe. You know, and I think that’s getting back to that scene where
[Danticat] talks about her exploration in the library of Haitian writers, I mean I think
that kind of captures a little bit of what Nyah is getting at, that you know, for the
first time she finally was able to find writers who were writing about who she was.
And maybe if she had had that along the way, that would have built her ability or
capacity as a reader to be more engaged with a diverse group of writers. Although,
she seems like she’s just the type of a person who from the gate was a very engaged
reader. I mean, she fell in love with all of the White writers that she was reading in
Haiti, you know? But, she’s one person. That may not be true for other people. Other
people may have the reaction that Nyah said she had, which was, Why do we keep
reading the same thing? You know, or about the same people? You know, and Nyah,
I’m not…I’m just using you as an example because you brought it up, but I’m sure
many people have had that experience of feeling as though they are not represented.

Nyah: In African American History last year, I heard a lot of people said, [with a
mocking tone] “Why we gotta take African American History? I don’t want to take
African American History!” [sporadic laughter from girls around her] And of course
they gonna feel like that! They don’t want to sit there and here about it over and over
again!
Me: Mmmhmm. Yeah, yeah that may be. You know, um, and so there’s a question there about why do we teach the things that we teach? How do we build curriculum? You know, and that’s actually the focus of my research—is how do I choose texts for the students I’m teaching? You know, how do I build a curriculum that’s responding to them? If you look at the sheet that I gave you and the syllabus addendum, a lot of the questions are about how do I understand my students and who they are and then pick texts that will be significant to them and engaging and that can—you know, have that kind of—that can allow them to have that kind of engagement with literature. You know, so this is a great point that you raise. Yeah, Amir?

Amir: All right, this is for Frazier—sorry but I don’t mean to pick on Frazier, but… [laughter from class]

Me: [jokingly] I don’t think he minds, so…

Amir: What he said again, I don’t think it—that as a reader that you have to become a citizen—to live their writing. Because I feel like if you do that, then you are basically saying that you can just ignore it [inaudible] like I feel like that just takes away the whole, the whole purpose of reading a book. So…

Me: What do you think the purpose is?

Amir: So you can establish your own ideas and you can feel like your own type of view on life. Like Mr. Whatshisface [referencing another teacher at the school] and the episcopology [sic] or whatever it’s called. You can have…

Me: Epistemology?

Amir: Epistemology. You can build your own epistemology on stuff like that, so…

Me: [other hands go up in the classroom; responding to them] Okay. I see you guys.

Amir: By me saying, “I’m just going to ignore it, I’m just gonna be sensitive to this writer and work”—that is so ridiculous.

Me: Okay, I’m going to get Tegan and then Sebastian. Yeah, go ahead Tegan.18

Tegan: It was just like Amir said, I mean part of—like if you delve into your own internal opinion about something, you might like just sit there and say, “Oh, that’s

18 White, female student
not true, I don't agree with that.” And then like you just disagree with the entire book, and you can't really look at the book as kind of—I’m saying like to a certain extent, I think you have to kind of ignore your opinions about certain things. Like especially if its like a controversial topic. So that you can kind of open your mind to what the other side might be saying and like other ideas and other cultures and stuff. And I mean just because you have your opinions, it's not that you're ignoring that, but it’s like you have your opinion and it kind of like blocks some of that if that's your opinion. And then like you can—after you're done reading the book or whatever, you can think about how that relates to your opinion, and then you can like change your opinion on that and… [trailing off]

Me: [responding directly to Tegan] So for you, developing your own epistemology means coming at this with openness and blending your own, uh, your own identity in a way that’s a little bit more…does that make…?

Nyah: That makes sense. [inaudible talking…period bell rings]

During the earlier sections of Danticat, which these students discussed at the outset of their conversation, the critical lens of reader response emerged as a useful frame for analysis, and writings from that critical tradition might provide some ways for making sense of Frazier, Amir, and Tegan’s deliberations over the relationships they have as readers to the texts they read and to the authors who have composed them. However, Nyah’s comments in the above exchange regarding her past experiences in literacy classrooms suggest an additional layer of theoretical complexity emerging from these conversations. The turn that Nyah initiates invites the class to look outward and beyond an individual reader’s response to a text and to investigate larger ideological issues regarding the school as an educational context for encountering texts as cultural products embedded within systems of power. Worth emphasizing here is that this broadening of scope originated from an individual transaction with Danticat’s text: Nyah’s voiced exasperation over the disconnect she felt in having been asked to read what she interpreted as a narrowly framed cannon of texts curated largely from authors who hail from White, Western cultural groups and her stated relief in
having the opportunity to read something different in Danticat. Had Nyah not been willing or motivated during this conversation to express as openly as she did here her perspectives on the schooled canon, the conversation would not have gone down the path that it did.

Confronting Silence?

Nyah’s words present a call for teachers to read with criticality the world of school as rendered through the critiques that students voice and to act by resisting the tendency towards silence and complacency—by heeding their words and responding to their concerns, especially in moments that may be marked with dissonance, discomfort, and a challenge to the curricular status quo. Thematically, the above section of dialogue between Nyah, Amir, Frazier, and me portrays a deliberation over the role of texts in the context of school that touches on issues of power, representation, access, and inclusivity/exclusivity, all of which are informed by the intersection of race, class, and culture. Moving beyond the lens of reader response, these issues might better be explored through a framework that takes into consideration

a) how the interconnected concepts of silence and silencing can provide lenses for unpacking risks that threaten the project of critical literacy by helping to make apparent intersecting cultural, historical, and pedagogical factors that work to restrict students’ voices and identities in the literacy classroom,

b) how critical dialogue that focuses on the experiences of students as readers can reveal meta-conversations regarding what it means to read that can transform the literacy classroom into a contested, dynamic space through which silence and silencing acts are either challenged, left uncontested, or ignored, and

c) how critical reflection on classroom discourse indicates a pedagogical imperative that teachers (and institutions) look to current practices to identify what can be done to transform the literacy classroom into a space that counters the silencing of students and their identities.
Citing Carter’s (2007) research on classroom interactions between high school-aged Black females in a British literature class, Ayanna Brown and her fellow researchers discuss the roll that silence held as “an active, agentive strategy” for young African American women employed “in their predominately White high school literature class to establish solidarity among themselves, and to contest explicit and implicit racialized nature of their educational experience” (Brown et al, 2017, p. 460). When Nyah reflects on her response to reading texts that centered on Judaism and the Holocaust, she verbalizes past reactions as utterances like “so it was just a little like ‘I don’t get it.’” It’s unclear whether Nyah actively voiced those concerns at the time to anyone, her framing of these comments seems to position them within the realm of internal rather than outwardly spoken discourse. If so, this raises a question of the extent to which in her inability to connect with the subject matter being taught, Nyah engaged in some level of self-imposed silence. In these remembered words, regardless of whether they were verbalized or not, Nyah does question openly the lack of representation of people from cultural backgrounds similar to her own that she found troubling in her literature classes. Although there is no indication that she made this concern known to her instructor or voiced it openly in the classroom, Nyah’s reference to more recent conversations with peers (e.g. with Layla, also female, also a person of color), indicates the existence of a dialogue through which these issues have been discussed in the context of reading Danticat. This raises questions as to the extent to which Nyah and other young Black women in this school have been engaged in acts of selective or imposed silence in public spheres but have engaged in more rich conversations behind the scenes given a school whose past and present practices were presenting as culturally exclusive to them. It also invites consideration as to whether to some extent opening up the canon to include
more diverse texts can at the very least become a starting point for energizing student talk around larger issues relevant to diverse groups of students.

While Carter’s (2007) research presents data that indicates how silence was operationalized as a strategy for establishing solidarity among the young women who participated in her study, Nyah’s framing of her experiences—the apology she offers for a teacher she otherwise “loved” and the tone of exasperation expressed in her retelling of events—reads less as though her silence was active and aimed at transgression and more as though it were a function of resignation at an inability to find personal relevance in the reading she was being assigned. Careful consideration must be also given to the degree to which one student’s telling of an anecdote about a single unit of study can constitute the existence of a larger trend in a school, district, or field. Clearly, one teacher creating a unit that explores with apparent depth a single cultural group through literature does not constitute systemic cultural exclusion, and the way in which Nyah uses this example to voice a larger critique of the school’s educational program can risk overstating the significance of the experience she references. However, as Danticat indicates in Create Dangerously, the struggle to have her own words be heard and acknowledged, reminds us that we must also be attuned to the ways in which the individual perspectives of those who hold positions outside of the mainstream have historically been invalidated and delegitimized by the chorus of voices emanating from those afforded membership in the cultural and political power majority. As Danticat notes through reflection on her own decision to break an imposed silence though writing, “I meant in that essay to list my own personal experiences as an immigrant and a writer, of being called diaspora when expressing an opposing political point of view in discussions with friends and family members living in Haiti, who knew that they
could easily silence me by saying, “What do you know? You’re living outside. You’re a*diaspora*” (2010, p. 49). Danticat reminds us that we must be careful to honor the words of those who express dissent, or we risk relegating their voices—and by extension, them—to some less significant “other” that can be dismissed on a variety of grounds that include differences in age, race, sex, gender, culture, etc. Moreover, Nyah’s passion regarding what she perceives as a skew in her language arts classes towards greater representation of work produced by authors hailing from White, European cultural groups and a dearth of works produced by those who do not share that heritage is well supported by a body of research indicating the persistence of White Eurocentrism (Carter, 2007; Johnson et al, 2017; Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber, 2006) and Discourses of Whiteness (Borsheim-Black, 2015) in high school literacy education. Moreover, while I do not have precise numbers in support of this, my own experience as a teacher in this school provides me with the ability to speak to the legitimacy of Nyah’s claim that the number of authors of diverse social, cultural, gendered, and ethnic groups who found representation in the literature being taught in that school at that time was small.

Even though it was early in the year, Nyah had already positioned herself as a generally outspoken participant in our class’s discussions on literature, but her willingness to go beyond a reading of the text to levy a larger critique on her literacy education may have afforded her the opportunity to further develop and strengthen her public voice in the classroom. And this perhaps began with those behind-the-scenes conversations had in solidarity with her peers, who according to Nyah appear to have gently teased her about the fact that now that she would be reading a book authored by a woman of color, she would finally be happy in English class. A strengthening of her voice might also be detected in her
willingness to counter further attempts to silence her that arose within the space of this dialogue, as in her reaction to a White student towards the back of the room whose comment she clearly interpreted as a challenge to her perspectives. Her open challenge to him (“Shut up, Logan,\textsuperscript{19} cause I can hear you all the way from over here”) constituted not only an act of resistance to being questioned or delegitimized, it also called the speaker to account for the fact that his utterance was not made openly, but surreptitiously. Not only was Nyah no longer going to accept a kind of \textit{sotto voce} veil of silence for herself, she refused to give quarter to the inverse from Logan. Nyah did hedge a bit immediately following her exchange with him by employing the word “just” as a means of softening her previous comment on how glad she was to be reading Danticat (“I’m just saying” and “I was just saying”), but she nevertheless maintained her position. And any indication that Nyah might have relaxed her stance here simply serves as an indication of the risks inherent to extracting oneself from silence, which can include threats of retaliation and further attempts from those in positions of power to silence others. An additional risk embedded in Nyah’s challenge to Logan comes when she resorts to silencing him by insisting that he “shut up”, which may signal that one aspect of the struggle to challenge those who would silence involves the potential for a vicious cycle of response through which silencing acts are continually weaponized in ways that lead to further suppression of ideas and perspectives. An important challenge that I missed in this moment was the imperative for me to pause and foster respectful dialogue between Nyah and Logan. In not mediating their exchange by

\textsuperscript{19} White, male student
engaging them in dialogue aimed at unpacking underlying conflict(s) that influenced the encounter, I wasted the opportunity to engage the two of them—and potentially others in the class—in the deeper critical conversation most likely needed to break such a cycle of silencing. In this regard, I became complicit in the kind of avoidance or ignoring of critical conversations on difficult issues like race and cultural representation that characterize covert forms of silencing (Call-Cummings, 2017).

My follow-up to Nyah’s comments, in which I questioned whether it was something “else” perhaps related to the quality of the writing of texts she has read in school that might have had an impact on whether or not she was able to connect with them served to further delegitimize her argument over the lack of diversity and representation that she noted in the school-sanctioned canon. But Nyah met my challenge head on in her exclamation, “It’s who I am!” This served as a clear rebuke of my attempt to place the onus either explicitly on the writer or, even worse, on Nyah herself for just not being able to connect with texts she has read in school (unlike Scarlett who then went on to express having found a connection with Danticat). Although Scarlett voices support for Nyah’s experience, stating that sometimes it isn’t possible to connect to a writer, she then suggests that it has been possible for her and it might be possible for others to do so “if the writer has really good technique.” As I noted earlier, at the time my overt intention in hearing this was to try to maintain a balance of interpretations surrounding the way in which a reader may or may not be able to connect with a text. However, the suggestion that it might be something other than what Nyah has expressed to be true about her experience, something other than a lack of diversity in curricular texts and critical conversations relevant to her identity, places the blame on her and essentially asks her to ‘get it together’ and to find a way to access those texts. It harkens
to a kind of bootstrap model of meritocratic thinking (Villanueva, 1993) and to constructs like Black individualism\(^{20}\) that are routinely imposed upon members of minority groups and used as frameworks for explaining away or justifying ongoing cycles of inequality and racism. Rather than conceding to structural inequalities embedded within society that serve to disenfranchise members of specific groups, they point instead to an individual’s mental, moral, or civic lassitude as the cause for their failure to succeed in economic and political life.

In terms of literacy education, my observed persistence in trying to “strike a balance between Nyah’s and Scarlett’s viewpoints” raises a few important considerations for White educators who want to engage in the project of critical literacy education. Regardless of my stated intention to teach in ways that honor social justice and equity, my status as a White male presents the very real and significant risk of my persistence in privileging the perspectives of two White students (in this case, Frazier and Scarlett) who argue continually that the reader should attempt to “find” a cultural connection with a work as a kind of alternative solution to Nyah’s expressed lived experience as a student of color and her perceptions of cultural inequality embedded in her education. This persistence in White privilege is made possible by a playing field in literacy education—and in education and

\(^{20}\) Sears and Henry (2003) coin the term *Black individualism* to identify a construct characterized by the fusion of broad racial prejudice and an emphasis on rugged individualism that are embedded within a range of general conservative values at the heart of symbolic racism. They identify it as providing a more targeted framework for understanding racist perspectives regarding the “inability of Blacks to live up to conventional individualistic values” (p. 272).
American society more broadly—that has been traditionally skewed in favor of a White majority. My attempt to strike any “balance” is, in fact, not a true striking of balance at all. Doing so fails to consider that the connections that two White students may have been able to make with the texts they’ve encountered across their academic careers were largely supported by a canon that undoubtedly bore a much closer likeness to their cultural, ethnic, religious, national, and racial backgrounds than it may have for their non-White classmates. If we examine our curricula and find these inequalities to be the case, we must not only look at the frequency with which we teach texts from a Eurocentric canon but also the ways in which we teach any text that risks either implicitly or explicitly requiring readers from non-White, non-Western cultural backgrounds to reach further outside of themselves than their White counterparts in order to connect with them. (We might also reflect on how often the opposite has been the case for our White students.) In short, we should interrogate in what small and large ways we privilege the perspectives of those who look, sound, dress, and speak like we do.

While I can say that I was genuinely invested in trying to present a variety of perspectives on the issues raised during this conversation and to maintain my commitment to striking a balance between those, the ways in which my own embedded biases, the historical privileging of Eurocentric literary traditions, texts, and critical frameworks, and the ongoing forms of racism and racial discrimination that persist in school and society undermined those intentions indicates a major challenge for educators who claim a progressive agenda. As actors in the cultural politics of education we must do much more intentional work than I did here to find ways to foster critical conversations that respect, value, and account for the variety of perspectives that all students bring to the table. At the
same time, we must also work to maintain a social justice stance that recognizes embedded
inequalities in those perspectives that must be openly challenged—and to then challenge
those. Further evidence of the need for this kind of critical reflection on curriculum and
pedagogy and the necessary hard work of having open, difficult conversations about race in
the classroom came in the closing moments of this class dialogue.

Following Nyah’s reference to *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a book that she “liked” in spite
of it being part of “what I’m forced to read in school” and Frazier’s subsequent reference to
the Emerson quote as an argument for becoming sensitive to the writer and finding
engagement with the source culture from which a text hails, I attempted to strike a stronger
counterbalance in weighing these positions. In pointing to the moment in Danticat’s literacy
history where she discovers a community of Haitian writers who are creating works that she
identifies as being both to and for her, I attempted to analogize Nyah’s voiced experience
with Danticat’s to provide a challenge in support of Nyah’s position and experience. The
result of this was an exchange characterized by what I have come to term a *negotiated silence*
through which Nyah reached out to those students who complained about taking an African
American history course during the previous year by drawing a comparison between their
voiced frustration with being made to learn repeatedly about a single ethnic group and her
own frustration with having to do the same given a schooled literary canon dominated by
White, Western authors. Nyah was perhaps taking a hint from me in drawing this
comparison between her own experiences and those of her classmates in that it paralleled
the analogy I had just drawn between her and Danticat. However, the immensely disturbing
and darkly ironic aspect of this exercise is that Nyah has been effectively forced into
negotiating with these students the truth of her own experience of having been to a greater
or lesser extent either underrepresented or wholly left out of the literature she has been
required to read for several years. She is then made to pander to their complaints about
being made to take a course in African American literature—complaints that I know from
experience as a teacher at this school were based on arguments that lacked legitimate
reasoning and hinged largely on racially-influenced blanket resistance by a significant number
of White students (and their parents) towards having to learn about the history of racism and
racial discrimination in this country. While Nyah certainly made the choice to draw this
comparison, I would argue that the compromised position she had come to occupy in the
conversation as a female Black student having to defend negative experiences grounded in
her racial identity to a predominately White class left her with little choice other than to do
so or to fall back into silence. In her move to bring these students to an understanding of
her perspectives on inequalities in curricular representation by referencing their own very
different—and potentially racist—arguments about why they shouldn’t have to learn about
African American history, the onus was placed on Nyah to do the work of educating. In a
narrative that is too often true, yet another person of color was being placed in the position
of having to “teach” White people about the nature of racism and discrimination. Even
worse, Nyah was forced to do so by creating a false comparison that served to implicitly
validate racist claims made by White students and families that they had been somehow
discriminated against by their school and district by being forced to take a course that
focused on a culture that was not their own. The perverse reversal embedded in this
argument operates in hegemonic ways not dissimilar to how African Americans have been
historically positioned in the US in the context of systems of law enforcement, immigration,
and education (to name just a few). Rather than having her identity, experiences, arguments,
and history be acknowledged and accepted as valid on their own merit, Nyah’s words provide another example of a Black American taking up the tools of her oppressors as way to explain and justify herself and her condition to White majority power brokers in ways that will “make sense” to those individuals and groups. The transcript of my response to Nyah, where I utter rather tersely, “Mmmhmm. Yeah, yeah that may be” fails convey what I actually felt in the moment as I listened to Nyah’s argument and what I might have more accurately responded (but didn’t) when listening to her have to legitimize herself and her perspectives in this way: Fuck that.

Amir, to his credit pushed back one final time by insisting that the notion of becoming a citizen of the text that Frazier fore fronted in his comments on Emerson negates what for him is the true purpose of reading, namely to “establish your own ideas and [so] you can feel like your own type of view on life”, what he then links to developing his own epistemology²¹ towards his identity and the world. Tegan’s final comment on the matter, her description of a process of reading through which a balance might be struck between maintaining one’s own perspectives while actively attempting to engage with the world of the text seemed to resonate with Nyah, who responded, “That makes sense” just as the bell rang signaling the end of class. Did it really make sense to Nyah? Given the ebb and flow of the conversation, I wasn’t so sure.

²¹ Students in both Sections A and B were recently introduced to this branch of philosophy as part of their work in their American History course and had begun using epistemological frameworks to develop knowledge and justified belief based on the examination of historical events.
My analysis of the transcription of this discussion developed from a thematic coding process through which I identified those moments of silence, of silencing, and of challenges to both silence and silencing that emerged during cycles of reading and reflection. Ultimately, what appears as most significant in terms of its relevance to my practice is my own silence, which exists within the negative space—to borrow a term from the visual arts—that sits between the lines of talk and which comes in the form of all that I didn’t say as a facilitator of this discussion. The final challenge to that form of silence, as I’ve indicated above, is to recognize that the conversation must not end when the period bell rings. Instead, critical reflection on classroom talk must be taken up by teachers as a method of preparation and professional development for finding ways to address these moments both in subsequent conversations and through ongoing planning and practice. While I certainly reflected informally on the conversations I had with my students at the time, I had not developed a methodology for going beyond simply recording and tracking what was said in the moment during class sessions via board notes and for moving towards a form of reflective praxis that would involve shaping my goals and objectives for teaching in pragmatic ways based on the haps of the classroom (Sumara, 1996).

Engaging in research on my teaching and conducting analyses of classroom conversations like this one has allowed me to imagine what I might have said at a number of points along the way and has led me to engage in more expansive readings of literature produced by teacher researchers who have focused on how to make sense of the ways in which students respond to texts through classroom discourse. While it is undeniably unrealistic to imagine that most classroom teachers can build into their professional lives the time needed to engage in fine-grained, ongoing systematic inquiry into their practice while
simultaneously teaching five or more sections of language arts on a daily basis, what is incumbent upon teachers and schools is the need to develop some system for pedagogical reflection and action. Listening back to and reflecting upon classroom talk may be one important way to develop our skills in classroom discussion, but we must remind ourselves that our voices as teachers do not exist solely in utterances spoken during direct instruction and dialogue in the classroom. We speak also through the curricular choices we make, the texts we choose to teach, and the prompts for writing and discussion that we author. In those moments when we identify failures in our ability, attentiveness, or willingness to literally speak out in the classroom, we can pick ourselves up and find a way towards voice by attending to those other media through which our voice is made manifest in our teaching. As my conversations around Danticat have shown with Section A and will show continue to show in my discussions with Section B, I had not yet found a method for attending to the voices of my students and for helping to carry those voices forward as we progressed through her text. Instead, our reading of Danticat largely retained its focus on the pre-ordained path laid out through the prompts I developed at the outset of the course. The questions that students raised in response to her text that touched on larger questions about the relationship between text, author, and audience and representation and the canon remained artifacts tied to this reading rather than becoming lines of inquiry used with intention to inform my ongoing teaching. However, as I will discuss in the opening to Chapter 8, by the time we would move into our work with James Weldon Johnson, I had begun to figure out a method for structured reflection and planning that might help me to better attend to what was lacking here in this regard.
CHAPTER 5 – INVIDUALITY ↔ SOLIDARITY

From Singular to Plural

Students from my Section B class chose to focus on Danticat’s portrayal of the creative works of specific individuals who appear in her novel and on her chronicling of how these artists’ actions combined with group memberships that they held to have a significant impact on their activist work. 22 One question these students raised asked whether a singular person can enact change and the extent to which an he or she may or may not achieve a level of success in doing so. Students offered a few examples from Danticat’s book of persons who have had a significant impact on her life and on the lives of others as evidence of the power that an individual might have to enact change. They referenced, for instance, Danticat’s chapter titled “I Speak Out” in which she tells the story of Alèrte Bélance, a woman whose husband had been a political organizer for Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a presidential candidate and political rival of the current regime in Haiti. Bélance was abducted as part of a failed attempt by paramilitary members who, during a 1991 military coup d’état, entered Bélance’s home armed with machetes intent upon either arresting or killing her husband. When her husband managed to escape the raid, they took Bélance in his stead. Bélance was brutally mutilated by the men and left for dead in a mass grave. She was later rescued by a soldier who, as Danticat notes in an aside, “proving that not all soldiers are the same” (2010, p. 79) was passing by the site where she had been abandoned, noticed she was

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22 See Appendix F, “Class Discussion, 9-20-2012 (Section B): Create Dangerously”
still alive, and transported her the nearest hospital. Bélance survived, but with the loss of her
tongue and an arm and with severely disfiguring scars covering most of her body. Through
the publication of pictures of her injuries on a human rights pamphlet, her appearance on an
episode of the Phil Donahue Show, and her travels around the United States to tell her story
and the story of Haiti to any who would listen, Bélance became one of the faces of the
atrocities enacted upon dissident Haitians during that period. Danticat presents her story as
an exemplar both of the nature of those atrocities and of the strength and courage of a
woman who refused to be silenced.

In referencing this chapter in Danticat’s collection, Amelia, the student who
pointed to Bélance’s story as a moment that exemplifies the impact that an individual can
have on the lives of others commented, “the one thing I noticed that carried my attention
was that there was that one person that did help Alèrte. Like, there was still like that one
person. There is like hope in society for change, because people still will help each other.” In
response to Amelia’s comments, I asked whether we can detect other instances in Danticat’s
book where we might identify an individual who acts in a small, but significant way (as the
soldier did here) as a catalyst for greater change—whether this might be a theme that
Danticat has constructed through the vignettes that she presents. Sebastian commented
that it appears that each chapter in the book focuses on a different person who has had

23 White, female student
24 White, male student
some impact on Danticat’s life, and Alejandro, Isaac, and Julian offered examples ranging from a doctor to a radio announcer to a government official, each of whom contributed to a larger social project or activist cause related to Haiti and its people.

As the students listed these, we leafed through the text together, identifying each moment and clarifying the contributions that these individuals made in support of some larger effort. I continued taking notes on the board to track the trajectory of the conversation, and at one point, I wondered aloud whether these individuals might ever feel as though some of the challenges that they face are so big that “they can’t, you know, kind of make the change that they want to. But maybe there’s a message there that they in a small way, they’re doing something?” to which Dylan replied, “I was going to say, I like the idea of a group of people helping.” In response to this, Amelia turned the group’s attention to “I Am Not a Journalist”, the third chapter of Create Dangerously in which Danticat remembers the life and work of Jean Dominique, an activist anchor for Radio Haiti Inter who used his broadcasts as a vehicle for challenging openly and critically “groups as well as individuals, organizations, and institutions who’d proven themselves to be inhumane, unethical, or simply unjust” (2010, p. 42). Danticat developed a long-lasting friendship with Dominique, and she spends a large section of the chapter discussing their collaboration on a Haitian cinema project and seminar that they co-taught through Ramapo College. The project focused on the role that film has played for Haitians as an artistic medium that embodies

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25 White, male student
26 African American, male student
27 White, male student
both aesthetic and democratic value through its ability to “be not only open and available but also welcoming to those who were shut off from other means of information communication and entertainment” (2010, pp. 44-45). Dominique was gunned down outside of his radio station on April 3, 2000, and the overall thrust of the chapter captures the impact that Dominique had through his participation in a broad spectrum of relationships ranging from the interpersonal to the national. That is, Danticat not only captures the powerful influences Dominique had on her through their own collaborative work and on his wife, Michèle Montas, with whom he co-anchored Radio Haiti Inter, but also the larger impact he had on his students given his position as a teacher and the much broader scope of his activist leadership of a large listenership who looked to Dominique’s broadcasts as a gauge to better understand ways to navigate the ever-shifting political climate in Haiti to achieve their goals.

Amelia’s suggestion that we consider this chapter as an example of a group of individuals coming together “to help” (in Frazier’s words) inspired me, as I compiled my running notes at the front of the classroom, to move the conversation toward an examination of the collaborative character of the creative activist work in which individuals like Bélance, Dominique, Montas, and Danticat were engaged. With this in mind, I took a few more examples from students of sections from Danticat’s book where we might identify people coming together to enact change. Many students now began speaking to each other in asides, and I was inspired by the turn that the conversation had taken and by the energy and dialogue that had developed in the room to write the word *solidarity* on the board. I asked the class whether anyone could define this term for me, and a few began looking it up
in the dictionaries housed in their desks.  

28 Addison volunteered a partial definition: “complete unity as of opinion or feeling”, to which I added, “So, what we might see […] or what we might ask is, ‘Is there a relationship between these singular people and these groups? Do some of these singular people have membership in some of these groups and, you know, what’s the relationship, maybe, between groups making changes…and individual change?’” I paused briefly to give students time to consider my question and wrote a version of it on the board. A few moments passed and no student offered a response, so I suggested that we open the conversation up to other students who might be interested in sharing what they had discussed in their small groups, regardless of whether those were related to this question around solidarity or whether they focused on other aspects of Danticat’s writing.  

29 **Insider/Outsider Status**

The discussion that followed was characterized by a deliberation over the complex nature of cultural, ethnic, and national group membership. It emerged from students’

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28 These dictionaries were a mainstay of my classroom and my teaching. “Look it up” had become a mantra for me, to the point that students knew it was coming. It had become something of a running joke.

29 In one of my research notes logged while transcribing this discussion, I noted that this may have been a missed opportunity. “Why didn’t I allow for this to be explored in the moment rather than pressing on with my pre-determined course?” I asked. However, the broader perspective that time and distance have offered indicates that the conversation that these students proceeded to have, a discussion that focused on Danticat’s struggles as an artist and activist, the changes she underwent as part of this process, and the group dynamics embedded in the criticism she received from those Haitians who read her work and who were offended by her representation of the country and its people may, in fact, have been more closely tied than I initially realized to our focus on the relationship between individual acts and group solidarity.
interests in exploring sections of Danticat’s essays that focused on her identity as an artist and on how the publication and reception of her writing has impacted how she understands herself in relationship to her craft and to her readership. Danticat conveys for her readers that given her position as a member of the Haitian diaspora who chooses to write in openly activist ways, this creative work has involved for her a kind of push-pull of insider-outsider status. The focal point of the conversation became sections of Danticat’s essays in *Create Dangerously* in which she responds to the critical reception of her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and Cassidy moved the class in this direction.

Cassidy: Um, well I asked my group did they think that Danticat considers herself to be on the other side of the water? And the answer that, um—she [indicating another student] thought that Danticat—like the fact that she is *a diaspora*—is a bad thing, and Isa said that it isn’t necessarily a bad thing, uh and Victoria said that like being part of the diaspora gives you more points of view and just expands like you as a person. It isn’t necessarily like a bad thing. […] I think that [members of the Haitian diaspora] often feel like outsiders and like aliens and they don’t belong because you know they have the guilt of [inaudible] and maybe their families feel like it’s hopeless, and the people that they actually come from, they don’t feel like they’re [members of the diaspora are] actually Haitians [inaudible]. And like Isa said, Isa said that…

Me: Can—Read the passage for us. So, we’re on 32 here, and we’re talking about dealing with outsider/insider status potentially. What does it mean to be an outsider or insider in terms of your status as a member of this community? Go ahead.

Cassidy: Um, okay. [reading at length from the text] “The virginity testing element of the book led to a backlash in some Haitian American circles. ‘You are a liar,’ a woman wrote to me right before I left on the trip, ‘You dishonor us, making us sexual and psychological misfits.’ ‘Why was she taught to read and write?’ I overheard a man saying at a Haitian American fund-raising gala in New York, where I was getting an award for writing this book. ‘That is not us. The things she writes, they are not us.’” So, um, when I brought that up, I was like—[…] [Victoria] said that because she is a part of the diaspora that women just like want to attack her because

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30 African American, female student
what if they were Haitian? I don’t think that they would be—feel so angry about the book. I don’t think they would see it as an attack. But since she isn’t directly from Haiti, they wanted to attack her because they don’t see her as really Haitian. They don’t think she has a right to speak on behalf of Haitians.

In “Walk Straight”, the chapter of Create Dangerously that Cassidy references here, Danticat discusses the range of critical responses that she received to Breath, Eyes, Memory from inside the Haitian community. When Cassidy relates the question that she posed to her study group, which asked whether they thought that Danticat believes herself to be on “the other side of the water”, she alludes to Chapter 6 of Danticat’s collection which takes its title from that phrase and in which Danticat explains how the phrase has become a way for Haitians to conceptualize the particular phenomenon through which “faraway family members realize that they are discovering—or recovering—in death fragments of a life that had swirled in hidden stories. In Haiti the same expression, lòt bò dlo, the other side of the water, can be used to denote the eternal afterlife as well as an émigré’s eventual destination. It is sometimes impossible even for those of us who are on the same side of lòt bò dlo to find one another” (2010, p. 94). In the preceding small group session, Cassidy’s questions clearly became the starting point for a complicated discussion of Danticat’s difficult negotiation of intersections between her own identity as a Haitian-born American, her goals as an author seeking to tell a multigenerational story of Haitian women, her own nuanced concerns around individual and group representation through artistic creation, and the often brutal criticisms leveled both on her and on her work by her Haitian readership. Cassidy’s choice to reference this moment in Danticat’s text as a talking point for our whole-group discussion sparked a new conversation that reveals the nature of some of the emergent processes of sensemaking in which these students engaged as they were introduced for the first time to
the variety of people, perspectives, histories, issues, and concepts embedded in their reading of Danticat. From a critical literacy pedagogical perspective, the above exchange, as well as what followed might help us to better understand what it means to teach a critically reflective, self-referential text such as Danticat’s *Create Dangerously*, one that blends elements of narrative with essay, memoir, and political and cultural critique.

Cassidy’s brief retelling of the conversation between her, Isa, and Victoria in her small group meeting conveys a speculative process through which each student appears to have attempted to use Danticat’s text to imagine for themselves the lived experiences of both the author and Sophie Caco, the protagonist narrator in Danticat’s novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In doing so, they attempted to make sense of the interplay between the author, the protagonist, and the various antagonist critics that Danticat faced as a way gain a better understanding (in reference the subtitle of Danticat’s book) of the the immigrant artist at work and what it means for Danticat to hold membership in the Haitian diaspora. The compositional quality of Danticat’s chapter has a critical bearing on this process. Danticat blends memoir or essay-style reflections on the reception of her work with a letter that she wrote to Sophie Caco, as a way of speaking back to the ways in which that character was forced against her will “to represent a larger space than your flesh […] to represent every girl child, every woman from this land that you and I love so much” (2010, pp. 34). In doing so, Danticat captures the same difficult back and forth negotiation that Cassidy, Isa, and

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31 White, female student  
32 African American, female student
Victoria experienced as they attempted to make sense of Danticat’s struggles as an author facing criticism of her identity and her work. Looking to the above excerpt of transcript, we can see this negotiation unfold first with Cassidy’s questioning of whether Danticat considers herself to be on the other side of the water. This is followed by the unidentified student’s reply that being a member of the diaspora may be inherently “bad”, Isa’s disagreement that “it isn’t necessarily a bad thing”, Victoria’s elaboration on Isa’s push back (“being part of the diaspora gives you more points of view and just expands like you as a person. It isn’t necessarily like a bad thing”), and Cassidy’s final comments in which she imagines that members of the Haitian diaspora must “often feel like outsiders and like aliens and they don’t belong”, that they may bear some sense of guilt, that their families may feel “like it’s hopeless”, and that “they wanted to attack her because they don’t see her as really Haitian. They don’t think she has a right to speak on behalf of Haitians.”

Writing on immigration and the politics of national belonging and building upon theoretical frameworks on established nationals and outsider nationals and the intersectional power dynamics at play in the construction of national identity, Manolis Pratsinakis (2018) argues that entrenched ideologies persist in supporting our conceptualizing of the world as a collection of discrete nations. He notes that this construct is supported political mechanisms that “turn immigrants into de-facto outsiders as soon as they cross national borders and start building their life abroad, away from their previous ‘national home’.” This outsider status, he notes, characterizes not only immigrants’ relationship to the state, but operates also at the interpersonal level “in their everyday interactions with members of the native society” (p. 9). Pratsinakis characterizes these established nationals as self-identified stewards and representatives of sets of cultural norms who experience deep national pride and may view
immigrants, or outsider nationals, as threatening to “their” nation’s unified cultural identity. Pratsinakis’ research does not touch on how established nationals might view members of their nation’s diaspora who, although they are situated outside of their country of origin, still claim deeply-rooted cultural and ethnic memberships to that nation. However, the established-outsider model that he develops might be useful in understanding the struggle over national identity, positionality, and representation that Danticat chronicles in *Create Dangerously*, particularly with regard to the apparent threat conveyed through her critics’ responses to her work.

If we conceptualize the novel as a textual creation of a world unto itself, a secondary representation of the primary (Benton, 1993), then the characters within can be thought of as fictive citizens who occupy that world. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a novel born of an essay about Danticat’s own childhood, and although it is a work of fiction, its subject matter and setting are very much intended to represent with realism the experiences of its Haitian narrator, Sophie Caco. So, in creating her novel, Danticat authors not only a secondary world of Haiti but a secondary citizen of Haiti who—regardless of Danticat’s intentions—appears to have become for many of Danticat’s readers an unwelcome representative of that nation. Margaret Glover’s discussion of Iser’s (1974) theorizing of processes of meaning making in which readers engage as they encounter the secondary world of the text and its occupants might help us to better understand the powerful transaction that some of Danticat’s readers had when encountering her text. As Glover writes, if we consider that although the reader must be aware that any experience [of the text] must be an illusion, he/she cannot watch him/herself having that illusion [and] so must in fact oscillate between involvement in and observation of these illusions. The dynamic of the text depends on the failure to achieve balance here between the polysemantic nature of the text and the illusion experienced, and this leads to other areas of indeterminacy such as shifting perspective, and an interplay of illusion-making and
illusion-breaking. The reader seeks continually for consistency in order to make sense of the unfamiliar. But this entails selection, and hence exclusion of some possibilities; and these excluded possibilities assume a reality inasmuch as they are a latent disturbance of the established consistency. (2018, p. 74)

This oscillatory interplay between illusion and involvement and the attendant dynamic of indeterminacy that occurs within the mind of the reader—the conflict between desire for consistency and the disturbance that comes when making sense of the unfamiliar world through the selection and exclusion of possibilities—might help explain the nature of the disturbance that Danticat’s readers experienced. In their scathing condemnation of her work, which included branding her a liar, questioning why she was ever allowed to be taught to read and write, and accusing her of dishonoring Haitians by casting them as “sexual and psychological misfits” (2010, p. 32), Danticat’s critics seem to claim established national identities for themselves through which they are afforded the power and discretion to sanction or condemn images of Haiti as being either authentic or fallacious. And they may do so as a means of coping with the dissonance they have encountered in trying to reckon with the illusory but perhaps all-too-real world of her novel. Using Sophie Caco as a proxy for Danticat, they then map Danticat’s outsider status as a member of the diaspora onto the fictional narrator of her novel to discredit the story that Sophie tells regardless of the fact that many of the practices that she relates have been historically documented. It is as though her critics view Danticat as possessing a kind of “immigrant presence” in their own world as conveyed through Sophie’s words and actions in the fictional world of the text, and thus they view Danticat with the same suspicion and sense of threat as Pratsinakis finds established nationals do the immigrant who, in crossing the border into their nation, is immediately positioned as a “de-facto outsider” (2018, p. 9).
Employing first the transactional framework, which positions the novel as having the capacity to present an illusory, secondary world that bears real and significant potential for reshaping the cultural truths that a reader holds about the primary world, and then overlaying that model with Pratišnakis’ intersectional framework on immigrant-native relations, we might be able to better understand the inherent danger in the creative work of activist authorship and the potential that texts have to pose profound threat to readers for whom a narrative bears either unrecognizable or distorted images of their realities. It may be unfair that Danticat’s critics have forced Sophie to become a representative for all Haitian women and their experiences, but it is no less powerful and important to recognize the ways in which a character like Sophie might become just that for those readers. Danticat recognizes this, and the letter that she writes to Sophie—and that Cassidy will reference in the dialogue that I present in the coming pages—conveys the internal struggle that Danticat experiences as part of her commitment to speak her truth through writing.

As teachers of literature, bringing transactional reader response theories and intersectional theories on race, culture, and immigrant-native studies into our pedagogical repertoire might provide us with a lens for hosting conversations that get us closer to the Gramscian notion of a “praxis of the present” (Lather, 1993, p. 132), a progressive agenda for increasing individuals’ awareness of their own power and for helping them to develop a critical consciousness towards the roles that their situations and actions play as local and global citizens. Lather’s call for a move towards praxis-oriented research provides an analogue for the value that the concept of *praxis* has for hosting critical conversations around literature. These kinds of conversations, she finds, can move students closer to taking on the roles of “praxis-oriented inquirers [who] seek emancipatory knowledge” of the
kind that “increases awareness of the contradictions hidden or distorted by everyday understandings” and that “directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of social processes” (Lather, 1993, p. 132). During my exchange with Cassidy, my question, “What does it mean to be an outsider or insider in terms of your status as a member of this community?” was certainly valid as an entry point into a larger discussion, but I did not make the subsequent moves necessary to progress towards a praxis of the present orientation towards teaching. I might have facilitated a more sustained, in-depth inquiry marked by a nuanced dialogue that focused on what it means to hold insider/outsider status. I might have delved more deeply into the role that Danticat’s writing might play in helping us to unpack the complicated social and cultural politics that I suggest might be possible through the discussion I’ve presented above of Danticat’s work. In short, the methodological implications that Lather identifies as beneficial to emancipatory research apply also to the emancipatory goals of critical pedagogy. And given the invitation that Cassidy provided through her comments, I could have taken a next step in making explicit how texts provide a medium both for unpacking the nature of those power structures that serve to dominate and subjugate and for indicating how we might counter and transform those structures. I might have done so by guiding students through processes of identifying the contradictions and distortions embedded the act of reading and transacting with a text and the world it conveys, by asking them to consider the subjectivities and positionalities readers bring to bear part of the discourses or repertoires they carry, and by posing the question, “What ways forward does this analysis suggest for transforming society?”
While my teaching did not take us in that direction, in listening to Cassidy’s rendering of Danticat’s writing, I was struck by the seeming imbalance in her analysis towards negative ideations associated with holding membership in the Haitian diaspora that certainly occupy (and justifiably so) Danticat’s writing. I felt as though Cassidy glossed rather quickly over a comment like Victoria’s regarding the positive aspects of the multiple perspectives afforded by Danticat’s identity as a Haitian immigrant, and I wanted to push her to explore that possibility. I asked, “So, what was her argument about writing that stuff [about virginity testing] and why it was, you know, valid for her to write that?” My choice to respond by asking Cassidy to articulate whether Danticat presents an argument in support of the validity and authenticity of her work was my way of trying to see whether we could identify a moment where Danticat tips the scale towards positive aspects of holding membership in the diaspora, and in particular for her work as an immigrant Haitian writer. Cassidy responded by directing our attention to Danticat’s letter to Sophie and quoting it at length.

Cassidy: —she said that um, “I guess I have always felt, writing about you [Sophie], that I was in the presence of family, a family full of kindness as well as harshness, a family full of love as well as grief, a family deeply rooted in the past yet struggling to confront an unpredictable future.” […] “I felt blessed to have encountered this family of yours, the Cacos, named after a bird whose wings look like flames. I feel blessed to have shared your secrets, your mother’s, your aunt’s, your grandmother’s secrets, mysteries deeply imbedded in you, in them, much like the wiry vetiver clinging to the side of these hills” (2011, pp. 33-35). So, I mean basically she wrote it because, you know, she felt like it’s Haiti and it reminded her of her family and stuff, and it reminded her of like—of Haiti.

The passage that Cassidy selected to read aloud is a powerful one, and her comment that Danticat’s motives in writing this letter to Sophie were simply to present an accurate representation of Haiti that “reminded her of her family and stuff” clearly do not do justice
to the dynamic that Danticat frames regarding the pain and comfort she has experienced as a function of her positionality as an immigrant artist. Instructionally, I once again missed the opportunity here to slow down the conversation and to guide Cassidy and the class in a deeper analysis of the excerpt that she referenced, one that would have perhaps served to develop a more nuanced discussion of the specific reasons Danticat provides to justify writing the lives of Haitian women through the fictional story of Sophie. A closer read of the passage might have focused on Danticat’s powerful statement that writing about Sophie placed her “in the presence of family, a family full of kindness as well as harshness, a family full of love as well as grief, a family deeply rooted in the past yet struggling to confront an unpredictable future” (2010, p. 34). Here the message is clear: in writing about Sophie and the fictional family of the novel, Danticat was not only finding herself in the figurative “presence” of the Haitian family that occupied the world of the page, she was also establishing through a process of dangerous creation a very real presence for herself in a community of Haitian and Haitian American readers and critics, a ‘family’ of sorts that would also prove to embody the intersecting qualities of kindness and harshness, love and grief, a deeply rooted past and an unpredictable future. I might have asked Cassidy, in what ways were Danticat and her critics unable to find each other? Based on their critiques of her work, where might Danticat’s critics position themselves? Finally, I might have referred Cassidy back to her original question of whether Danticat saw herself as being positioned on “the other side of water” and asked her what it might reveal for us to read this excerpt from her letter to Sophie in juxtaposition to Danticat’s statement that “It is sometimes impossible even for those of us who are on the same side of lòt bò dlo to find one another.” Where is
Danticat positioned in terms of the river? I never really attempted to answer Cassidy’s original question. Instead, the discussion moved onward.

The Politics of Representation

Since our conversation had at this point transitioned away from a focus on community membership and solidarity and towards a deeper exploration of Danticat’s critics and issues related to writing and representation, I decided to introduce the term *essentialization* to the class. I commented that I felt as though the backlash that Danticat had received was perhaps connected to concerns voiced by her Haitian readership that the images of Haiti and its people portrayed in it would stand as stereotypical archetypes to be ridiculed by non-Haitians—concerns that Haitian identity would be reduced to largely negative sets of fixed traits, behaviors, and cultural practices. This was a consideration taken up by both Nyah and Amir in a section of my conversation with Section A that I did not discuss in Chapter 4, but which remained on my mind as I moved into my discussion of Danticat with this group of students.

During that previous class, Amir pointed to pride and concerns over optics as motivators for the anger and resentment expressed by Danticat’s critics. He expressed understanding towards their position, noting that “they were too proud and they were scared of what other people may have thought of them, you know. They were being proud of who they are, and you know, where they come from. I don’t think there’s nothing wrong with that.” Nyah followed this by homing in on the glaring incongruity characteristic of the denial by Danticat’s critics that her portrayal of Haiti and its people was realistic when clearly historical fact supported the credibility of her account. Nyah remarked, “I think the word
that’s missing in this conversation to me is exposure. Only because like maybe they didn’t think—maybe they think that she is exposing them. Instead—I don’t want to necessarily say that they actually think that what she’s writing about isn’t going on, because they know, cause they live there—I think that they were more so afraid and hurt that she’s telling, you know, us—I’m saying, you know, people in New York or America about what goes on over there.”

In my current conversation with students from Section B, I now attempted to connect the issue of representation that was clearly of interest to both classes of students with the earlier half of our discussion on group membership and solidarity. I commented that Danticat’s status as a novelist is inherently problematic. If she chooses to write novels set in Haiti or novels that feature Haitians or members of the Haitian diaspora, she must by needs create singular characters who bear specific sets of traits and engage in specific actions. In doing so, she runs the risk that those traits and actions may be perceived as broadly characteristic of a larger group. Because Danticat clearly positions herself as an activist artist invested in conveying with realism the lives of her characters as they live and interact in a particular setting, if she chooses to write, as she did in Breath, Eyes, Memory, about difficult subjects like rape, the cultural practice of virginity testing, and issues of racial and cultural identity, her work must necessarily risk offending at least some portion of her readership. Additionally, by being both Haitian herself and a novelist who has chosen to write a first-person narrative set in Haiti that tracks closely to autobiography, she would most likely be identified by readers as a credible representative of that community and thus risk criticism from those members of that group who may find her writing sensational and may choose to voice negative responses to it.
In reply to this, Isa commented, “I just had a question—because she was writing about an individual family. She wasn’t writing about groups of families. Like if you read a story about a particular family in America, you’re not going to think all Americans do the things that they do. So why did they [sic] receive that reaction when it wasn’t like different stories about different families all from Haiti? Like it’s just one family, so everybody experiences something different, so why was it assumed that she was generalizing about Haitians?” Cassidy responded that perhaps it was her positionality as an author writing from outside of Haiti that cast her in the greatest negative light for her critics: “That if she isn’t from there, they’re just going to have a reason to not approve of what she’s gonna write and put out.” Julian’s reply to Cassidy led to an exchange that is worth quoting at length. It captures the complicated intersections of race, culture, power, and history that flow through and influence the issues of authorship, representation, group membership, and creative legitimacy over which these students spent the majority of this discussion deliberating.

Julian: I actually think that it’s more of that Haitians are a minority and there aren’t that many stories about them and—that get read by most people in say, a pop culture world. So that if you’re going to read a book, and let’s say it’s the only book that you’ve ever read about Haitian culture, you’ll assume that. Now, stuff like American culture and European culture—that doesn’t happen a lot because it’s a very—most people experience it and that’s what most of the books are about. So, if it’s a minority culture, that’s what’s going to happen. That’s the reason why people are worried about it. It wasn’t that she’s being discriminated against entirely, but some of it has to do with that.

Me: Yeah, we talk about the United States culture, the American culture, as being a widely exported culture, you know? And so, I think it’s a fair point, the idea that there may be a really authentic sense of fear on the part of people who are Haitian citizens or are Haitian-born that if Americans are only picking up, you know, or only have access to or, you know, are only being sold or marketed books—a few, you know, a very small cross section of books—that, you know, well this is the image you’re going to see of us? What image are we giving them—that readership?
So, I think it’s really—A powerful moment in the first six chapters that forefronts this is when [Danticat] is living in Brooklyn and there’s only one, you know, rack in the library dedicated to Haitian writers. And she was how old before she started reading any Haitian writers? She said she was in her teenage years, I think seventeen or something like that? Sixteen or seventeen? So, imagine growing up your whole life reading only White male or White female writers from Europe or America, and then all of a sudden discovering at your age [indicating the class] that people from your country, your nation, write and produce literature, write about your experiences. You know? So, I think it’s a fair point. I think both are. I think there’s a feeling there of real, you know, potential discrimination, potential resentment at people who may have “gotten out” or who have abandoned that nationality, that ethnicity. It might be a mixture. There might be other things. Sebastian, what was your question?

Sebastian: I was thinking about the gay movement and when she was writing about [inaudible] and she was just talking about her being away from her country. I was thinking about her as a person, as a human being, she just feels as if she doesn’t belong, because on page 49, she was talking about how—

Me: Let’s all—let us get there [in the book] first. So, on 49…

Sebastian: She was talking about how she thinks that her family would say, “Why do you—” [Victoria suggests “what do you know about it…”]—yeah, “what do you know about it?” And that shows that even the people close to you and important to you—that maybe she felt that she wasn’t as, like I don’t know, like she didn’t fit in. That’s what I was thinking it was just her being away from her country—it was just her being—feeling like less of a person, I guess.

Me: Yeah, Victoria?

Victoria: I still feel like it’s not fair that she should have to feel that way because it’s not really her fault that she had to leave, you know? It was like a choice—in the book I think [inaudible] it says that she had a choice between exile and death, so of course you would choose to leave the country that you could potentially be killed in just for doing [inaudible] things because of the dictatorship that she grew up in.

Julian’s words not only invite analysis of his handling of the thematic content of Danticat’s writing and of the perspectives she offers regarding her work as an immigrant artist, they also indicate two significant considerations for my work in literacy education. They point to the difficulties inherent both in substantively accounting for my identity as a White, American male and in responding effectively to students who also hold positions of
relative privilege as members of dominant cultural and ethnic groups. Julian, also a White male, chooses as a starting point for his comments a reference to Danticat’s description in her chapter “Daughters of Memory” in which she writes of being seventeen years old and visiting a library in Brooklyn. There, she encountered for the first time a small collection of texts by Haitian writers that she imagines must have been curated at the insistence of “the more vocal Haitian patrons of the Brooklyn library [who] had demanded more books about themselves to help them interpret their ever-changing country from afar” (2010, p. 61). Julian then reasons that the initial lack of a literary presence of Haitian writers in that American library was most likely a function of the minority status of Haitians in this country. In doing so, he positions this “minority” Haitian group to which Danticat and the writers on that book rack ostensibly hold membership against, in his words, “a pop culture world”. He does so to emphasize the difference in the size of the readership afforded to each. But by setting up this distinction, Julian presents a vastly over simplistic framing of the complex and embedded racial, ethnic, and economic politics of power that influence both the mainstreaming of a culture as well as the de-legitimating, minimizing, or silencing of some minority “other”. Julian’s language exemplifies a practice of codifying perceived differences in one form of cultural capital—in this case, readership—that risks normalizing the disenfranchisement and colonization of oppressed and minority groups by reducing complex cultural dynamics to operational distinctions between what is “popular” versus what is “not”.

Julian’s overt intent—and I feel comfortable in making this assertion having taught him for two years—was arguably not to present a racist rendering of a skewed power dynamic by casting non-White, non-Western groups of writers as ‘lesser than’ those from
America and the West. He was instead attempting to explain the phenomenon of a disparity in representation by employing terms that made the most sense to him (i.e. in terms of numbers who might have read and had access to those writings). By framing this binary between a “popular” culture and a “less popular” culture as fundamental to the conflict between Danticat and her critics, Julian does correctly indicate the highly problematic link between the lack of representation of creative works produced by members of “minority” groups and the threat that consequent inequalities to access pose to the perceptions around the cultural value of that creative work (O’Brien and Oakley, 2015). However, none of the above negates the fact that in his deliberation over the systemic organization power that he identifies, Julian does not progress to a point of acknowledgment of the underlying forces that bear accountability for the disparities that exist. That next step would mean unpacking the responsibility that the social, cultural, economic, and political power brokers who have contributed to historical disparities between the production and the presence of diverse literature on the shelves of a library in a Haitian American community bear for any collateral damage that that lack of representation may have had on interactions between and within Haitian cultural groups. In her recounting of the excoriation of her writing by critics in Haitian and Haitian American circles, Danticat provides us with a snapshot of one form of that damage: that this endemic and systematic silencing of Haitian voices in American culture has now risen up in the form of fear and resentment from members of the Haitian community for how they will be perceived once one member of their community finally manages to break through that silencing. To Julian’s point, perhaps given a more multiculturally literate “pop-culture” in America, Danticat might have found a different response from the segment of her critics—certainly not all—who were primarily concerned
with their representation and, as Nyah framed it, their exposure. However, even in recognizing this, Julian persists in admiring the symptoms of the problem without unpacking its source. Clearly, the potential next step and challenge for me as his teacher would have been to move the discussion towards a heightened understanding of the embedded, systemic power relations that bind together the oppressor and the oppressed (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012).

Julian’s words also reveal a second challenge many of us face on the path towards the development of a critical consciousness: the reflexivity needed to negotiate how to talk about and understand culture and cultural difference in ways that actively account for our own positions in groups that hold dominance over others. And this presents yet another challenge for literacy educators. Julian uses the phrase “most people” twice in this excerpt to characterize those who hail from an “American and European culture” and “a pop-culture world” and then coins the term “minority culture” to describe sets of creative practices and works that hail from Haiti and its people. It is difficult to know from his words the extent to which Julian identifies with his own privileged position as a member of the same American majority that he frames in his comments. The stance that Julian works as he assigns these identifications seems to indicate some tacit understanding that he, as a White American, is positioned within that group. This is supported by the tone of Julian’s comments, which betrays his investment in insulating the position of the majority against criticism by walking a fine line between acknowledging a system of inequalities in the cultural landscape while simultaneously casting those inequalities as a kind of ‘that’s just the way things are, so this makes perfect sense’ justification. Phrases like, “So, if it’s a minority culture, that’s what’s going to happen” signal an attitude that of course the outrages felt by Danticat’s critics are
justified, but should they really be considered outside of the norm? Thus, Julian seems to acknowledge the marginalization of Haitian writers while also showing a willingness to forgive the methods through which colonizing forces in the mainstream have created that “pop culture” society which alienates—literally positions as “alien” through a re-colonization of them—creative works authored by ‘the other’. Julian’s closing words, in which he reasons that “it’s not that she’s being discriminated against entirely, but some of it has to do with that” strikes a stance towards Danticat’s treatment by her critics that focuses primarily on letting them off the hook but completely misses that it isn’t her Haitian critics who ultimately need to beg forgiveness for the damage they have done.

The ascribing of majority and minority labels stands as a trope pervasive in the language of global politics and the social sciences. Julian seems to understand how to use these labels to frame his analysis, but he shows little understanding of how problematic his use of them can be. He notes that when minority status is linked to the perception of negative exposure and scrutiny by a media market populated by majority White consumers who have been historically afforded greater power on the world stage, the threat that Danticat’s critics felt and the reactions they had towards her writing made perfect sense (Stephan and Stephan, 2017). What needs further exploration in the context both of Julian’s words and of our class’s larger discussion of majority and minority status as it applied to Danticat’s work involves making problematic two assumptions implicit in his comments: 1) the notion that those who fall in American or European cultural camps can be forgiven for or have a right to not have gained exposure to Haitian writers simply because those works did not apply to them and 2) the fallacy in statements like Julian’s that “there aren’t that many stories about them”. These might be countered first by asking students whether just
because those books aren’t on the shelves, that they shouldn’t be found there, and second, by questioning the forces that drive assumptions that those creative works may not exist at all. Having that conversation when faced with these kinds of suppositions is an important next step for teachers who want to advance an approach to literacy instruction that critically investigates and supports equity and social justice. Developing greater sensitivity and attunement towards some of the Anglo-normative assumptions latent in comments like Julian’s and then working to unpack those can lead educators towards extending the focus of conversations like this one towards exploring vital issues related to access, discrimination, and representation. Extending those lines of inquiry would encourage students like Julian and his classmates to do the work necessary to move towards positive, progressive, activist orientations, work central to the project of critical pedagogy. My participation in this dialogue reveals that while my motives for incorporating Danticat’s writing in my teaching were well-intentioned, my teaching of that text went only slightly beyond those approaches to multicultural literacy education that bring a diversity of texts from authors into the classroom but persist in framing those texts as worlds to be explored through the White, Western gaze rather than in engaging in more critical analytic works that focuses on the varied positionalities held by the persons and groups who read, produce, and appear in those texts.

As I listened to Julian’s words, I lacked the necessary presence of mind and perspective that would later come with the deeper reflection to address the complicated intersections of race and culture that emerged and to introduce critical theoretical perspectives to help unpack them. This, perhaps, makes sense. How many high school English teachers—including those who have a much greater background in history and the
social sciences than I do—could, in the moment, move the conversation in that direction? However, the greater loss is that my research methodology in this case failed in its rigor, and I never explicitly addressed these issues as part of our discussions of Danticat’s work. In the coming months, during our reading of Johnson’s *Autobiography*, we would engage in more focused discussions on race and the power dynamics of majority/minority status, but this missed opportunity with Danticat stands as an argument for the need for teachers who seek to further orient their practice towards a critical pedagogical approaches to incorporate processes of structured reflection—perhaps in the model of the research memo—along with iterative cycles of instructional planning as part of their methodology for responding to critical moments such as these. I did not reflect in a timely manner on this conversation or engage in reflective writing on it until well after we had moved out of our reading of Danticat. Had I done so, I might have been able to respond to Julian’s words beyond what appears here in the transcript and which amounts more to an affirmation of Julian’s perspectives on the resentment felt by Danticat’s critics and a rehashing of his reference to the library episode in Danticat’s chapter.

Although it does not provide a way forward for how to address encounters around race, culture, power, and creative production head on, this fragment of classroom discourse does attest to the richness that a few moments of talk can hold for pedagogical reflection, and the same is true of the connection Sebastian chose to draw between Danticat’s struggle over her identity as an artist and the gay movement in America. Earlier in this chapter, I referenced the passage in Danticat that Sebastian cites. It comes from Danticat’s reflections in “I Am Not a Journalist” on an essay in which she struggled “to explain the multilayered meaning of the Creole work *dyaspora*.” She writes,
I meant in that essay to list my own personal experiences as an immigrant and a writer, of being called dyaspora when expressing an opposing political point of view in discussions with friends and family members living in Haiti, who knew that they could easily silence me by saying, “What do you know? You’re living outside. You’re a dyaspora.” I meant to recall some lighter experiences of being startled in the Haitian capital or in the provinces when a stranger who wanted to catch my attention would call out, “Dyaspora!” as though it were a title like Miss, Ms., Mademoiselle, or Madame.” (2010, p. 49)

In choosing to reference this passage, it felt to me that Sebastian, who self-identified openly as gay and male at the time when I was teaching the class, was looping back to my introduction of the concept of essentialization and was responding specifically to my thoughts on the ways in which Danticat had been accused of casting Haitians and their culture in a negative light for her non-Haitian, Western readers. When Sebastian notes that Danticat’s experiences remind him of the gay movement, he makes an important connection that points towards the value that reading a text like Danticat’s can have for engaging in deeper lines of inquiry into the bridging of the personal and political self. He does so by drawing a conceptual link between “her country” as an extension of her family (“the people close to you and important to you”) and the group solidarity associated with the socio-political and cultural movement of gay rights activism. Particularly insightful is his comment that “just her being away from her country—it was just her being—feeling like less of a person.”

Sebastian’s analysis of the impact that being cast as dyaspora by her close friends and family had on Danticat, especially given how her physical distancing from Haiti was already such a significant part of her identity, seems to convey that he detects a powerful connection between the emotional trauma attendant to physical distancing and the ways in which being forced to leave one’s nation or cultural group can be deeply devastating to an individual’s self-concept. Implicit to the connection that Sebastian draws to the gay rights movement is an acknowledgement and expressed concern over the risk of the significant negative impact
on mental health attendant to social distancing or a lack of social or family support that
members of the gay rights activist community and members of the LGBTQ community,
especially adolescents may face (McConnell et al., 2016; Teasdale and Bradley-Engen, 2010).
While our conversation did not move to a further exploration of this connection, subsequent
discussions held in response to the class’s reading of two short stories written by David
Sedaris, one of which focuses on his own journey in navigating gender identity, gender
expression, and sexual orientation, would provide a context for more dialogue around these
issues. Brief as this moment was, Sebastian’s response indicates the ways in which themes
like discrimination, physical distancing, and cultural exclusion offer curricular paths towards
readings and conversations on intersecting issues significant to the experiences and identities
of our students.

**Coda: Towards Solidarity**

My goal in teaching *Create Dangerously* was to provide students with a literary context
for discussions grounded in analyses of identity, authorship, representation, colonialism,
activism, and social justice. Looking back over the discussions that comprise this chapter,
one trend that emerges across the data is the existence of a continuous series of undulating
shifts between a concern for the valuing of individual perspectives and identities and a
recognition of the importance of larger activist projects that seek fostering connections and
furthering community. These shifts are characterized by constant tensions, an ongoing
push/pull of negotiations between and among the student voices that occupy these
conversations over Danticat’s framing of the relationship between the self and the other, the
artist and the audience. Danticat’s text clearly operates as a creative medium through which
these transactions flow and are grounded. But where do I go from here? How do I best make sense of what the contested quality of these conversations means for my teaching? How do I reconcile the incompleteness that accompanies the many missed opportunities for deeper conversations on race, power, and cultural politics? What might I do better when facilitating future conversations? What lines of inquiry might I encourage students to pursue given the stated orientation that I bring to my teaching?

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) argues that the formation of solidarity relationships must be the necessary next step towards enacting a critical pedagogy committed to the project of decolonization. He develops a framework built upon three modes of solidarity: the relational, the transitive, and the creative that he insists must be taken up as essential strategies in such a project, and his analysis of how progressive pedagogies might address the work of decolonization through the lens of solidarity sits well with my teaching of *Create Dangerously* for two key reasons. First, as a text whose subject is Haiti, its people, and the nation’s diaspora, its themes and topics are inextricably tied to a colonial history of political and moral atrocities both similar to and greater than those that American colonists took up as part of their own revolution against Britain, atrocities that America, in support of its interests, has chiefly ignored. As Danticat notes, “Haiti’s very existence highlighted the deepest contradictions of the American revolutionary experiment” (2010, p. 98). Second, as progressive educators seek to foster conditions for a new kind of human encounter, one that opposes ongoing colonization and “seeks to heal the social, cultural, and spiritual ravages of colonial history”, we need a sea change in pedagogical orientation away from “tired conceptions of individual autonomy and rational consciousness” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 42) and toward a relational, praxis-oriented approaches to creative, collective
change. Encountering Gaztambide-Fernández’s model while attempting to make sense of our discussions of Danticat has offered a heuristic for reflection on these conversations and has provided me with what I believe to be a useful way to close my discussion them.

Gaztambide-Fernández identifies the relational mode of pedagogy of solidarity as constituting the first acknowledgment of a “co-presence” between individual subjects who rather than entering into relationships, are instead “made in and through” them (2012, p. 52). Our conversations over Danticat evidence both the possibilities for and impediments to engaging in this relational work. The contested nature of these discussions, where we watch students grapple with each other’s readings of Danticat and deliberate over how to make sense of the identities and motives voiced by her critics and by those artists who she has chosen chronicle in her book, capture students engaged in discourse that reveals the impossibility of any attempt to fully “know” another person’s perspectives and identities. And instead of becoming mired in attempts to reconcile the individual interests of each of the speech actors in these discussions, we must attend to “the conditions of possibility that produce the encounter between self and other” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012 p. 52). This resonates deeply with my goals for teaching and for this research. Ultimately, the classroom is the space in which we as educators have the ability to enact some semblance of agency towards setting the conditions for possibility and change. Critiques that I’ve registered regarding my methods as a facilitator of dialogue in these two chapters have been aimed at engaging in the thought work and critical reflection needed to improve in that capacity. The sensemaking process guiding that project has involved deep deliberation over how to better engage the relational work of a pedagogy of solidarity with the recognition that the contributions we can potentially to make towards the development and maintenance of a
progressive American citizenry stands as perhaps the most powerful stake that we hold as educators. I’ve raised several questions at points across these chapters about ways that I might have acted and things that I might have said but didn’t during my conversations with students. Gaztambide-Fernández offers some additional questions that educators would do well to consider as they engage their students in critical readings and discussions aimed toward a pedagogy of decolonization, namely, “How am I being made by others? What are the consequences of my being on others? What kinds of sacrifices are implied in the mythology of myself as being and my insistence in my individual freedom?” (2012, p. 52). Each of these opens complicated lines of inquiry, and my suggestion is not necessarily that they be put directly to students (although they may). Instead, the focus on looking simultaneously within and without to consider the interplay between subjectivities and the making of self and other through our encounters in local and global contexts can help to govern the trajectory of a curriculum towards more progressive goals, but only if the goals, objectives, and prompts for spoken and written discourse that we design honor a relational framework.

The next step towards a pedagogy of solidarity, the *transitive*, embodies a call to action that “rejects a static position and embraces contingency” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012 p. 52). Earlier in this chapter, I looked to Lather’s (1993) theory of a “praxis of the present” when imagining how I might have taken a next step in responding to Cassidy’s deliberation over Danticat’s insider/outside status as a member of the Haitian community. Referencing the concept of *praxis* in his essay, Gaztambide-Fernández argues that the kind of engagement that I noted was missing as part of my facilitation of that discussion is essential to a pedagogy of solidarity. Embedded within his concept of the transitive, is the
notion of movement from one relational state of being to another, and the social praxis that he advocates requires challenging ideologies that deploy colonial power and mounting active resistance towards the tendency to observe and call out the ways in which those structures oppress while remaining safely at a distance outside of them. Transitive solidarity requires a call to action, to move into and through those systems, to intervene. Drawing from the work of Rorty (1989) and Sandoval (2000) Gaztambide-Fernández argues that praxis must be coupled with the abandoning of a static mythology of self and the embracing of an un-ironic stance of contingency through which we can recognize the ways in which our “identities” and “cultures” constitute symbolic arrangements informed by larger power structures. Armed with that recognition, we can thus transition towards the development of a “differential mode of consciousness that self-consciously deploys—and transforms—subjectivity” (2012, p. 54).

For the literacy educator, I take this to mean engaging students in critical conversations about texts from a framework that recognizes how literature, as an act of creation that conveys a rendered world, can function as a medium for the reader to examine the powerful structures and forces that contribute to those constructions of culture and identity that all of us, as humans, are complicit in creating and maintaining through our actions. Reading and discussing texts from a transitive stance would help make more apparent for all of us, students and educators alike, the sources of the mythologies that we construct about ourselves and others, how contingent our selves are upon the actions we take in the context of society, and the ways in which our actions continuously serve to re-create those selves, thus stressing the importance of praxis as part of the project of transitive solidarity. Ultimately, as Gaztambide-Fernández concludes, incorporating this transitive
stance towards solidarity as part of teaching and learning would lead us to examine the limits and potentials our actions bear a) for reconfiguring existing ideas or restructuring current inequalities, b) for unmasking further mythologies about ourselves about which we are currently unaware, c) for considering how those mythologies influence and are influenced by our actions, and d) for questioning the extent to which we are willing to challenge the mythologies that we currently hold. Regarding our discussions on Danticat, a lens of transitivity has invited me to ask what it means to conceive of myself as a progressive educator. How does the image that I hold of who I am and the work that I do influence and become influenced by my history, institutional and political affiliations, actions, relationships, racial and ethnic background, sexual orientation and gender identity? How do I enact that self each day in ways that maintain and transform it and the selves of others? What steps have I taken towards building solidarity through praxis? What must I do to progress forward?

The third and final component that Gaztambide-Fernández explores frames the emergence of culture as bounded by encounters “between subjects, creatively negotiating—and sometimes rearranging—the structural conditions that produce the encounter in the first place.” The creative mode of solidarity holds the promise of something new, a vision of culture that resists frameworks that claim the existence of a multiplicity of distinct cultures like those that premise multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism and instead “requires a view of culture as a site of action, change, and dissonance, rejecting the dominant view of culture as something inherent in who we are or something that we can claim to authentically own, with stable and fixed boundaries” (2012, p. 57, emphasis added). If the relational and transitive strands of solidarity constitute shifts in ontological and practical orientations—new ways of
being and acting in the world, then creative solidarity stands as a way of conceptualizing the field of play that these actions and relations create and within which they are created. Thus, seeking to characterize, for instance, “school culture” becomes a highly nuanced project of description, an analysis of an unbounded space through which culture is the result of interactions and encounters between actors—faculty, staff, students, parents, and local community members—engaged in an ongoing process of negotiation and rearrangement. Creative solidarity invites teachers and researchers to identify the relational and transitive arrangements and actions that influence and are influenced by a particular site of learning and to imagine how to use that knowledge to influence the evolution of new cultures that support progressive modes of pedagogy like those that seek the project of decolonization.

Taken as a whole, Gaztambide-Fernández’s framing of a pedagogy of solidarity offers hope to educators, like me, who look often with dismay at moments in their teaching when an opportunity was missed to counter silence or to move towards solidarity. It suggests reassurance that embedded within the relational, the transitive, and the creative stands of a critical pedagogical framework are possibilities for new encounters, new paths to action, and new opportunities for cultural evolution that hold the promise for transformative change in education.
PART III – CREATING DANGEROUSLY: “DISOBEEDIANCE TO A DIRECTIVE” IN PROSE AND POETRY

Daring again to speak for the collective, I will venture to say that perhaps we will write with the same fervor and intensity (or even more) as before. Perhaps we will write with the same sense of fearlessness or hope. Perhaps we will continue to create as dangerously as possible, but our muse has been irreparably altered. Our people, both inside and outside of Haiti, have changed. In ways that I am not yet fully capable of describing, we artists too have changed.

Edwidge Danticat, Create Dangerously

Re-framing the Conversation

The classroom discussions held in response to Danticat became one space for us to unpack a variety of topics related to the larger theme of the individual in society. Students from Section B were particularly drawn to Danticat’s exploration of the shifting roles that solidarity and alienation, which often accompany participation in civic life, play in the work of artists and activists who seek to create transgressive and liberatory works. Talk in Section A centered primarily on the relationship between reader and text and focused on the role that literature and the development and implementation of a literary canon can play in affording or limiting an individual’s access to ideas, cultures, ethnicities, and histories and the extent to which power differentials around access and institutional vision can work to silence or encourage voice. Written pieces authored by these students provide equally powerful indicators of their deliberations over the paired relational concepts of silence and voice and individuality and solidarity and provide indications of how students would continue to address these concepts in compositions authored during two subsequent units of study. The texts that these students produced included two sets of written commentaries submitted in
response to reading Danticat’s book, identity poems modeled after Jamaica’s Kincaid’s “Girl”, and brief memoirs composed after having read Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Story of a Part-time Indian*.

In Chapter 6, I focus first on a selection of analytic commentaries from our readings of Danticat and discuss their continued work with the concepts of silence and voice, individuality and solidarity, and the overarching theme of dangerous creation. I argue that my identification of these as emergent themes in the conversations held over *Create Dangerously* reemerged in students’ writing and went on to become the foundation for their continuing journeys towards the development of critical consciousness. I argue further that the conceptual quality of these capstone writings in response to Danticat, when considered in the context of the spoken and written work that preceded it, serves as an indication of the potential value that a tri-partite framework which considers the relationship between *passion* and *ingenuity* as generative components in the development of a creative *voice* can have for analysis of student writing and speech (discourse). In the final section of Chapter 6 I discuss in detail the components of that *passion-ingenuity-voice* framework.

Moving into Chapters 7 and 8, I apply that framework by examining both the identity poetry that students modeled after their reading of Kincaid and conversations had in response to reading James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. In doing so, I seek to determine the potential analytic value that such a framework may hold for teacher research in the areas of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. In Chapter 9, I to conclude my research by employing Macaluso’s (2016) framing of *pedagogy-as-text* as a heuristic for “reading” broadly the teaching, learning, and analysis that this research
embodies as a critical text. In doing so, I return to the questions that gave life to the inquiry and consider findings and limitations that it suggests.

For Whom, to Whom: From Recognition to Reinvention

Early writing that students composed in response to Danticat took the form of brief analytic commentaries that provided the foundation for the conversations that appear in Chapters 4 and 5. The most popular prompt selected by students for response posed the questions, “To whom is Danticat writing? For whom does she write?” Another that many students chose asked them to select one issue related to the lives of those living in the Haitian diaspora that Danticat addresses in her writing and to reflect on how reading her words has changed their perspectives on that issue.

Recognition and Reinvention: Exploring the Personal and the Global

I opened Part II of this dissertation with a quotation from a written response authored by Adrienne to the prompt, “What aspects of Danticat’s identity come through in her writing? Choose a moment (or two) where you feel like you were able to understand her through her writing and discuss.” I selected that passage to mark the entry point into these chapters because of the particularly beautiful and nuanced way in which Adrienne frames the complexities of Danticat’s identity as an artist, the facets of Danticat’s private and public self that her work explores, and Danticat’s framing of what it has meant for her to invest a life’s

33 Asian American, female student
work in the project of dangerous creation, of “push[ing] the bounds to create something beautiful”. When Adrienne comments that “art is the artist because it is created from what the artist feels, thinks, and knows” and concludes that “the statement that she is making […] is art itself”, her words resonate with the thrust of the discussions held with students in Chapter 4 and the thematic focus on the transaction between artists and audience that emerged during that class period. In my analysis of that conversation, I argued that their discussion reveals for literacy educators the power that a text like *Create Dangerously* can have for engaging in larger deliberations over the roles that the concepts of silence, silencing, and voice play as pedagogical considerations in the field of critical literacy. I found this conceptual focus to be true not only regarding the spoken discourse of students in that single class section but as a larger theme taken up in writing authored by students in both sections of the course.

Dinh, 34 a classmate of Adrienne’s responded to the prompt that asked “to whom” or “for whom” Danticat writes, and authored a commentary in which he explored what it meant for Danticat and other members of the Haitian diaspora to create dangerously, particularly in terms of “creating” a new world for themselves. Through his writing, he reflects on the Vietnamese diaspora, arguing that Danticat “writes to anyone who is interested in the struggle of immigrant”, and he discusses how her chronicling of transgressive reading groups organized by the *centre d’étude* and attended mostly by young men during the despotic rule of Duvalier revealed for him the extent to which “[a]ll effective

34 Asian American, male student
action against dictatorships must be thought out and reading books often prepares people’s minds for this task.” Dinh’s words convey eloquently a first step in the project of critical literacy: the preparation of the mind for action through the reading of text, or what Clarke (2006) in her discussion of the work of Freire and Macedo identifies as recognition, a step towards critical consciousness that can be achieved through a respect for pluralities of voices and varieties of discourse and then further developed through explorations of texts. Clarke notes that a second component of this framework involves a reinvention whereby knowledge gained through reading must then be used “to create new directions, interpretations, and reconsiderations to create meaningful spaces for empowerment” (p. 58). Dinh references in his commentary those members of refugee groups who fled communist rule following the Vietnam War and then connects the choice that Vietnamese refugees made to “live and start families in a free society to give better lives to themselves and their children” to the power that Danticat shows texts held for Haitian citizens as invitations and incitements to create dangerously and resist the rule of Duvalier. In Create Dangerously, Danticat alludes to the Old Testament narrative of Eden and compares the risk that a reader who dares to pick up and consume a transgressive text to the risk that Eve undertook in seeking knowledge restricted to her. Danticat poses the open question, “How does that reader find the courage to take this bite, open that book? After an arrest, an execution? Of course he or she may find it in the power of the hushed chorus of other readers, but she can also find it in the writer’s courage in having stepped forward, in having written, or rewritten, in the first place” (2010, p. 10) Danticat describes a cycle of recognition and reinvention central to the project of critical literacy through her discussion of the groups of Haitian readers, actors, consumers and creators of transgressive texts who, having been driven by oppression to action and
having drawn inspiration from their readings of historical and contemporary texts, then chose also to create dangerously. In his commentary, Dinh argues that in choosing to leave their country of origin and the oppression of communist rule, Vietnamese refugees “accepted that they could be imprisoned and killed yet still gambled with their lives to leave their country to gain opportunities to a better life for themselves, their children and their children’s children. I strongly believe that this is what it means to create dangerously.” From speaking with Dinh about his choice to explore the Vietnamese diaspora in his commentary, I learned that it emerged from a very personal transaction with Danticat’s text through which he brought his own family history to bear on his reading. Interpreted from the stance of critical literacy, the importance of reading Danticat’s work for Dinh involved the crystallization of the concept of creation into a consideration for how it operates at a meta-level in Danticat to frame creative acts as transcendent, as moving beyond the composition of discreet sets of artistic or literary works and towards the act of creating ongoing projects that have cross-generational impact and can give life to a legacy of action.

Isaac also chose to reflect on his family history and discussed how reading Danticat altered his perspectives on the choice his parents made to leave Ethiopia and resettle their family in America. To frame his commentary, Isaac wrote about how the treatment of Danticat at the hands of those critics who labeled her as “un-Haitian” and who accused her of being a parasite feeding off the pain of the Haitian people and of “monetizing their tragedies” through her writing raised questions for him about his own parents’ relationships with those friends and family members they left behind. He wrote, “I never thought about what my parents’ families thought of their decision to move. I asked my mom and she told me that her friends, back home, were very judgemental [sic] of her. They thought of her as
someone who was abandoning their heritage and that she wasn’t a real Ethiopian. She explained that not many people, where she grew up, left the country.” Isaac went on to express an understanding of how his parents’ choice to leave could appear for some fellow Ethiopians as a selfish act and an abandonment of heritage. He noted that he hadn’t thought much about their decision to immigrate to America prior to reading Danticat. However, he found that through his reading, he developed the stance that leaving one’s country of origin did not constitute forsaking one’s heritage. Isaac wasn’t precise in his commentary regarding the specifics in Danticat’s writing that motivated him to come to this perspective. Instead, he shifted focus and referenced the chilling effect on creativity that Danticat notes became a biproduct of the animus between many Haitians and members of the Haitian diaspora. This hostility engendered feelings of fear, shame, and guilt for many Haitian artists, which ultimately lead to the silencing of creative output. “And,” as Isaac notes, “silence, according to Danticat, is dangerous […] It was because the people were silent that [Duvalier] ruled for so long and did so much damage. It was a fear that they would be killed like Numa and Drouin. Because they wanted to create dangerously.” While Isaac’s commentary may appear somewhat fragmented in its focus, subsequent writing he would submit to me in response to his reading of Kincaid’s “Girl” would unify the dual focus he begins to explore here of honoring one’s heritage and of finding a voice of strength and power for oneself.  

35 Isaac would do so by composing an identity poem that frames a conversation between a male mentor and a young superhero-in-training. I examine Isaac’s poem in Chapter 7 (see “Black Dynamite”).
Although Danticat touches at multiple points in *Create Dangerously* on how silence operated both as a product and tool of Duvalier’s repressive regime, during our discussions we never addressed those passages or the ways in which she explicitly discusses silence and silencing. However, in noting the relationship between the guilt imposed upon Danticat in response to her work and the threat of silence or self-censorship that she identifies as a potential result from such an imposition of guilt by her detractors (2010, p. 33), Isaac’s commentary suggests similarities between the repression of voice that Danticat experienced and the repression of voice that I detected in Nyah’s comments regarding schooled literacy and a lack of representation of persons like her (i.e. people of color) in the prescribed canon of texts taught in her school (see Chapter 4, “Confronting Silence?”). As Nyah’s words made clear in that discussion, the persistence of a mainstream culture of White, Western normativity in American literacy education constitutes a powerful construct instantiated within many language arts curricula and established canons of literature (Thompson, 2014), and recent research conducted in a variety of international contexts confirms that this is not a phenomenon limited to American classrooms (Makhdoom, 2014; Misco, 2018; Pillai, Menon, and Vengadasamy, 2016; Heleta, 2018). This Eurocentric normative construct places students like Nyah, whose identities and experiences may not conform to the set of cultural standards imposed by that canon or by a particular curriculum, at risk of developing feelings of guilt or inadequacy that can lead to silencing. The personal ramifications of that silencing bear similarities to the feelings of guilt and repression that Danticat expresses having experienced as part of her choice to take the risks necessary to author texts that capture with fidelity aspects of her identity as a young woman growing up in Haiti through topics and
critiques that make openly problematic the mainstream Haitian cultural and historical narrative that others have agreed upon as the “accepted” heritage of that nation.

And yet, both Danticat, Nyah, and Isaac resisted succumbing to a silence borne of guilt, and a key similarity between all three was that the act of reading transgressive works from resistant perspectives (for Danticat, the artists and authors she discusses in Create Dangerously; for Nyah and Isaac, Danticat) allowed for recognition of the problems inherent to these systems of domination and the possibilities for transgressing those systems through reinvention of the self through creation. For Danticat, this process has taken shape in the form of the many books she has authored. For Isaac, it would begin with his reading and writing in response to Danticat and continue with his authoring of an identity poem in response to Kincaid. For Nyah, our spoken discourse had become a space for her to explore the early stages of recognition and reinvention, and while I commented earlier in Chapter 4 that “I wasn’t so sure” as to whether our discussion had gotten us very far towards valuing and supporting Nyah’s voice as she urged us to recognize the problematic nature of the teaching and learning that she had experienced, the conversation that we would have over our reading of Johnson’ Autobiography (see my discussion in Chapter 8, “Speaking Resistance: A Message in Blood”) would evince the ways in which Nyah would challenge all of us to engage not only in recognition, but in resistance.

Lily’s commentary signaled that she too had found a connection between Danticat’s work as an activist and artist and her own journey as an immigrant to this country,

36 Asian American, female student
a journey that embodied processes of recognition and reinvention. In her writing, Lily succinctly identifies an embedded irony that undermines perspectives voiced by those critics of Danticat who accuse her of doing damage to the image of Haiti and its people. Lily argues that in addressing these critics as she does in Create Dangerously, Danticat achieves her overarching goals as a writer, which Lily identifies as a desire “to restore the culture and well being of her country […] to write to restore an individual freedom of speech. To give the voices back to the people, where it rightly belongs. For others, to take notice of what has been taken full advantage of them and abuse of power.” Lily’s words forefront the liberatory importance of free speech and serve as a reminder to us that the vehement invective that Danticat’s detractors level against her only serves to betray their resistance to recognizing and actively challenging problematic cultural aspects of Haiti’s past and present. By taking a position that resists the admittedly dangerous project of acknowledgement essential to reinvention and the creation of a progressive identity for Haiti and its people, Danticat’s critics destabilize their own attempts to refute the destructive narrative that they seek to challenge. We can take Lily’s use of the concept of cultural restoration to signal the call for making sense of history through a method very different from the revisionist one which those critics seem to desire. Rather than calling for a restoration of a Haiti located within some distant past free of the atrocities attendant to colonial rule and inhumane cultural practices like virginity testing, Lily recognizes that Danticat argues instead for the rise of Haitian writers and artists who voice recognition and ownership of all that embodies the narrative of that nation—the terrible and the beautiful, alike—as fundamental to the critical project of reinvention.
Lily’s words resonate with my own goals for teaching Danticat and for bringing in Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* as a supplemental reading. Although I wouldn’t have been able to name them as such at the time, in looking back at my choice to incorporate Kincaid’s text into this unit, recognition and reinvention were two essential concepts embedded within her project that influenced my choice to include it as a paired text. When Kincaid voices her powerful, lyrical rebuke of the history and legacy of colonial rule in Antigua, she calls for the same complete rendering and recognition of the social, cultural, political, economic, and human devastation of her nation and its people. Kincaid crafts a narrative voice that demands that this past and present must be acknowledged and accounted for by those of us who have benefitted and continue to benefit from the privilege afforded by our White, Western European ancestry. Kincaid frames her book by offering multiple perspectives: of the tourist encountering her country, of her own and other Antiguans’ past and present lived experiences, and of an historical record of subjugation through corruption and disenfranchisement. In doing so, she contests and reinvents the various false narratives about Antigua and its people through an openly-voiced challenge to the prison-like unreality that operates as “an incredible constant” (Kincaid, 1988, p. 79) under which Antiguans exist. As I noted in Chapter 3, Kincaid’s book can be characterized as a jeremiad, and its lamentation is decried by voices that shift between first, second, and third person points of view. In constructing it in this way, she captures the identity conflict central to the hegemonic project of colonization, one that has found its legacy in a tourist industry that positions Antiguans as ongoing subjects of domination who “having observed the event of tourism, have absorbed it so completely that they have made the degradation and humiliation of their daily lives into their own tourist attraction” (1988, p. 69). Kincaid’s
authoring of *A Small Place* is in itself an act of reinvention, one that operates tangentially to what Lily identifies as Danticat’s goal as an activist writer “to restore the culture and well-being of her country”. Kincaid argues that short of time travel, there can ultimately be no restoration for what has been visited upon Antiguans. However, her writing conveys a powerful voice of opposition that challenges those forces that have become instantiated in Antiguan society through Western European colonial rule, that persist in de-humanizing and silencing indigenous peoples through systems of wealth and tourism, and that capitalize upon their nations’ material assets (i.e. their lands and people) to create alternate and decontextualized realities and histories that benefit multinational corporations and satisfy the gaze of tourist populations. Because a goal of my teaching across the first half of this year (and beyond) was to move students towards the development of their own voices, the processes of recognition and reinvention that undergird Kincaid’s writing both in *A Small Place* and in her poem “Girl” positioned them as key complements to *Create Dangerously* by offering additional models for writing and expression that extended themes and topics that Danticat addresses. Although students did not compose formal writing based on their reading of Kincaid’s prose, they would engage more closely with her style and voice when authoring identity poems based on her verse.

**Critical Challenges to the Self**

The lives and family histories of Dinh, Isaac, and Lily tie them to the realities of immigration and the complicated processes of sensemaking around how to protect, honor, and understand their heritages while continuing to carve out their own identities. The discourses they voiced indicate that reading Danticat and Kincaid provided them with
frameworks for investigating and valuing aspects of their selves and their backgrounds. For those students whose families have resided in America for several generations and hail predominately from White, Western European ethnic groups, reading Danticat became a space for recognizing those aspects of their existing views on immigration and colonization that may have been limited in myopic ways. Their writing expresses burgeoning understandings of the limited knowledge they possess not only about the lives of persons living in nations other than their own, but often, given that these students live in a large urban city, of members of immigrant communities living just a few city blocks from their homes. For these students, by making apparent the experiences, histories, and activist projects of persons and groups that they do not know—and, in some cases, actively resist knowing—Danticat’s and Kincaid’s writing provided a challenge to the mythologies of history and identity that have been constructed by them and for them around immigration and some of the instantiated biases they held towards ‘the other’ and that have become culturally normative in the US.

The second round of writing assigned to students during their reading of Danticat came at the close of our work with Create Dangerously, when I asked them to use The New York Times online search engine (http://www.nytimes.com/) to perform a keyword search on issues, topics, and questions raised by Danticat in her collection of essays. I chose the Times site for this assignment because it is a major news publication with an extensive online database of articles that would afford what I considered to be sufficient journalistic depth for this work. I provided some examples of keywords and topics that came from our discussions during the prior week’s conversations, including: immigration, diaspora, freedom of expression,
Once you find a news or feature article that you feel connects to your reading of Danticat and that focuses on an issue/topic that she addresses or question that she raises in *Create Dangerously*, you should respond to the following prompts:

- On what topic related to Danticat’s writing does this article focus?
- What are the major issues, ideas, arguments and/or questions that the author(s) explore(s)?
- In what ways has this article extended your reading of Danticat? What new questions, ideas, and/or interests has it raised for you?

As you respond to the above prompts, be careful to support your analysis and interpretation through direct reference to both Danticat’s text and the article you have found.

Alexander’s submission for this assignment focused on an op ed piece titled “A Reset in Jewish Thinking” authored by Stephen Robert (2012) in which he argues for “Jews to realize their changed position, to eschew the time-worn arguments of the past, to raise the plane of the debate and to move vigorously toward an achievable two state-solution” (n.p.). Early in his article, Robert establishes his personal connection to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by discussing the experiences of his father, a Ukrainian refugee who was forced to flee his town during the pogroms conducted by the Cossacks and who was spared only because he was a child. Robert’s family immigrated to the US in 1922, which he notes was fortunate since the remaining Jews in the village would eventually be executed by the Nazi regime during World War II. In his commentary, Alexander draws upon Robert’s framing of a “deeply ingrained victimhood” within the Jewish people established through a history of

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37 White, male student

165
persecution and genocide that Robert claims now haunts the Israeli perspective in the conflict with Palestine to imagine how Haitians may feel given their history in American colonization and the realities of life under the horrific reign of the Duvalier regime. Alexander argues that a similarity exists between the histories and current positions of the Israelis and Haitians, noting that the pain and suffering that both groups have endured unites them under a common humanity that we must all recognize and with which we must all reckon if we hope to move out of isolation and ignorance. Alexander writes,

The idea that as people, we are united by something and under something has opened up more after reading this article. Relating both of the authors’ cultural history [sic] and their thoughts on what happened is what brought the idea to my attention. Besides who played a part in their stories and dates, there is no major difference in the two […] no matter how different the backgrounds of people may seem, we actually have more in common than we think. Not to speak of interests and such, but a little deeper, such as pain or ideas.

After reading Danticat’s story, I was under the impression of it being a “one of a kind” story. This in fact wasn’t true though. Besides the article I read, there were many like it. Each author wrote of a problem going on today in a country that’s not America. And more importantly, we can see it in the news. So, the idea of it being a “one of a kind” isn’t entirely true. It just happens to be the only one I’ve actually took [sic] the time to read or involve myself in.

People everywhere in the world are oblivious to the problems others face. We are only concerned with what should happen or is happening with in our country. I believe it isn’t until we are forced to deal with these problems that we care. In my opinion that’s not how it should work out. We should be more enthusiastic to hear the stories of other people. I believe in this matter, we could understand each other.

Something to note about Alexander is that while in the casual conversations I had with him outside of the classroom, he was an outspoken individual who often voiced his opinions on a subject by blending humor and candor with introspection, in whole class discussions, Alexander was a rare participant. Through writing, Alexander’s voice emerged in pieces that were characterized by the same type of openness and insight that I argue are present here. His words resonate with my goal in positioning Create Dangerously as an anchor.
text for the course and align with my anticipation that engaging in supplemental readings would provide students with additional context for explorations of its themes and arguments. When Alexander points to society’s lack of concern or enthusiasm for hearing, acknowledging, and acting upon significant problems faced by humans around the world, he indicates behaviors that history has shown to be a reality of the ways in which each of us at some time or another (dis)engage in public life at the local and global level. He also lands on currents of isolationism and nationalism that have at different moments in our nation’s past, including during the current Trump presidency, constituted deeply problematic trends in American foreign policy. And as Danticat argues in a later chapter of her book titled “Another Country”, when we consider the ways in which American political leadership forwards domestic policies and practices that discriminate against the many while privileging the few, we can identify the growing risk of our becoming a more deeply bifurcated society within which a citizen who happens to fall into one or more groups of disenfranchised persons, including those in indigent and immigrant populations, can become “a refugee within one’s own borders” (2010, p. 111). She suggests that a cruel irony exists, for instance, when journalists and pundits lament the state of affairs in the US during a natural disaster like hurricane Katrina and compare America to “less-developed” nations, insisting that our wealth and development should have afforded us better preparation and prevention, aid and assistance. Instead, she comments pointedly, “Perhaps this America does have more in common with the developing world than with the one it inhabits. For the poor and outcast everywhere dwell within their own country, where more often than not they must fend for themselves. That’s why one can so easily become a refugee within one’s own borders—because one’s perceived usefulness and precarious citizenship are always in question,
whether in Haiti or in that other America, the one where people have no flood insurance” (2010, p. 111, emphasis added). Alexander’s statements resonate with Danticat’s in that they identify a similar form of deafness and ignorance within his and others’ stances toward the many widespread forms of struggle and pain that exist outside of domestic contexts in places that appear to have little immediate personal relevance to our lives as Americans.

Alexander’s commentary hits on the importance that performing critical readings of multiple texts can play in expanding a student’s sphere of consciousness to an increasingly global scale and in challenging the parochialism that he identifies as characteristic of contemporary civic life in America. Alexander’s comment that “it isn’t until we are forced to deal with these problems that we care” reminds us of the ways in which, for instance, mass media and social media operate—more often than not in biased, fragmented, and corporately and politically influenced ways—as the primary vehicles responsible for doing the “forcing” that brings local, regional, and global events to our attention.38 When coupled with his observations on the problematic nature of the ways in which we fail to participate fully in a global community of concern, Alexander’s subsequent insistence that we “should be more enthusiastic to hear the stories of other people” and to seek to “understand each other” presents for literacy educators a charge to exercise the power that we possess as

38 The effects of this kind of forcing or filtering of digital content have become the focus of several recent studies, with researchers focusing their attentions on the impact that incidental exposure (as opposed to selective exposure) to news and political content have had on individuals’ frequency of use of news sources (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017), political information sharing (Weeks et al, 2017), perceived importance of policy issues (Feezell, 2017), and the recognition and recall of news information and the consequences of selective exposure (Lee and Kim, 2017).
textual mediators. As facilitators of critical discourse, we bear both the ability and responsibility to engage students in literacy practices that bear the potential to foster the critical dialogue needed to counter isolationist trends. Inviting students to undergo the selective work of finding and engaging with research and journalism on topics and themes that emerge from their reading can lead to a recognition, as it did for Alexander, of the problems and possibilities inherent to our participation in a global community. Finally, Danticat reminds us that we must also consider the ways in which blindness towards the “others” who live and suffer in our own communities stands as a reality of our modern lives. While the terms of this assignment did not place constraints on the geographical settings on which researched articles focused, almost all submissions focused on international contexts. Another approach towards its design might have asked students to narrow their search to look at domestic or even local issues related to themes explored in Danticat. Given that a goal of critical literacy pedagogy requires taking substantive action, doing so might have provided an entry point towards engaging students in activist projects in their own communities around issues and injustices that they and others face.

In terms of what was successful, this unit and the assigned writing accompanying it indicate the value that literacy instruction of this kind lends to the project of fostering awareness of global issues and engaging students in critical dialogue over ethical and social justice topics, principles that inform recent research into critical global literacies and that draw influence from cosmopolitan critical frameworks. As I noted in Chapter 5, Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) has criticized the use of the concept of cosmopolitanism as a critical pedagogical framework, arguing that it cannot achieve liberatory, decolonizing goals since it takes as its premise an orientation that is directional rather than relational and focuses too
narrowly on “what the individual should know, be able to do, or about understanding individual experiences and fomenting an individual orientation toward difference” rather than “through and into difference” (p. 51). Gaztambide-Fernández argues that in doing so, cosmopolitan responses to coloniality have failed historically to fully address the question of “the other” and have tended instead to re-inscribe the colonial self. However, Choo (2018) lists a set of five principles undergirding a cosmopolitan ethical framework that address these concerns by accounting for the relational, collective work necessary to overcome these limitations. These principles include:

1) an anti-fundamentalist stance that resists intolerance to difference,
2) a focus on developing a dispositional orientation that considers the interactional relationship between self, other, and the world,
3) openness to difference through which one maintains ties to a home community while embracing cultural hybridity,
4) an other-centered focus on engaging with and understanding others (particularly those positioned in marginalized groups), and
5) active, critical dialogic engagement.

Yoon et al’s (2018) framework stands as a useful lens through which to consider the extent to which my teaching of Danticat attended to the goals of a critical global literacies framework; it also suggests some considerations for future practice. With regard to developing global awareness and an interconnected world concept, I argue that we can detect in Alexander’s writing a deep concern for unpacking the complicated role that locus and physical, geographical orientation play in how we see ourselves in relation to others as well as a kind of sea change in thinking that evolved from his reading of Danticat and a desire to expand upon that project. The commentaries authored by Lily, Dinh, and Isaac that I discuss earlier in this chapter forefront the ways in which these texts and prompts for writing became a place for drawing connections between the personal and the global and for deliberating over how their own lives and family histories could become a useful lens for transacting with these texts. In short, the work in which all four of these students engaged resonates with the first two dimensions of Yoon et al’s critical global literacies framework.

A theme that emerged in student commentaries authored for the *Times* assignment, one that focused on the ways in which their readings of Danticat and the articles they researched altered their perspectives on immigration, speaks to the third dimension of Yoon et al’s (2018) framework. Logan read an article by Jeffrey Gettleman (2012) titled *A Taste of Hope Sends Refugees Back to Darfur*. In it, Gettleman reported on the return of over 100,000 Sudanese refugees to villages in the Darfur region following a peace agreement between Sudan and Chad negotiated in the wake of the death of Muammar el-Qaddafi (whose regime supplied arms to many of the Darfurian rebels) and the easing of tensions between the Sudanese government and those rebel groups. In his commentary, Logan focused on how reading Danticat in conjunction with Gettleman’s article broadened his understanding of the
immigrant journey and helped him to unpack his own prior stereotypes about immigrants. He commented, “I was really able to connect to what the people of Sudan had gone through because of the way Danticat told her story. I almost felt as though I understood what it was like to be in the position to have to leave your homeland in order to protect yourself.” In their discussion of the third dimension of their framework, Yoon et al stress the importance of providing students with opportunities to “deconstruct their own ways of thinking and to (re)construct them through the process of analyzing texts from diverse viewpoints” (2018, p. 210). Logan’s description of how “the way Danticat told her story” provided him with a critical lens that influenced or altered his sense making around what Sudanese refugees returning to Darfur might have experienced speaks to the benefit of engaging students in readings drawn from a diverse set of multiple, global perspectives. A fundamental task for progressive educators who desire to develop in their students a political orientation towards active engagement in local and global social justice initiatives involves supporting students’ growth as readers of the world, of the past and present, of history and of current events. As Logan’s words indicate, performing a reading of a text can have an impact on students’ subsequent readings if that transaction becomes a critical instrument (as it seems to have for Logan) for refracting transactions with the worlds of other texts. Acknowledgment of this ability for literature to transform the readerly self invites literacy educators to develop sets of readings, curricular units, and prompts for discussion and composition aimed to engage and expand students’ repertoires in ways that can make apparent embedded subjectivities that may obstruct their ability to engage in the relational work necessary for critical praxis. And this engagement with one’s subjectivities was not isolated to Logan’s reading of Danticat. I argue that the same kind of deepening or expansion of perspective is apparent in Alexander’s call
for a broadening of a global, critical consciousness and in the words of another student, Kiera, who wrote in one of her commentaries,

Many, including myself, have fallen under the impression that when people leave their homeland it is a selfish and greedy action. Imagining leaving your family behind in a dictatorship where they are constantly at risk makes us cringe. After reading Create Dangerously, I realize that not all who are exiled from a country like Haiti forget where they came from. [...] I always felt this way when learning about immigration, even when people from other countries legally moved to another place. I did not think it was a respectable, honorable or morally right decision. [...] The information presented in Create Dangerously [sic] has changed my opinion on not only Haitians but all diasporas throughout the world.

Combined with those of Alexander, Lily, Dinh, and Isaac, Kiera’s and Logan’s comments indicate how literature can function as a catalyst for developing awareness of global issues, making personal to global connections, critiquing one’s own dominant ideologies, and taking social and political action in response to global and multicultural issues, four integrated dimensions in Yoon et al’s (2018) framework for growth towards critical consciousness. These students’ writings indicate how developing curricula that offer a blend of readings drawn from various genres that explore current and past events through a thematic focus (like immigration) can contribute significantly to the practice of progressive literacy education and support objectives for teaching tenets of social justice, equity, empathy, and solidarity.

The final (fifth) dimension of Yoon et al’s framework describes teaching and learning grounded in active engagement. In their article they provide a useful table of instructional examples (2018, p. 208) suggesting what this might look like in practice that includes

39 White, female student
recommendations that teachers *expose students to diverse forms of action* by bringing social activists and community leaders into the classroom and *promote social justice and social actions designed to address local and global issues* through multimedia projects aimed to spark and/or sustain activism in various communities. They note that for literacy educators, “action can be about *implementing critical practices* in the classroom to promote students’ awareness as responsible global citizens” (2018 p. 211, emphasis added). The units of study that I designed and executed across my year of teaching the sections of students who participated in this research were not characterized by actions that engaged them explicitly in social projects in their communities. This stands as the aspect of my teaching practice on which I continue to level the most self-criticism when I reflect on the potential strengths and weaknesses of my work with these students. However, two indicators from data collected during this semester of teaching and research and one additional contextual factor indicate promise in this regard.

First, as I have argued thus far, students’ written, expository commentaries and their participation in prompt-based discussions produced emergent instances of classroom discourse that constitute critical practices. These practices are characterized by shifts towards the promotion of critical awareness and social responsibility of the kind that Yoon et al describe as essential to the fourth dimension of their framework. Second, as I discuss in the latter half of this chapter, student verse composed in response to reading Kincaid stands as another form of critical practice through which students built upon their heightened awareness and criticality to create voices for themselves that capture the source and quality of action. Finally, in addition to these two indicators, an important consideration requires taking a holistic look at the role that the school plays as a community of educators who each
contribute to a larger instructional and ideological vision. While the work of my English language arts classroom may not have engaged students in direct civic action, I do know that these students would go on to do just that in the context of their Social Science courses taught by a colleague whose teaching was also grounded in principles of social justice. That teacher, “Mr. Whatthisface” (an alias coined by Amir in Chapter 4 during his discussion of the work they had recently completed around epistemology), engaged these students in broader social projects that included writing letters to members of Congress on important issues and developing individual senior research projects with a mandatory component that required some form of local community engagement and action. An example of one of these, for instance, included one group of students mobilizing residents in the surrounding neighborhoods to petition for street-side solar compactors to address issues with litter in their neighborhoods due to a lack of receptacles.

The takeaway here is a reminder of the obvious: that not everything can be or must be done within the sphere of the literacy classroom. However, the importance is that something must be done. As Yoon at al indicate, the dimensions that they describe are intended to be taken up as part of an integrated approach to critical global literacies practices, not as discrete areas to be addressed linearly (2018, p. 212). That integration can happen within the space of a single classroom, but it can also be interwoven into the larger program of studies. While I did not collaborate directly with our Social Sciences instructors as part of the teaching on which this research is based, the conceptual link that Amir made between his work with epistemology in his Social Studies class and our reading of Danticat in Language Arts stands as an example of the ways in which indirect interactions between courses and curricula that share similar goals can occur when students gain awareness of and are able to
draw connections across their studies. Additionally, the invitation that an occurrence such as this offers to teachers to reach out and collaborate with one another to sustain that integration in more direct and intentional ways is clear. Not all students may notice these connections, nor may they necessarily choose to or have the tools necessary to articulate them when they do become apparent. This places the onus on educators to plan ways to encourage this kind of interconnective, cross-disciplinary work.

**Conceptualizing Voice: An Emergent Framework**

As this narrative of critical pedagogy now transitions away from Danticat and towards our work with Kincaid, reflection on the story that this research has told thus far reveals how writing composed by students in these sections of language arts contributed to the ongoing development of the student voices we encountered in Chapters 4 and 5. We begin to glimpse their character arcs and are able to track the ways in which they have gained in the qualities of openness, sensitivity, criticality, and articulation. In reading and re-reading my students’ words in the context of analysis and write-up for this research, I can detect the ways in which this period of time between Danticat and Kincaid became a liminal space through which students were traveling. Their written compositions, as literary manifestations of that transition, have revealed for me a new framework for creative expression grounded in the relationship between three interconnected concepts: *passion* as the motivation and call that drives creative action, *ingenuity* as the essence or quality of action itself, and *voice* as the incorporation of both of these in the creative project.

While the various commentaries students authored, some of which I have discussed above, inform the development of this framework, it crystallized with greatest clarity in my
reading of *Times* commentaries authored by Alexander, who wrote of passion\(^{40}\), and by Frazier, who wrote of the nature of representation.

*Passion*

Towards the end of his commentary, Alexander reflected on the personal impact that reading Danticat had on him, noting that her writing helped him to learn to “really appreciate the freedom and privileges” that Americans often take for granted. Realizing this, he continued, led him first to further speculate as to what drives so many around the world to come to the US to seek refuge and then, building on the topic of motivation, he raised a series of open questions about what inspired those artists and activists whose lives Danticat chronicles in *Create Dangerously* to risk death to produce transgressive works. He asked, “What is the value of dying for something? Why would people like Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin risk being slaughtered? What is their purpose?” He concluded, “Passion drives motive, and people like Danticat did and still do what they do because they have a passion and believe in standing for what is right. Regardless of the consequences, Danticat had a passion to write and to become something.” Alexander’s words point most readily towards

\(^{40}\) It is coincidental, but significant to note that Aria mentions “passion” in the first excerpt of talk that I discussed in this dissertation. (See Chapter 4, “A Starting Point: Transaction, Interaction”) She identified it as the inspiration guiding Danticat to write for those potential artists “who have the same passion as her and so they can like—it can motivate them to like take a chance and to know that they can speak out.” I only realized that Aria had used this term as I performed one of the final editorial read-throughs of that chapter. In hindsight, her choice of diction strikes me as prescient, in that her use of passion captures the essence of how I have come, years later, to rendering it as a concept in the framework I discuss in the following pages.
the denotative meaning of passion as an intense desire, enthusiasm, or fervor that drives an individual to action. And as such, while it may appear, on its face, to be trite to argue that passion can be taken up as a component of a critical pedagogical framework, a more nuanced view of how passion can operate as a catalyst in compositional and motivational processes speaks to its complexities and to the value it holds as a force driving creative work.

Rooted in the Latin verb *pati*, “to suffer”, passion has been used, for example, in the Christian religious tradition to describe the progression from struggle though to creation, as chronicled in the narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus which, according to New Testament scriptures from the Bible, led to his resurrection and the subsequent creation, through his apostles, of a new faith. And while the narrative of Christ as well as those of Numa and Drouin hinge in many ways on physical suffering as central to the risk around the creation of something new, it is essential to consider the internal component of that struggle and the ways in which activist work not only by necessity embodies a physical risk but also an inner struggle that drives those projects. Consider, for instance, the struggles of Gandhi and his followers and of the millions of citizens who joined the civil rights movement in America and the many forms of physical and mental anguish that those activists faced during their decades-long, non-violent work in the name of social justice. While the daily practices of the high school ELA classroom may not seem to exist on the same plane as the endeavors of Gandhi or King, we should consider a) the ways in which our students struggle and in many instances suffer through creative processes that bridge the self and society and that are often made dangerous in the cultural and political context of time and place—as, for instance, with the negotiation of how to perform and construct one’s gender (Oost et al, 2016; Gamson and Gindstaff, 2010)—and b) how those creations can indicate for us, as educators, the
nature of that struggle. In doing so, we might be better equipped to make sense of and honor our students’ lives and identities and to use that learning to inform our teaching.

In their review of literature focusing on passion as a concept taken up in the context of education research, Ruiz-Alfonso, Vega, and Beltran (2018) note that a small body of literature has explored the various roles that passion plays as motivational factor affecting students’ academic performance, participation, cognition, concentration, resilience, goal achievement, and general well-being. And while their article does not point to research that has focused on the part passion can play in areas related specifically to literacy pedagogy, they do present some findings that bear relevance to the ways in which I frame passion as a concept in this study. For one, they cite identification as a key feature of passion that describes the positive motivational impact for a student that is contingent upon the extent to which “the activity is something within the self, something that is part of who he/she is” (2018, p. 22). They also stress the importance of context, noting that passion is not a fixed characteristic but rather draws influence from a variety of environmental factors, a few of which include the pedagogical orientation that educators bring to their work, teaching practices themselves, and the extent to which “the individual feels identified, and to which he/she invests a lot of time” (Ruiz-Alfonso, Vega, and Beltran, 2018, p. 25). Inspired by Alexander’s comments and given the focus on context, practice, and the self that it contributes as an analytic lens, I will consider through my discussion both of the identity poetry that students composed and of discussions had in response to the Johnson’s *Autobiography* how passion can function as one of two components that contributes to the development of the creative voice.
Ingenuity

The second component to the framework I propose considers the quality and substance of the creative act and is directed at better understanding how spoken and written discourse develop from the passion the work represents by focusing on the intentionality and the authenticity—motives, goals, and creative legitimacy—we can detect in it. One of the most oppressive elements of Duvalier’s regime came in the form of the suppression of intellectual and cultural creativity and creative production. With the removal of the voice of the individual also came a negation of personhood and the intended prevention by that regime of the ability for an individual to actuate the self through works that bore the potential to serve as vehicles for active engagement in the cultural and political life of the nation. As Danticat shows us, this method of domination can be enacted through outward restriction of creative output or in more subtle forms of censorship like those that contributed to the creation of a culture of disapproval for any critique of current and/or historical conditions.

Frazier’s *Times* commentary focused on realism and the telling of difficult truths through writing, and in it he drew connections to earlier classroom discussions regarding Danticat’s critics. He chose to read and write in response to a blog post by Brooks Barnes (2012) which discusses the Iranian intention to boycott the 2013 Oscars in retaliation for the refusal of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to condemn the YouTube video “Innocence of Muslims”, which caused deadly riots in the Middle East. In his commentary, Frazier argues that Iran’s response has “deep implications for the importance of media and exposure in terms of how one specific culture is perceived by the world” and he draws a parallel between those implications and Danticat’s exploration of how the creation of various
forms of media along with the ways in which audience receives and reacts to those creative works impact the identity of a nation on the world stage. As Frazier writes,

The idea that everybody deserves to have the right to create and tell their story, or spread their message is an integral part of both the article and Danticat’s essays. Regardless of the differences in context, they both refer to the same right. This article has extended my reading of Danticat by giving me a whole separate way to look at of one of the most compelling and important themes in her work. It shows how her ideas can be extended further than the confines of the covers [of her book]. One passage that really pinpoints the idea that spans both the article and Create Dangerously is from the photographer Daniel Morel, who captures ‘the way things are’.

“‘A lot of people see my pictures,’ he says. ‘They tell me ‘you make the country look bad.’ People sometimes say my photos are too negative. They’re shocked by them, but that’s exactly the reaction I want to get from people. I am not trashing Haiti or denigrating it. I am just showing people the way things are…” (2010 p. 141)

His disposition towards creating an image of Haiti from his perspective to tell the story and show the world is shared by many, including the author of the article. The story needs to be real and not solely one narrow channeled perspective of a country, culture, or situation. It should not be slimmed and shaped down to a controlled vision. It should really just be ‘the way things are’.

Frazier combines his readings of Danticat and Barnes with his focus on the Morel quote to support what he sees as a primary theme that cuts across these writings, namely, arguments all three authors make regarding “the right to create” works that bear authenticity and resist being controlled or narrowed by a third party. Frazier’s words speak to the importance of investigating the substantive quality of creative works in order to make apparent how power structures that operate within, through, and in the context(s) surrounding those works frame our transactions with them, including our perspectives on the intention of the text (i.e. its argument or thesis) the method of the text (i.e. it’s thematic and compositional quality) and the sources (i.e. context, authorial intent, etc.) that influence its creation. To this end, I consider the term ingenuity as useful in its ability to convey the
existence of an active force that operates within discourse (talk and text), that embodies all of these qualities, and that is conveyed through oral or written production.

As a noun commonly associated with the adjective “ingenious” and used to describe the quality of being clever, original, and inventive and of having high intellectual capacity, *ingenuity*, like passion, bears a much more complex aspect when we consider the second sense of the word and its connection to the adjective *ingenuous*, which references the condition of being born of free and honorable birth and bears the root *gen-*, the Latinate stem of *gignère* or “to beget”. Taking up *ingenuity* as a term that signifies what is imbued within a text through its creation and by its creator can perhaps take us a step further than, for instance, a concept like *repertoire* (Iser, 1978), which deals more narrowly with the historical and socio-cultural referential and normed “territory” of the text. Instead, both senses of *ingenuity*, the active, intentionality of engenderment and legitimation by the author combined with an emphasis on the inventive and novel quality of the act, provide a connotative value to the term that conveys a process of giving birth to and “raising up” a creative work from the ground and then releasing it into broadening contexts through which it is received by others and likewise receives the perspectives of others (audience).

In a review of their own and others’ research in education, Gutiérrez et al (2017) employ ingenuity to describe how members of nondominant communities engage in everyday practices that actively resist those systems of embedded educational inequalities that frame persons hailing from disenfranchised populations as inept and lacking in intellectual ability. They focus on “boundary crossing” to “illustrate how families innovate and leverage familial and other everyday knowledge to imagine and enact new practices” (p. 32) that are complex, dynamic, and executed both routinely and longitudinally. Drawing on a
theoretical framework that incorporates writing and research on disidentification, border crossing, and queer theory (Muñoz, 1999; Anzaldúa, 1999), Gutiérrez et al argue that ingenuity drives these “everyday creative responses to constraints and (un)intentional moves to blur boundaries” (2017 p. 45) and point to what they term “line-stepping” as one example of just such a response through which an individual “deliberately and consciously pushes against society’s ideological constraints” (2017, p. 53).

With regard both to the literature that my students read and to their oral and written responses fostered by those readings, Gutiérrez et al’s work suggests the value that ingenuity can carry as a lens for description and analysis that aids in the identifying moments of potential transgression as they emerge in the creative acts around which this research centers. Texts like Danticat’s and Kincaid’s, commentaries like Frazier’s and Alexander’s, and verbal interactions like those in which Nyah, Amir, and others participated stand as acts that embody processes of line-stepping or border crossing and evince the ways in which students can use the work of the literacy classroom to resist socio-cultural and political constraints including the silencing of voice and the persistence of colonialism and isolationism enacted through systems of dominance.

Voice

When considered in the context of the project of critical pedagogy, passion provides the lens through which we can identify the various generative influences that foster the motivation to create and embodies the process of identification through which the individual engages with the influences that support creation. Ingenuity resonates with the concept of praxis by signifying how the process of textual and oral creation embodies a “term of
engagement”, one that positions both author and audience as critical actors in a recursive, transitive process that “transforms both performer and audience” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012 p. 54) and supports the activist project of transgression. Acting together, these two concepts have the potential to function as components within a framework through which a third component, the critical voice of the text, emerges.

Lensmire (1999) takes up the project of how to reconcile two useful but, as he argues, inherently problematic conceptions of voice as they have been traditionally framed within the Workshop tradition of written composition (Calkins, 1986; Murray, 1985; Atwell, 1987) and from the stance of critical pedagogy (Simon, 1987; Giroux, 1988a; Giroux and McLaren, 1989). He notes that foundational to the Workshop model sits an Enlightenment ideology that supports the search for an extant, stable voice that a writer carries and that is clearly distinguishable from other authors. Turning to critical pedagogy, Lensmire discusses how theorists from that school have shed the Enlightenment cloak of stability for a view of voice that favors participatory action and the socially-mitigated production of meaning. This conceptual shift frames the construction of voice as a participatory act that resists the “meanings, subjectivities, and forms of authority determined by powerful others” (1999, p. 268). He notes that these two schools of thought do maintain some similarities in that both encourage the flourishing, acceptance, and affirmation of student voice and encourage students to actively explore their worlds rather than to submit to passive reception of knowledge controlled by a pedagogue. Lensmire find lacking in both schools a framework for reckoning with the ways in which conflicts operating “among students, between teacher and students, and within individual students [affect] the actual production of speech and writing within classrooms” (p. 271). As an alternative to these frameworks, Lensmire
suggests that voice be conceptualized as a project that develops across time and context, exists in the grounded work of the classroom, and bears three aspects—appropriation, social struggle, and becoming. Taken together, these components provide a suitable complement to my conceptual rendering of how passion, ingenuity, and voice operate in my own theoretical framework.

In appropriation, Lensmire locates the process through which an emergent self a) comes into contact with the complexities of a social environment and the various resources available to it and b) actively responds to and transforms those influences through the crafting of a unique written and spoken voice. The social struggle attendant upon the creation of that voice bears three facets: first, it involves the task of creating something new given the conventions and traditions that have come to characterize a recognizable voice. Lensmire emphasizes the risk involved in this undertaking, especially within the context of school, where often the bar for “not being recognized as a competent, worthy student” (1999, p. 283) is low enough to include simply speaking and writing in unconventional ways. The second facet considers audience and the negotiation over how various sets of critical arbiters, including parents, peers, family, and local communities might react and respond to the writer’s voice. The third deals with the struggle over choice and the ways in which through “the appropriation of certain voices (and not others), and in the particular ways they rework these voices, students position themselves with and against certain meanings and values, with and against certain audiences, in a social setting marked by asymmetries of power” (1999, p. 284). The final major component of the creative project, becoming, signifies the possibilities and risks inherent to the release of student voice into an unknown. Lensmire argues that enacting voice must come with the understanding and realization that writing and speech
may be recognized and “become” but that one’s voice may also be “shut down” by feelings of inadequacy, by fear or shame in response to hostilities and dissent, or by self-censorship and silencing in response to those who simply refuse to listen (1999, p. 285). For the creator, Lensmire writes, becoming must also entail a refusal to simply repeat what has already been voiced, and instead, to reimagine and reconstruct the old to form something new. Finally, becoming also involves recognition that the artist does not work in a vacuum and relies instead upon a collaborative community to support the development of their voice. That community can include peers, teachers, and any number of past and present others.

As I consider how to conceptualize voice as part of a passion-ingenuity-voice framework, I take influence from Lensmire’s model and the specific focus it brings to the role that conflict plays in the construction of voice and the components of that conflict that he identifies. Apparent in the written compositions and excerpts of transcripted dialogue that I have discussed in previous chapters is an interplay between the spectrum of motivations and influences (passions) that drive particular discourses and the character and substance of those discourses (their ingenuities) that involve continual negotiations over dissonances both great and small. The various interpersonal and internal considerations around conflict that Lensmire enumerates in his discussion of the social struggle component of his framework, including deliberations over composition, recognition, and choice bear relevance as analytic tools for making sense of the voice an instance of discourse conveys. Useful also is the sense of an ongoing, unfinished process inherent to the concept of becoming, as is recognition of the risk and reality that a voice may not become at all. Framing discourse in this way resists the notion that a given speech act or text constitutes a final articulation of voice. As Lensmire reminds us, our voices do not exist in isolation, but rather as utterances is in a potentially
infinite field of play. That field is loosely bounded by the communities in which our voices exist and are either heard or ignored, taken up or discarded. In this sense, our voices are continually becoming or un-becoming in ways we can and often cannot know or control.

Figure 2 presents a visual model that represents how I conceptualize the relationship between passion, ingenuity, and voice. The converging arrows and interlocking spheres suggest the various potential influences that come together to constitute the passion that gives life to the creative work. These may include various forms of media influence (visual, oral, written), the self-concept of the creator, historical, cultural, and political influences, interpersonal relationships (e.g. with family, friends, colleagues), and the sense and presence of “other” as representative of persons or groups the creator cannot or resists knowing. The inward directionality of the diagram is intended not only to indicate that these influences converge, but also to convey the potential for struggle (and perhaps suffering) that often accompanies the creative process of identification. The four larger arrows that emerge from the center of the model along with the field that they enclose indicates the ingenuity of the work. Its outward directionality captures the sense of origin or birth and outward growth through intention and directed action and engagement (praxis). The voice of the work is represented by the sphere within and through which ingenuity and passion
operate. Although the sphere appears to bear a finite boundary, the blurred edge of the sphere is intended to indicate the sense of becoming inherent to voice.

As I noted earlier, the *passion-ingenuity-voice* model emerged from my analysis of those discussions and written responses presented and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 and in the first half of this chapter. In Chapter 7, which focuses on the identity poems students authored in response to Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”, and in Chapter 8, which focuses on another set of classroom conversations hosted with students in response to their readings of James Weldon Johnson, I test this interpretive framework for its value as an analytic tool. The questions that guide that analysis ask, What are the *ingenuities* of these discourses? What *passions* do they embody? How can we describe the *voices* they carry?
CHAPTER 7 – IDENTIFICATION, TRANSGRESSION, INCORPORATION: FINDING VOICE THROUGH IDENTITY POETRY

The call for students to author poems that captured aspects of their identities came from my desire that they be given the opportunity to compose verse through a readily accessible format. Asking students to read published poetry and to compose their own works modeled after the form and thematic content of a poem they’ve read is an approach taken by many ELA teachers, and from my experience, it may not always be a successful endeavor. Using another poet’s composition as a model for one’s own can sometimes lead to a contrived piece that captures all too well the pedagogy that informs it: the verse that emerges can often betray a forced exercise through which the writer focuses most intently on trying to fit poetic tropes into syntactical structures in an aim to conform to the style, meter, and rhyme scheme of the model poem. The resultant voice of the work often suffers from a lack of authenticity, a failure to communicate the passion and ingenuity that the poet might bring to a work. However, my prior experiences in teaching Kincaid’s “Girl” indicated to me that attempts to use that prose poem as a model for imitative verse largely avoided this tendency. I speculated that this may have had to do with the balance that it strikes between freedom and constraint in form and content. A reading of “Girl” (see Appendix F) that focuses on its structural and thematic aspects reveals the following set of compositional characteristics: It straddles classification between prose and verse forms. It is multivocal (with the balance favoring the non-italicized speaker). It is comprised of a series of clauses separated by semicolons and bears repetitive elements including instructive phrases like “this is how” and the use of imperatives like “don’t”. It conveys a relationship between one
speaker as an authority providing advice and a second speaker acting as a respondent who reacts to that advice. There is no rhyme scheme to the work, nor is there a set rhythmic pattern (although the writing is deeply rhythmic in its voicing). Given these features, “Girl” provides students with enough structure to offer a compositional framework and enough freedom to support the writer’s individual goals, and my work with it has shown that presenting it as a model for composition has prompted a variety of carefully considered, powerful prose poems that communicate aspects of students’ identities, histories, and personal lives and relationships with adult figures. Because of the deep connections to the self that these poems carry, I had begun to refer to Kincaid’s and my students’ works as identity poems, and my past readings of them had become invitations for better understanding the self-concept they conveyed, the influences and motivations driving their composition, and the internal and external conflicts that were of greatest interest to the adolescents who composed them.

Because Kincaid’s prose poem is autobiographical and deals with the relationship between a mother (her own) and daughter, students were instructed to place themselves in the role of Kincaid’s speaker and to consider for the other voice in their prose poem a figure who has been influential in shaping their lives. To support prewriting for this assignment, I asked students to select a single noun that would stand as a foundational identity marker from which to build their composition. Suggestions I provided to students included “boy”, “girl”, “son”, “daughter”, “artist”, “singer”, “dancer”, “student”, “athlete”. Students then made three lists. The first included direct quotes from people who have contributed to that aspect of their identity (a minimum of 5). The second was a list of “this is how” statements that captured the various actions and abilities they have learned from that individual and that
they identify as essential to their identities (a minimum of 10). The third list enumerated things that the they have said or would like to say to the primary speaker in the poem in response to the advice and instructions they have been given (a minimum of 3). Students were then asked to use those lists to compose a poem of similar length to Kincaid’s that captures the identity noun that they selected by organizing the items on those lists in an order that worked best for them.

Building upon my suggestion that passion, ingenuity, and voice can provide a language of description and analysis for written and spoken discourse, I use the remaining space of this chapter to closely examine a sampling of three identity poems drawn from our work with Kincaid and authored by students in my Section B class. My intention here is to determine the extent to which the passion-ingenuity-voice framework might bear analytic value. For the purpose of continuity and ease of reference, I place the full text of each of prose poem alongside my discussion as figures rather than in an appendix.

**Student**

Seth[^41^] chose to take up the role of student as the aspect of his identity around which to center his poem. In it, he uses a day in his life to frame a series of direct exchanges with a parental figure and indirect exchanges with his school and a larger system of schooling. In its opening line, the speaker of his poem declares his resistance to waking up for the start of the day by insisting that he feels too “tired” to do so. However, he does not let that statement

[^41^]: White, male student
hang as a blanket expression of fatigue. He instead uses that feeling as a springboard for a series of arguments against the structuring of the school day and the demands and requirements of schooling that he finds to be at times “pointless”, “unchallenging”, and unreasonable. As the poem progresses, this litany of complaints about the nature of school and the pressures applied by various actors including teachers, parents, and peers, provides the reader with the sense that the overarching passion driving Seth’s creative project is bound thematically to its opening line, to feelings of exhaustion that the speaker identifies as associated with it being “time to wake up for school”. Seth’s choice to open his prose poem by framing his identity as a student through his expressed fatigue and resistance to getting out of bed to take on the role of student communicates the poem’s central thesis. It presents an argument for a more holistic exhaustion with and struggle against being told metaphorically to “wake up and get with the program”. This argument is supported and

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<th>Student</th>
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<td>Time to wake up for school; But I don’t want to, I’m tired; This is how you wake up extremely early for school even though students are much more productive and focused when they’ve slept in; This is how you wear a school uniform, even though it’s a pointless rule and it accomplishes absolutely nothing; This is how you learn things in school that you will never use in your life; This is how you tolerate an unchallenging class that’s teaching you nothing; This is how you try harder than you’ve ever tried at anything in your life just so you can get an 85 every single marking period since 5th grade, because no matter how hard you try, it doesn’t matter, you’ll never get an A because you’re “not athletic enough”; This is how you sing on a riser squished between 250 tone-deaf teenagers who don’t even want to be there; Why do we have mandatory choir if concert choir sounds better? Don’t our parents think that 4 choirs in one night is too much?; This is how you sing the Hallelujah Chorus, also known as one of the stupidest songs ever written; This is how you tolerate swallowing an inedible school lunch just so you have enough food in your belly to make it through the afternoon; This is how you watch your teachers do everything wrong and daydream about how you’ll do everything better; 89% on your report card? Not good enough; This is how you stay up very late on a school night, barely able to keep your eyes open, attempting to create a half-decent poem that you’re turning in late because it’s taken so long to get the inspiration needed to create it, while hoping that it won’t have too bad of an effect on your grade; I just got an email from JupiterGrades, why didn’t you turn in your homework?; Why is that your business? Don’t you think I care about my grades just as much as you do? Can’t you just mind your own business until I get my darn report card?; Do you think that TV is more important than homework?</td>
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So? How was your day at school? |
contextualized across the work through the speaker’s listing of various experiences that feed into this physical and emotional exhaustion.

We can detect through the questions uttered by the speaker in response to the variety of pressures he experiences that what motivates Seth to engage with his audience (primarily me) through this piece is an *identification* (Ruiz-Alfonso, Vega, and Beltran, 2018) with an aspect of his identity as “student” that he finds to be deeply problematic and his desire to question the complex set of negative factors that contribute on a daily basis to its development. These include: a) the disconnect between the speaker’s self-concept and sets of requirements that he identifies as being foisted upon him by others, namely by the adults in his life, b) the historical and cultural norms of school, including systems of grading and evaluation and the structuring of the school day, and c) the interpersonal relationships that he feels forced to navigate with parents, teachers, and “the 250 tone-deaf teenagers who don’t even want to be there.”

One way to consider how the *ingeniousness* of Seth’s work operates in his poem might be to explore the ways in which his construction of the poem’s speakers both imitates and resists conforming to Kincaid’s framing of the speakers in her poem. In “Girl”, the italicized portions of text indicate the response of the child to the parent, as do the italicized lines in Seth’s poem, which clearly communicate the student’s responses to parental/authoritarian figures. However, while unitalicized text in Kincaid’s prose poem consistently references both the words and actions of the parent, this does not appear to be case in “Student”. Instead, the unitalicized text in Seth’s poem appears to constitute a multi-voiced representation of self through which the “this is how” statements, which in Kincaid’s poem provide directives from the parental figure in the form of modeled actions, are instead cast
as ways of being that the student himself embodies as he is compelled to enact this role. In fact, the unitalicized voice of the parental figure is limited solely to a few utterances that directly address the student speaker. Examples of these include, “Time to wake up for school”, “89% on your report card? Not good enough”, and “I just got an email from JupiterGrades, why didn’t you turn in your homework?” Unlike Kincaid’s poem in which the bulk of guidance comes in the form of the parental figure’s modeling of actions and behaviors that should be emulated or adhered to by the daughter, in “Student” the individual engaging in these “this is how” behaviors takes on the identity not of the parent but of a secondary persona of the student speaker, one who tolerates and conforms to the constraints being placed upon him rather than resist those. In short, Seth casts the figure of the student as the embodiment of a fractured identity that speaks with two voices: the voice of begrudging complacency (as indicated through the unitalicized, embodied actions of the “model” student) and the voice of outward, questioning resistance (as indicated through the poem’s italicized text).

The transgressive function of the poem—the project that Seth undertakes of conveying the nature of these external struggles around his identity as a student and the ultimate challenge of finding a voice of resistance for himself—is bound in the form of the work itself. Pitted against the student speaker’s desire to attain the benchmarks that have been established by the powers that be (“how you try harder than you’ve ever tried at anything in your life just so you can get an 85 every single marking period since 5th grade, because no matter how hard you try, it doesn’t matter”) is both the voice of the inner self that encourages resistance (“how you watch your teachers do everything wrong and daydream about how you’ll do everything better”) and the voice that speaks out openly in
defiance (“Why is that your business? Don’t you think I care about my grades just as much as you do?”).

If we consider the space given over to these voices, we notice that the student voice of tolerant suffering occupies most of the poem in comparison with the voices of internal and open resistance, which take up much less space in the work. Thus, the structural form of the poem functions to indicate the overwhelming position of power—at least at the time of its composition—that parental/authoritarian forces hold over the student speaker. This is further emphasized in the poem’s penultimate line, when the voice of the parent utters in a tone that blends genuine concern with sarcasm the question, “Do you think that TV is more important than homework?” Seth uses the placement of this rhetorical question as a final point of emphasis that further frames the structuring of power in the work by situating the parental voice in a position both of privilege and of potential vulnerability. While sarcasm can be employed in ways intended to reemphasize the rectitude of one’s own perspective, it simultaneously can work to betray the shaky footing upon which the premise it carries may stand. That the parent’s remark receives no response other than silence (as indicated by the line break that Seth places after it) captures perhaps the student’s refusal or resistance to attend to the voice of dominance as does the final turn of speech uttered by the parent speaker, “So? How was your day at school?” In this question we can recognize, both in its banality and in Seth’s placement of it at the close of his poem, the implication that it may have been asked of him so routinely as to have become for the student—regardless of the parent’s intention—less an invitation for response and more a cue for silence. As such, no response follows, the poem ends, and we are left to consider the extent to which the student’s refusal to speak functions in ways the undermine the authoritarian voice of the
parent by refusing to engage with it or empower that voice by allowing it to have, in effect, the last word on the matter.

The voice of Seth’s identity poem is without a doubt guided by a passion to convey the nature of the internal and external struggles that he and potentially many others have experienced as a function of negotiating the identity of student. He expresses this struggle with a transgressive ingenuity characterized by compositional choices that include manipulating the roles of speakers, challenging the established structural norms of the model poem, and openly questioning the institutional norms of school and the various power structures that govern the context under which the writing was assigned. Indeed, when we consider the risks to becoming (Lensmire, 1999) that student-authored works often face in terms of how they may be received within the context of academia, the voice and value of Seth’s creative project risks being marginalized by two stances that often prevent us, as teachers, from attending (possibly not unlike the parent speaker in the poem) to the powerful message it attempts to voice. These stances include the potential for a) dismissing the poem as compositionally flawed over its lack of conformity to the model poem, and b) delegitimizing its message through criticism of the stance towards the institution of school and the role of parental figures it takes. Not only did Seth resist strict adherence to the structural model suggested by “Girl”, he also took up as the subject for his poem a student calling into question the value of school and the value of the assignment. In making these choices, he “line-stepped” (Gutiérrez et al, 2017) into risky territory. But by engaging in both of these transgressions, Seth invites us to consider the extent to which his decisions strengthen rather than undermine the creative value of the work. This can be particularly challenging for language arts teachers who—and I indicate myself in this regard—may not
always find it easy to value speech and writing that resists conformity to the norms and guidelines of form and function that we establish in our classrooms. But writing like Seth’s reminds us that as critical readers of student texts who bear a great deal of power in shaping our students’ identities as writers and their development in literacy, educators must bring an openness to difference and a willingness to engage in transactions informed by a framework for critique and evaluation that is grounded in humility. Taking such a stance requires us to cede evaluative power in favor of adopting a more capacious view of our students, one that considers their motivations, goals, and techniques as components of intentioned projects that seek specific, legitimate ends.

A consideration for how passion and ingenuity come together to reveal the voice of the work may be one useful framework (among others) for adopting that stance since applying a critical lens to student writing requires that we employ the same standard of believing and valuing to reading the works our students create as we would to works by published authors. After all, what the voice of the student in Seth’s poem seeks most is legitimacy, the right to be accepted on his own terms and to define his identity to those of us who possess the power and ability to create structural constraints that often delimit what possibilities exist for adolescent self-ideation. If we fail to listen to and consider the validity of the arguments that students like Seth voice through written and spoken discourse, we risk drastically limiting our ability to be effective respondents to the contributions they offer. If we, like the unitalicized speaker in Seth’s poem, resort to sarcasm or persist in pedantic adherence to norms without pausing to listen and to engage in critical self-reflection, we risk doing a great disservice to our students and our profession by silencing their voices and creating even greater boundaries between us and them.
“Well-Behaved” Child

If Seth’s identity poem voiced various critiques challenging the practices and power structures that exist at the intersection of school and home, Isa’s offers an equally powerful rendering of a struggle between parent and child over issues related to voice and silence and individuality and conformity that considers the intersecting spheres of private and public life. Isa’s poem conforms more closely to Kincaid’s in its framing of two distinct poetic personae, a parent (stepfather) and a child. Both speak directly in the work, with the child’s voice placed in italics and the parent’s actions and voice placed in unitalicized text. Isa’s poem is admittedly difficult to read given both the raw emotions embedded in the conflicts it portrays between the father figure and the daughter as well as some of the direct quotations attributed to Isa’s stepfather, which, if accurate, fall somewhere along a spectrum ranging from indelicate, to harsh, to bordering on abusive. Having been Isa’s teacher for only a few months, I knew very little about her life outside of school or her family structure, but after reading her poem, I did have separate conversations with her and with our school guidance counselor to discuss the ways in which Isa had characterized her relationship with her stepfather. Our counselor let me know that she and Isa had spoken about the dynamic in the home and that she (our counselor) was monitoring the situation in an ongoing way. When conferencing with Isa, I asked her whether she felt as though she were in danger at home and whether she was receiving the support she needed to navigate the conflicts she had chosen to disclose in her poem. She expressed to me that she was okay and that she had adults (including our counselor) who were supporting her. I reminded her that I was willing to listen and support in any way I could and would help her find the individuals who could
best support her if the issue was beyond my purview. I also stressed the importance that she maintain a relationship with an adult who she could trust and upon whom she could rely for support if necessary.

I selected Isa’s poem to include as part of the data set for this research because it speaks to ways in which engaging students in reading and writing that focuses on identity development and the exploration of self and other invites students to create dangerously, often by taking risks and choosing to expose aspects of their lives that are deeply troubling and in many cases require that we, as educators, intervene. I was clear with students going into their authoring of these poems and their student memoirs that they should feel free to share aspects of their lives at whatever comfort level they deemed appropriate. I emphasized to students that I would be the sole audience for their work (outside of the publication of my research, for which I received written consent from students and in which I guaranteed the provision of anonymity). However, I did offer the caveat that if the content of their writing disclosed information that indicated the potential for harm either to themselves or to

<table>
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<th>“Well-Behaved” Child</th>
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<td>This is how you will live your life; this is how you be respectful; <strong>But I know how to be</strong>- “You don’t talk back;” I’m not talking back- “Children are to be seen, not heard;” this is how you must always listen no matter what because I am always right; “Everyone else is wrong;” I can think of many times when you were wrong, <strong>dead</strong> wrong; “Speak when spoken to;” you were speaking to me; you are wrong; “You are unimportant and your feelings don’t matter;” Why not? “Because I said so;” this is how you judge everyone; this is how you know that everyone is ignorant and rude, but not me; this is how you must view the world; everyone is wrong and evil; this is how you must live to avoid the dangerous, evil people; you must live alone; this is how you live isolated from the world; <strong>but not everyone is evil and dangerous;</strong> “You can’t have an opinion and if you do, it is wrong;” this is how you avoid excitement; this is how you blend in with everyone else; this is how you lose your identity and personality; <strong>but how will I become an individual?</strong>; you don’t deserve to be an individual; this is how you eat; “Don’t eat all that you are already fat enough;” this is how you will be ostracized because you are fat and ugly; this is how you will dress to hide how fat and ugly you are; you are not like the rest of us, beautiful and skinny; “You don’t belong in this family;” this is how you contribute to the family (even though you don’t belong); this is how you will take care of your mother; this is how you will clean your mother’s house; <strong>but I am just a child, why do I have to</strong> – this is how you will hide all your feelings because they don’t matter; this is how you will always love your mother and me; <strong>but I never loved you, I don’t even like you</strong>; this is how you will lie to everyone to avoid getting in trouble; this is how you will be a well-behaved child.</td>
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others, I was required to discuss what they had related to me with our counselor, principal, and in some cases with state-based reporting services. Overall, Isa’s poem was the most candid of those submitted by students from both sections.

The passion that drives Isa’s writing is clearly informed by a call to challenge restrictive and discriminatory forces operating in her relationship with her stepfather and to address how those extend outward from her personal life to broader social contexts. Isa’s writing is organized around a series of topics (like “Girl”) through which her stepfather is presented as imposing perspectives on the world and on Isa’s role in it that she actively resists. She presents this resistance both stylistically and rhetorically in the ways in which she characterizes the examples he has set for her through his behaviors and in her direct responses to him. The major topics that Isa chooses to incorporate into her writing cover a series of basic rights, including the right to be heard and to express oneself, the right to be seen and to craft one’s own identity, the right to one’s body and to be secure in one’s personhood, and the right to define one’s role in and contribution to society. Throughout, we can detect in Isa’s critical treatment of these topics an outward movement from the interpersonal to the societal. The ingenuity of her writing rests in how its framing of lived experiences offers critiques of a larger cultural system through which sexist, misogynistic, and isolationist ideologies of domination risk finding legacy through approaches to parenting that rely upon fear and judgement as methods of control. Isa’s technique ties closely to the methodology guiding Kincaid’s work which, although brief, reveals through the words and actions of the mother a great deal regarding the cultural landscape and gender politics of Antigua. In this regard and in terms of the prompt guiding this writing assignment, Isa finds great success in her ability to take up or appropriate (Lensmire, 1999) not only the form of
“Girl” as a model, but also the larger project of Kincaid’s prose poem as a cultural critique, and to recast that essential quality in a new form that reflects her own (Isa’s) lived experiences.

The multilayered series of rights and restrictions that occupy the lines of Isa’s poem draw influence from several components of her relationship with her stepfather, the first of which deals with an overall struggle to navigate spoken exchanges with him and the daughter’s attempts to establish a voice for herself while being repeatedly silenced by his directives. Isa opens this section with a rendering of one back and forth exchange between daughter and stepfather (“This is how you will live your life; this is how you be respectful; But I know how to be. ‘You don’t talk back; I’m not talking bac-’”). Here, Isa provides a snapshot of interaction between the two that frames the stepfather’s enforcement of those behaviors that he has decided can be deemed “respectful” as operating within a structure though which power is skewed to favor the individual whose voice speaks with the most traditional authority (his). This is further indicated through the stepfather’s use of clichéd statements and directives like “Children are to be seen, not heard” and “Speak when spoken to” that act as signifiers of his claims to control Isa. These claims are legitimized solely by what he perceives to be his privileged position as her father and as an adult. Isa then considers how the lessons the daughter is being taught by her stepfather (“this is how you judge everyone; this is how you know that everyone is ignorant and rude, but not me”) work to frame her identity not only in the household but in society at large. The worldview that her stepfather presents stems from his final insistence that “[e]veryone else is wrong”, a claim to superiority that extends beyond his relationship with his stepdaughter to much broader contexts. The universality of this message—his use of “everyone”—indicates the extent to which he
intends to extend the position he has worked to establish for himself in their relationship within the household to a more expansive justification of his right to act as the critical arbiter of what is right and wrong and good and evil at the societal level (“this is how you must view the world; everyone is wrong and evil”). Given such an absolutist stance, the stepfather’s only recourse when discussing society with the daughter requires that he frame “the other” as dangerous and, as such, as an entity both to be isolated and from which to seek isolation. The child responds to this, insisting that “not everyone is evil and dangerous”, but the stepfather rejects out of hand any right the child may claim to hold to a justifiable opinion (or any opinion) on the matter. Isa concludes this section of her poem by building upon the stepfather’s various statements regarding how to “be” or exist in the world by segueing into what constitutes an explication of the lesson that he insists the child must learn, namely that the she must “blend in with everyone else” and abandon her identity and personality. Isa captures this sentiment in the stepfather’s ultimate, outright rejection of any necessity that one might claim a self that is distinguishable from the group: “but how will I become an individual?; you don’t deserve to be an individual”.

In the second half of her poem, we see Isa first diving more deeply into an investigation of issues related to the daughter’s identity and self-concept. She begins by addressing the direct influence that her stepfather has had on his stepdaughter’s body image (this is how you eat; “Don’t eat all that you are already fat enough;”) and the ways in which that negative signaling around self-image and self-worth extrapolates to a societal level (“this is how you will be outcasted because you are fat and ugly; this is how you will dress to hide how fat and ugly you are; you are not like the rest of us, beautiful and skinny;”). In constructing this outward movement from the local to the societal, Isa embeds an
indemnification not only of the ways in which the child’s body image has been attacked in the home but also of larger forms of messaging conveyed through the media and other cultural outlets, both of which she identifies as contributing to an ongoing process of being “outcasted”. Isa closes her poem by extending this theme to include the condition of being cast out or exiled from the family while at the same time being required to contribute to it “(even though you don’t belong)”. Isa places in the voice of the stepfather a series of six directives indicated by the repeated phrase “you will” that convey the nature of this push-pull of exile and requirement. Four of these statements capture a series of actions and behaviors that will be required of Isa to maintain her status as a contributing member of the family (“take care of your mother”, “clean your mother’s house”, “love your mother and me”, “be a well-behaved child”), while the remaining two provide a subtext for how to cope with having to navigate a system of domination (“you will hide all of your feelings because they don’t matter”, “you will lie to everyone to avoid getting in trouble”).

The narrative that Isa advances in her poem captures a framing of the adolescent female speaker’s position in the family that can be liked to a form of cultural hegemony in that the conditions required for her participation dictate that she exist within a structure governed by a parenting mechanism which operates to advance domination by consent.42 The child’s repeated refusals to accept participation in this system and her continual questioning of the premises of control and authority that undergird her stepfather’s

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42 I would eventually introduce the concept of hegemony to students as part of our preparation for Johnson’s Autobiography in a discussion on how to apply a post-colonial critical lens to readings of literature.
directives constitute the nature of the transgression—the ingenuity—that drives the voice of the work. Through an ongoing process of dissonance there emerges a rendering of voice of dissent. In this regard, Isa’s poem exposes perhaps one of the most challenging forms of border-crossing or line-stepping that occupies the lives of many, if not all, adolescents: the struggle to reckon with the requirements of childhood and duty to one’s parent(s) and the identification of the self as an individual who often must speak truth to power and strike out on one’s own. The disturbing character of the relationship between child and stepfather that Isa presents in her poem may go beyond what we would hope constitutes the norm when we consider the relationship between parent and child. However, just as the voice emanating from Seth’s poem provides insights into the identity of “student” that transcend individual experience and that invite investigations into larger issues concerning the intersection between school, student, and the home, Isa’s poem likewise offers a richly articulated rendering of the character of the struggles that adolescents may encounter within the home and of how those struggles connect to larger societal issues that bear deeper consideration and investigation. For literacy educators, delving deeply into the voices of these works reveals themes, topics, and issues that can—and arguably must—be taken up as points of engagement and embarkation by educators. In this regard, Isa’s poem invites a call to action for us to develop pedagogical orientations and progressive curricula that respond to students’ passions (in the sense that I employ in this framework), that bear relevance to their lives, identities, and histories, that spur critical dialogue about texts, the self, and society, and that foster the production of new texts that engage with the most challenging aspects the human condition.
Black Dynamite

Isaac, Alejandro, and a few other friends in the Section B class formed a close bond with each other that led to the development of a superhero group in which members assigned themselves monikers and super powers. The title of Isaac’s poem, “Black Dynamite”, references the superhero identity he chose for himself, and Isaac uses the space of his poem to imagine the identity development of that character. In it, Isaac positions a young Black Dynamite as the secondary speaker (italicized text) receiving guidance from a mentor whose speech and actions are intended to provide him with the tools for developing into the superhero he will one day become. While both Isa’s and Seth’s poems convey tones that range from frustration and contempt to anger and resentment, Isaac’s work offers a much more optimistic rendering of the protagonist speaker’s struggle to develop a heroic identity for himself. Dynamite receives guidance from a mentor figure who frames for him the many steps needed to make manifest his destiny. Interspersed within those stages and functioning as structural elements that provide thematic organization to the work, Isaac provides a series of three very brief responses —two questions and one statement— voiced by Dynamite that capture the young superhero’s hesitant uncertainty over whether he will be able to attend to the various actions and ways of being that the mentor has placed before him.

As with Isa’s and Seth’s poems, the passion that drives Isaac’s composition clearly stems from multiple sources, interests, and goals. Because of his strong proclivity towards superhero culture, it is not surprising that Isaac’s poem bears many of the tropes common to the archetype of the hero and the heroic cycle, or journey, that cut across the genres of
classical epic, medieval *roman*, and modern narrative. Isaac employs the most basic set of these commonly occurring devices at the outset of his poem by naming the hero, identifying his key physical attributes and temperament, and describing the accoutrements he bears. As is consistent with many hero chronicles, Isaac’s verse will provide explication of an epithet (i.e. Black Dynamite) that captures the primary strengths imbued within the persona of the hero. The name that Isaac has chosen for superhero alter ego (also the poem’s title) captures a blend of his racial self-identification as a Black male with the potential that lies within him for explosivity and dynamism. Given that the focus of Isaac’s verse centers on an exploration of what it will take for Dynamite to bring to fruition the potential for greatness that exists within him, the poem functions very much as an expository piece that aligns with the essential qualities of the protagonist who lends his name to it.

Early on, the mentor’s instructions to Dynamite on the fundamentals of growing facial hair, picking an afro, rocking shades, and alternately avoiding and winning

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43 These classes of students had been exposed to classical epic through their reading of Homer’s *Odyssey* during their sophomore year, but I have no data indicating the extent to which they examined poetic elements of epic in that course work, nor can I determine whether Isaac intentionally incorporated these tropes into his poem. Many of the common literary forms and archetypes that Isaac includes remain so common to contemporary heroic narratives that it equally likely that they emerged organically from his exposure to popular culture, film, and digital media.
confrontations help define this characterization by providing the reader with a physical
description that tracts with his Black identity and a key personal effect (his shades) that
convey the sense of cool
that he will project.

Additionally, we are given
a preview of the kinds of
anecdotes that will
comprise his storied
career. He will be a
fighter, but he will be
judicious when
confronted; he will show
the reserve necessary to
determine when to engage
with an enemy and when
to avoid doing so. In tote,
the voice of the mentor
providing guidance to the
young Dynamite conveys
upon him an identity kit
that evokes the portrait of a street-smart, savvy operator who will carry forward with pride
the cultural traditions of his people.

**Black Dynamite**

This is how you overcome obstacles.
Remember to think smarter not harder. This is
how you overcome yourself. This is how you
express your beliefs. This is how you pick an
afro. This is how you grow facial hair.
This is how you rock a pair of shades. This
is how you get all of the ladies. This is
how you avoid a fight. This is how you get
into a fight. This is how you win a fight. *But
what if I don’t want to fight?* There will be
those who will try and stop you from
achieving success. This is how you ignore
these people. Remember that being yourself
is never a bad thing. This is how you tell your
enemies from your friends. This is how you
choose your friends. Choose your friends
wisely for they have the ability to raise you
to newer heights. This is how you stand up for
yourself. This is how you help those in need.
This is how you form a group. This is how you
work well in groups. This is how you act
quickly. This is how you defeat an enemy.
This is how you defeat many enemies.
The enemy of your enemy is always your
enemy. *Don’t you mean that they are my
ally?* This is how you question advice. This is
how you forget about the questions concerning
the advice previously given. This is how you
make tough decisions. This is how you live
with those decisions. This is how you deal
with pain. This is how you forget the pain.
This is how you move on. This is how you
create new memories. This is how you make
the most of your life. *I don’t know if I can
do all of this.* This is how you face your fears.
This is how you live up to your expectations.
This is how you achieve your destiny. This is
how you become a hero. This is how you
become a legend. This is how you save the world.

I don’t know if I can

This is how you face your fears.
This is how you live up to your expectations.
This is how you achieve your destiny. This is
how you become a hero. This is how you
become a legend. This is how you
save the world.
Having established this baseline characterization for our hero, the mentor’s guidance transitions to topics related to the recruitment of friends and the identification of enemies. Isaac uses this section of his poem to communicate the importance that Dynamite’s responsibility to the confederation of superheroes to which he belongs (“This is how you form a group. This is how you work well in groups”) holds in the construction of his identity. Isaac’s choice to include both formation and participation as twin components in Dynamite’s group involvement establishes a requirement that the superhero occupy a dual role both as the group’s leader and co-founder and as a contributing member. Dynamite must work to maintain a temperament that resists appropriating too much authority to himself and that instead favors preserving a power balance in the group. We can detect in “Black Dynamite” that fostering strong interpersonal relationships in solidarity with those who share similar goals, sustaining an ethic of equity, and seeking out the guidance of mentor figures who can provide the wisdom needed to make informed decisions all stand as key forces driving the creation of Isaac’s poem.

Cultural and media influences drawn from the genre of superhero fiction and archetypal framings of the hero provide an equally strong thematic foundation and a structure that unifies these passions into poetic form with a particular focus on Black male identity, individual responsibility, and the formation and maintenance of group solidarity. Comic book themes and stylings, including the illustration that Isaac creates to accompany his poem, lend both a hyperbolic focus on the superlative that infuses the concept of “power” as it operates in his poem as well as a storied tradition of teamwork that embraces both difference and individual expertise (think X-Men, Fantastic Four, Justice League). And in line with this, we can identify in “Black Dynamite” some elements of Joseph Campbell’s
heroic monomyth, which captures the rites of passage common to the heroes’ journeys of mythologies that have cut across the world’s cultures for millennia. An examination of Isaac’s handling of structure and content in his poem reveals some similarities between the sense of becoming that his verse conveys and some of the early stages of Campbell’s cross-cultural framework for the adventure of the hero. Those opening stages, which chronicle the first steps the hero takes as he attends to the call to action, provides a useful frame for discussing the ingenuity of Isaac’s poem. One key difference between Isaac’s verse and the classical monomyth is that while Campbell’s model describes a linear progression for the journey of the hero across what is normally a multi-chaptered epic, we can detect in Isaac’s writing an integration of these monomythical components conveyed through his short-form poetic work.

Campbell identifies The Call to Adventure or “the signs of the vocation of the hero” (2004, p. 34) as a summons at the behest of destiny for the hero to take up a quest by venturing beyond the realm he currently occupies into a “fateful region of both treasure and danger” (2004, p. 53) where he will complete tasks that await him. The call driving the actions of Black Dynamite conveys the thematic thrust of Isaac’s poem and is presented concisely in its opening line: “This is how you overcome obstacles.” But we can detect throughout the poem a much more complex confluence of dangers (adversaries, questions, etc.).

44 Scholars across disciplines have explored how Campbell’s classical monomyth has been taken up in the context of American popular culture, particularly in the genre of superhero fiction, and how that monomyth has been and continues to be reconstituted into uniquely American forms through comic books and graphic novels (Lang and Trimble, 1988; Davis and Westerfelhaus, 2013; Francis, 2016).
doubts, fears, and pain) and treasures (achievements to be gained, expectations realized, glories on the battlefield, immortalization into legend) that deepen our understanding of what the call will require and offer. The “fateful region” in which Black Dynamite will suffer and be rewarded is not, as is often the case in the classical monomyth, identified as a specific realm or physical field of engagement. Instead, we are left to imagine what the future may hold. Yet, the condition of uncertainty in which Dynamite finds himself holds common ground with the state of affairs for many an epic hero of the classical tradition at the outset of the journey. Like Aeneas, who fled a burning Troy with a ship, a prophesy, and a responsibility to carry forward the history and traditions of his people to a promised land, Black Dynamite has also been provided with a set of basic provisions by his mentor and a promise that he will perform legendary acts and achieve a great destiny, one that will position him as a hero for his people and who will be credited with having done nothing short of having saved the world. For Aeneas and Dynamite, the future of what that will entail cannot be known at this stage in the journey.

Accompanying the uncertainty of what will befall the hero comes the second potential stage—and potential pitfall—in the heroic quest: The Refusal of the Call. Isaac reserves inserting Black Dynamite’s voice into the poem until, in its ninth line, the mentor speaks of victories in combat, to which Dynamite responds, “But what if I don’t want to fight?” We see this doubt emerge again towards the close of the poem when, given the catalogue of accomplishments and challenges that the mentor has set before Dynamite, the young man utters in exasperation, “I don’t know if I can do all this.” Noteworthy is Isaac’s choice to position these two of only three very brief utterances in the poem as moments of uncertainty in which Dynamite questions whether he possesses the will or the ability to live up to the
guidance he is being given. As for the mentor, he not only seems to sense these doubts in Dynamite, he chooses to preemptively address them by stating candidly in the second and third lines of the poem, “Remember to think smarter not harder. This is how you overcome yourself.”

The greatest moments of risk that Campbell identifies in the early stages of the monomyth of the hero come in those instances when “[r]efusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or ‘culture,’ the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved” (2004, p. 54). We can detect in Isaac’s poem the push-pull between Dynamite’s urge to remain in the comfortable space of the present and his desire to seek something greater both for him and for his community—to master those parts of his identity that risk being given over to fear and subjugation. Repeatedly in the poem, we see language voiced by the mentor aimed to encourage Dynamite towards such “affirmative action” (e.g. in choosing friends, standing up for oneself, questioning advice, etc.) as well as moments where the mentor recognizes the existence of those voices of dissent (including Dynamite’s own, internal voice) that risk leading him to refuse to step outside of the safety of the status quo and imagine new possibilities for personal transformation. These voices urge him instead to fall back into a life of complacency. As Campbell writes, the Refusal to the Call is “essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one’s own interest. The future is regarded not in terms of an unremitting series of deaths and births, but as though one’s present system of ideals, virtues, goals, and advantages were to be fixed and made secure” (2004, p. 49). Black Dynamite’s varying “interests” in the poem—those that have the potential alternately to derail or to support his quest—consist of a confluence of intersecting concerns, all of which can
contribute to how well the hero will be armed with tools that will allow him to fulfill his quest. As Isaac’s poem often communicates, self-interest in the form of self-doubt seems to be one of the great concerns, or obstacles, that stands in the way of Dynamite’s ability to take up the call. The role of the mentor is vital in this regard, since it is his words and actions which provide the hero with the weapons for combating the tendency to refuse.

To this point, it may be useful to consider two classical analogs. The first of these references the notion of the “arms” of the hero as spoken by the unidentified speaker who opens *Aeneid* with the declaration, *Arma virumque cano* (I sing of the arms and the man), an invocation to the Muses which bears within it a dual reference both to “the weapons” and to “the war” that forms the thematic basis for Virgil’s epic poem. As the unidentified speaker in “Black Dynamite”, the mentor also “sings” of those weapons Dynamite must carry and of the wars he must fight, and as a figure analogous to the Supernatural Aid that Campbell identifies as supporting the hero during the third stage in the adventure, the mentor also provides the guidance from on high that overpowers or drowns out the mundane voices of discord. In this way, the mentor occupies a position akin to Circe, the witch who offers Odysseus direction on how best to ignore the Sirens’ calls to destruction. Just as Odysseus was made to learn through his repeated failures that he must cede the pride he carries in his own intelligence—his *hubris*—and follow the guidance of the gods and their priests, the message to Dynamite dictates similarly that as long as he remains focused on the words of the mentor, he will be provided with the knowledge that will allow him to successfully navigate those ‘dangerous waters’ that stand between success and demise. For, as Dynamite’s mentor states, “There will be those who will try and stop you from achieving success”—including Dynamite, himself—”This is how you ignore these people.”
This characterization of the personage of the Supernatural Aide in the monomyth stands as another important lens through which to consider how Isaac presents the mentor in “Black Dynamite”. Campbell’s survey of cross-cultural mythologies reveals that while often the supernatural aid manifests itself through the voice of a figure who appears in myth and legend as a concrete physical entity, the source of the aid can ultimately be located within the self as an abstract, “protective power” that is always and ever present within the sanctuary of the heart and even immanent within, or just behind, the unfamiliar features of the world. One has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear. Having responded to his own call, and continuing to follow courageously as the consequences unfold, the hero finds all the forces of the unconscious at his side. (2004, p. 66)

The unnamed mentor that Isaac presents in “Black Dynamite” aligns well with this notion of an internal and ancient force—not unlike the Force of the Star Wars saga—which resides within the self as a kind of inner compass. Once the call to action has been answered, this unnamed mentor emerges to direct the hero on the path towards the fulfillment of that call. And, when considered in terms of the melding together of poetic form and function, the path or method of achieving that heroic objective can be likened to the ingenuity of the poem, to its _praxis_. Just as the “path” of Black Dynamite seeks an apotheosis (literally, the deification of the hero) of having saved the world and reached legendary status, the path or ingenuity of “Black Dynamite” advances arguments about what will be required to achieve the fulfillment or apex of that heroic destiny for its Black male protagonist. The nature of that poetic path presents a catalogue of the challenges and influences that work either to prevent or support such a realization. As far as the figure of a mentor is concerned, he may very well occupy both the space of the material world as a concrete father-figure who speaks advice to Black Dynamite and the space of the internal world of the soul, as a spirit (force) of
the unconscious who guides the hero on his quest. Conceptualizing the mentor in this way, as a dual figure both concrete and abstract in nature, may also aid in interpreting the illustration that accompanies Isaac’s poem, a hand-drawn image of an adult male who bears features that indicate a blend of physical strength and Black identity (as represented by the figure’s thick musculature and chiseled facial features and Afrocentric hair styling). The man’s gaze is fixed upward and to the left, and his face bears an expression that seems to indicate either internal concern or an outward glance in consideration of another figure located beyond the page. If we assume that this depiction represents the character of Black Dynamite, both possibilities leave us to imagine the presence of another unseen entity (ostensibly the mentor) of whose physical form we are given no indication. What we can observe is that the mentor who occupies Isaac’s poem is made manifest primarily through a series of embodied actions (“this is how” statements) interspersed with imperatives to “remember”. Thus, this illustration leaves the reader to imagine that Black Dynamite’s gaze may fix on a concrete figure who provides external advice; it may represent an introspective turn in search of guidance housed within the self; it may indicate both.

And just as we might inquire to the source of the voice of the mentor, we are invited to explore what voice housed within the ‘self’ of the verse “Black Dynamite” articulates. The temporal location of the poem seems to position its voice at a liminal moment in the heroic journey of Dynamite, at the brink of what constitutes the fourth stage of Campbell’s framework, or Crossing of the First Threshold into regions unknown. The ingenuity of Isaac’s work expresses a process (path) of identity work through which the mentor invites Black Dynamite to deliberate over how two key components, the individual and the collective, must integrate and become a framework necessary to his preparation for
departure on the journey towards his destiny. Isaac’s structuring of the poem into four major divisions, delineated by turns of speech between Dynamite and his mentor, reveals the nature of Dynamite’s engagement with these components.

1) The poem opens with a focus on the persona and on the outward projection of self. This serves to establish the particular identity that the hero recognizes his mentor as encouraging him to take on: he must be outspoken, Afrocentric, charismatic, a ladies’ man, and a fighter.

2) This is followed by considerations for the self in collaboration with others and frames how the hero will operate as a member of a larger community where he will engage in collaboration and conflict with friends, enemies, and those in need. The mentor’s guidance centers on those interactions that will govern how the hero navigates the journey to come.

3) In the third major division of the poem, we can detect consideration for the self in praxis through which the mentor focuses on readying Dynamite to face and overcome the internal and external struggles that lie ahead and to create something new. Here, the mentor touches upon various aspects of what it means to navigate society: Dynamite must both question authority and be able recognize when those questions have been forgotten by others or should be forgotten by him; he must recognize that the decisions he will make will often lead to pain with which he must cope; moving beyond that pain, he can then fully engage in a progressive agenda for change that involves the creation of “new memories” that will replace the shadows of the past.

4) When, in the final turn of speech in the poem, Dynamite questions his own ability to “do all of this”, he employs the pronoun “this” in an expanded sense, utilizing it as a signifier not of a single exemplum of a discrete action in which the mentor has engaged and
that should be emulated by Dynamite but as a means of representing the collective catalogue of advice and examples that has been laid before him. And in his reply to Dynamite’s reservations, the mentor engages with this extended sense of the pronoun by using it to emphasize that yes, indeed, all of this (in its most superlative spirit) is how Black Dynamite will reach the apotheosis of his quest. The message is simple: through bravery, the maintenance of an internal compass, and “[w]ith the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him” (Campbell, 2004, p. 71), Dynamite’s preparations are complete. He can now embark upon his journey.

At the poem’s close, Isaac presents a progression from becoming a “hero” to becoming a “legend” by placing the two statuses in that order. In doing so, he seems to acknowledge the significance that time will play in this struggle. He recognizes that present heroic acts must be recast in historical context by those who will follow, and he acknowledges that in order for any individual to play a role in moving humanity to a better place, or in his words to “save the world”, one must recognize that there will come a time when his part in the narrative of history will be as a figure of the past. Here, we are left with a strikingly authentic rendering of the place that heroes often occupy in our own literary and cultural traditions as pseudo-historical figures—one part fact, one part myth—who provide us with the guidance necessary to embark upon our own journeys and to achieve our greatest goals in the spans of our lives and in memoriam. The voice of “Black Dynamite” calls to all of us to imagine how we might best honor our selves as embodiments of the cultures, ethnicities, and histories through which they have been formed. It calls upon us to engage and leverage stakeholders in the communities to which we belong as partners in positive projects aimed
to overcome adversity and adversaries. It calls us to imagine potential futures for our *selves* marked by optimism and liberality and oriented towards protecting a world worth saving.

**Coda: Seeking, Inspiring**

When we invite students to engage in writing that explores the self, the interpersonal workings of family and society, and the contested, complicated spaces of identity development, and when we do so by encouraging those writers to tell their stories by appropriating and adapting some of the tools that other writers have successfully employed to communicate their lived experiences, we not only support students’ development on a path towards increased sophistication as prose and verse stylists, we facilitate their ability to engage with those topics about which they are passionate. We encourage them to recognize the power and meaning of the written word as a mode of communication that they can employ to forward their own intellectual and creative goals. We train them in one aspect of what it means to develop as a writer and to carve out for oneself a voice in which to write and a purpose to drive that voice. For literacy educators, the benefit of engaging in this work with our students is twofold: Student writing that focuses on the self can form a rich data set that we draw upon to help elucidate those questions, conflicts, and passions that are of greatest relevance to our students’ lives, that drive their ambitions and goals for the future, and with which they currently grapple. And in terms of our developing pedagogies and the ongoing curricular choices we make, having a nuanced understanding of who our students are and their questions, conflicts, and passions bears relevance to the texts that we make available to students, to our understandings of how to differentiate effectively for diverse sets of learners, and to the choices we make around thematic organization of content and
the analytic prompts and assessments we develop.

Looking specifically to the three poems discussed in this chapter and to the potential value for bringing a *passion-ingenuity-voice* framework to qualitative analysis discourse, I argue that the model provides a useful language for articulating the individual goals that each of these writers is engaged in *seeking* (calling for) through the voice of their poetry. And as a counterpart to that seeking, employing this framework from my stance as a literacy educator provides a methodology for recognizing some of the many problems and possibilities that stand at the intersection of teaching and learning and that present a call for action in the classroom. In this regard, the *passion-ingenuity-voice* framework also reveals the power that these students’ poems have for *inspiring* educators to create or recreate—often in ways that may feel dangerous—both the orientations they bring to their work in the classroom and their teaching practices (their pedagogy). With these benefits in mind, I close this chapter by reflecting on potential takeaways gained from applying the framework to the poems I’ve discussed.

In “Student” we find Seth seeking *legitimacy*: legitimacy in terms of the goals, policies, and actions of the school he attends, legitimacy in the work his teachers (including me) create and assign, and legitimacy for the identity that he seeks to create for himself, rather than the one that has been created for him. Part of Seth’s project in seeking forms of validation from each of these entities also involves an effort to delegitimize the identity of “Student” that he captures in his poem and that has been conferred upon him by others. As educators, reading Seth’s words may inspire us to consider what it means to gain in the practice of *humility*: the humility required to honor transgressive voices and differing perspectives that push back against those stances and practices that have become mainstays
of our teaching, the humility needed to actively question what we imagine we can “know” about who the adolescents in front of us “are” as students and individuals, the humility to forego making snap judgements when determining what we understand to be the legitimacy of a response to a particular assignment; the humility needed to take a believing stance towards our students’ creations, one that will allow us to recognize when they’ve done much more thoughtful and complicated work than we may have initially recognized.

In “‘Well-behaved’ Child” we find Isa also seeking a kind legitimacy, but with a special focus on voice and identity and on human rights. For Isa, these include: the right to have her words and feelings heard and acknowledged, the right to be exempted from persistent judgement and scrutiny, the right to craft her own identity and ideology, the right to belong and to participate in communities from the local to the global, the right to believe that “others” are not inherently evil and that the possibility for good exists everywhere, the right to love her body and to know that she is beautiful in the eyes of others, the right not to be “well-behaved” in accordance with an unfair standard. Isa’s words provide an invocation to all of us to heed the call and to recognize that our students are crying out. Her words inspire us to take action: action to teach in ways that counter the application of fear and judgement as methods of control, action to teach in ways that honor human dignity and that provide students with the tools and opportunities to engage in work directed towards specific human rights agendas, and action to teach in ways that support students in resisting the negation of self and the forwarding of destructive self-ideations.

And finally, in “Black Dynamite”, we can observe Isaac seeking a destiny for himself, a destiny that can be attained by defining, expressing, and maintaining one’s sense of self, a destiny built upon his role in the formation of, membership in, and contributions to various
groups and communities, a destiny whose path will be fraught with risks and challenges and will demand reliance on the fortitude and wisdom bestowed by elders, a destiny that is super-human in that it is progressive and extends beyond the status quo and towards the creation of a better world, a destiny where he, as a Black male achieves greatness and assumes his own mentorship role as a model for future generations. Isaac’s words inspire us to consider the stake and responsibility that we hold as educators in supporting the development of generations of students, and in particular powerful Black boys and men, by making school a place where their identities, lives, and histories are valued rather than placed under continual duress, by making the language of potential rather than failure the discourse that frames their everyday encounters in school, by fostering partnerships and mentorships that honor their identities and life paths, by supporting positive visions for the humans they want to become, and by providing them with the tools and steps needed to bring into fruition those possible selves.
PART IV – CONTINUING COVERSATIONS:

Kinda like I said in my essay. It was like...it just reminded me of like a quilt with like pictures or like fabrics of different women who went through different things. [Danticat] kind of just like stitched them all together to make the whole—to make the whole book. To make the whole series of stories that she’s telling.

Nyah, excerpt from transcribed classroom discussion

Reflecting and Moving Forward: A Meditation on the Quilt

The past four chapters provide an emergent narrative of how the passion-ingenuity-voice framework developed from cycles of analysis of spoken and written discourse. That iterative process revealed the ways in which students use opportunities to speak and write to confront silence and foster solidarity and to honor their individual identities while simultaneously considering their positioning in and among intersecting communities of practice. The discussion of student writing that I present in Chapter 7 suggests that a framework which considers passion, ingenuity, and voice as integrated aesthetic components can help educators make sense of the nuanced compositional qualities of students’ creative projects in writing. Additionally, I argue that when literacy educators look back at what has been revealed as operating within the discourse we examine, we can (and must) consider how to use these expanded understandings to inform the pedagogical choices we make. In the two chapters that follow and that conclude this study, I present a final stage of analysis that considers how we might move teaching and learning in the literacy classroom from an orientation of complacency to one of resistance. I do so first by bringing the passion-ingenuity-voice framework to bear on a set of two recorded classroom conversations held during our reading of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. In doing so, I aim not only to complete the narrative arc of this study through which the resolution of the
research returns to the site of its exposition, to spoken discourse in the classroom, I also intend to test the extent to which this tripartite framework bears analytic value when applied to classroom talk. In Chapter 9, I conclude with a brief essay that considers how the pedagogy that this study captures can be conceptualized as a “text” (Macaluso, 2016) that can be read and analyzed. I use that pedagogy-as-text framework to discuss the findings and limitations of this study and to consider ways forward.

Before moving into these two final stages of analysis, it seems useful to take a moment to reflect on how the past four chapters have led up to this moment by looking back to the emergent “quilt” of data that has been assembled. When transcribing classroom discussions over Danticat, I encountered Nyah’s quilting metaphor, which she used to describe Danticat’s compositional methods of weaving together the essays that comprise Create Dangerously. At the time, I found it intriguing enough to highlight it in the transcript as something that might potentially emerge again in the discourse. In that particular case, it did not. However, the metaphor has remained in the back of my mind, and as I look back and consider how best to frame my own research narrative, it bears striking relevance. In the paragraphs that follow, I consider how two major thematic strands have come together in my research to provide the fabric that, having been stitched together through the process of analysis and write-up, comprise the ongoing creative work whose pattern has emerged through the process of its assembly. When “read”, this developing quilt tells the story of the generation of the passion-ingenuity-voice framework (the emergent pattern) that, in turn, assists in our sensemaking of the quilt’s substance. This emergent quilting process provides the in-process groundwork for what follows in the final two chapters of this dissertation, which will provide the final pieces of patchwork that contribute to the completion of this quilt.
**Strand 1:** Initial conversations had in response to Danticat revealed that prompts for discussion built upon lines of critical inquiry that explore both the role of the individual in society and what it means for activist artists to “create dangerously” fore fronted the push-pull of negotiations between *silence, silencing,* and *voice* as intentioned and inadvertent haps of the classroom. Those conversations indicate that when educators attend to those negotiations, they are presented with opportunities 1) to unpack risks that threaten the project of critical literacy by helping to make apparent intersecting cultural, historical, and pedagogical factors that work to restrict students’ voices and identities and 2) to recognize how students’ voiced experiences as readers provide meta-conversations regarding what it means for them to read in the context of school that can then help educators to identify what can be done to transform literacy classrooms into spaces that counter the silencing of students and their identities.

**Strand 2:** Students identified in Danticat’s writings a focus on the interplay between the identities, perspectives, and goals of the individual writer and reader—and in particular, between Danticat and her critics. Their conversations focused on and the risks that those subjectivities can often pose as well as the possibilities they can offer to larger projects that seek *solidarity.* In this regard, data indicated the importance that educators develop approaches to teaching and learning with 1) a *relational* focus that invites students to look both inward and outward with consideration for how we make and remake our ‘selves’ and ‘the other’ through encounters at local and societal levels, 2) a *transitive* orientation that considers the sources (mythologies) that inform identity creation and the provisional, evolving nature of that creation, which is bound in *praxis* and is contingent upon the actions in which we engage, and 3) a *creative* direction that fosters the reimagining, reorganization,
and restructuring of conditions that oppress and the formation of new cultures that resist colonizing influences.

The *passion-ingenuity-voice* framework—the emergent pattern of the quilt—draws influence from both of these strands and provides a set of integrated analytic lenses for investigating the motivation (*passion*) driving the process of creation: “the call” to create that is intimately tied to the creator’s identification with the project, the value that project holds both to the individual and to the collective, and the often contentious crystallization of numerous converging influences. These facets of the work’s passion shape the project and provide its essence (*ingenuity*): its form, function, method, and argument, and its progressive and often transgressive compositional nature. The final incorporation of that project (*voice*) stands as the manifestation of the aesthetic product that is cast into the world with the potential to become a new call—perhaps contributing to another artist’s passion—for change. The voice carries with it a sense of that which its creator seeks and a nascent potentiality that beckons for it to be taken up by another, to *become*, which constitutes the essential possibility and danger inherent to creation. And if we consider the ways in which all creative acts constitute arguments of some kind, in its utterance, the voice shuns complacency and embodies resistance. This deliberation over complacency and resistance has emerged for me as a new thematic strand indicated by my reading of the narrative that the quilt of this research reveals, and I take it up as a way to complete (for now) the quilt.
CHAPTER 8 – COMPLACENCY ↔ RESISTANCE

It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people. [...] My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage.

James Weldon Johnson

Returning to Talk

The reading, writing, and talk in which we engaged over the course of the first semester of the academic year covered a spectrum of content areas and literary concepts, a blend of readings drawn from the genres of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama. This provided us with multiple opportunities for critical conversations over a variety of topics, and by the time we entered into our reading of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, we had spent almost five months getting to know each other. Although there exists a broad gap between our conversations around Danticat's *Create Dangerously* and our entry into Johnson, the various forms of critical discourse that students from Sections A and B had developed in response to their readings of Kincaid, Alexie, and Miller indicated to me that they had developed some powerful tools for literary analysis and critical reflection that would serve them well in their ongoing explorations into the theme of the individual in society. Given the critical exploration of race central to Johnson’s novel, I anticipated this background and practice would support our reading of his *Autobiography*, but that students might also benefit from additional structured frameworks for analysis. So, as I began to plan how I would approach his novel and considered its compositional style and thematic
content, I decided to introduce students to another set of critical lenses to support their reading and to assist them in unpacking the intersectional quality of Johnson’s work, which explores with great depth, openness, and sophistication the complexities attendant to the social, cultural, and political construction of race and identity.

Originally published anonymously in 1912 for fear of how it would be received and then again in 1927 as work bearing his name, Johnson’s *Autobiography* chronicles the life of an unnamed biracial narrator living during the post-Reconstruction era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A frame narrative written in the format of *roman à clef*, the novel takes as its influence Johnson’s own encounters in education, the arts, and social and political life. Johnson’s narrator is born in Georgia shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War to his African American mother and a southern White aristocrat, who appears only briefly as the novel opens through a series of dim recollections from the narrator’s early childhood. The narrator and his mother soon leave Georgia and travel north to Connecticut, where the narrator spends the bulk of his boyhood with his mother and where he experiences early on differences in how he is treated as an individual who can “pass” as White. This differential treatment manifests itself through small and great injustices and brutalities that the narrator witnesses his darker-complexioned schoolmates suffer at the hands of White faculty members, treatment that he can avoid because of his own physical features. As a child, the narrator is provided with piano instruction, and as he moves into adolescence and adulthood, he develops a high level of skill on the instrument. After high school, he returns south to enroll in Atlanta University. But after being robbed of the money he would have used to secure tuition for himself, the narrator is forced to rely upon the generosity of a train porter, who provides him with a small loan that allows him to find
footing in Jacksonville, where the porter assures him he will find work. The narrator then spends a few years in Jacksonville working in a cigar manufacturing plant where his skills in language and literacy allow him to assume the role of “reader” on the factory floor and where he learns to speak Spanish with fluency. Just when he imagines that he will spend the rest of his life in Jacksonville, the factory is closed, and the narrator moves north again, this time to New York, where he begins a professional career as a musician playing ragtime in late night jazz clubs.

Interspersed throughout these early chapters of his novel (and beyond), Johnson integrates a series of reflections through which his narrator presents both brief observations and lengthy discussions that focus on his own raced identity, on the interpersonal relationships between and among members of various racial groups in America, and more broadly, on the larger “race question”, a public conversation over how to sufficiently define the positions of and relations between persons of color—“Negros”, in particular—and Whites. As Johnson conveys throughout his novel, that “race question” dominated American life during and well beyond the period of Reconstruction. It remains in many ways just as relevant in our society as we approach the third decade of twenty-first century, and for that reason, I continued to include Johnson’s novel as a core text in the eleventh-grade curriculum.

Indicated in my lesson plans for early to mid-February of 2013 (see Appendix C) are two primary questions that I posed to students as a frame for our reading of Johnson. These asked, “What theory (or theories) of race does Johnson develop in his novel? How might examining this text through lenses of gender, class, power, history, culture, and psychology help us to analyze the role that race plays in this novel?” I opened the unit by exposing
students to a sampling of critical lenses for analysis drawn from Deborah Appleman’s (2009) *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents (2nd Ed.*), which I had found to be a useful resource text for introducing students to critical frameworks for reading literature. I began by using a single class period to distribute a handout to students that contained a reproduction of two pages from Appleman that provides an overview of a handful of critical lenses (see Appendix E). During that period, I discussed those various lenses with students and answered any questions students had regarding their nature and application. We then began our reading of Johnson with the goal of exploring what understandings and interpretations emerge given the application of one or more of these frameworks. The overarching goal of the unit was to invite students to consider how multiple approaches to literary criticism can support deeper levels of engagement, analysis, and discourse around the literature we read.

The excerpts of student talk drawn from Johnson’s *Autobiography* that I present in this chapter were recorded during the last two weeks of the unit during which students focused primarily on the second half of his novel. I chose to host and record whole-class conversations at this point in our reading of Johnson because I felt as though students had by now worked their way through the expository sections of his text and would be able to engage in some in-depth discussions of his writing. In addition to the larger questions that I posed, I placed two additional frames on the analytic work informing each of these discussions.

For the first, students were asked to track the development of Johnson’s narrator as a dynamic character as they examined chapters five through eight of his novel. Prior to our discussions, they were asked to work either independently or with a partner to select four
passages from those chapters (one from each) that they felt capture moments of significant change in the identity of Johnson’s narrator. They were then instructed to take process notes on how these passages illustrate that change through the author’s use of specific words, phrases, images, and/or figurative language. This preliminary written work was posted to the Edmodo online system prior to the discussion period, and students received a process grade for it. An instructional focus of these discussion sessions would be to assist students in the development of well-supported text-based analyses that effectively addressed the prompts provided to them. The intended benefit of the use of a whole-class discussion to debrief on what they had written would be to provide students with the opportunity to deliberate both with peers and with the instructor over that work.

For the second discussion, which focused on the closing chapters of Johnson’s novel, students again worked either independently or with a partner to take notes in preparation for writing a capstone analysis on the theory/ies of race that Johnson explores in his novel. The following questions guided this work: 1) What are the most significant events that comprise the closing chapters of JWJ’s novel? Discuss the significance of each. 2) What major realizations about race, gender, and/or class does Johnson explore in the following sections of these chapters: a) his time in Paris, b) his travels by train across the South, c) his journey into the interior of Georgia, d) his return to NYC? 3) What questions are you left with at the close of his novel? How do you interpret the concluding statement that he makes in the final lines of Chapter 11? Students were asked to take notes and reference key passages in relationship to these and to come to this wrap-up discussion prepared to present their findings.

The thematic grounding of our discussions of Johnson conveys an intersectional
focus through which we considered the interplay between race, identity, power, politics, individuality, solidarity, and resistance. As was the case with Danticat and Kincaid, the discourse that emerged from our conversations evidences what I believe to be a series of critical moments in an ongoing progression towards Freirean conscientization fostered by engagement in processes of critical literacy, a reading of the world that “involves second guessing, reading against the grain, asking hard and harder questions, seeing underneath, behind, and beyond texts, trying to see and ‘call’ how these texts establish and use power over us, over others, on whose behalf, in whose interests” (Luke, 2004, p. 4). This process is captured through discourse marked by these students’ critical explorations of a) their own and others’ identities and lived experiences, b) their past and present orientations towards literacy and literacy education, and c) negotiations over how to frame and express their private and political selves. As with my treatment of students’ identity poems, I bring the passion-ingenuity-voice model to bear as an overarching framework to guide my analysis of the conversations we had, and I consider whether we can detect the reemergence of negotiations over the concepts of individuality and solidarity and silence, silencing, and speaking out. Finally, it is important to note that my analysis focuses on making sense not only of our individual voices as speech actors and how we interacted at different points in these two discussions but also of the larger voice that the discourse of these discussions express.

As stated in the opening field notes to this transcript, 45 my intention in hosting these

45 See Appendix F, “Class Discussion, 2-19-2013 (Section A): The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man”
discussions with students was not only to open up a conversation about the narrator’s development as a dynamic character and his ongoing understanding of what it meant to be a “raced” person in America during the early twentieth century, but also to model for students ways to construct structured analyses that would support their ideas and interpretations of Johnson’s novel. While I incorporated writing composed by students from Section B during my analyses of students’ identity poems (see Chapter 7), for our work with Johnson, I selected transcripts drawn from two discussions with Section A. That choice was based on a process that included cycles of reading and memo writing that made evident to me the existence of substantive, touchtone moments that bore analytic value. The three identity poems from Section B that I discuss in Chapter 7 were selected for the same reasons. The balance struck between my alternating focus on students from one class section in Chapter 7 and on another in this chapter was unintentional but fortuitous in that both class sections end up finding equal representation. Amir, Nyah, Lily, and Frazier, who contributed their voices in such powerful ways to our work with Danticat, arose again as key players in our deliberations over Johnson, and in that regard, their participation offers the ability to gain a sense of the arc of these students’ journeys as individuals who develop in their own unique ways across the narrative of the research.

**Working Towards Resistance**

Our first discussion of Johnson’s *Autobiography* dealt with the novel’s middle three chapters and opens just prior to the point where my above summary of the first half of the novel left off, with a focus on Chapter 5 and the narrator’s time in Jacksonville as a worker in a cigar factory. Our discussion centered on the development of the narrator’s character
across the novel and dealt first with his statements regarding his initiation as a member in the “freemasonry of the race” (Johnson, 1995, p. 34), which he ties in large part to his participation in the religious community in Jacksonville. We then discussed how the narrator’s role as “reader” on the cigar factory floor contributed to that membership, to his identity development, and to his understanding of the nature of the struggle that persons of color faced in America at the time when the novel is set. Finally, we considered briefly the perspectives of the factory owner as a representative of the class of White businessowners in the South, and I closed the discussion first by posing an open question regarding how members of the White ruling class in America might view the workers that we encounter in this factory and then by summarizing the steps we had just taken in the analytic process.

My voice dominates this first recorded session to an extent greater than with any other transcript of conversation in this study. Of the 384 total lines of talk, my words occupy 316 (82%). Thus, looking back on it, I characterize this session’s discourse as falling somewhere on a spectrum much closer to that of direct instruction than of discussion. There does exist some balance to the framing of the discussion; its overall trajectory and its major topics and referenced passages were initiated by students. However, part of my approach to facilitating this class session, which included taking notes on the classroom Smartboard as I responded to students’ questions and ideas, involved a great deal of concurrent oral processing of what was generated—an approach characteristic of my instruction. By responding to students’ ideas, interpreting those, and offering my own, I recognize that I retained a dominant position that governed in many ways the directions that these discussions took. I address this aspect of my participation in this first conversation by centering my analysis on fragments of discourse that capture the primacy of my voice in the
transcript. These excerpts align with the major topics addressed during the discussion and provide both a narrative of how that conversation progressed and a groundwork for the second conversation. In my analysis, I attempt to account for the powerful position that I held in it and to describe how my voice contributed to the larger discourse of the classroom by applying the passion-ingenuity-voice framework as an overarching lens for sensemaking.

_A Discourse of Misrepresentation: The (Re)Emergence of the White Pedagogue_

That there exist many moments when instructors take on central roles as speakers in their classrooms is an undeniable reality of teaching. An important practical challenge for teachers involves crafting a discursive space that allows for a balance between student and teacher voice. For teacher researchers, a similar balance must be struck between accounting for the voices of all discussants. Thus, failing to take a critical look at my own voice as it operated during a class discussion in which I held a very apparent, and at times problematic, position of dominance in the discourse would be disingenuous to a major goal of this research, which seeks to provide an accurate rendering of the teaching and learning that occurred in these classes. As stated above, I consider this first, mid-novel discussion of Johnson’s _Autobiography_ as having contributed a foundational component that informed the direction that the second discussion would take. Layla⁴⁶ laid the first layer of this groundwork by asking us to consider Johnson’s use of the term *freemasonry* to describe the nature of the community into which he has begun to feel welcomed during his time in

⁴⁶ African American, female student
Jacksonville. As was the case in our discussion of Danticat, we began with the definition of

terms. In Layla’s opening glossing of Johnson’s use of freemasonry, she framed it as him
“coming in touch with the Black side—his Black side more and living with his landlords—
that Hispanic guy and the landlady.” As I took note of Layla’s definition on the board, I was
struck by the way in which she had managed to succinctly capture through her use of the
phrase “coming in touch with his Black side” the essential fraternal quality of the term
freemasonry that tied to racial or ethnic identity. I did not express that at the time, and instead
posed an open question to the class, asking what they thought this notion of a
“freemasonry” might mean. Amir responded with “a group of people, a society” and pointed
to the importance that singing, the gospel, and church seem to hold for the narrator as
aspects of that freemasonry. As I listened and continued writing on the board, I added a
note indicating that freemasonry constitutes “an important concept” that we might consider.
This sparked another round of reference work around the term “concept” that culminated
with Charlotte 47 providing the rest of the class with “an idea, thought, or abstract notion” as
a working definition. I then paused in my notetaking, took a step back, and proceeded to
process what had been said thus far. I didn’t realize at the time how significant the following
words would become to understanding my positionality in the classroom as a discussant and
my orientation towards teaching.

Me: [writing on the board] “An idea, thought, or abstract notion”—Yes. So, the idea
though—That’s a pretty broad way of thinking about this [indicating “freemasonry
of the race” written on the board]. This [again, indicating “freemasonry of the race”]
is closer to the way that he’s using it here [drawing an arrow from one phrase to

47 African American, female student
another], this “abstract notion”, okay? So, the idea is that a freemasonry is a literal group of people who come together, okay? You know, the freemasonry of race, there’s no organization that is the group of, you know, Black persons—at least not at this time. Now, you can say that there are several organizations, you know, currently that would probably call themselves part of a formal organization or freemasonry of a specific race, one being the NAACP. Okay? So, that’s a little bit different, but—so what we want to do is track, then, what does this membership mean? And Amir kind of came up with something that’s central to this concept of the freemasonry of the race, which is the interest in singing and music, okay? What else does the—is he showing us or is possibly part of this—coming to be a part of this freemasonry? What else does he—is he seeing being a part of what it means to be Black for him?

On its face, this exchange may appear unremarkable. It captures a moment of teacher discourse that would most likely sound (and look) familiar to anyone who has spent even a limited amount of time in a high school English language arts classroom. However, taking a stance that privileges the empirical value of the seemingly mundane work of the everyday, one that drives the methodology practitioner inquiry (Lytle, 2008), reveals how moments such as these can provide fundamental understandings about teaching and learning. And we can read the complexities embedded within the ordinary, if we acknowledge that an analysis of discourse aimed at identifying and understanding the passion that it bespeaks requires that we look both to the creative struggle from which that everyday writing and talk emerges as well as the extent to which that discourse is rooted in some identification with an aspect of the creator’s identity that provides them with the motivational force to express their voice (Ruiz-Alfonso, Vega, and Beltran, 2018).

I selected the above moment of discourse because it provides a snapshot of my teaching that reveals larger aspects of approaches I take to critical pedagogy that tie to my passion for teaching and that indicate both positive and problematic outcomes. In terms of the “call” to speak, I was motivated by a desire to support the trajectory the conversation had taken towards investigating the concept of a freemasonry of a race and what it might mean...
to hold membership in that social collective. I wanted to guide students towards deeper
textual explorations into the complexity of Johnson’s use of that term. Amir had pointed to
the religious connection that had developed between the narrator and community members
in Jacksonville through faith-based participation, and my goal became to try to engage
students in tracing the various influences and cultural threads that might comprise this
freemasonry. The concept of solidarity was certainly present in my thinking as we engaged in
this conversation, and the agenda that I brought as a participant in this discussion was to try
to communicate what I believed to be the analytic importance of exploring Johnson’s
conceptual use of the term *freemasonry* as a critical instrument to describe both a) the literal
brotherhood of men living in this community and working at the cigar factory and b) the
figurative conditions of being a person of color in America that serves to unite these
individuals.

A major aspect of my investment in that project involved an attempt to contextualize
the historical realities of the period during which the novel is set by referencing the NAACP
as a “formal organization or freemasonry” that exists today as a civil rights organization. 48

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48 I spoke inaccurately when I suggested to students that the NAACP, which was established
in 1909, would not have been in existence at the time when this novel was set. It certainly
would have been an established organization in its early stages at the time of the publication
of Johnson’s *Autobiography*. However, given the absence of dates associated with events in
the novel, we can’t know for sure at what point in the narrator’s life it would have been
formed. The larger inaccuracy embedded in this comment lies in the fact there were several
established organizations, including a system of freemasonries and unions, that formed from
the mid-nineteenth century onward and were intended to provide solidarity and political and
legal protection to Black workers in the South. I discuss the critical lessons to be learned by
my error with greater depth in the coming pages.
Drawing these kinds of contemporary connections was common in my teaching practice, and they often took the form of brief references, like this one, made during classroom discussions. The questions regarding the role of the individual in society that I posed to students at the beginning of the year focused not only on what a literary work can reveal about the persons existing during the time and place enclosed within its pages, but also on an exploration of the relevance these readings have for our present-day lives. As Shor (1999) argues, teaching from a critical literacy stance requires that we take “an attitude towards history” that “challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development” (p. 2). Thus, a major objective guiding my participation in these discussions and my design of opportunities for writing was to attempt to continually reframe our analyses of texts to include cross-generational, historical perspectives as means towards developing our skills in criticality. This orientation to literacy instruction crystallized at the intersection of my professional life as an ELA teacher and my graduate-level studies in reading, writing, and literacy. My work in both contexts led me to conceive of the notion of critical consciousness as constituting a capacity towards critical thinking that relies upon bringing an historically contextualized reading of the world to bear as a framework for analyzing the

In addition to these brief connections, I also constructed more robust invitations for students to explore the social, cultural, and political realities and themes conveyed through texts and to investigate how those can operate to reveal larger understandings about humanity when considered within historical contexts that stretch beyond the periods during which they were written or set. Students’ critical commentaries authored in response to Danticat (see Chapter 6) stand as one example of that kind of work. As with my reference here to the NAACP, smaller, less nuanced exemplars of that technique emerge often across the transcripts of classroom conversations gathered for this study and tie to the overall thematic focus of the course and to my own goals for critical literacy.
realities of our present. Facilitating and nurturing the ongoing development of that critical consciousness sits at the heart of the passion driving my contributions to the classroom discourse, and it is made manifest in small, but significant ways in my contributions to the discourse of the classroom.

As I discuss below, this passion, while certainly well-intentioned and grounded in a desire to advance the tenets of social justice, also brings with it the struggle to account for the influence that the power and privilege afforded to me as a function of my position as the teacher and de facto knowledge-holder in the classroom who is also White and male. A critical look at my contribution to the discussion in the above fragment of talk reveals one instance when my position as power broker in the classroom served to corrupt the voice that I intended to contribute to our critical discourse.

Thus far in this study, I’ve conceptualized ingenuity as the embodiment, essence, quality, or substance that characterizes the compositional aspects of voice, its melding together of form and function, its nature or character, its praxis. In this regard, the practices that I employ as a discussant—my words and actions—inform the ingenuity expressed through my spoken contributions. These are very much bound to how I occupy the physical space of the classroom and how I position myself methodologically as a teacher and researcher. I describe my participation in the classroom as occupying the dual role of active notetaker and discussant, and analyses of the various utterances that emerge as part of that participation help characterize how adopting that intended role manifests itself in real time. Looking more closely at the fragments of talk from this discussion, at least two major aspects of my speech serve to convey the ingenuity of the voice I express, These include: 1) my use of discourse markers which, when analyzed as linguistic fragments, reveal my process
and positionality in the discussion and 2) my use of series of questions as a methods of encouraging ongoing cycles of close readings aimed at deepening textual analysis.

Several repeated utterances appear in the above excerpt of talk. Among others, these including my use of ‘so’, ‘you know,’ and ‘okay’ as discourse markers across the flow of my speech. Over the years, my students have commented on my overuse of ‘okay?’ as a filler. That and ‘you know’ have been utterances that I’ve made conscious but largely unsuccessful attempts to remove from my speech. 50 The opening five lines of this excerpt show a progression through two conversational topics, both having originated from the overarching focus of our discussion of the term freemasonry. In the first of these, I attempt to extend the definition that Charlotte provided for the term concept and deals with the “abstract notion” of a freemasonry. For the second, I shift focus back to the term’s use in describing an intuitional system. That shift immediately leads to the example I raise of the NAACP as one instance of an organization founded as a membership-based activist society—a kind of freemasonry—aimed to support the securing and maintenance of equal rights for persons of color in America. I open both of these topics with the use of the discourse marker ‘so’, and an analysis of how that marker functions to introduce each assists in revealing the nature of my engagement as a notetaker and discussant.

In his study conducted using the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English (HKCSE),

50 I was supported in that goal, by a few students in Section B of this research cohort who during one class period counted without my knowledge my use of “okay?” and delivered the count to me. It was embarrassingly high.
Lam (2006) discusses the frequency and functioning of ‘so’ as a discourse particle. He finds that of its uses in academic contexts, its greatest prevalence appears in lecture and in seminar and tutorial formats (p. 359), and he identifies six major functions that emerge when speakers employ ‘so’ in their discourse. These include textual functions like framing, linking, and establishing consequence, the interpersonal function of response, and interactional functions associated with processing and turn management. Looking to the two utterances of ‘so’ in my speech, Lam’s taxonomy seems to indicate that my first use of it functioned to indicate a form of processing, while in my second use, ‘so’ acted as sequential marker. In the first instance, I had just written the definition for concept provided by Charlotte on the board, repeating it aloud as I wrote. I then followed that by commenting,

“Yes. So, the idea though—that’s a pretty broad way of thinking about this [indicating “freemasonry of the race” written on the board]. This [again, indicating “freemasonry of the race”] is closer to the way that he’s using it here [drawing an arrow from one phrase to another], this “abstract notion”, okay?

The above was spoken just as I had finished writing and was taking a step back to examine where we stood at that moment. Here, my use of ‘so’ signals the initiation of oral processing that involved taking what had been said thus far and working through how to progress towards the next step in analysis. What I noticed when looking at the board was that a visual representation of an analytic path had begun to emerge from the notes I had written. Reading these jottings of what had developed thus far signaled for me a way to build upon Amir’s earlier comment, in which he named music and singing as aspects of religious practice important to the freemasonry of the church community, by linking his observation to the narrator’s burgeoning understanding of what it meant to be granted membership into a freemasonry of the race. This line of thinking inspired me to imagine aloud how the narrator’s membership in a “freemasonry of the race” included but also transcended participation
in an institutional community. In my speech, this imagining emerges in the halting utterance, “the idea though—That’s a pretty broad way of thinking about this”. As is indicated parenthetically in the transcript, I mapped this out on the class whiteboard drawing a connection—a line on the board—between the term freemasonry and the definition of concept that Charlotte provided to us. I then continued by adding,

So, the idea is that a freemasonry is a literal group of people who come together, okay? You know, the freemasonry of race, there’s no organization that is the group of, you know, Black persons—at least not at this time. Now, you can say that there are several organizations, you know, currently that would probably call themselves part of a formal organization or freemasonry of a specific race, one being the NAACP.

In this instance, my use of ‘so’ functions as a sequential marker. Having sought to communicate to students the ways in which Johnson uses the term freemasonry to indicate an abstract community to which the narrator feels as though his has begun to gain membership, I now intended to sum up “the idea” or the crux of this construction and did so by returning to the definition of freemasonry that frames it as an institution or organization. I then attempted to emphasize Johnson’s use of the term to signify a connection much broader than that of an institutional organization by commenting erroneously that Black Americans during that period possessed no formal organization or fraternity that might acts as a freemasonry might to protect the interests of its members. My significant error in stating this

51 Across the transcripts for this dissertation, I indicate various sudden shifts in talk (e.g. self-corrections, fragments, interjections, and digressions, etc.) with the use of an em dash (“—”). Here, that text character indicates an interjection that captures the shift in my thinking towards how to articulate the merging of the abstract and the institutional value of Johnson’s term.
was two-fold: not only did the NAACP exist as just such an institution, the organization of African American workers through systems of freemasonries from the 1840s onward is a matter of historical record (Kantrowitz, 2010) as is the existence of unions and collective action efforts of Black Americans such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) (Biegert, 1998). The lesson to be learned by my failure to provide accurate information to students is likewise two-fold in nature in that it indicates a significant risk for educators, in general, and a risk to the project of critical literacy.

When I reflect on the bad information that I provided to students here, the most immediate reaction that I have is one of disappointment. Disappointment in my failure to uphold a core orientation towards teaching and that governs how I attempt to model academic rigor; guarding against the sophistry of overstepping the bounds of what I can claim to know in favor of appearing as though I possess knowledge that I do not. I recognize that my transgression here does not constitute a tragic reversal of years of teaching. However, to me this example indicates the very likely probability that this was not the first and only time that I was guilty of providing my students with false information. My sense that this might be the case stems from my acknowledgment that the conditions under which I did so are tied to a practice common to my classroom and one that bears similarities to practices in which many literacy educators and their pupils engage daily. The misinformation that I provided was born of my desire to communicate to students a valid interpretation of literature that would support their conceptual understanding of how an author can use diction to convey multiple meanings, both concrete and figurative. Most readers of Johnson would agree that in employing the term *freemasonry*, he intends to operationalize not only its definition as an institutional body, but also its ability to convey a
secondary, more abstract sense of the term. That additional meaning captures the feelings of sympathy and solidarity that guide the narrator towards the realization of how the systemic similarities governing the conditions under which persons of color in America live can serve to unify them within a kind of figurative ‘brotherhood’. In my attempt to legitimize that interpretation by emphasizing how given the lack of formal solidarizing institutions Johnson’s use of freemasonry focuses on that figurative racial or ethnic bond, I provided students with false historical information. I can truthfully say that I was ignorant of the fact that I was doing so at the time—that I lacked the knowledge of the historical record around Black unions, freemasonries, and activist organizations operating during the period in which the novel is set that would have allowed me to support my interpretation differently. But my lack of knowledge in that regard—while deeply problematic for other reasons that might be explored—does not constitute the core concern here. What’s more troubling is that my desire to drive home my interpretation prevented me from recognizing that I didn’t possess that knowledge. Instead, in assuming too fully the role of the pedagogue, I adopted a blindness to pedagogical rigor.

An analysis of the ways in which another discourse marker, ‘you know’, functions within my speech seems to support this reading. In her analysis of the contracted form of this utterance (y’know), Tudor (2017) finds that instances of its use can indicate the multifaceted set of acts and intentions that a) underlie a speaker’s efforts to convey meaning to the listener and b) constitute attempts to guard against attacks that might question the speaker’s credibility. These include the desire not only to solicit reception (acknowledgment) from listeners of new information, but also to provide “discourse coherence when it is endangered by the sudden shift of frames, to display positive face to the hearer whose initial
frame is shifted, and, not least, to require the hearers’ interpretation, involvement in the interaction for sense-making” (2017, p. 436). Tudor references the earlier work of Tannen (2009), who presents these concepts of framing and face as related components in communication which describe the ways in which speakers “communicate and discern” (p. 300) particular speech activities (frames) and the simultaneous project through which the speaker engages in care for being understood while guarding against misunderstanding.

Looking to the false statement I made regarding the NAACP and other Black freemasonries, a series of my own utterances of the fragment ‘you know’ emerges and illustrates the ways in which these processes of care and guarding may have operated in my speech. My comments regarding the NAACP began with a single shift away from the previous conversational frame, which focused on Johnson’s use of the term freemasonry as an abstract term, to a new framing that focused on the institutional application of that term and an erroneous historical example to support my earlier analysis. The first instance in which I employ the marker ‘you know’ indicates how it functions in my discourse as an attempt to encourage my students to attend to this new frame and to consider its validity. Working in concert with the two remaining utterances, the use of all three ‘you know’ fragments in succession indicates my attempt to carry students along with me, to keep them engaged and on common ground with me as I build the components of this frame. This attempt at reassuring both them (and me) that what I’m proposing is accurate and makes sense carries with it a “listen up and stay with me, because I know what I’m talking about” message that operationalizes the face-saving use of the ‘you know’ discourse marker. Spoken at intervals, I employed the ‘you know’ marker as a linguistic tool for moving students towards the completion of the frame, at which point I then checked in with them to see whether they
were still with me by asking, “Okay? So, that’s a little bit different, but—so what we want to
do is track, then, what does this membership mean?” The finality of this statement and the
subsequent quick transition to a new frame and line of inquiry leaves no room for students
to push back. As I proceeded to shift frames yet again, I employed ‘so’ as a discourse marker
signaling the initiation of a new sequence in action.

Expressed within these smaller fragments of discourse is an ingenuity perhaps far less
positive than what I’ve observed operating in the speech and writing of my students.
Performing this close reading of my discourse reveals that the praxis that my words advance
bears on its surface the character of the project of critical pedagogy but carries a more
problematic aspect when examined closely. Again, perhaps we can excuse this moment of
misinformation as having done only minimal damage to the larger goal I had of moving
students towards understanding Johnson’s use of freemasonry as a concept that captures the
solidarizing aspects of his narrator’s participation in non-White communities. However, I
argue that the above analysis of the workings of that discourse speaks to the sensitivity and
criticality necessary for literacy educators to account for the voice we construct in our
classrooms—and the danger of failing to do so. As I became aware of where the
conversation was headed and employed my own agenda to support the specific trajectory
that analysis was taking—one that satisfied the goals that I had established for it, I sacrificed
taking a rigorous stance towards my practice. In that instance, the result became the
misrepresentation of historical fact. And while this may have been a relatively small slip, it is
worthwhile to consider the potential risk to the goals of critical pedagogy that becoming too
intently wrapped up in one’s agenda can pose.

Reflecting on this moment calls to mind Villanueva’s (1993) chronicling of the
practices of Floyd, an African American poet and writing instructor, whose teaching
Villanueva both praises for its grounding in the tenets of Freirean social justice and criticizes
for its dogged commitment to a singular agenda governed by his own reading of the world.
Rather than becoming an interactional space for the generation and contestation of a
multiplicity of worldviews, Villanueva finds that Floyd's classroom took on the dogmatic
nature that re-inscribed aspects of the same systems of subjugation that he worked
outwardly to counter. “For all that was valid—even necessary—in what Floyd had said, there
was no dialectic in his class” (p. 60, emphasis added). When one considers not only the power
afforded to me given my positionality both in the classroom and in society as a White male
along with the dominant space that my voice occupies in this conversation, I have to ask, to
what extent was I also guilty of shutting down critical dialogue? The need to guard against
and account for the re-inscription of domination and dogmatism that I detect lurking
beneath the surface in this fragment of discourse resonates deeply for me when I consider
Villanueva’s casting of the problematic nature of Floyd’s pedagogy. That significant concern
justifies why a small, perhaps mundane moment like the one I’ve spent some time discussing
here does indeed constitute a small crisis, a symptom of a flaw potentially much larger and
more fatal to the work of critical pedagogy than it may at first appear.

The Role of the “Reader” in Defining the Struggle

The second aspect contributing to the ingenuity or substance of my discourse
emerges in the closing lines of that first fragment of talk and is conveyed thematically in my
repeated use of the phrase “what else”. This phrase captures my practice of engaging
students in cycles of questioning across the span of a discussion. The approach that I take
towards the questions I pose during discussions aims to encourage students to move beyond surface explication of what “happens” in a text and towards an exploration of how a text operates as a medium through which we are not only exposed to the world the author has constructed but also invited to construct meanings that will help us to interpret our own realities. This method of critical inquiry continues to be a foundational stance that guides my pedagogy. It connects intimately to the methodology that informs the analysis and write-up of this research, and it has governed the ways in which I have interacted with the ‘texts’ presented to me through my data gathering of the discourse of the classroom. The root of this analytic method begins in the classroom and involves working with students as we draw connections across a single text. My participation in this practice is intended to help convey what to me has always felt akin to an organic process of sensemaking through which we attempt grounded interpretations of a text and thus construct argument. As I’ve indicated at various points in this study, I attempt to model that process using various notetaking utilities, both physical and digital. I do so to draw connections between concepts and ideas and to capture the flow of ideas, often by quoting or paraphrasing my students’ words on the classroom Smartboard or whiteboard as jottings that track their thoughts. This allows me to (re)present those ideas in the spirit of honoring what students bring to the conversation. And to further support my ability to do so, as we entered our work with Johnson, I begin saving and recording those board notes as addenda to each week’s lesson plans. I would then reference these notes before subsequent sessions, sometimes posting them on the Smartboard as starting points for continued discussion.

Following our brief attempt to clarify and define the nature of the term freemasonry as Johnson employs it, my first cycle of questions asked students what it might mean for the
narrator to hold membership in the “freemasonry of the race”, what was involved in gaining that membership, and what we can understand about what it means for the narrator to come to understand his own identity both as a Black man in America and given his biracial identity. These lines of inquiry necessitated that students return to the text and find ways to ground and deepen their analyses through close readings of referenced passages. Students did not respond at first to those questions, so I initiated a return to the text by asking Layla to continue reading where she had left off. She read aloud a powerful passage in which Johnson’s narrator states,

I had formulated a theory of what it was to be colored; now I was getting the practice. The novelty of my position caused me to observe and consider things which, I think, entirely escaped the young men I associated with; or, at least, were so commonplace to them as not to attract their attention. And of many of the impressions which came to me then I have realized the full import only within the past few years, since I have had a broader knowledge of men and history, and a fuller comprehension of the tremendous struggle which is going on between the races in the South. (1995, pp. 34-35)

Here, the narrator explicates the analytic perspectives and processes that have afforded him the ability to make sense of the various hypotheses about race he has formulated thus far from his experiences both as a White man ‘passing’ in the North and now as an identified person of color in the South. Through this description of what occurs within the intellectual development of his narrator, Johnson also captures the core methodology that seems to inform the passion that drives his own writing and that which provides it with its power—its ingenuity—as a prose form. As a critical text, Johnson’s novel functions as a kind of fictive research narrative through which its protagonist, as a practitioner immersed in the realities of his society sets out to develop grounded theoretical perspectives on the questions that his
racial identity has posed for him. 52 Taken as a kind of methodological statement, the above passage frames two aspects of the narrator's approach to inquiry that bear striking resemblance to an ethnographic research model. First, he accounts for the “novelty” of his position as an individual who, as a function of his ability to ‘pass’ for White, has been able for years to cast an etic ‘gaze’ upon the other and who is now presented with emic perspectives through his participation as a person of color. Second, he describes drawing upon the “broader knowledge of men and history”—bases of knowledge that hold epistemological value for him similar to that which theoretical frameworks and extant bodies of literature hold for researchers—and bringing those to bear as he crafts “a fuller comprehension” of his experience. The fruits of the application of this methodology are made manifest in the hybridity of the narrator’s functional and conceptual application of a term like freemasonry. In the style of a social scientist, the narrator will go on to discuss the value of that concept in its ability to frame analysis of the phenomenological data he uncovers in the field. As will become apparent through our classroom discussion, the narrator will then arrive at some conclusions about the nature of the everyday struggle between White and Black Americans. With regard to my teaching of Johnson’s Autobiography,

52 I draw a functional distinction between my use of “fictive” rather than “fictional” that hinges upon my consideration of the genre of Johnson’s novel as a work of historical fiction. The narrative at its heart captures the realities of American life for its fictional narrator who operates in many ways as an archetypal analog for the author himself. As such, the story that Johnson’s narrator (consider the melding of the two identities here) tells ultimately presents a portrait of life in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America that blends imaginative, or “fictive” elements with a very real account of one biracial man’s journey through that historically grounded sociocultural and political landscape.
passages like this one, which appear often across his novel and through which he engages in meta conversations on race, class, and power, inspired me to frame it in the ways that I have for this unit, namely as conveying Johnson’s ongoing development of a theory of race.

In line with this approach to teaching Johnson and in response to Layla’s reading of this passage aloud for the class, I posed yet another series of questions aimed to encourage students to explore with more depth one of those pieces of data upon which Johnson bases his theory of race and builds his ongoing understanding of the concept of a freemasonry.

Me: Okay, so he says I started to observe things, alright, that didn’t—that were commonplace, that didn’t attract my attention before, okay? Can we put our fingers on what some of the things that he begins to observe are as he’s living now with—this is where he’s with the Cuban workmen in the factory, is that correct at this point? What is he observing with the Cuban workmen in the factory? Like, what is he starting to see it means to be non-White, I guess in this country? [Pause] yeah, Victor?

Victor: Struggle.

Immediately following Victor’s brief response, I posed a question to the class that asked what the nature of this struggle entailed. In response, Camila focused us first on the financial struggles associated with the work of the cigar makers, who labored long hours at their trade and were paid based on the number of cigars rolled on a weekly basis. Acknowledging this, I then asked what we knew about the daily work of the men in the factory and what they did to pass that time given this monotonous work. Grace pointed us to the role that that ‘reader’ occupied in the workplace.

53 African American, male student
54 African American, female student
55 White, female student
As Johnson’s narrator progressed through the early months of his employment at the factory, he was promoted from the role of “stripper”, which required him to separate the leaves of tobacco from their stems, to that of “roller”, which advanced him to the rolling table and allowed him to learn the trade of crafting cigars. Progressing to this position meant that in addition to the literal seat at the table that the narrator gained, he was also provided with a figurative one that would open successive levels of access to him. First, the new role offered him a deeper level of acceptance into the workplace community occupied by his Cuban counterparts. As part of his membership in that institutional freemasonry, he would not only learn how to craft cigars, but also to speak Spanish. This ability to communicate with his counterparts would then allow him to become immersed with even greater depth in the cultural and political interests of the local community. Finally, just over a year into his tenure at the factory, Johnson’s narrator would gain the requisite manufacturing and linguistic skills along with the cultural capital that would aid him in assuming the position of ‘reader’ at the factory. As Johnson’s narrator describes it, that role granted him the ability to be “released” from the quota system of cigar manufacture, bestowed upon him the honor of providing knowledge and entertainment to the workers through his readings—an activity that he describes as being “more in accord with my tastes”, and provided him with the income necessary to advance in the society of Jacksonville (Johnson, 1995, p. 34).

Amir, Kiera, Grace, and Camila each contributed to our unpacking of those functional roles that the ‘reader’ occupies in the factory as a conveyor of news and current events, an arbiter over disputes, and the final authority on topics and questions ranging from science to sports. Lily’s comments on the role of the ‘reader’ looked beyond those day-to-day functional aspects of his work and focused on the larger role that he plays within the
fraternal society, or freemasonry, of the factory and by extension, of the race.

Lily: I think, it’s like the ‘reader’ is trying to hold down the weight that is like the race—like the flaws and stuff. Like I don’t how to say this right, but like he—he’s kind of had to lead everybody to the right place—like hold the weight of the whole race down so that he can, you know, have [sic] a better future for them.

Lily’s characterization of the reader as holding a leadership role that requires him to “hold down the weight” of race, the substance of which she identifies as it’s “flaws”, reads initially as problematic in that it can be interpreted as positioning the injustices that these men face as defects inherent to their identities. However, a closer read of Lily’s diction seems to reveal an attempt to convey how the narrator’s role as reader required him to help bear in some way the heaviness of a load that has been placed upon these men (i.e. “the race”) and to assume the role of a leader who will support them as they move forward to seek that “better future”. This conceptual framing, which presents race as an identity construct that has been foisted upon these men, seems closer to what Lily intends. Given the functional roles that the ‘reader’ occupies as a practitioner dealing all aspects of communication and intellectual pursuits, the heaviness or “weight” that Lily describes the reader as attempting to “hold down” or control may be interpreted as the economic and sociopolitical forces that aim to subjugate and colonize these men within a system of labor—to silence them. The ‘reader’, who quite literally reads and interprets the world as a function of his role in the factory, embodies the voice that resists such silencing.

To try to honor the spirit of what I had interpreted Lily as endeavoring to convey, I responded by attempting to synthesize what we had addressed thus far through our discussion of the concept of freemasonry. I began with Amir and Victor’s earlier comments, which characterized the nature of the freemasonry of the race as rooted in cultural unification (as within the religious community to which the narrator belongs) and in the
larger struggle the narrator relates regarding Cuban workers.\textsuperscript{56} Using my running board notes as a guide, I connected each of these to a single new jotting that read “requires leadership”, which was intended to capture Lily’s latest comments. My sense was that taken together, these three components (i.e. reliance on community, the indication of a struggle, and the need for clear leadership from within the group) which had emerged from our reading of Johnson and our deliberation over his use of the term \textit{freemasonry} constituted an accurate rendering of the reading students had performed thus far of the nature of that concept as conveyed through the textual substance of Johnson’s prose.

Having represented to students this summary of our developing understanding of Johnson’s concept of a \textit{freemasonry}, the next line of questioning that I posed asked whether we could identify the activist project that these employees of the cigar factory, as members of a shared community of a practice, have taken up in the novel and the methods they employ to advance that project. In short, what does Johnson’s text reveal about what it means to mobilize this freemasonry towards resistance? Rather than opening this question up to students, but as a nod to Victor’s original utterance, I directed the class back to the novel and quoted aloud a passage that I believed captured the activist project, the \textit{praxis}, that

\begin{quote}
56 While Victor’s classmates raised the issue of working conditions and pay as indicators of the nature of the struggle that cigar workers faced, it is worthwhile to note that in Johnson’s novel the landlord of the boarding house where the narrator first stays upon his arrival at Jacksonville provides information regarding the political struggle in which Cubans living in exile were invested. The man describes for the narrator the system of juntas set up across the country through which money raised by Cuban workers in America was sent back to their home country in support of insurgent militant groups who sought independence from United States control. Cuba would gain that independence in 1903.
\end{quote}
Johnson’s narrator identifies as the work of resistance. That passage states,

It is a struggle; for though the black man fights passively, he nevertheless fights; and his passive resistance is more effective at present than active resistance could possibly be. He bears the fury of the storm as does the willow tree.

It is a struggle; for though the white man of the South may be too proud to admit it, he is, nevertheless, using in the contest his best energies; he is devoting to it the greater part of his thought and much of his endeavor. The South today stands panting and almost breathless from its exertions. (1995, p. 35)

I followed up my reading of this passage by stressing the importance of Johnson’s use of the term “passive resistance”. In doing so, I effectively defined it by pointing out to the class that the portrait we are provided of these workers’ seemingly quiet and acquiescent participation in this factory through the roles they’ve been assigned (i.e. ‘stripper’, ‘roller’, and ‘reader’) does not, for Johnson’s narrator, indicate complacency. Instead, their act of assigning the leadership role of ‘reader’ to an individual who possesses specific talents and abilities and who can provide them with the guidance and knowledge is essential to achieving a form of passive resistance. The ‘reader’s contribution to the working lives of these men is not limited to providing them with the entertainment necessary for them to pass the time while remaining engaged in the repetitive, operational labor that will provide the modest monetary income necessary to sustain their lives. The ‘reader’ provides an even greater contribution to the lives of these men, an intellectual sustenance that helps reveal to them the nature of their resistance. As workers participating in the industrial arm of a capitalist economic structure that organizes work in ways that resemble Taylorist and Fordist models of assembly, these men are at risk each day of being operationalized by a factory system of cigar production that intends to position them as cogs in a machine aimed at efficiency in mass production. (This is not to say, however, that the cigars that these men produce are not beautiful creations in and of themselves; indeed, Johnson honors the “the acme of artistic
skill” (1995, p. 32) involved in the crafting of them.) But the key to their resistance, as Johnson notes, lies in their ability to bear “the fury of the storm” with the flexibility attendant to that of the willow. And as I commented to the class, in doing so “they are advancing themselves in some way”. With respect to the White captains of Southern industry, Johnson argues that the mental and physical “energies” that they devote to maintaining this system of domination have driven them almost to exhaustion. However, he recognizes that the pride that these White men bear will sustain their efforts and prevent them from admitting defeat. Indeed, as Johnson states in the paragraph following the two that I read aloud, the only thing that he has observed having changed in the nature of the struggle between Whites and Blacks on the American battlefield are the terms of engagement. As he writes, “The battle was first waged over the right of the Negro to be classed as a human being with a soul; later, as to whether he had sufficient intellect to master even the rudiments of learning; and today it is being fought out over his social recognition” (1995, p. 35).

The daily practices in which the ‘reader’ engages as part of that new phase in the battle or struggle between the races serve to mobilize and build upon the incremental gains achieved by those two earlier ‘victories’. Operating within a capitalist system and a production model that by necessity de-humanizes the worker, the ‘reader’ is positioned as a kind of renaissance figure who engages his fellow workers in discussions over language, the arts and sciences, athletics, and intellectual debate, all of which stand as core elements of human endeavors in which he possesses mastery. By bringing his talents in these areas to bear on the everyday lives of these men, the ‘reader’ humanizes the de-humanizing conditions associated with their work and supports these workers as they seek to further
enrich their intellectual capacities. In terms of the current struggle that Johnson identifies, the unifying aspect of the ‘reader’s’ role, its ability to foster community and the potential it carries for attending to the struggle for social recognition, drives the organizational and conceptual power of a freemasonry. Factory floors such as these are where organizers and civic activists will form the guilds, unions, and institutional freemasonries that will seek both changes in the conditions for workers like these men as well as broader social recognition of their humanity and intellectual capabilities. In short, the voice of the ‘reader’ embodies the passion and the ingenuity fundamental to the project of moving these men from complacency to resistance. In its ability to educe, or help bring out their potential, the voice of the ‘reader’ is the voice of education in the most fundamental sense.

As the transcript of our discussion shows, I did not discuss with my students the nature of the passive resistance in which these men are engaged with the level of detail that I have above, nor did I explore with them the nuanced role that the ‘reader’ plays in the struggle that Johnson outlines. In the course of discussion that day, we never moved into that subsequent passage from Johnson. Doing so might have moved us farther down that interpretive road. However, I did suggest to Layla (and to Aria, who worked with her to prepare comments for the discussion) that they consider the value that exploring the narrator’s role as ‘reader’ in the cigar factory might provide as the source of additional evidence in support of their analytic focus on tracking the narrator’s character development across the novel. I tied that suggestion to the original interpretation that Layla voiced at the outset of our discussion when she spoke of the narrator’s membership in the freemasonry of the race as constituting his “coming in touch with the Black side”, and I suggested that she consider how “part of that is this membership in this freemasonry that’s exemplified by the
cigar factory and what was going on with the working class in the South”.

Although I did not engage these students in a fine-grained analysis of how the role of the ‘reader’ might connect to the concept of a freemasonry and to the nature of the struggle between non-White working classes in the South and White men who governed industry in the South, I must have been thinking in that moment of these intersections. The final question that I posed to students for our discussion of this chapter asked them to consider the perspective of the cigar factory owner and what he “thinks about all of this—about what’s happening in his factory” and, in particular, what he might think about the role the ‘reader’ plays in the work community. Kiera and Lily took a fairly narrow view towards the perspectives the owner might have. Kiera commented, “He probably doesn’t care. Cause he’s making money, so why does he care?” I responded that it might be accurate to think that way given that meeting the quota for production may be his sole objective. But I decided not to leave it at that and pushed the issue a bit further by asking, “What about this reader, this guy who’s reading these stories and reading the news and doing that stuff? What do you think? How do you think the owner sees that? What do you think he makes of all that?” Lily wrote off the potential for the reader to receive any recognition from the factory owner on basically the same grounds as those that Kiera cited, adding that “He probably thinks it’s a waste of time, and he thinks, you know, ‘just make my cigars and I’ll get a profit out of it.’ He doesn’t care for that race, or that person who reads them news and stuff. Cause it—basically he thinks it’s garbage because what really matters is him getting his profit.”

Frazier took a slightly different view, commenting that the factory owner might actually view the ‘reader’ as beneficial—but beneficial to his own bottom line rather than to the wellbeing of the workers. “Because, I mean to [the workers], they all regard it as like—they kind of
respect the person whose doing it. So, I mean maybe [the owner] sees it as ‘Oh, this person is actually taking initiative to read things and to make—and to settle arguments and to keep kind of the peace.’” Tegan echoed Frazier’s sentiments that the owner might view the ‘reader’s’ actions as “helpful because it keeps the workers motivated.” In response to these perspectives, I summarized what I had heard by framing these students’ interpretations as representing three potential options for how the owner might view the ‘reader’s’ role in this community of workers: 1) he may disregard it as meaningless, 2) he may find it useful and see it as a tool for maintaining control and keeping the workers “docile” (my term), or 3) he might find it useful in a different sense in that it keeps the workers engaged and productive. I did ask students to consider taking a step back to look at the larger societal picture, noting that “it’s worthwhile to think about, you know how the other ‘person’ in this novel, the ‘person’ who is kind of looming there, or that we don’t really get the insights of, which is that larger White superstructure—that White society. How does—how might White society see these kinds of things, all right?” This wasn’t a question that we went on to discuss. Instead, I left it to stand as an open invitation for consideration. This was not necessarily a bad thing.

The analysis that I presented above, my reading of how the narrator’s position as ‘reader’ working within the structure of the factory and in a larger industrial complex voices an interpretation based on my transaction with the text. It is influenced by my goals for reading, by my identity, and by the variety of experiences I have and have not had and knowledge that I do and do not possess. My goal for this discussion was to avoid to the greatest extent possible dictating my own analysis of Johnson’s writing to my students. Instead, my intent was to frame our exchanges as modeling a process through which
students could develop, with my assistance, some frameworks for reading and analysis that would be of use to them as they progressed forward to complete the final chapters of Johnson’s novel and develop their capstone essays on his theory of race. Additionally, I wanted to offer the class a sense of my expectations for analysis, including the level of depth and support that I knew I would require as a reader of their writing. This goal is captured in the final portion of transcript of our discussion. In that excerpt, I attempt to provide students with a voiced rendering of how I might engage with and respond to their writing were they to take up as a focus for their essays the various aspects of Johnson’s text that we covered during this discussion. I include that concluding fragment of discourse here because it provides a fairly concise rendering of the process through which I led this class in collaborative textual analysis, a process that included the use of cycles of questions as a way to encourage support and depth. It captures a final instance of the ingenuity that guided my voice during this discussion. It reads,

Me: Good. All right, so you are writing about dynamic character for me, and you chose this passage. You want to get into this stuff. If you’re talking about—the fact that he feels membership in a freemasonry is a change in him—if I’m reading this, I’m going to say, “Alright, so what changes is he seeing and what does this membership mean to him?” And so, you want to go through and say, “Alright, well, there’s singing and talking involved; there’s something at the heart of that has to do with struggle; and then we see him as being the leader as part of one of these freemasonry groups—or freemason groups of ‘the race’.” And so, then we want to look at well, what does it mean for him to be the ‘reader’? Well, what is the reader doing? Reading news, reading fiction, reading literature, you know, he is a leader in times of conflict. Then, so what does James Weldon say about this? He calls it “passive resistance.” So, you then want to describe, you know, what is he learning about himself? He’s learning an act of passive resistance. That’s the change. This is—[pointing to the words “passive resistance” on board] This is the big fundamental thing that potentially is coming out this—is this [circling the words “passive resistance” on board], you know, and to some extent this [circling the words “leader in times of conflict” on board]—to some extent, that [pointing to the two phrases again to emphasize the connection between the two]. Alright? And so, part of him coming into this is a change he’s seeing in himself—that he can be a leader to some extent. Right? He gets a voice in this. It’s a really big thing for him to be the leader of
these men who are working there. So, you might even say—Layla, if you were going
to do—and Aria—if you were going to do a good opening sentence, a good thesis
statement—that this passage shows that he’s developing this quality: leadership.
Okay? And he’s doing it by discussing what it meant to be part of one of these
freemasonry societies and what that involved.

~

Between the above conversation and the one that I will present as the final portion
of data in support of this study, students completed their reading of the second half of
Johnson’s *Autobiography*, during which the narrator travels extensively both domestically and
abroad. During his remaining time in Jacksonville, the narrator earns enough money to
acquire a piano for himself, and he devotes a small amount of his time teaching and playing
sporadically either at small church gatherings or for public entertainment. However, after the
cigar factory closes and he decides to return to the north, the narrator’s career as a ragtime
pianist moves into full swing. While playing in late-night jazz clubs in New York City, he
eventually catches the attention of a wealthy, White gentleman who assumes the role of
benefactor to him. The narrator spends most of his time playing for this unnamed
individual, who occasionally “loans” the narrator to his friends for entertainment.
Eventually, the two travel overseas, where they embark on a tour that will take them to
several European cities. In Paris, while attending the opera, the narrator has a chance
encounter with a man whom he recognizes as his birth father; he also quickly realizes that
the two women accompanying the man, the younger of whom had caught his eye earlier at
the event, must be the man’s wife and daughter. The narrator resists making contact with
them. He instead views them from afar, and the episode leaves him distraught at the
“tragedy” of the situation, which has prevented him from identifying himself to the younger
woman as her brother and leaves him “divided between a desire to weep and a desire to
curse” (Johnson, 1995, p. 63). The benefactor and narrator eventually leave Paris and spend an extended period in London before moving on to Amsterdam and finally to Germany.

At an event in Berlin, the narrator encounters another pianist who improvises on the “new American music” that the narrator has been playing that evening for the group by transforming it into something that the narrator describes as “classic” (Johnson, 1995, p. 66). This melding of genres into a novel form sparks an epiphany in the narrator, who decides he must return to the States, where he plans to travel back to the South and to make good on his musical talents by further developing his craft through emersion in the African American community. The narrator’s benefactor attempts to discourage him from doing so, warning him of the professional and personal risk that will be involved in such a venture, commenting at one point, “I can imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured, and refined colored man in the United States” (Johnson, 1995, p. 68). The two discuss the “race question”, and the benefactor attempts to discourage the narrator even further by mounting a diatribe through which he excoriates America for its political and cultural failures around race by listing the various wrongs and injustices that plague that society. However, Johnson’s narrator is not discouraged. Instead, he feels even more compelled by “unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form” (Johnson, 1995, p. 69).

Once back in the States, the narrator travels south and encounters several individuals who assist him as he develops a deeper understanding of the “perplexity of Southern character” (Johnson, 1995, p. 80). This is exemplified by what the narrator describes as its various contradictions, including the absolute and holistic hatred that he observes the part of most Whites towards the Black race juxtaposed against the “strong affection” that those
same individuals seem to feel towards “those blacks who come into close touch with them” with whom “they live on terms of the greatest intimacy” and to whom they entrust “their children, their family treasures, and their family secrets” (Johnson, 1995, p. 80). Once he reaches Macon, Georgia, the narrator strikes out into the interior of the country, where he has the opportunity to attend nightly “big meetings” at a Negro settlement. There he hears sermons delivered by a Black preacher bearing the both common and conspicuous name of John Brown (a nod from Johnson, it would appear, to the long-dead White abolitionist of the same name) and listens attentively to the spirituals and slave songs that will form the inspiration for his musical compositions.

The climax of Johnson’s novel comes after his narrator returns from a meeting one evening and becomes aware of a disturbance in the town. Because no one has been alerted to his biracial racial identity, he decides to risk leaving the house where he is sleeping to investigate. He finds a group of men—all White—gathered at the railroad station preparing a search party to look for the perpetrator of “some terrible crime” (Johnson, 1995, p. 87). By morning, the accused, a Black man, is dragged into town between two horsemen with hands tied behind his back. The narrator witnesses the lynching of the man at the hands of the mob who, rather than hang the victim, decide to burn him alive. Johnson captures the devastating psychological impact that beholding event has on the narrator through an extended reflection on the hypocrisy of the Anglo-Saxon civilization, whose existence the narrator likens to an old-world romanticist farce born of the Dark Ages and perpetuated into and through modernity. In the end, the narrator is left with a decision as to how he will proceed in terms of his own life and racial identification. Expressed with eloquence and in a tone that captures the utter devastation he feels, Johnson’s narrator reflects on the choice he
ultimately makes as he heads north on a train bound for New York.

All along the journey I was occupied in debating with myself the step which I had decided to take. I argued that to forsake one’s race to better one’s condition was no less worthy an action than to forsake one’s country for the same purpose. I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead. All the while I understood that it was not discouragement or fear or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. For certainly the law would restrain and punish the malicious burning alive of animals. (Johnson, 1995, p. 90)

**Speaking Resistance: A Message in Blood**

Johnson compresses his narration of the narrator’s life following what will be his final return north to New York into a rather brief final chapter. After floundering for a time and exhausting his savings in the city, the narrator enrolls in some business courses and finds employment in a firm where his knowledge of Spanish can be of use once again. Although he no longer performs professionally on the piano, the narrator’s passion for music does not fade, and one evening at a “musical” given at a private home, the narrator meets and falls instantly in love with a woman whom he describes as “white as a lily” (Johnson, 1995, p. 93). The two become romantically involved, but when the narrator eventually reveals his racial identity to the woman, she receives it with a shock which causes her to separate from him for a summer. In the immediate aftermath of her reaction, the narrator comments, “This was the only time in my life that I ever felt absolute regret at being colored, that I cursed the drops of African blood in my veins and wished that I were really white” (Johnson, 1995, pp. 96-97). Yet despite the separation caused by this revelation, the two remained in contact, and eventually they would reunite, rekindle their love, marry, and have two children together, a
girl and a boy. Tragically, with the birth of this second child came fatal complications, and the narrator’s wife passed away shortly after. In their life together, the narrator describes harboring a “constant fear that [my wife] would discover in me some shortcoming which she would unconsciously attribute to my blood rather than to a failing of human nature” but according to him, that never comes to pass. With his wife’s passing the fear that his secret will be revealed also fades. He proclaims that he will never again marry, and instead will devote his life to his children and to ensuring that “the brand” of his Black heritage from being “placed upon them” (Johnson, 1995, p. 99).

Johnson closes his novel with a brief, three-paragraph reflection in which he captures the narrator’s feelings towards the life he has lived and towards his current “position in the world” as an ‘ex-colored’ man, about which he comments, “Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother’s people” (Johnson, 1995, p. 99). Johnson carries this same blend of loss, yearning, and regret through to the final lines of his novel, which I’ve placed as the epigraph that opens this chapter. Through allusion to the Biblical story of Esau, who is deceived by his younger brother Jacob into trading his birthright for a “mess of pottage”, the narrator articulates the existential crisis central to his identity that has come of his life experiences as a man of biracial birth. In it, he first considers his children, whose existence constitute the physical manifestation born—literally—of his choice to privilege the White identity afforded to him by the color of his skin over his African heritage. He then weighs the enduring love that he bears for the two against all that he has forsaken in the interest of that choice: “a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent” (Johnson, 1995, p. 100).
By closing his novel in this way, Johnson defines the ultimate struggle that has encompassed the life of the narrator and that captures, perhaps, a theory of race particular to his own human condition that he has sought to develop through his narrative, a paradoxical message in blood. That message, driven by the societal construction of race as a biological marker and conveyed across the novel both through his own words and through the words of those whom he encounters, states that ultimately, he must choose the aspect of his racial identity that he will privilege when, in fact, the choice never really seemed to be his own. Beginning with his mother’s comments in the novel’s opening chapter that “the best blood of the South is in you” (Johnson, 1995, p. 8) and carried through in the words of his White patron, who commented, “My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man. Now, why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle, of the black people of the United States?” (Johnson, 1995, p. 67) in the words of the Texan whom he encounters while traveling back to Georgia and who asks rhetorically, “[N]ow do you believe that all the niggers on earth are worth the good white blood that was spilt?” (Johnson, 1995, p. 75) and in his own reaction to the covertly racist remarks of northern Whites, to which he imagines replying, “I am a colored man. Do I not disprove the theory that one drop of Negro blood renders a man unfit?” (Johnson, 1995, p. 93) At the close of Johnson’s novel, this remains an open question. The narrator does state that reconciling that paradox of his racial identity can, on a personal level, perhaps be found in the love he bears for his children whose existence, as he writes, “makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise” (Johnson, 1995, p. 100). However, just as the narrator’s final words then proceed to express the deep shame he carries over those aspects of his identity that he has forsaken in choosing to privilege the
White aspects of his identity, the final message that Johnson’s novel conveys is not one of hope. Readers of Hebrew scripture will recall that Esau and Jacob do eventually reconcile, but that reconciliation will be hard-fought, tenuous, and occur far in the future. For now, for Johnson and his narrator, there can be no reconciliation, only regret.

Having completed their reading of Johnson’s novel, students from my Section A class participated in a capstone conversation, the space of which they used to deliberate over the choice that Johnson’s narrator ultimately makes to live his life in New York as a White man married to a White woman with two children who he describes as bearing some of his physical characteristics, but who largely resemble their mother. In the pages that follow, I include a multi-page section from the transcript of that discussion combined with a series of long-form footnotes that provide a running commentary and analysis of it. I have approached presentation of this section of data in this way because I feel it is important to preserve the flow of talk that emerged during this discussion. With the exception of the identity poems that students wrote, each of which is presented in its entirety in Chapter 7, my write up of most of the spoken and written discourse in this study blends relatively short excerpts of exchanges or quoted text with paraphrase and paragraph-form discussion. As a way to forefront the voices of my students and the character (ingenuity) of their interactions at the close of this research narrative, I feel it is vital to present their words in this way. The long-form footnotes that I include are intended to maintain my presence in the data for the

57 See Appendix F, “Class Discussion, 2-27-2013 (Section A): The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man”
reader, and in doing so, to convey through the page one aspect of the analytic process that I brought to my readings and interpretations of student discourse.

Lily posed the question that initiated the turn in our discussion that led to the dialogue I present below. Approximately midway into the class period, she asked, “[W]hat if he didn’t meet his wife? Cause his wife is White, and once she died he kind of gave up on pursuing that Black power, I guess.” I often caution students about asking “what if” questions like the one Lily asks here, because they lead to speculation that goes beyond what has been written by the author rather than toward analysis of the text. I encourage students to conceptualize a text as a complete work that has spatial and temporal boundaries, a closed system that presents a finite snapshot of a world that has been authored by the writer. However, because I felt that some provocative lines of inquiry about the influences that race, racism, and racial politics have had on the narrator’s life and identity lay at the heart of Lily’s question, I chose not to push back against it and instead reframed the question on the board in a way that I hoped would refocus the discussion on the text itself. I wrote, “Did his marriage to his wife and her subsequent death prevent him from doing the work he might have done in this world?” Based on the reflections that Johnson’s narrator voices in the final chapter of the novel, I felt as though this question could be explored with a legitimate level of analytic rigor. And as my own summary and analysis of the second half of Johnson’s Autobiography indicate, Lily’s question points very much to the core concerns embedded with the narrator’s struggle with his biracial identity. As the conversation below unfolded, it would become clear that the passion driving these students’ words was very much informed by their sustained investment in making sense of what I have termed the ‘message in blood’
that Johnson pursues as part of the theory of race and that he explores with great depth across his novel. I pick up the conversation with a comment from Nyah regarding the narrator’s choice to live as a White man and his desire to marry a White woman.

Nyah: I think this all started when his mom—when his mom said that thing about is dad. That right there was just putting him on a pedestal—that whole description there. [mimicking the mother in the novel with a hyperbolic tone of praise] “I know. I’m not White, but your dad… mmmm he Jesus.” [laughter from students around her] I know! Like, what?! [students speak over each other around her] No, I’m not saying like—[pause] She put him—she put him on a pedestal.

Me: And the implication that his dad was White, you think, made him want to identify more with the White race than the Black race?

Nyah: Kinda sorta. Cause that, right there, was to me saying that dad is—like she didn’t say nothing about herself. But I guess he knew—he knew her. But I’m saying, the way she talked him—yeah, it was making him superior.

Me: So, do you see other times in the novel where the Black race is held up in comparison to the White race, where the White is placed as the better of the two and the Black is placed [as] being inferior to the other?

Amir: When he decided he was White—when he woke up and said, ‘Oh, I’m White.’

Me: Lily?

Lily: No, it was the time— [interrupted by a great deal of crosstalk]

Me: Shh shh shh. All right let’s let some other people get some ideas in. Lily?

Lily: Because the thing was, when he dropped out of college, and he went to—some place, and then he was in that hotel with the other guy, he—like they went to the restaurant right?—the segregated restaurant, and then they went in there and they were treated like—the food was bad, the sanitation was bad where the Black restaurant was. But then, he tried to go—like him, the narrator tried to go to a White restaurant—like everything’s all nice and pretty and stuff, and it’s showing that, you know, White is superior in the way that they try to—the elegance and their food and stuff—
Me: Yeah, well, but I meant—that was a reality of the—of what the world was like, right? I mean, my question is do you see him purposefully having a bias that places—in the way that he discusses race—that places Whiteness as something that is—something to be obtained, maybe, and him not embracing the Black or colored part of him—of his biracial identity? Frazier?

Frazier: I think to me, it’s like—it’s not he thinks one is kind of— [pauses, looking for the right word]

Me: Superior?

Frazier: —superior. It’s just that he identifies more, maybe, with White, and he’s been trying to see—find the like Black side of him—or find what, you know, things about him that he can identify with as Black. But I think he sees more like in himself—like a few times he talks about how he thinks about himself as White, I think. Or, he thinks of himself as sometimes more as—sometimes being Black. And some other people also think of him as—

Me: Yeah. And I’m wondering where that thinking of—where do you decide that, maybe? So, if you are of biracial identity, right? Where do you decide that you identify with—at what point in your life does that like, maybe, happen? And is there a point we can track in his life where that happens in a big way? Pearl, and then I’ll come back to—

Pearl: I think his mother had a big thing to do with that, because of the way like she didn’t let him really see the Black side of him until after. So, he grew up like in that type of environment—like understanding that. And yet, even though he tried to understand the other side—that you can’t really go from living one way to completely changing your whole entire situation.

Me: Nyah?

Nyah: I think we decide when you find out what’s the world’s preference. What do they want you to be? For some people—if you're a human, how—which one is going to be the

58 In referencing the disparities in the conditions of segregated facilities and businesses in the Jim Crow era South, Lily provided a precise answer to my question about other indicators of the privileging of Whites over Blacks in American life. My response sent the message to her that she didn’t answer my question when, it appears from my reframing of the question in the following line it was I who was not precise in my asking of it.

59 Pearl echoes the sentiment expressed by Nyah at the start of the conversation that the narrator’s identification with one racial or ethnic identity over another finds it roots in his early childhood and in how it was framed by his mother.
easier way? If my life’s going to be easier being White—I’m a be White. Like, for real for real? If I was back then, and I like could dye my hair, I would be White and just like try to be White for a little bit. And try to live like the life. [Aria echoes her sentiment by nodding in affirmation and adding, “Mmmhmm.”]  

Me: Now, do you think that’s embedded in the comment that you pointed out to us that [paraphrasing the words of the narrator’s mother] ‘you’re from the best blood in the South’ like that was an early indicator of what society values, in that sense? Is that—does that go along with that comment that you made? [Nyah nods in assent.] Yeah? Yes? Others? Other ideas about that? Yes, Amir.

Amir: I think it just all goes back to—I think life made him decide that he wanted to be White. It’s—

60 The tone that Nyah’s voice conveyed at this moment in the audio recording was halting and somber—a shift from just moments before when she spoke with great energy. Earlier in this conversation Nyah identified openly as “Black”. Her comment that “we decide when you find out what’s the world’s preference” raises the question of whether she views that identification as having been her choice or someone else’s. This a topic around which the remainder of the conversation will focus, one that considers the power that an individual, particularly a person of ‘biracial’ or ‘multiracial’ origin has to self-identify versus the ways in which society dictates a particular identification based on ‘readings’ of physical attributes.

As to Nyah’s use of the pronoun ‘we’, it is difficult to know whether she means individuals from specific racial or ethnic groups or whether she uses ‘we’ as a more broadly inclusive way of saying “we as humans.” Her shift to the second-person pronoun you may support this alternative reading of her intent here, since it conveys the sense of pointing to or addressing all of us, in general.

It is significant, too that Nyah chooses her hair—and in particular its color—as a marker of her racial identity and uses the historical setting of the novel as a way to imagine an alternate racial identity for herself in that period. Nyah clearly possesses knowledge of the history of race politics in America, as it has been an ongoing topic of discussion in our conversations, in the context of her coursework in African American history, and extensively throughout Johnson’s novel. She is aware of the very real consequences for African Americans of the legacy of White privilege that was pervasive not only during the time when this novel was written and set at the turn of the twentieth century but that continues to be deeply embedded in the fabric of contemporary American and global society. And yet, by emphasizing the distance between “back then” and now, Nyah seems to indicate that American society has undergone a significant change, one that limits the extent to which a choice is afforded her to move completely from one pole of the Black-White continuum to the other and that she in today’s world she must choose to orient herself somewhere between “biracial” or “Black” on that spectrum—White is no longer an option.
Nyah: That’s what I said in the first place.

Amir: I know—yeah, preference, or whatever. Cause it’s all just goes—all just goes back to
the thing—this whole idea that white is right, brown, stick around, and black, get back.
Like— [Several students sitting nearby exclaim, “What?!” Laughter erupts from the class,
and someone from the back of the room shouts, “It’s the truth! Another student says, “I
never heard it.”] Well I have—

Me: Where does that—where does that saying come from?

Amir: I have no idea.

Me: I mean, where did you pick that up?

Amir: [mishearing my question] I didn’t make it up.

Me: No, I said, “pick it up?” Where did that—yeah?

Amir: Oh, my dad. My dad.

Me: From your dad?

Amir: [to others around him] Yeah, my diddy. [laughter from class] 61

61 The line that Amir attributes to his father can be traced back to the lyrics from a protest
song made popular by Big Bill Broonzy titled “Black, Brown, and White”, which was
recorded under the title “Get Back” and was released posthumously in 1956. The chorus to
the song states

They say if you’s white, should be all right,
If you’s brown, stick around,
But if you’s black, well, brothers, get back, get back, get back.
Amir: And I think that is where this whole White—it all comes down to that. And life may have decided, “Oh, this is what I’ma be.” And I think if his mom, because she was Black, she would have expressed that blackness or whatever more—

Nyah: She didn’t *embrace* it!

Amir: Then he would have been able to say, “Oh, you know what? I *am* Black.” Or, would have just been able to say, “I’m *both*.” As confusing as it is, the world isn’t always going to be able to understand “I’m one or the other”, so you can just say it yourself, “I’m both.”

Nyah: You said it, boo.⁶²

According to Harold and Stone (2016) in their article on Broonzy that appears on the website for the Association of Cultural Equity, the lyrics to the song itself were first published in 1946 in the Bulletin of People’s Songs, and although it has been recorded by a number of prominent musicians over the years, Broonzy had great difficulty securing label backing to record it. In an interview that Harold and Stone quote at length, Broonzy describes arguing for its legitimacy based on the fact that it presented an accurate portrayal of race relations in post-World War II America. The reply that Broonzy reported having received from label executives was pregnant it’s racist subtext about what the public expects from songwriting. Namely, that “when you write a song and want to record it with any company, it must keep the people guessing what the song means... And that song comes right to the point and the public don’t like that.” Clearly not much had changed since that time. As Harold and Stone note, almost sixty years later when the song was quoted by the long-time civil rights activist Reverend Joseph Lowery during the 2009 inauguration of President Barack Obama, “rightwing commentators denounced him as ‘racialist’ and ‘divisive,’ provoking much ‘is-he-or-isn't he?’ handwringing in the media.”

⁶² Amir’s approach to voicing his ideas often includes creating imagined speech used to voice ideas and hypotheticals regarding how characters are, may be, or should be thinking or reacting to the world around them. This is not unusual method of expression as students engage in conversations around texts in the classroom and is part of a common approach that we all use from time to time when we talk about what someone might have said or thought in a particular situation.
Me: So all of this—all of this leads me to the question, like do you feel as though this is a realistic portrayal of—now I know that you’re not living in the early twentieth century, alright, clearly—but maybe taken out of time for a second, you know, do you feel like this is a realistic portrayal of someone’s life living as a biracial individual?

Nyah: Kinda, sort of. Yeah.

Me: I mean, are there things that are more realistic than others? Do you feel like there were times when you weren’t—you didn’t believe the narrator, or you didn’t find, you know, this to be a believable account of someone’s life? Or, times where you thought that it was really real, maybe?

Amir: Yeah.

Nyah: Yeah.

In the context of engaging in critical inquiry into concepts like race, this practice of creating alternative voices for a character calls up the possibilities that similar voicings or re-voicings might have for the creation of counternarratives that respond to the action the text. Although Amir’s comment is grounded in the hypothetical ‘what if’ of reimagining what the mother might have said when talking to the narrator about his racial heritage—an act that on the surface may not seem to be significant, in terms of its value in making problematic the question of parental influence on one’s racial identity, it is quite powerful. When voiced in assertive declarations like those that Amir has offered here, these voicings offer insight into just how powerful his feelings regarding the influence that a parent can (and potentially should) have on a child’s burgeoning understanding of the concept of race and its significance to one’s identity as a member of a raced society.

In terms of the change-oriented and action-based goals considered fundamental to the praxis of enacting a critical pedagogy in the ELA classroom, this kind of practice indicates the potential that this work has for influencing the kind of practices that these students might bring to their own future roles as parents, teachers, and mentors. Discussions like these have the potential to serve as workshops for the development of nuanced understandings about difficult concepts like race, concepts that are laden with power, politics, and emotion, and for processing and strategizing ways to cope with, manipulate, re-frame, counter, and/or support how students will take up these concepts in their lives and work.

Moments like these also provide us, as teachers, with insights into the cultural norms and literacy practices in which our students engage outside of the classroom and thus a better understanding of how to develop a pedagogy that engages and enriches their lives as participants in our classrooms.
Me: Can you point to aspects or—

Nyah: Yeah, the part I picked out yesterday, that was a part—

Me: What was that? Say that again? Or remind us.

Nyah: About the light—how light you are. Like how we had the discussion about how it puts you like higher sometimes. Or like with the marriage present [sic] and stuff like that.63

Me: Mmhmm.

Nyah: Like that’s—that’s not how people think, but like—I don’t even know how to say that—

Me: You think that still exists?

Nyah: Yeah.

Me: Or, you know that still exists.

Nyah: Yeah, it does. Some people automatically think like if they see somebody—like cause you light-skinned, you might think you prettier or something like that cause you lighter. [some low volume comments from people near her] That’s what some people think like—

63 Here, Nyah references a passage from the novel discussed during a prior class session that was not recorded for transcription. In Chapter 10, Johnson’s narrator contemplates the broad-reaching effects within the African American community of White narratives and practices that stigmatize having darker skin over lighter skin and the inverse affordances granted to those persons of color who possess lighter complexioned skin. The narrator raises as an example of this preferencing practices that he observes within the African American community regarding the selection of a marital partner, noting

that among Negroes themselves there is the peculiar inconsistency of a color question. Its existence is rarely admitted and hardly ever mentioned; it may not be too strong a statement to say that the greater portion of the race is unconscious of its influence; yet this influence, though silent, is constant. It is evidenced most plainly in marriage selection; thus the black men generally marry women fairer than themselves; while, on the other hand, the dark women of stronger mental endowment are very often married to light-complexioned men; the effect is a tendency toward lighter complexions, especially among the more active elements in the race. (Johnson, 1995, p. 72)
Amir: You right.

Me: So, the fact that ideas about beauty are linked to color of skin and tone—skin tone—is something that comes out in this? So, the fact that he’s identifying with these lighter-skinned women you think might reinforce that stereotype? That’s interesting. Anything else? Yeah? Lily?

Lily: I kind of disagree on that, because the whole like—

Me: [quieting down some side talk] Listen please.

Lily: Almost half of the book he talks about like how he wants to fight for the Negro race and everything, and—right? It’s just at the very end of it he kind of gave up on it. But in the middle and in the beginning he identifies as a Negro, and he wants to better their lives and do great things for them, and I don’t understand why people are telling—say that he’s White. Because he kinda—he in some ways, in aspects, yes, he has some characteristics that you can identify him as White, but the whole—almost all of [what] this book talks about is him being Black. And he wants—he talks to a lot of—he interacts with a lot of Black people, and he wants to enforce that he is this kind of race. And [with great confidence] that’s what I believe, and I don’t care what people say. [laugher from some around her]

Me: I’m so glad you’re so passionate about it. In fact—and I don’t think you’re wrong. I’ll comment in a minute. Let me get some other people. Frazier?

Nyah: [interjecting] Pick Gina!64

Frazier: He talks about that a lot, but I think it’s more like he’s trying to understand it, and that’s why there’s so much in this book dedicated to talking to other people about race and stuff in their culture. But I think he’s trying to understand it, but at the end he realizes that he’s—he’s kind of grounded, you know, in his White—I don’t know, maybe he’s—

Me: So there’s a struggle between—

Frazier: There’s a struggle—65

64 White, female student

65 Frazier seems to be responding most directly to Lily’s argument regarding the number of discussions the narrator has with various individuals about race relations and ‘the race question’. For Lily, reading these moments indicates an intention on Johnson’s part to use those discussions as a method of supporting the ways in which his narrator “identifies as a Negro” and seeks to improve the lives of African Americans and “do great things for them.”
Me: —his goals as a person of color who is part of—that is part of him—and the incredible goals that he has—like Lily pointed out—to really do great work and to do this kind of stuff, and at the other end pulling at him is this desire to make a better life for himself—in the sense that what Nyah pointed out—about the fact that, unfortunately, identifying with that White part of him will give him some kind of power in society. So, you know, I think, you know, Lily is opening this up to maybe, you know, pointing to the fact that this is a really—that the Blackness is a really important part of his life. But you know, I think that the other comments are equally valid in the sense that, I think, what you’re all coming together to figure—or to point to is that struggle, in a sense. Gina?

Gina: This might not make sense, but like I hate things like this. Because not even just—Like this guy is equally as White as he is Black. By like—technically he is 50% White and 50% Black. So, this entire book is so like—Maybe cause I’m not biracial, I don’t understand as well as someone who is, but like I feel like so many people today and, you know, back then like if they’re biracial, they’re either Black or White, which isn’t—isn’t like—they identify themselves as either Black or White. Like a lot of sports players who are “mixed” usually say, “Oh, I’m Black” or “Oh, I’m White.” You know what I mean? When like—it’s I

As Frazier’s diction reveals, he views these moments more as indicators of a struggle characterized more by the narrator’s attempt to understand how race functions within society rather than as a move towards embracing his Black side and engaging in activism. He frames the narrator’s tendency towards ultimately identifying as a White man in the north, saying that “in the end he realizes that he’s— he’s kind of grounded [emphasis added].” In presenting Whiteness as a point of ‘realization’, Frazier speaks to and legitimizes the perspective that Nyah and Amir have been advancing regarding the power ascribed to the lightness in hue of one’s skin tone.

With regard to Frazier’s use of the term “grounded”, it might be valuable to consider two definitions for that term that serve to communicate the complete nature of the narrator’s positioning. Not only might we take Frazier to mean that the narrator ultimately takes a practical and sensible “grounded” approach to his racial identification by choosing to live as a White man in the north, we might consider the term’s restrictive definition, which would position the choice the narrator makes as a function of prohibition and prevention towards Blackness, in that his ability to seek a non-White identity for himself has been “grounded” by societal power structures that restrict that choice to the point of eliminate it as a possibility. If we look not only to the verbal messaging around Blackness that pervades the many conversations the narrator has with others throughout the novel but also at the impact that witnessing the horrors of a lynching has on him, it’s likely that both senses of the term “grounded” apply.
think—it’s just you should—it’s not, you’re not, you’re not are—you’re not just are—

As Gina indicates about midway through her comment, she does not identify as being of biracial heritage. Knowing Gina and her family, she would most likely describe as a White female of Italian American ancestry. Her choice to enter the conversation at this point and to occupy the stance that she does as it continues forward speaks, I think, to the outspoken comportment she has taken in past classroom conversations. Most of the White students, with the exception of Frazier, did not attempt to inject themselves into this conversation.

Gina’s words here seem to indicate a fairly deep frustration not only with the conversation around racial and ethnic identity but with the narrator’s deliberation over his identity that forms the centerpiece of Johnson’s novel. She attempts to take an egalitarian position towards biracial identity by questioning the whole premise of the struggle as being beneath reason. She argues that clearly individuals do not and should not have to choose one racial or ethnic marker over another since the biological breakdown is clear. This is captured in her use of diction like “this guy is equally as White as he is Black” and words and phrases like “isn’t”, “you should”, and “you’re not” as discourse fragments that indicate a perspective that there exists some essential calculation that can be made and that should inform an individual’s identity.

The complicatedness of Gina’s comments given her positioning as White female cannot be understated. Probably the most significant of these shows that she simply is not yet there in terms of reckoning with the notion that racial and ethnic identification is not a matter of biological factors that can be calculated at attributed to an individual. In her desire to broker accord—to silence contention—she is, as Markus and Moya (2010) describe, “doing race” by crafting speech that blends two of the eight kinds of conversations and their attendant assumptions about race and ethnicity that “people have with one another as they make sense of events in which race and ethnicity figure prominently” (p. 5). As I state above, the first of those supports the narrative that forwards the biologizing of race as a set of specific, inherited characteristics. The second draws upon the instantiated tenets of individualism that undergird Western culture and that fail to recognize that “identities are more than just labels”; that they are “highly mutable […]and can be shuffled by context and circumstance” (p. 50). Gina’s simplistic calculation for the narrator’s racial identity and her insistence that we should—to remove the contentious aspects of racial and ethnic identification and settle the issue once and for all—simply attend to some independent rendering of identity like the one she has proposed here rather recognize that racial identity is an interdependent construction draws influence from both of those cultural assumptions.
Amir: You are! It is a law in America! That’s—

Me: [trying to get students to speak in turn] Shhh shhh shhh. Wait. Let’s—let’s keep this—

Amir: If you are a percent Black, then you are Black! 67

Me: Let’s keep this—

Gina: [to me] You know what I’m saying?

Me: Yes, I do. So, what I—what I would say is maybe we want to think about why that is.

[classroom phone rings] If you’re noticing that is the case—as someone like me—like many people who are not of biracial identity but maybe notice that there’s some tendency to go one way or the other. Hold on. [answers phone; conversation between students continues in the background]

Nyah: Kiera, what are you? Irish?

Having said this, a grave mistake here would be to demonize Gina in this regard. First, and to her credit, she hedges considerably in her remarks by opening her statement with “This might not make sense” and then noting “Maybe cause I’m not biracial, I don’t understand as well as someone who is”. Clearly, Gina recognizes that she’s trying to figure this out just like everyone else in the class. Second, and to that point, without students like Gina who are willing to put themselves out there and engage in these difficult conversations, the classroom would be mired in actual silence around these issues. Students like Gina remind all of us of how much we have yet to learn about how to understand race and ethnicity. Amir’s response to Gina will provide a starting point for that deliberation.

67 Amir’s response to Gina seems to resonate to some extent with my reading of the restrictive aspect of Frazier’s use of the term “grounded” in that it speaks to the very real existence of a power structure through which persons living in America are ascribed discrete labels in terms of their race or ethnicity by others regardless of how those individuals might self-identify. Through his insistence that this labeling process constitutes “a law in America”, Amir demands that we consider that while there may not be any formal legislation on the books that dictates a calculation for an individual’s racial identification, there exists a kind of de facto, legalistic standard for the practice of racial and ethnic identification that governs, as law would, the lives of citizens. Whether or not he intends to do so, by responding directly to Gina’s comment that “technically [the narrator] is 50% White and 50% Black” by casting it as a politically driven calculation whereby “If you are a percent Black, then you are Black”, Amir constructs an argument that reveals just how fallacious any attempt to ascribe biological percentages to a person’s racial identity.
Kiera: I’m Irish. Polish.

Me: [returning to conversation after passing on an announcement to students to visit the guidance counselor] Maybe—so my idea about that is—Is there something that society does to discourage people from acknowledging that we are both and not just one or the other? I don’t know it’s just a question.

Gina: But don’t you think that it’s like—

Amir: [to Gina] No!

Gina: —it’s so like unnecessary. You know what I’m saying? Like you’re both. You’re Black and you’re White. You don’t have to—

Nyah: What you call Obama?

Me: Okay, hold on. Shh shh.


Nyah: Wait, wait!

Gina: Obama was raised by a White woman.

Nyah: [turning to the class] What do we call Obama? [Several students start to speak over one another.]

Amir: [to Gina] Yeah, but [if] he never said his mom was White, what would you have thought he was? Halle Berry never—[he is drowned out by an increasing number of students

68 Again, drawing on the notion that race is an inherent human characteristic, Gina’s comments here seem directed as an attempt at support the onus of the individual to choose to honor the biological breakdown of his or her own racial identity. This is captured with poignancy in her imperative, “You don’t have to choose”. In other words, ‘It’s already been chosen for you, so embrace it.’ As Nyah will go on to argue through the example she raises of Barack Obama and our identification of him not as the first “biracial” president but as the first Black president, Gina is simultaneously correct and incorrect. Biology has not done the choosing, society has.

69 This is admittedly hard to believe, and listening to Gina’s tone, you can sense that she is attempting to backpedal. Nyah immediately calls her on this.
speaking over one another]

Me: All right, shhhh, one at a time, please. One at a time. Nyah, what were your comments going to be before you were interrupted?

Gina: [to another student] Shhhh! It doesn’t matter.

Kiera: It’s always a race war. It’s always a race war with this class! 70

Me: This is not—shhhh [trying to quiet some overlapping student voices; some students can be heard commenting that this has turned into an intense discussion; in acknowledgment of those comments, I reply] That’s good, there’s nothing wrong with that. As long as—listen, listen—there is nothing wrong with having these kinds of discussions. These are the kinds of discussions that we should have, right?

Nyah: [in agreement] I’m just saying!

Me: As long as they’re done in a respectful manner, okay? [student crosstalk begins to come down in volume] Go ahead, Nyah.


Me: Well, you can’t tell her what she would say…

Nyah: [getting an answer from Nora that can’t be heard on the recording] Okay, you’d say

70 Gina’s stance, with the assistance of Kiera, has now shifted to a blend of two additional conversations that Markus and Moya (2010) identify in their framework, namely, that “We’re beyond race” and that “Racial diversity is killing us” (pp. 7-8). Embedded within both lies an ultimate denial of the importance of conversations around what it means for us to “do” race, an insistence that we should just move on and save ourselves the trouble of working though these issues, and more disturbingly, the notion that having critical conversations about race and ethnicity do more harm than good. As my response to their comments indicates, I was not going to let the conversation end on that note.

71 It may be significant that Nyah provides a specific timeframe of “two weeks ago” as a premise to her question. Does her doing so indicate that she feels as though things have changed given our work in this class around race? Are there other reasons/factors that influence the framing of her question in this way?
Black or White? Okay, what would you say, Pearl?

Pearl: He’s Black and White. He was raised by his White grandmother—

Nyah: [querying one student after another] So, would you say Black? Would you say Black?

Me: Nyah—Nyah. [again the class erupts in crosstalk] So I think the point—sbbbb. I think the point Nyah is trying to make. [letting the conversation die down] Sbbbb.

Nyah: What was Obama? The first what president?

Aria: Black.

Kiera: Black president.

Me: Well, we do describe him as being the first Black president. Yes, absolutely.

Gina: Yeah, because he’s the first Black president—president who has Black in him.

Nyah: I’m just saying—this just what I’m saying and then—

Me: Can I—?

Nyah: I'll be quiet. [pauses] We go with the minority.

Me: I know what you’re saying—I think that—

Nyah: It’s whatever you’re mixed with—whatever you’re mixed with, the minority is always what you go with. Whatever!

Me: I think that’s a valid point! I think that is a valid point.

Nyah: [over a great deal of crosstalk] Why are we like, “Oh, you’re Black?” Cause we mixed?

Me: That’s absolutely is a valid point. [waiting for crosstalk to dissipate] Okay. Sbbbbbbb. Settle down for a second.

Gina: [with an exasperated tone] Ohhh man!

Me: Let’s do this in an orderly way. Okay? So, this is what I’m hearing so far before I get to

72 Pearl would most likely identify as female and of White, Western European ancestry.
the three people with their hands up. [acknowledging those students] I will, okay? What I’m hearing so far is a kind of acknowledgment that there’s something about society that has us identify people as one or the other, and very often, it’s based on something that is very non-definite about someone’s skin color. But if we feel as though their skin is of a certain hue, there’s some kind of threshold where we automatically say, ‘That person is now Black.’

Amir: Yes!

Me: Okay. What Gina’s—

Nyah: Are you talking about—what type of society? I mean you’re just saying a society in general?

Me: Let’s say American society.

Nyah: The girls I know love to say they’re mixed. Cause that’s a part of the [inaudible]

Me: Well, then maybe—maybe it’s—maybe mainstream society? Is that more accurate?

Owen: Yeah.

Kiera: Yeah.

Aria: Yeah.

Me: Maybe.

Nyah: Yeah, I guess so. That’s correct.

Me: Maybe White society? [A male voice says, “Black.”] 73 I don’t know. Alright, but there’s also another perspective here. That there’s something—there’s a problem with, potentially, with—that if people are noticing that—that biracial identification isn’t happening in the sense of “I am of a biracial background” rather than “I am—either White or Black.” And the question is—Where is that coming from? Maybe [asking that question] is going to be a more productive way rather than just trying to poll people about “Do you think this person’s White or Black?” Okay? Because that’s just reinforcing, you know, whatever that problematic aspect potentially is in society. All right. Let me get Amir, and then Pearl, and the Frazier. Go ahead, Amir.

73 This unidentified speaker seems to emphasize Johnson’s point discussed earlier regarding the ways in which privileging and marginalizing persons based on skin tone operates within non-White or “Black” communities as well.
Amir: All right, if Obama never once said his mother was White, and you just looked at him—just like you was saying—a specific hue, or whatever—

Me: [tentatively] Right…

Amir: You would have automatically thought, “Oh, this guy is Black.” [A male voice says from the back of the room says, “That’s what I’m saying.”] If Halle Berry—

Me: Why?

Amir: Because he looked it.

Me: So, it’s—

Gina: That’s not what I’m saying.

Me: [to Gina] I know, I know. [to Amir] Okay.

Amir: He got the nose, he got the facial features—[he is drowned out by another round of crosstalk; Gina asks to add something]

Me: Shhh. You can in a second. We’re going one by one here.

Amir: All right? All right? He got his skin.

Me: Yes.

Amir: You would have thought he was Black.

Me: Okay.

Amir: Halle Berry has never said she was—

Me: I know, but these hypotheticals aren’t getting us anywhere. Okay? We get the point—we get the point.

Gina: I’m not saying like—

Amir: [to Gina] You say that they should acknowledge both sides, but why should they have to? Why?

Gina: It’s not about how you look.

Amir: [Lily tries to add something, and Amir raises his voice to her.] I’m trying to SPEAK, Lily! Can I SPEAK? [A few people around him say, “Oooo” in disapproval.]
Gina: [in response to his tone toward Lily] Oh my god!

Amir: Let her speak in my turn? [as if to caution me not to do so] It’s my turn!

Nyah: It is his turn.

Amir: They don’t have to acknowledge both sides if they don’t want to!

Lily: That’s racist! 74

Gina: [to Amir] But why wouldn’t they—why—? 75

74 I’ve read and re-read the section of the transcript that follows many times to try to discern how the dialogue devolved to a shouting match, and after much deliberation, I’ve landed on the inciting issue as most likely residing in Amir’s repeated use of the vague pronoun “they”, as in his question, “why should they have to” (in his words) “acknowledge both sides?” Amir seems to mean that the individuals themselves should not have to acknowledge aspects of their racial or ethnic identities, even if an identity has been attributed to them. Basically, it is the individual should have the ultimate choice over whether they want to identify in the ways that society has framed. Gina seems to pick up on Amir’s reasoning and voices her disagreement through her reply, “It’s not about how you look.”

However, because Amir (and others) have spent the last few turns of speech focused on the ways in which persons of color are commonly identified by their complexion rather than by their ancestry, it may be that Lily reads his words as meaning that it is fine for others not to acknowledge the biracial identity of an individual. Thus, Lily resorts to labeling his question as “racist”. If so, Amir’s response here that an individual should not have to acknowledge more than a single racial identity if “they” choose not to do so might not have resulted in the response that it received from Lily had the “they” in that statement been clarified. And yet, in combination with his earlier statement that it is tantamount to law in America that individuals must choose a primary racial identity for themselves since it has already been chosen for them by virtue of their skin, this statement may still have been construed as highly problematic and perhaps racist.

As the facilitator of this conversation, my takeaway is that I could have done a better job of slowing down the conversation and requiring that Amir clarify his terms. The pace of the conversation without a doubt made this very difficult to do so. I recognize that the transcript as I’ve formatted it does not convey the speed of the dialogue. As a teaching artifact that can be read an analyzed, this moment of talk serves as an ongoing reminder of how attentive we must be towards helping students frame their arguments and interpretations with the greatest possible clarity.

75 Here, Gina’s tone conveys a genuine sense of misunderstanding.
Me: We won’t have future—excuse me! I will negate turns to speak if you are rude to each other. [to Amir] And that includes you.

Amir: Well I wasn’t being rude until Lily had to hop in it! [in a playfully angry tone] Thanks, Lily!

Lily: [to Amir, and with an unrelenting seriousness] I really don’t think you should give that tone to me, cause I didn’t—[people around her erupt in agreement]

Me: This is true. Amir—

Amir: [over a great deal of crosstalk and argument between class members] It was my turn to speak!

Me: Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me. [Some members of the class shush others until the crosstalk comes down in volume.] Now, [pauses] I’m having these conversations with you cause I’m assuming a level of maturity.

Nyah: Not when we got race—

Me: Well, I think we need to get there. I mean we need to get there.

Amir: It’s—it’s just—

Me: Everyone—everyone needs to stop talking over everyone else. Okay? Everyone does. Amir, your point is well taken. Okay?

Amir: The extreme factor—

Me: Your point is well taken. The hypotheticals about seeing people is just reinforcing the point that’s already been made: that there are some stereotypes that people have when looking at each other that have us identify something essential about that person’s race that we can’t possibly identify just by looking at them. I think the better point that you [indicating Amir] made somewhere [with a tone intended to lighten the mood] in that craziness that just happened. [laughter from class] Okay? Was that it should be up to the person to self-identify. The question—the better question is how does Barack Obama or Halle Berry self-identify? And what can we do as a society to stop placing those labels on people and letting those people identify their own identities and put those as what should be understood about who they are. The question that Gina raised, I think, is that sometimes the way people identify

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76 Here he seems to mean the extreme factors involved in having a discussion on race.
themselves—or maybe every time or all the time the way they identify themselves—has to do with the way society has already set up those rules for how we are identified. So, whether or not you choose “White” or “Black” is sometimes because society asks you to choose one or the other. Okay? And maybe there’s something that’s problematic about that. Before we leave, I want to get the last two comments. Go ahead, Pearl.

Pearl: [waiving off the invitation to speak] No, I was just— [indicating the area where the argument occurred]

Me: Ahh, okay, you were just trying to mediate there, okay. Frazier? [He shakes his head.] You’re good? Lily, did you want to add something?

Lily: No.

Me: Listen, you’re all doing really good work here.

Amir: It’s the truth!

Me: Listen, you’re all doing excellent work here! These are no easy things to work through, all right? But we need to be respectful when we’re doing this. 77 [The period bell rings.]

77 Beginning with Amir’s outburst towards Lily and continuing through until the end of the class period, the climax and resolution (or not) of this conversation suggests some important takeaways terms of its implications for engaging in critical discourse over a concept like race. First, it further emphasizes what we already know to be true about the risks associated with having these difficult conversations, including the potential for volatility. This is especially true when students speak with openness and honesty about perspectives they hold on a topic like racial identity, one that is influenced by their own lives and experiences and by the positions they hold regarding what it means to name or to be named in terms of one’s race or ethnicity. Second, this dialogue captures some of the strategies that students use both individually and through alliances with others—often along racial and ethnic lines—to try to negotiate those difficult moments and to find ways to voice what they find to be offensive towards themselves and towards others in terms of comments made by peers.
Across the year, Lily and Amir often took opposing positions during classroom debates, and it isn’t surprising that in an intense moment such as this one, the two would find themselves in direct conflict with one another. Early on in this class period—prior to the portion that appears in this transcript—Lily took an opposing stance towards arguments by some members of the class that the narrator favors seeking a White identity for himself as function of the ways in which Whiteness has been framed as being superior to Blackness. At the time, Amir was very much in support of that argument. As the conversation progressed it was increasingly marked by series of interjections, interruptions, and crosstalk, and it seems that perhaps Amir’s lashing out at Lily when he did probably had as much or more to do with his passion over his side of an argument being validated and heard more than it did with being interrupted specifically by Lily. My sense is also that Amir may feel threatened at times by the analytic quality of Lily’s contributions.

Lily’s response to Amir that she would not allow him to take the tone that he did with her speaks to her commitment to being heard and respected and an insistence that she too will not be silenced. Amir’s mockingly playful (but aggressive) tone in his response to her characterizes well the stance he takes towards his relationship towards Lily that I have come to know as their teacher, namely that Amir enjoys the opportunity to mount a contradictory stance towards any argument Lily puts forth and often does so with the intention of provoking her. Lily’s silence as the discussion comes to a close indicates something that I have come to know about her stance towards these interactions with Amir. While Amir’s tone often attempts to trivialize these exchanges, Lily takes these arguments very seriously and is more likely to need some time to process the intensity of the moment rather than to perpetuate the debate when it reaches levels like it has here.

Negotiating a relationship like the one between these two students as a teacher who aims to facilitate difficult conversations and who anticipates becoming the mediator of heated debates like these raises some important questions: How do we foster respect for all actors during these conversations? What steps can we take to value the ideas being expressed, even when they may be viewed by discussants (including ourselves) as inflammatory or offensive? How do we protect discussants who may feel threatened or at risk? How do we negotiate the interpersonal relationships between discussants that are brought to bear during these discussions?
Coda: The Voices of Two Interconnected Narratives

I take as a working definition of complacency one that frames it as existence within a state of self-satisfaction, a state that is accompanied by a lack of awareness of actual dangers or deficiencies. Embedded within this definition are two interconnected components: a sense of pride in one’s current state and a blindness towards criticality. A concise glossing of resistance defines it as a refusal to accept or comply. This definition carries a remarkably powerful subtext that calls to mind a broad history of activism rooted in countless manifestations of small and great, public and private moves and movements aimed at advancing peace, equity, and social justice. In his review of how resistance has been taken up as a concept in the social sciences, and in particular in the context of research on social work, Glazer (2018) formulates two questions useful in guiding an analysis of how resistance operates in practice: What power is being expressed and contested? and What is the idea(l) being asserted by such opposition? (p. 64). Taken together and looking to the discourse that emerged during the two discussions I’ve presented in this chapter, a brief analysis of how complacency and resistance operate as paired, antipodal concepts—not as binaries, but as competing forces—can provide some takeaways for making sense of the voices that emerge in the discourse of these classroom conversation. The critical narrative I’ve attempted to craft in this chapter around the spoken discourse that emerged from our readings of Johnson’ Autobiography reveals three major projects (voices) operating in my teaching, each of which bear positive potential for supporting the goals of critical pedagogy as well as problematic aspects that must be recognized and accounted for.

The first of these projects suggests the vital role that critical reflection on practice plays in the ongoing work required for moving from a teacherly stance of complacency to
one of resistance. The conditions under which I provided historical misinformation to students during our mid-novel discussion communicates to the extent to which pride and self-assurance in my own intellectual abilities and in the base of knowledge that I brought to my teaching served, in that moment, to occlude my ability to perceive aspects of my discourse that subvert the ideological orientations that I hold towards teaching. Resistance against that loss of perspective requires interrogation and contestation of the sources of the power that drive that blindness towards criticality. For me, I identify a primary source as residing in the privilege that has traditionally been afforded to me by my status as a White, heterosexual, male, who has grown up in America as a native speaker of English and holds advanced degrees in language and literacy education. These aspects of my identity have afforded me the luxury of always being heard and of having my ideas continually legitimized by others. This is particularly true of the dynamic that exists between me and my students, who are not only younger and positioned at more foundational levels in their educational paths, but who also bear diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, economic, and gendered histories and identities, many of which have been marginalized across time and place by persons just like me. No orientation towards critical pedagogy, no education or level of ‘woke-ness’ can negate that reality.

Looking to that moment and to my failure to account for my powerful positioning in the classroom, it seems that one approach to enacting resistance—to the extent that it is possible—against further re-inscription of that legacy of colonization requires ongoing, rigorous attention and accountability to discourse I create. For the professional and student writers, artists, and speakers whose words and ideas have supported this research, creating dangerously has manifested itself in the development of voices that embody activist,
transgressive agendas. These take on the forms of border-crossings, line-steppings, refusals, rebukes, and defiant acts that resist the various racist, sexist, isolationist, hegemonic, and de-humanizing narratives that operate in their personal and professional lives. For me, the danger of creation lies in the risk of crafting a discourse that supports all of the above, even while attempting to speak and write in ways that oppose them. However, as the data from this study has affirmed and re-affirmed, great danger also lies in silence. My hope is that the form of critical narrative that this dissertation has taken might become—might be taken up as an instance of teacher research practice that embodies a voice of attention and accountability, and as such, a form of resistance to complacency.

The second project, or voice, that emerges from these discussions is embodied in my methodology as a teacher and researcher. Both conversations that appear in this chapter are driven by cycles of questions aimed at engaging students in critical analyses not only of Johnson’s text but also of the contexts for the authoring of his novel and for students’ reading of it. While the transcript of our mid-novel conversation showed a clear imbalance favoring teacher voice over student voice and was often marked by open questions that I posed but that went unanswered, what can be read in that transcript is the process I bring to guiding students in approaching analyses aimed at supporting depth and criticality. Sometimes, a class session needs to fall more heavily on the direct instruction side of teacherly practice, and I argue that the guidance conveyed through my spoken discourse communicates to my students a stance that values inquiry and the need to ground analysis on in-depth investigations into whatever text we are engaged in reading, whether it be a novel, a poem, or the transcript of a classroom discussion. In taking this approach towards reading, the message I intend to send to students is one that encourages them to resist academic
complacency and lassitude, to adopt those critical practices needed to accurately assess the limits of what they already know, and to investigate funds of knowledge that will help them to support their individual capacities. And equally important to embracing this stance is the acknowledgment that I am working towards those same goals. The same critical practices that I aim to instill in my students will assist me in guarding against a pitfall such as that which prevented me from acknowledging where my knowledge fell short.

This stance and its teaching practices also bear relevance in their application to my work as a researcher, which runs parallel my teaching practice. My approach to composing the summary of the second half of Johnson’s novel, which provides a segue between the two class discussions that appear in this chapter, was intended to serve two functional purposes: first, to carry my readers through from the first conversation to the next, and second, to model how my approach to constructing my analysis and discussion of these conversations is embodied in my own reading and writing. The passages and quotations drawn from Johnson’s novel that I’ve integrated into that retelling have been chosen with an eye towards forwarding the larger trajectory of my own research argument while supporting the critical narrative of spoken discourse that emerged from my students’ readings of his Autobiography. My reading of the focus, for instance, that students placed in their capstone conversation on the ways in which society defines race and racial identification very much influenced my re-reading of Johnson’s novel and revealed what I came to identify as the ‘message in blood’ that operates as a motif across his Autobiography. Thus, in constructing a critical narrative that synthesizes data drawn from the discursive text and the literary text, I apply the same methodology for the development of academic argument as that which I encourage students to employ when crafting their own analyses. The teacher researcher voice at the heart of this
second major project is one that honors inquiry and cycles of questioning, engagement in
critical scholarship, and approaches to academic rigor that value close readings of texts and
iterative compositional practices.

The third project emerges from students’ deliberations over issues tied to the
construction of racial and ethnic identity captured that developed through our capstone
discussion of Johnson. The move to counter complacency that drove students towards
resistance in that dialogue ties intimately to the struggle that Johnson’s narrator undergoes
throughout the novel as he reckons with the ways in which society has framed his identity as
person of biracial ancestry and as he seeks to define his identity for himself. In a way, their
voiced interactions comprise a discursive text analogous to the critical dialogue written into
Johnson’s narrative. Looking to their words and using as a guide Markus and Moya’s (2010)
concept of “doing race” and the typological framework of “conversations” that they present
for understanding how individuals “make sense of events in which race and ethnicity figure
prominently” (p. 6), we can see in microcosm a series of critical moments that capture how
broader problematic conversations governing the framing of race in America are taken up in
the interactions that occur between and among these high school students. Through these
critical encounters, which stemmed from their reading of literature that centered on a critical
exploration of race, racial identity, and race relations in America, we are also able to detect
the ways in which these student actors, engaged in deliberations over these issues, formed,
dissolved, and re-configured alliances.

The most apparent of these emerge as expressions of solidarity formed or
maintained through what appear to be race-based alliances, as with Nyah and Amir and with
Gina and Kiera. But for a student like Gina, whose journey through this discussion seems to
be very much about coming to terms with how her understandings (and misunderstandings) about racial and ethnic identity were being met with opposition, this critical encounter appears to have constituted a point of inflection that shifted her trajectory from a place of complacency—of self-assurance in her understanding of racial identity and identification—towards one of inquiry. We see this best, perhaps, in her final utterance to Amir (“But why wouldn’t they—why—?”), in which she appears to express genuine consternation as to why an individual would not want to conceive of his race in the way that aligns with her own ‘knowledge’ regarding the concept of race that she has taken as fact. For Gina, resistance emerged not as an act initiated of her own accord, but as an imposition—the countering of a stance by another force—that was born of the dissonance generated through critical dialogue. This sense of resistance is fundamental to understanding one aspect of its essence.

At the outset of this section, I framed complacency and resistance as antipodal, but not binary, concepts. Conceiving of them in this way positions them as polar forces that resist each other but that create an overlapping field of play within which we as humans operate. Through the influence of complacency, we are continually lured into the comfort and sure-footed self-assurance and self-satisfaction of the knowledge that we are certain possess about ourselves, about others, and about the way the world ‘works’. In our complacency, we abandon a worldview that sees knowledge as provisional, as part of a progressive narrative of empirical understanding that undergoes continuous change. Fortunately, the world does not support such a utopic stance towards existence, and we are continuously presented with encounters that jar and disrupt the many certainties that we claim for ourselves. Perhaps, for instance, we get caught up the cultural currents of individualism that seem so promising given the narratives they offer about the ability for ‘those people’ to pull themselves up by
their bootstraps—narratives that let those of us in positions of privilege off the hook. And perhaps it is only when we are hit with resistance to that certainty—perhaps with education that unmasks the lie, perhaps with circumstances that provide through experience the smallest taste of the structural inequalities that disenfranchise so many of ‘those people’—perhaps it is then that we can begin to realize that interdependence and recognition of the hard truths that come with embracing difference, not independence and insentient denial of the truths spoken by others—of their voices, provides the path forward for human progress. For, as Audrey Lorde writes,

difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of difference strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively ‘be’ in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

Within the interdependence of mutual (non-dominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged. (2003, p. 26)
CHAPTER 9 – REFLECTIONS: “PEDAGOGY AS TEXT”

The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is only found in the plentitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce.

Paulo Freire

I encountered the above quotation from Freire as I was completing revisions on the final data chapter for this study and re-reading the first chapter of his Pedagogy of the Oppressed as a meditation on critical praxis. When I happened upon this passage, it resonated with me because in it, Freire brings together the concepts of voice, solidarity, and resistance that I identify as central foci guiding this dissertation and incorporates the three into a concise argument for what must be done to move from oppression towards humanization. When considered in the context of our work in education, Freire’s description of the steps necessary for the oppressor to become solidary with the oppressed captures the same work that teachers must undertake as we progress towards enacting critical pedagogy. Drawing such an analogy, which frames the teacher as oppressor and students as the oppressed, may seem extreme. However, we can conceive of how the role of oppressor can apply to many of us in differing ways if we consider the varied forms of power we may be afforded by aspects of our identity and/or by the positions of authority and privilege that we hold and if we acknowledge that many of our students undergo equally varied forms of oppression every day and perhaps too often at our hands. Taking Freire’s words to heart, this research will bear its greatest value in the extent to which it presents an argument for an approach to
critical pedagogy that is a) grounded in advancing the principles of justice, b) oriented towards facilitating and honoring the voices of those who have been and continue to be marginalized and oppressed, and c) directed toward challenging power structures that delegitimize, disenfranchise, and dehumanize others. This research will also find value in the extent to which it resists hypocritical displays of virtue and sentimentality and communicates, instead, an “act of love” performed through a narrative of critical praxis, a narrative that draws upon multiple discourses, textual and oral, to affirm the power that students and teachers possess, as practitioners, to advance society further towards democratic freedom. The critical reader of it will be the ultimate judge of its merit in that regard.

I consider as a useful model for my own reading of this research and my reflection on its findings and contributions Macaluso’s (2016) framework of the pedagogy-as-text. Conceiving of the ideologies, methodologies, and actions that comprise teaching practice as a “non-print-based text” that can be read and interpreted (p. 16) resonates with my own approach to making sense of the potential value of this critical narrative. Blending analyses of classroom discourse with close readings of the core literary texts authored by Danticat, Kincaid, and Johnson that supported the generation of that talk and writing, the write-up of this study stands as a third “text”, one that communicates a research story substantively

78 In Macaluso’s review of literature, he focuses on a study conducted by Juzwik and Sherry (2007) that bears similarities to mine in that it presents an analysis of classroom discourse that considers the relationship between the written literary texts that students read and the discursive text of the classroom that emerged in response to those texts.
hybrid in nature. A core pedagogical contribution that this study offers rests within that hybridity, which captures a series of close readings very much in the spirit of Freire: readings of texts, readings of the classroom, and readings of the world. The intersection and interplay of these readings speak to the importance of facilitating deep discussion and writing on critical societal issues and examining that discourse through an inquiry stance. As Gerald Campano offered in his discussion of my work with me and with my research committee, our sense and intention is that practitioner inquiries such as this one will offer rich descriptions of the kind of “rigorously intellectual curriculum and teaching that all children deserve.” My hope is that this dissertation demonstrates the power of that kind of pedagogy and values the complex intellectual work of teaching and of teacher research in the field of critical literacy.

In the remainder of this chapter, I attempt a final reflection on this hybrid research text through a capstone essay guided by a series of questions and responses. Across the five data chapters that comprise the main body of this work there emerge what I consider to be a collection of in-process “findings”, but there also arise various questions. To consider what knowledge about literacy teaching and learning this research might provide, I look back to those emergent questions and present them and responses to them. The overarching research questions that I posed at the outset of my study act as guideposts to structure this critical reflection.

Questions and Responses

Research Question 1: How can classroom discourse that focuses on issues related to race, gender, social class, and other cultural, historical, and societal factors contribute to a teacher’s ability a) to understand how adolescents’ identities and lived experiences contribute to the teaching and learning that occurs in a language and
literacy classroom and b) to develop responsive curricular choices that support students’ academic interests and proclivities while meeting the educational goals set forth at the state and district levels?

The classroom discourse that developed from our readings of Danticat, Kincaid, and Johnson reveals the vital role that literature focusing on critical societal issues can play as a starting point for understanding more about our students’ and our own identities. A major focus of that writing and talk drew upon the intersectional nature of the self. It communicates the value of hosting literature-based discussions that explicitly consider how race, class, power, and gender converge as social and cultural mediators that impact our everyday lives and work, our readings of our own and others’ histories and identities, and our ways of conceptualizing and constructing our individual and communal futures. In terms of my analysis of that classroom discourse, the emergent thematic pairings of silence and voice, individuality and solidarity, and complacency and resistance evidence how our readings led us to new understandings and fresh lines of inquiry regarding the intersecting spheres of school, home, and society. An early set of questions that I posed when framing this dissertation asked, “How have/are my students being taught to purify, suppress, or altogether erase the truths of their identities? How can I develop a richly articulated understanding of how they frame their own identities?” 79 Instances of spoken and written discourse, including Nyah’s struggle over how to make sense of being required to read texts at the middle and high school levels that failed to represent her cultural and racial identity 80 and Isa’s prose poem

79 See Chapter 2, “Transcending Textbook Multiculturalism”.
80 See Chapter 4, “Readers Respond”
that chronicled a deeply troubling relationship with a stepfather whose rhetoric surrounding her identity served to limit her voice and degrade her identity, capture the kinds of struggles that many students face every day. For me, developing a “richly articulated understanding” of how Isa, Nyah, and the many other students who appear in this research have framed those struggles around identity has been about employing practitioner inquiry methodologies that facilitate close readings of the speech and writing they create.

An argument and a finding that pervades this research and that I’ve voiced at multiple points throughout communicates to the value that engaging in systematic inquiries into teaching and learning can have for the professional development of literacy educators. The identity work in which the student participants in this practitioner inquiry engaged speaks to the importance first, that teachers develop approaches for getting to know the individuals who come together in our classrooms early on in our time with them, second, that we sustain and broaden those understandings as we progress through the academic year, and third, that we adapt curricula along the way in response to what they tell us. What this will look like is highly context-dependent and relies upon the creativity and individual talents and capacities that teachers bring to the classroom. But the bottom line is that we need to get there, and the critical student discourse at the center of this study indicates that a starting point must involve crafting a curriculum that takes as its primary goal facilitation of opportunities for students to create dangerously and critically through writing and talk.

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81 See Chapter 7, “‘Well-Behaved’ Child”
My partner, who is also a teacher and who brings to her work a dedication to getting to know her students that I deeply admire, once commented that a single-sentence summation of one of the findings from this study could read, “Students feel silenced because adults don’t listen to them.” While we laughed at its simplicity and circularity, analyses of my students’ and my own discourse speak to the truth this statement bears. A premise that underpins this research argues that we must listen more closely to the students we teach, and as such, it is not surprising that a framework around voice—one that focuses on understanding the passions that drive the creation of discourse and the ingenuity of the compositional techniques speakers and writers use to communicate their voices—developed organically for me from my readings and interpretations of the data set for this practitioner inquiry.

But attending more closely to our students’ words requires that we help create the conditions that support the generation of critical discourse. Another early set of questions that I posed when framing this study asked, “What work have I done towards challenging the ways in which dominant discourses can undermine the individual experiences of teachers and students? How can I develop approaches to multicultural education that critically examine textbook constructions of linguistic and cultural identity? What does this look like in terms of reading, writing, and assessment?”82 This study shows that for me, attempting to challenge those dominant discourses has involved at least two components: 1) the selection and framing of texts and 2) critical reflection on student discourse. Clearly, my choice to

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82 See Chapter 2, “Enacting a Pedagogy of Change”
include novels like Danticat’s *Create Dangerously* and Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* were fundamental to meeting this challenge. However, the story of this research communicates the important role that the questions I posed to frame those readings and the ways in which I interacted with students around the emergent questions that those texts raised for them were what deepened our interpretations of those works in generative and complicated ways. Exploring a question like “To whom is Danticat writing? For whom does she write?” led Frazier and Amir to deliberate over Danticat’s complicated positioning as an author and member of the Haitian diaspora who writes openly and critically about American and Haitian life and culture. Their discussion, which focused on the negative reception that one of Danticat’s novels received by many Haitian and Haitian American critics, then led to an examination of the transactional relationship that exists between author, text, and reader and thus to larger, more fundamental questions about human agency and the possibilities and limitations that creative works can have as activist projects. If we want to move away from “textbook” approaches to multiculturalism that frame reading works authored by diverse writers as akin to taking a museum tour that maintains the exoticizing stance through which colonization of ‘the Other’ is preserved through the Western gaze, then these larger questions about power, agency, stance, and the cultural and political underpinnings that drive how we interpret texts must become a starting point.

In terms of the second component needed to challenge these dominant discourses, reflecting on the spoken discourse of the classroom has allowed me to recognize the ways in

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83 See Chapter 4, “A Starting Point: Transaction, Interaction”
which my own voice has silenced or risked perpetuating the silencing of my students\(^{84}\) and to identify problematic aspects of my approaches to direct instruction\(^{85}\) that flow from the dominant position I hold in the classroom and in society as a function of my identity as a White male of Western descent. In both instances, cycles of reading and analysis of transcribed talk have helped me to account for my own positionality as a teacher and researcher. That interpretive process, which has included looking to research conducted by others in the fields of literacy education and the social sciences as a way to generate contextualized meaning about practice, has supported and deepened my understandings of the ways in which aspects of my identity and the stances that I bring to teaching can work both to support and to challenge my intended goal of teaching from a critical pedagogical stance.

A second, related aspect of my role in perpetuating a dominate discourse in the classroom is tied to the control that I hold over the curricular goals and the pathways we take to meet those goals. As my research reveals, the approach that I took to curricular design was by no means a de-centralized one. Students were not invited to select their own texts or asked to contribute to the development of assessments, and timelines for reading and assessment were also established by me. Because I have not identified an investigation into the teacher-centeredness of my practice as a focus of this study, this is not something that I address overtly in my discussion and analysis. However, Nyah’s distress over a lack of

\(^{84}\) See Chapter 4, “Confronting Silence?”
\(^{85}\) See Chapter 8, “A Discourse of Misrepresentation: The (Re)Emergence of the White Pedagogue”
diversity in the literary canon and Seth’s poetic rendering of the identity he has been forced to adopt as a student and of the established system of dominance around schooling both constitute key moments in the data set for this study that present powerful calls for me to attend more closely to students’ voicings of dissent against dominant discourses that govern education.

**Research Question 2:** What is the nature of the social engagements that occur when students are invited to take up critical issues related to the self and others in the context of the ELA classroom? What themes and concepts surface from an examination of classroom discourse?

Although chronologically ordered around the teaching and learning that supports them, I have framed chapters four through eight of this dissertation according to the major themes and concepts that emerged from my cycles of reading and analysis. In three of those chapters, I identify sets of competing forces that we negotiated through our in-class discussions of Danticat and Johnson: silence and voice, individuality and solidarity, and complacency and resistance. In those chapters, explore how these concepts emerged through my analysis of spoken discourse and then employ them as critical lenses to interpret the nature of that discourse and its value in generating knowledge about literacy teaching and learning. In my discussion, I have attempted to resist framing these concepts as stable, binary states that we occupy. Instead, I conceive of them as just a few of the many expressions of self through which we make ourselves known to others and that we perform continuously and in ongoing and

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86 See Chapter 7, “Student”
conflicting ways across our lives. Thinking of them in this way allows us to consider, for example, how we often operate in silence even as we work to craft a voice for ourselves or how an individual can persist in acting selfishly and oppressively to satisfy a set of personal interests while simultaneously seeking (in good faith) solidarity with persons whom those same interests serve to oppress. The emergence of these concepts in my analysis of the classroom discourse serves as a reminder that the journey towards critical conscientization must be understood as a life-long project, one that requires us to continually unmask and account for the contradictions and dissonances that comprise the realities of social engagement.

In addition to the three chapters that focus on spoken discourse, I have given two chapters over to an examination of student writing. In the first of those, I developed a framework for making sense of the quality of the voice that we construct as we enact expressions of self through our participation in social contexts. The *passion-ingenuity-voice* framework that I propose in Chapter 6 developed from a combination of my earlier analyses of classroom conversations held in response to *Create Dangerously* and of written commentaries authored by students in response to Danticat. Moving into Chapter 7, I applied the *passion-ingenuity-voice* framework as an analytic lens in my analysis of a sampling of three identity poems, and in Chapter 8, I did the same with two conversations held in response to our reading of Johnson’s *Autobiography*. As a conceptual model that emerged

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87 See Chapter 6, “Conceptualizing Voice: An Emergent Framework”
88 See Chapter 6, “For Whom, to Whom: From Recognition to Reinvention”
from my initial readings and analysis of writing and speech, I have found the passion-ingenuity-voice framework to be useful in guiding my ongoing analysis of the transgressive qualities of classroom discourse given the focus it places a) on the intersecting influences that drive the crafting of speech and writing—what I term its underlying passion, and b) on the oral or written compositional techniques employed by its creator, or its ingenuity. By performing close readings of what emerges given the convergence of these two components, I argue that we can begin to make sense of an emergent, critical voice in discourse. In terms of the three identity poems that I selected for analysis, I discussed how applying the passion-ingenuity-voice framework made apparent forms of “seeking” common to the transgressive voices that each of those writers crafted. But as I reflect further on the arguments they voiced through those prose poems, I can also detect forms of resistance embedded in these students’ compositions. Seth’s investment in seeking legitimacy both in terms of his identity as a student and with regard to the demands being placed upon him by adults in the home and at school also involves resistance against attempts to have his identity framed for him by those same adults and against larger systems of measurement and accountability. In Isa’s poem, she seeks to claim for herself a series of rights by crafting a voice and an identity for herself, and in doing so, she resists cooptation and the imposition of sexist and isolationist ideologies that seek to limit her potential as a woman and as a human being. And with Isaac, whose avatar, Black Dynamite, seeks a destiny cloaked in greatness, he recognizes that achieving that status must involve resisting the myriad forces—physical, mental, and societal—that

89 See Chapter 7, “Coda: Seeking, Inspiring”
could threaten his hero’s journey towards becoming that legendary Black man who will be a role model to future generations.

In the preface to Part I of this study 90 I posed three problems of practice that I identified as fundamental to my work in literacy education, and in doing so, I also suggested ways in which those problems might be addressed. When reframed as questions, those imperatives have invited me to consider the following: 1) To what extent does my teaching work to disrupt the de-personalizing, de-localizing, and de-contextualizing of the school as a site of learning by preparing students to become active rather than passive participants in society? 2) Does my teaching value the individual identities of students through non-static, non-standardized, student-centered curricula? 3) Has my teaching helped make apparent and problematic forms of discrimination that persist in our schools and in society at large and that affect specific populations of students in specific contexts? As I reflect on my sensemaking around the themes and concepts and the knowledge about practice that has risen to the surface through my crafting of this critical narrative, and as I consider how those “findings” sit with the stance that I bring to my work, I detect some possibilities in addressing these problems.

Reading texts and engaging in in-depth discussions and cycles of writing in response to texts will (must) remain central to literacy education. The student discourse that flowed from our readings of Danticat, Kincaid, and Johnson demonstrate the power that engaging with these texts can have for disrupting the de-personalization, de-localization, and de-

90 See Part I – Calling for Justice, “Framing the Problem”
contextualization of the school as a site of learning. The critical voices of these adolescents indicate how their work with these texts each took on the aspects of critical social engagements through which they became invested as discussants and authors in ways that positioned them as active rather than passive participants in society. In Chapter 2, I discussed the ways in which critical pedagogy as an orientation towards teaching and learning can take on a variety of forms in practice. The work in which I engaged with these classes of students was very much limited operationally to the boundaries of the classroom. It did not, for instance, include invitations for students to participate in activist literacy projects aimed at directly impacting local and global communities, an approach that is very much a mainstay of the work of many teachers and researchers who seek to advance the goals of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. I recognize and anticipate that the absence of such an approach towards the practice of criticality will invite criticism from some in the field. However, I contend that the classroom discourse which drives this research—and which developed from the pedagogical orientation and teaching practices that I brought to my work with these two classes of eleventh grade students—evidences a fundamental component to the complex and multifarious natures of critical projects in education.

Through the variety of engagements with and around texts in which they participated, these students brought their identities to bear in ways that were often intensely personal and that risked opening up conversations to a variety of difficult topics. In terms of whether my teaching honored and valued the identity work in which these students were engaged, there were certainly times—and I identify several of these across this study—when I could have done more. In this regard, the value of conducting this practitioner inquiry and of framing it as a critical narrative of teaching centers on its ability to make apparent these
moments and to suggest ways forward. Likewise, as a rendering of one approach to enacting a critical literacy pedagogy, this research narrative has afforded me the ability to value more deeply the identities of the students who appear in it as well as the identities of those whom I have yet to encounter. When presented through a research text, the discourse students crafted combined with thematic analysis of what that discourse reveals about the nature of teaching and learning constitutes a valuing of the individual identities of these students. It conveys the joy and pain that students carry with them and with which they struggle, the activist orientations that they bear towards participation in various communities of practice, and the educative power that their voices hold for teachers who hope to improve upon their daily practice in literacy education.

Finally, I can state without hesitation that the teaching and research that this study communicates makes apparent and problematic forms of discrimination that persist in our schools and in society and that affect specific populations of students in specific contexts. While transcribing and taking notes on our classroom discussions, it became clear to me that the texts we covered were eliciting responses from students that were tied closely to forms of oppression that persist in our society and that bear significance to their lives and communities. In many instances, as with the fragment of transcribed talk drawn from our final conversation over Johnson’ Autobiography, ⁹¹ I recognized in real time and as the conversation was unfolding the importance that discussion would hold for this study. In this regard, I owe a great debt of gratitude to my students, because it was their speech and

writing that made both apparent and problematic the various discriminatory practices that many of them face and that touch each of their lives in some way.

My job in all of the above has been to assume the role chronicler, magnifier, and extender of what my students have offered. Finding ways to assemble their words into a cohesive narrative that blends and balances their voices with my own and with the voices of other researchers has, at times, been the greater challenge for me. Along the way, I have attempted to preserve the continuity and critical spirit of my students’ words as best I can by providing close readings of discourse along with critical interpretations and extensions. A method that I have brought to my writing to aid me in this regard has been to hold in the back of my mind the question, ‘How well have I preserved the ‘realness’ of this discourse in this moment?’ When working with student writing, the task of communicating the discrimination, for instance, that Isa feels at the hand of her stepfather became an exercise in blending close reading, literary analysis, and social science scholarship. Because I have a background in English literature, working with a piece of student writing and engaging in a discussion of how research from the field can enrich and make problematic our readings of it came more readily than with fragments of spoken discourse. With student talk, my role in making apparent and problematic the various issues that they raised was decidedly more challenging. I do not have a background in critical discourse analysis, and thus I do not bring very many approaches from that tradition to my interpretation of our discussions. Instead, I have attempted to craft my interpretations and analyses in such a way as to convey the voice of an English teacher-cum-researcher who, having held a discussion with his class, has been provided with the opportunity to read closely what occurred. In the longer sections of interpretation, where student voice operates in the background of the narrative (as is the case
in the various sections of chapters that bear the title “Coda”), I’ve attempted to write with the meditative voice that might emerge were a teacher to reflect on an aspect of his teaching through a critical memo or in discussion with a critical friend. And it is with this spirit that I consider the last of my three research questions.

**Research Question 3:** How might the development of an emergent, critical narrative of teaching support the professional development of literacy educators who seek to better their practice through sustained inquiries hosted in their own classrooms?

The central focus of this question is one of contribution. I think that it is safe to say that most of us enjoy a good story. Literacy teachers and social scientists alike (one would hope) find particular enjoyment in a well-told narrative. I concede that this dissertation isn’t a page-turner in the style of [pick your favorite novelist], nor can it compare to the work of those teachers, scholars, and researchers whose writings, regardless of how dense the matter at hand, flow forth with artistry, sensitivity, and insight. Yet I do hope, as I wrote above, that my students’ words and those of the writers and researchers whom I’ve invited to the interpretive table in this study can pick me up in those moments when I have fallen short. I commented in the opening chapter to this dissertation that the greatest contribution that this research might find would be “in its ability to support and extend the work undertaken by ever-broadening networks of educators who engage in deep, systematic inquiry into their practice.”92 My sense is that perhaps the written and discursive fragments that my students

92 See Chapter 1, “Neighborhood (Contribution)”
have contributed to this study will resonate with other literacy educators in the field and remind them of their own students. I speculate also that the discussions and interpretations of that discourse will ring familiar with them as they consider their own contexts for teaching and learning and the knowledge they’ve developed about their students through their work with them in their classrooms.

For the students who appear in this dissertation, I argue that the contributions that they have made to the discourse that appears within its pages will serve them to an even greater extent than it has served this study. A great value of engaging in critical literacy practices in the classroom rests in the power that doing so can have for encouraging students (and teachers) to continue to engage in transformative practices. This is the praxis, the ongoing “act of love” to which Freire refers, the progressive project that carries with it the power to resist oppression and to move towards solidarity. While I have not followed closely the careers of those students who sat with me in my classroom as participants in this study and thus cannot speak to whether the work in which they engaged has had a lasting contribution to their lives, the legacy that their voices holds for me stands as proof of that transformative power. I choose to take the believing stance that educators think deeply about their students and the work that they do each day. My hope is that the inspirations that these students have provided to me may inspire other teachers to engage in sustained forms of inquiry into their teaching and to develop their own understandings of the ways in which the work in which they and their students engage each day can indicate ways forward for their practice.
Some Limitations

Early on in this dissertation I outlined the various groups to whom I imagined this research might speak; these include students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other researchers in the field of adolescent literacy. One approach to framing the limitations for this practitioner inquiry can be to think in terms of the various audiences for this work and the problematic nature that its frameworks, data, and findings may hold for each of these. As Anderson and Herr (1999) note, “practitioner research is not an apolitical enterprise and should be entered into with an understanding of potential risks and controversies” (p. 17). In the high-stakes, high-risk climate of contemporary urban education and life, this is especially important.

Regarding the students whose words appear in this dissertation, I entered this work with the anticipation that my narrative rendering of their experiences and of their discourse would require great deal of sensitivity and negotiation. This has certainly been the case. The subjectivities inherent to making sense of the shared lived experiences of a diverse group of individuals greatly complicates the ability to tell one story that captures the life of a social space—even a relatively small space like that of a high school literacy classroom. I noted in my proposal for this study that addressing this limitation would require that I maintain a commitment to multivocality, one that honors both the epistemic complexity and the provisional nature of this kind of sensemaking. As Ball and Lampert (1999) state in their framing of “an epistemology of practice”, taking such an orientation towards teacher research would seek to “illuminate, not solve, its intricacies. Knowledge in and of practice would be seen as inherently interpretative rather than certain and real” (p. 396). In terms of composition, my approach to honoring this stance has meant foregrounding the voices and
work of my students so as to construct as balanced a representation as possible of the voices (my own included) that have contributed to the discourse that constitutes the data set for this research. With regard to the construction of a critical narrative, Conle (2000) identifies the tendency for a story of research to “become ‘frozen’ and entrap the teller into an unchanging story, reinforcing stereotypes of others and of self” (p. 57) as a risk to criticality that accompanies constructing an experiential narrative (like the one central to this study). She suggests that an approach to mitigating this risk includes maintaining concern for the “temporal quality” of the research and for the preservation of the “dialectical relationship of the inquirer with his or her object of inquiry” (p. 58). One way in which I have attempted to address this potential limitation has been to maintain in my analysis an approach to pacing and depth that values striking a balance between close deliberation and reflection over the momentary haps of the classroom (the figurative trees within the forest—sometimes down to the veins of the leaves) and the larger pedagogical goals and pacing of the curriculum (the forest itself). Doing so has helped me to maintain—I hope—a stance of criticality through which a method of sensemaking emerges that conveys how the fragments of discourse, each bearing various passions, ingenuities, and voices, have been informed by my practice and can serve to inform my practice. Given this approach and the framework for discourse analysis that I have developed through this study,93 I have attempted to construct a comprehensive approach to meaning making that honors the voices and identities of student participants and represents them in ways that do justice to the value that their words have to their own

93 See Chapter 6, “Conceptualizing Voice: An Emergent Framework”
creative projects in literacy, to their lives and selves, to my work as a literacy instructor, and to the field of literacy education.

For teachers and administrators, the limitations of this study are governed in many ways by the site in which it has been conducted and the affordances in teaching and planning that it provides to me as an educator. The school and classroom in which this research has been conducted brings together a moderately diverse group of students from across a large, urban city and shares some similarities with other urban schools. However, its size, its special admissions status as a magnet school, its Vanguard status, and its record of having attained Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) since that measure of accountability was established in 2001 all helped to insulate it from a variety of factors that other larger, comprehensive high schools have faced. For instance, at the time when this research was conducted, the school was not subject to levels of district oversight in the form of periodic walkthroughs and observations that check for the uniform delivery of content and test preparation. (As far as I know, it still is not.) Students were not required to take supplemental periodic standardized tests ('benchmark’ exams) that students attending non-Vanguard schools were required to take, and many of the imposed sociocultural and academic policy norms created in response to difficult or dangerous disciplinary climates, falling attendance rates, or other school-wide academic concerns often attributed to “at risk” populations (O’Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 94 Very little information is readily available regarding the qualifications for Vanguard designation. A February 2010 Core Team Newsletter (Core Team, p. 2) released by the School District of Philadelphia mentions that these programs are marked by their “high academic performance,” but no further mention of specific criteria is given.
2009; McDermott & Varenne, 2006; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009) were in no way as prevalent as they are in many urban high schools. Given these realities, literacy educators and educational leaders may call into question the validity of research into critical literacy pedagogy that fails to address or openly challenge some of the norms (e.g. corrective reading programs, the daily/weekly use of a district mandated textbook, and adherence to a planning and scheduling timelines) that most students and teachers experience daily. However, as I discuss in the “Questions and Responses” section of this essay, this study does address several aspects of literacy teaching and learning that stand as everyday concerns for educators and that I argue offer possibilities for further investigation across a broad range of educational settings. Having said this, I welcome critiques of the success of this research in that regard. Identifying such limitations will assist me in further accounting for the ways in which my approach to teaching fall short in attending to criticality.

Finally, in the field of literacy there have been numerous discussions regarding critiques of the generalizability and validity of qualitative research that falls within the paradigms of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) and teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1998) as well as questions raised about the viability of critical pedagogy with regard to its goals, its impact on students and educators, and the challenges inherent to its enactment in urban contexts (Fecho, 1998). I have attempted to address many of these concerns explicitly through my discussion of the outcomes of this practitioner inquiry and the validity of its findings. Yet from my vantage point, the most significant response to these critiques that this study can voice will be measured by the extent which it is deemed successful in its conveyance of a richly detailed narrative that captures the complexities attendant to critical literacy teaching and research and that is characterized by a
high level of reflexivity with regard to the generation of any knowledge claims it makes. Following this approach, validity can to a certain extent be reduced to the poststructuralist notion that “if all research is ultimately tied up with narrative and story-telling, then its ‘validity’ might be linked to the criteria of good narrative to the extent that it reflects either an objective or socially constructed ‘reality’” (Anderson & Herr, 1999). From this perspective all write-up of research—regardless of the paradigm—is merely one “told” version of reality. It is in the hands of the readers to make of it what they will.

A Conclusion

Reading my students’ writing, participating with them in critical dialogue, and engaging in systematic processes of sensemaking has stressed for me the importance that teacher research and practitioner inquiry not be cast as post-secondary academic enterprises discrete from the everyday work of secondary and elementary educators. Instead, it should be incorporated as a primary pedagogical orientation for language and literacy teachers at all levels and with attendant methodologies and practices that support it. Literacy teachers—all teachers—must be encouraged and supported by academic institutions and districts to engage in systematic inquiries into what the discourse of the classroom can reveal about their practice, their lives and the lives of their students, their own and their students’ personal, professional, and academic goals, and the complicated roles they hold in a variety of intersecting and social groups and local/global communities.

If we were to commit to transforming elementary and secondary education by allocating resources to furthering the professional development of teacher researchers in our schools, we would elevate the often-undervalued roles that educators are made to play in our
civic lives by positioning them as capacious practitioners who contribute to the generation of knowledge about what it means to teach and learn rather than as functionaries who deliver a curriculum and deserve less than adequate compensation and respect. Additionally, we would invest teachers in a form of learning about practice that provides them with opportunities to better understand their students’ identities and academic and social-emotional needs and furnishes them with the tools and data needed to make informed choices regarding how to improve upon their practice. We would send a message as a field that we recognize the responsibilities we bear to future generations of citizens.
## PRACTITIONER INQUIRY: A FRAMEWORK (Working Draft)*

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<th>Reading Practitioner Inquiry</th>
<th>Becoming a Practitioner Inquirer</th>
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<td><strong>LEGACY</strong></td>
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<td>Where does the research come from?</td>
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<td>What traditions or disciplines is this work connected to, and how/why does this matter?</td>
<td>What are my social, cultural, political and educational frameworks?</td>
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<td>What traditions or disciplines do I come from, and how/why does this matter?</td>
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<td><strong>LOCATION/POSITIONALITY</strong></td>
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<td>Who is doing the work and where is the work being done?</td>
<td>Who are you to be doing this work?</td>
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<td>What are the relationships among the participants?</td>
<td>What is your positionality on a continuum from insider to outsider? Your location in the work? Research on/with/for?</td>
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<td>What perspectives do they bring?</td>
<td>To what extent and in what ways is the project collaborative or participatory?</td>
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<td><strong>WAYS OF KNOWING</strong></td>
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<td>What is the theory of knowledge (epistemology) in this research?</td>
<td>What assumptions am I making about knowers and the nature of knowledge?</td>
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<td>What is the theory of getting knowledge (methodology)?</td>
<td>What do I understand as the relationships of inquiry, knowledge and practice?</td>
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<td>How do I position myself/others as generators of knowledge?</td>
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<td>What sources inform this inquiry?</td>
<td>What sources inform my inquiry?</td>
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<td>How are the questions framed/presented?</td>
<td>What questions frame/guide my inquiry?</td>
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<td>How do these evolve throughout the process of the study?</td>
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<td><strong>METHODS</strong></td>
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<td>What counts as data in this study?</td>
<td>What counts as data for my study and how will I collect and analyze them?</td>
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<td>How are they collected and analyzed?</td>
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<td>What is the social organization of my work?</td>
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<td>Who is the audience for the research?</td>
<td>Who am I talking to in my research?</td>
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<td>Why/how does this matter?</td>
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APPENDIX B: CLASS SYLLABUS

Class Syllabus
Fall, 2012

English 3 – American Literature
F. Fiorini

This document provides an outline of what we will attempt to cover during the 2012-2013 school year along with detailed information about how I have structured the day-to-day work of this class and guidelines for submission of work. Rather than working chronologically through the periods of American literature, we will work thematically across the wealth of literature published in American over the past five centuries. Organizing a survey of literature in this way allows us to cover a variety of writers, styles, and genres in a relatively short period of time. Taking this approach also provides me with the flexibility to tailor our curriculum to the developing interests of my students while aligning the scope and sequence of my teaching with the Common Core Standards, which govern the instructional goals for the State of Pennsylvania.

One of the major goals of the Common Core includes striking a balance between informational texts and works of literature (i.e. drama, fiction, and creative non-fiction). Below is a list of major literary texts that we will attempt to cover this year. Students’ readings of these will be complemented by texts drawn from current periodicals, published research, and historical texts that focus on issues and themes explored in these literary works.

Longer texts

Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work, Edwidge Danticat (memoir, collected essays, 2011)
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, Sherman Alexie (memoir, 2007)
The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, James Weldon Johnson (long fiction, 1912)
The Soloist, Steve Lopez (creative non-fiction, 2008)
Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller (drama, 1949)
The Crucible, Arthur Miller (drama, 1953)
The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald (long fiction, 1925)
The Catcher in the Rye, J. D. Salinger (long fiction, 1951)
Close Range: Wyoming Stories, Annie Proulx (short fiction, 1999)
The Things They Carried, Tim O’Brien (short fiction, 1990)

Shorter texts and verse

“Salt” and “War Dances”, Sherman Alexie (short stories, 2009)
Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio, Jimmy Santiago Baca (excerpted memoir, 1994)
A Small Place, Jamaica Kincaid (excerpted memoir, 1988)
“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, Jonathan Edwards (speech, 1741)
Selected poems: McKay, Hurston, Frost, Whitman, Hughes, Kincaid
Selected sonnets: Bradstreet and de la Cruz

Guiding Questions

- What do writers consider to be the role of the individual in society?
- To whom are writers writing? For whom do they write?
- How do writers use their writing to communicate a vision of what society is and/or the possibilities for what it might become?
- Has reading these works changed our perspectives on issues these writers have raised?
- What big themes, issues, ideas do writers address, grapple with, support, and/or challenge through their work?
- How do writers write realistically? What gets said? What doesn’t?
- How can/do authors bring themselves into their works?
- What kinds of questions about identity do they raise?

Class Schedule

I have found that having a set structure in place does benefit our students. As individuals enrolled in a performing arts school, our students are often asked to miss multiple classes in a single week for mandatory rehearsals and performances. With the following schedule as a roadmap for participation in this class, students (and parents) should be able to keep track of what occurs daily. We will attempt to adhere to this schedule as much as possible throughout the year.

Monday & Tuesday: Whole-group Instruction and Small-group Break-out Sessions

- We will spend some time during Monday’s period recapping last week’s work and discuss writing completed over the weekend. I will distribute any supplemental readings for the week along with the practice SAT/PSSA practice work, which will be collected later in the week. (See Thursday’s agenda.)
- Discussions during these two days will focus on developing an understanding of the major aspects of literature and literary periods, performing close analysis of key passages drawn from current class readings, and examining issues of race, gender, culture, history, politics, etc. as they are taken up in a variety of genres.
- The agenda for these sessions will vary, and pedagogical approaches will include a blend of lecture, Socratic seminar, literature circle group work, short independent writing exercises, choral reading, and others.

Wednesday: Active reading and note taking period
Students will have time during this period to read texts we are currently covering in class. We will discuss some approaches to keeping notes, tracking ideas and connections, and building vocabulary while reading, and students will be expected to bring these strategies to this work.

Occasionally students will be given a specific short reading and writing assignment for this period.

At the close of these periods we will engage in a short discussion activity to wrap-up this independent work.

Thursday: SAT and State Standardized Test Preparation Period

In preparation for these two major standardized forms of assessment, students will have three days to complete a short selection of test items prior to this class period. (See Monday’s agenda.)

We will use this period to focus on test taking, reading comprehension, and writing strategies as a way to build proficiency and comfort in preparation for these exams.

Most of exercises will focus on SAT preparation. During the second marking period, we will focus more heavily on PSSA items.

At the close of the period I will introduce the weekly writing assignment, which will be posted on the Edmodo website that I have set up for the class. This writing will due the following Monday morning.

Friday: Working Period with Laptops

Students will have this time to begin/continue working on the weekly writing assignment due the following Monday. All assignments should be submitted electronically to me via Edmodo. (I will walk students through guidelines for submission of work during the first week of school.)

Writing and Assessment

Weekly Commentaries

Each weekend, students are required to complete a short writing assignment (1-2 page minimum) based on the readings they have been assigned. Students are usually given a selection of prompts to choose from for this writing. My comments that accompany grades for these assignments will focus on elements of writing that were successful as well as those that the student should consider working to improve as he/she completes revisions and moves forward in this class. Notes on assignments are designed to be concise. There is no substitute for meeting with me in person to work on elements of your writing that you want to improve. I hold office hours between 3:30p.m. and 4:30 p.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.

Grade Values
Assignments in this class are individually weighted according to a point value system. Because much of the work that students complete for this class involves independent reading and note taking in preparation for class discussion, I do not follow the traditional percentage weighting for homework, tests, projects, etc. that is often the norm in some other academic classes. Instead, most written assignments will be worth somewhere between 30-50 points depending on the length and requirements of the assignment. A final exam on a novel or a larger project might be worth 80-100 points and a small informal writing assignment might be worth 15 points.

Class participation

All students begin the marking period with a perfect score (100%) in class participation.

Infractions including latenesses to class, coming unprepared to class, and dress code and cell phone violations use will result in three (3) points being deducted from this grade per incident.

Students will have five (5) points deducted from their participation grade for every late or incomplete assignment submitted for this class. This will be calculated prior to each report sent during a marking period and will be reflected cumulatively as part of the final grade for that period.
APPENDIX C: LESSON PLAN

LESSON PLAN FOR WEEK OF 9-17-12

Name: Franco Pizzi

Grade/Subject: English 3

WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Lesson Plan for Week of 9-17-12

QUANTITATIVE GOALS (as outlined in the PA Common Core Planning and Scheduling Timelines)

- At the beginning of this quarter, students will analyze drama, poetry, and the effective use of figurative language and character motivation.
- At the end of this quarter, students will have analyzed structure of poems and effective use of sound devices and write critical analysis. Additionally, students will analyze historical, political, and religious literature and its impact on drama. Students are to engage in creating informative test, as well as questioning the text, building insightful text-based conversations.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES/READINGS

- Assigned Text - A Midsummer Night’s Dream
- EFL Class Forum - Students will be asked to submit weekly writing assignments via the online survey.
- Promethean Smartboard for in-class lecture.
- Laptop (made available to students as needed)

THIS WEEK'S INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS/TEACHING OBJECTIVES

- Students will complete at least one weekly reading assignment and one weekly writing assignment (as appropriate).
- Students will continue their reading of A Midsummer Night's Dream according to the following schedule:
  - Chapters 1 - 6 (pp. 1-18) due Monday, September 17, 2012
  - Chapters 7 - 12 (pp. 19-37) due Monday, September 24, 2012
- The overarching goal of this reading unit will be to understand and to make sense of the unique experiences of the characters that we encounter in Shakespeare’s collection of essays. To aid in this, students will be asked to consider the following questions as they read, write, and discuss the novel:
  - What images of persons living in the ancient dioramas do Dante present in his collection? How do these play in relation to images of persons living in the media and in contemporary society?
  - What topics and themes does Dante develop through this work?
  - An individual living in America in 2012, how do you respond to these images?
  - What relevance do they have for us?
- Students will also gain proficiency in identifying figurative language as it occurs in this text, as well as focusing on character motivation and the various internal and external conflicts that they face.

ALIGNMENT WITH COMMON CORE STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

- 1.1 - Foundational Skills
  - Students gain a working knowledge of concepts of print, alphabetic principles, and other basic conventions.
- 1.2 - Reading Informational Texts
  - Students read, understand, and respond to informational text — with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.
- 1.3 - Reading Literature
  - Students read and respond to works of literature — with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with a focus on textual evidence.
- 1.4 - Writing
  - Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.
- 1.5 - Speaking and Listening
  - Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and express themselves as individuals or in group discussions.

WEEKLY WRITING ASSESSMENT (Due: Monday, September 24, 2012)

The following questions are an extension of the independent reading completed over the summer. They are based on the overarching theme The Individual in Society, which will guide this year’s course of study in American literature.

Students choose one of the following prompts and write in response to it based on their reading of the first half of Dante’s novel. This week they will work on an expository essay that first reading assignment of the year based on the in-class discussions during this week:

- What images of what society is and the possibilities for what it might become does Dante see in his writing?
- What aspects of Dante’s ideas come through his writing? Choose a moment (or two) where you feel like you were able to understand her through her writing and discuss.
- What is the relation of the lives of those living in the dioramas that Dante describes in his writing? Has reading her work altered your perspective on that issue?
- How does Dante achieve a sense of realism in her writing? Be specific about techniques she uses.
- Pick a question about identity that Dante raises in her writing. What answers (or reasons for the lack of answers) does she offer?
- To what is Dante referring? For whom does she see the water?

DAILY ACTIVITIES/STUDENT WEEK

Monday (N/A)

Tuesday (N/A)
WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Name: Franco Fiorini

Week of 9/17/12

Grade/Subject: English 3

WEDNESDAY (Small-Group Discussion Period)

➢ Last week students chose one of the prompts listed under this week’s Weekly Writing Assignment and wrote in response to it based on their reading of the first half of Dante’s novel. This week they will work on revisions to that first writing assignment of the year.
➢ To support this work and to foster in-class discussion of Dante’s text, students will work in small groups during this period to discuss their reading of the first six chapters of *Inferno* and to take notes on ideas, arguments, significant passages, and questions that arise during this conversation.
➢ To organize the talk that occurs during this session, students will be grouped based on the prompt they chose for last week’s writing assignment, and the following objectives will be posted on the class Smartboard:

Small Group Discussion Objectives:

Refer to and individual take notes on the following questions:

1. What were some of the major ideas/arguments in response to the prompt that group members developed in their writing?
2. What passages were most important in supporting those arguments? (Make note of page numbers for reference purposes)
3. What questions, issues, etc. came up either during your writing or during your discussion that you want to bring to the larger class conversation?

➢ Students are given the whole of the class period to engage in this small-group work. Teacher will circulate to monitor and assist with this work.

➢ Homework: Continue weekly reading assignment and complete weekly writing assignment (due this Monday, September 24, 2012). Weekly writing assignment must be posted to the Edmodo forum by Monday morning.

THURSDAY (Whole-Class Discussion Period)

➢ Based on yesterday’s small-group discussion, students will engage in a whole-group discussion of the first six chapters of Dante’s novel.
➢ As student groups report on yesterday’s discussions, teacher will take notes on the class whiteboard to support the development of ideas, the clarification of any issues raised and cited passages, the fostering of questions, and the introduction/glossing of new vocabulary and terms (literary and otherwise).
➢ Smartboard will be used as needed to support this discussion.
➢ Focus when possible on generating some ideas about major topics/themes that Dante explores through his essay.
➢ Class discussion will be audio recorded to support the teacher research agenda.

➢ Homework: Continue weekly reading assignment and complete weekly writing assignment (due this Monday, September 24, 2012). Weekly writing assignment must be posted to the Edmodo forum by Monday morning.

FRIDAY (Active Reading Period)

➢ Students use this class period to work towards the completion of this week’s Weekly Independent Reading Assignment (assigned on Monday).
➢ Students should use the remainder of this period for active reading and note taking.
➢ Homework: Continue weekly reading assignment and complete weekly writing assignment (both are due Monday, September 24, 2012). Weekly writing assignment must be posted to the Edmodo forum by Monday morning.
# WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

**Name:** Franco Fiorini  
**Week of 10/1/12**  
**Grade/Subject:** English 3

## Quarterly Goals
(as outlined in the PA Common Core Planning and Scheduling Timeline)

- **At the beginning of this quarter** students will analyze literature, poetry, and the effective use of literary elements and figurative language as well as character motivation.
- **At the end of this quarter** students will have analyzed structure of poems and effective use of sound devices and write critical analysis. Additionally, students will analyze historical, political, and religious literature and its impact on drama. Students are to engage reading informational text as well as questioning the text leading to insightful text-based conversations.

## Materials/Resources/Readings
- Assigned Text(s) – An excerpt from *A Small Plane* and “Girl” (poem) by Jamaica Kincaid
- Edmodo Student Forum – Students will be asked to submit weekly writing assignments via this online utility.
- Promethean Smartboard (for in-class lecture)
- Laptops (made available to students as needed)

## This Week’s Instructional Goals/Teaching Objectives
- Students will complete at least one weekly reading assignment and one weekly writing assignment (as appropriate).
- Students will complete a practice page from the SAT study guide for test preparation.
- Students have read an excerpt from *A Small Plane* by Jamaica Kincaid (pp. 23-37) and will engage in a discussion of themes raised in her writing.
- Student will read Kincaid’s “Girl” and construct identity poems using the form and content of her verse as a model.
- The overarching goal of this mini-unit on Kincaid’s writing will be to understand and to make sense of the identities and the unique experiences of individuals living in a post-colonial society. To aid in this, students will be asked to consider the following questions as they read, write, and discuss her novel:
  - What aspects of her identity come through in Kincaid’s writing?
  - What topics and themes does Kincaid develop through her works?
  - As individuals living in America in 2012, how do you respond to these images?
  - What relevance do they have for us?

## Alignment with Common Core Standards for English Language Arts

### 1.1 – Foundational Skills
- Students gain a working knowledge of concepts of print, alphabetic principles, and other basic conventions.

### 1.2 – Reading Informational Text
- Students read, understand, and respond to informational text – with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with a focus on textual evidence.

### 1.3 – Reading Literature
- Students read and respond to works of literature – with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with a focus on textual evidence.

### 1.4 – Writing
- Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students were clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

### 1.5 – Speaking and Listening
- Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.

## Weekly Writing Assessment (Due: Monday, October 8, 2012)

Jamaica Kincaid’s mother had a profound impact on the development of her identity as a young woman. In her poem “Girl,” Kincaid captures the advice and teaching that her mother imparted to her that contributed to the person she has become. For this assignment, you will draw on Kincaid’s techniques to develop your own identity poem.

*Take the following steps to develop this piece.*

A) **Choose one noun that describes you.** (You may choose the same noun that you did for the memoir assignment or something completely different. Some suggestions are boy, girl, son, daughter, artist, singer, dancer, student, athlete, etc.)

B) **Make three lists:**
- List direct quotes from people who have contributed to this aspect of your identity (minimum of 5)
- List “this is how” statements that capture all of the actions and abilities you have learned that are essential to being successful in this aspect of your identity (minimum of 10)
- List things that you have said (or would like to say) to others that respond to the advice and instructions that you have been given. (minimum of 3)

C) **Compose a free verse poem of similar length to Kincaid’s** that captures the identity noun that you have chosen by organizing the above lists in an order that works for you.
## WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

**Name:** Franco Fiorini  
**Week of 10/1/12**  
**Grade/Subject:** English 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Detail of Daily Activities/Student Work</th>
<th>MONDAY (Whole-class Discussion)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➢ Distribute SAT practice exercises to students. This will be reviewed during Thursday’s class.</td>
<td>➢ Over the weekend, students read an excerpt from A Small Place by Jamaica Kincaid (pp. 23-27) that was distributed in class. As they read, they were asked to take notes on the following:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ What topics and themes does Kincaid explore in her writing?</td>
<td>➢ Construct at least one working statement of theme that you can assert about this short text based on its content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Come prepared to point to specific passages in her writing that support your assertions.</td>
<td>➢ Using the above to guide discussion, the aim of this session will be to reinforce last week’s teaching of the concept of theme and the development of statements of theme that drive written analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Further focus of this session will be on understanding Kincaid’s identity through her writing. This will lead into the class’s next reading, her poem “Girl”.</td>
<td>➢ Teacher presents these objectives and clarifies any questions that students may have about them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ As students begin this process writing, teacher will circulate to monitor for participation and to assist with any difficulties.</td>
<td>➢ Students have completed all pages out of the sample SAT (verbal section) in preparation for this class period. (See above.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| ➢ TUESDAY (Guided Reading and Discussion) | ➢ THURSDAY (SAT Test Preparation) |
| ➢ Distribute copies of Kincaid’s “Girl” to students. | ➢ The whole of this period will focus on strategies related to building vocabulary, reading comprehension, and understanding the structural aspects of the text and its questions. |
| ➢ Whole-group reading of poem followed by discussion questions aimed to clarify its elements. These include a focus on understanding the multiregional quality of her poem, the cultural and historical context and background to the poem (with a focus on the poet’s diction), and the images of identity and femininity that she conveys through this work. | ➢ This week students were given a section that focuses on sentence revision with multiple-choice questions to answer. |
| ➢ Connect this reading and analysis to the excerpt from A Small Place that students read and to the verse writing that students will be asked to complete this week by previewing that assignment (see below). | ➢ Students will be asked to complete the Weekly Writing Prompt. (See first page, left-hand column of this document.) |
| ➢ Students will be asked this period to begin developing their own identity poems in the style of Kincaid’s by following a small set of basic structural and substantive guidelines for this week. To support this, the following writing objectives are posted on the class smartboard: | ➢ Weekly writing assignment must be posted to the Edmodo forum by Monday morning. |

| ➢ Choose one noun that describes you. (You may choose the same noun that you did for the narrative assignment or something completely different. Some suggestions are: boy, girl, son, daughter, artist, singer, dancer, student, athlete, etc.) | ➢ Students who have completed posting their work can continue with their weekly independent reading assignment. |

| ➢ Make three lists: | ➢ Homework: Complete weekly reading assignment and post response to weekly writing assignment on Edmodo forum by Monday, October 8, 2012. |
| ➢ 1) List direct quotes from people who have contributed to this aspect of your identity (minimum of 5); | |
| ➢ 2) List “this is how” statements that capture all of the actions and abilities you have learned that are essential to being successful in this aspect of your identity (minimum of 10); | |
| ➢ 3) List things that you have said (or would like to say) to others that respond to the advice and instructions that you have been given. (minimum of 2) | |
Lesson Plan for Week of 11-26-12

Name: Franco Fiorini

Week of 11/26/12

Grade/Subject: English 3

Alignment with Common Core Standards for English Language Arts

1.1 - Foundational Skills
- Students gain a working knowledge of concepts of print, alphabetic principles, and other basic conventions.

1.2 - Reading Informational Text
- Students read, understand, and respond to informational text – with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.

1.3 - Reading Literature
- Students read and respond to works of literature – with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.

1.4 - Writing
- Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

1.5 - Speaking and Listening
- Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.

Weekly Writing Assignment:

The following guidelines for this week’s memoir pre-writing activities were distributed to students both in paper form and via the Edmodo class forum.

Writer’s Workshop Sessions 1 & 2: Memoir Pre-writing

Sherman Alexie describes his main character as a “part-time Indian.” What nouns and adjectives serve to describe who you are? Take a few minutes to list them.

Looking at these (and other) nouns/adjectives that describe you, what are some possibilities for simply phrases you would best describe who you are? (Just like Alexie, this can include how you see yourself and/or how you think others see you.)

Initial writing (in class):

Think of an event that comes from your life and that illustrates why this identity phrase works to capture who you are. Keep in mind that this story and phrase can communicate both how you see yourself and how you see the world. Your story can come from experiences that you’ve shared with someone else.

Consider: Who will be the character? Where and when would it take place? How would it start and end? Use this week’s writing prompt to begin composing your story. This is an outline of a sequence of events with notes about elements that you want to include, so you can just start writing. (All writers work in different ways. It’s up to you to decide what works for you.)
**WEEKLY LESSON PLAN**

**Name:** Franco Fiorini  
**Grade/Subject:** English 3  
**Week of 11/26/12**

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**SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR PLANNING YOUR STORY**

**Character Development: A Three-Phase Structure**

- **Exposition:** Introduces all of the main characters in the story, their goals, and motivations. This phase sets the stage for the rest of the story. It shows how each character is connected to one another, what their goals are, and the kind of person they are. In the exposition, the audience should be able to see how the main character is a part of the story.

- **Rising Action:** Begins with the introduction of a new character or plot device. This phase sets the stage for the climax of the story and the resolution. The main character faces a new challenge or conflict, which they must overcome. The story develops as the main character faces obstacles and learns new skills.

- **Climax:** The point of climax is when the main character makes a decision that changes the outcome of the story. The main character faces a choice, and the decision they make will determine the outcome of the story. This is the point where the main character's journey is at its peak.

- **Resolution:** This is when the main character solves the problem that started the story. The story ends as the main character finds a solution to the problem. The story moves from the climax to the resolution.

**Some other plot structures that you might consider:**

- **The episodic plot:** Focuses on multiple stories within a story or a series of episodes about different events that are connected to develop a theme.

- **The progressive plot:** Develops one major event by using a sequence of smaller details that lead up to and resolve the major conflict.

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**DETAILED DAILY ACTIVITIES/STUDENT WORK**

**MONDAY (Active Reading Period)**

- Distribute SAT practice exercises to students. This will be reviewed during Friday's class.
- Students will have the opportunity to practice on this week's Weekly Independent Reading Assignment (assigned last class period).
- Students should start this period for active reading and note-taking. We have discussed the use of post-it notes and a process journal as maps of tracking ideas for writing, questions, etc. We will discuss a variety of approaches to keeping notes, tracking ideas, and connections, and building vocabulary while reading over the coming weeks. Students are expected to bring these strategies to the work that they are doing during active reading periods.

**Homework:** Continue weekly reading assignment and complete SAT practice sheet for Friday's class.

**TUESDAY (Whole Class Lecture and Discussion Period)**

- Handout: "Writers Workshop: Understanding Narrative" to students as a guide to understanding narrative structure and developing their own narratives.
- Discuss the following questions with students:
  1. If students were asked to create an essay plan for the narrative of this essay, what does it tell you about the narrative?
  2. What aspects of the essay have you chosen to focus on? What techniques did you use to achieve this focus?

**Homework:** Continue weekly reading assignment and complete SAT practice sheet for Friday's class.

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**WEDNESDAY (Whole Class: Active Listening/Reading Period)**

- Distribute copies of David Sedaris' essay titled "Writing About Writing". This will be used this week to lead a discussion on the elements of narrative.
- Students will be expected to read this essay and come prepared for discussion.
- Immediately following the reading, the students will be asked to respond to the following questions: What does this essay say about narrative? What is the purpose of the essay? How does Sedaris' essay provide an example of the form and function of the short memoir-style essay that students will be expected to write for this unit?

**Homework:** Continue weekly reading assignment and complete SAT practice sheet for Friday's class.

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**THURSDAY (Independent Process Writing Period)**

- Students will have the opportunity to practice on this week's Weekly Independent Reading Assignment (assigned last class period).
- Students should start this period for active reading and note-taking. We have discussed the use of post-it notes and a process journal as maps of tracking ideas for writing, questions, etc. We will discuss a variety of approaches to keeping notes, tracking ideas, and connections, and building vocabulary while reading over the coming weeks. Students are expected to bring these strategies to the work that they are doing during active reading periods.

**Homework:** Continue weekly reading assignment and complete SAT practice sheet for Friday's class.

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WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Name: Franco Fiorin

Week of 11/26/12

Grade/Subject: English 3

Monday

Writing Activity: The following set of prompts will be posted on the classroom Smartboard. Students will be asked to follow these as a guide to beginning early process writing for their memoir assignment. Teacher will circulate during this period and support students as they develop ideas for their memoirs.

- Sherman Alexie describes his main character as a "part-time Indian." What identity phrase would you choose to best describe who you are? (Just like with Alexie, this can include how you see yourself and/or how you think others see you.)
- Initial Writing: Think of a story that comes from your life that illustrates why you’ve chosen this identity phrase for yourself. Keep in mind that this story and please can communicate both who you are and how you see the world. Your story can come from experience that you’ve shared with someone else. Consider: Who will be the characters? Where and when would it take place? How would it start and end?
- Use today’s period to write a first draft of your story. This can be an outline of a sequence of events with notes about elements that you want to include, or you can just start writing. (All weeks work in different ways. It’s up to you to decide what works for you)

Homework: Continue weekly reading assignment and complete SAT practice sheet for tomorrow’s class. As you complete your weekly reading, be sure to think about how this will inform your work on the weekly writing prompt (memoir process writing) and choose some passages that will help you to do so.

FRIDAY (SAT Test Preparation)

- Students have completed one page out of a sample SAT (verbal section) in preparation for this class period. (See above.)
- Teacher-led discussion held during this period will focus on strategies related to building vocabulary, reading comprehension, and understanding the structural aspects of the test and its questions.
- This week students were given a section that focuses on sentence revision with multiple-choice questions to answer.

Homework: Complete weekly reading assignment and the weekly writing prompt (memoir process writing).
WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Name: Franco Fiorini

Lesson Plan for Week of 1/14/13

Grade/Subject: English 3

Alignment with Common Core Standards for English Language Arts

1.1 – Foundational Skills
- Students gain a working knowledge of concepts of print, alphabetic principles, and other basic conventions.

1.2 – Reading Informational Texts
- Students read, understand, and respond to informational text – with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.

1.3 – Reading Literature
- Students read and respond to works of literature – with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with a focus on textual evidence.

1.4 – Writing
- Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate context.

1.5 – Speaking and Listening
- Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.

Materials/Resources/Readings

- Assigned Text(s) – Critical Literature in English (Deborah Appelman): “Sojourner Truth” (David Sedaris)
- Edmodo Student Forum – Students will be asked to submit weekly writing assignments via this online utility and/or to reference this forum for digital copies of handouts and readings distributed during class periods.
- Promethean Smartboard (for in-class lecture)
- Laptops (made available to students as needed)

Instructional Goals/Teaching Objectives

- Students will use Sedaris’ short story, which they have read for a previous writing assignment, as a model for developing a foundational understanding of one of the major critical issues used in literary analysis (Gender/Class).
- The overarching goal of this unit will be to develop in students an understanding of how multiple approaches to literary criticism can be used as frameworks for engaging in deeper levels of analytic understanding and discourse around the literature we cover in the ENL classroom.
- The frameworks that will guide this investigation include
  - Archetypal Criticism
  - Gender/Feminist Criticism
  - Social-Class/Material Criticism
  - New Criticism
  - Psychological and Psychoanalytic Criticism
  - Reader Response
  - Deconstructionism
- Across the unit, students will use two major works of American literature to engage in this work:
  - James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby
- Students will be expected to develop structured note-taking practices that support analyses informed by these lenses and to author two analytic papers based on or more of them.

Weekly Writing Assignment

The following guidelines for the weekly writing assignment were distributed to students via the Edmodo class forum.

GENDERED/FEMINIST CRITICISM PRACTICE SESSIONS

For this assignment you will work with one other person to perform a gendered reading and analysis of David Sedaris’ “Sojourner Truth.” The following prompts will assist you with this.

You will find a digital copy of this story attached to this note.

1. Look closely at the following characters in Sedaris’ story: 1) the narrator, 2) the father, 3) Mr. Mannix, 4) the mother. How would you describe the gender roles that each expresses in this story? (An example of a gender role might be ‘heterosexual, male father figure and disciplinarian.”) How does focusing on these characters’ gender roles help you to understand why they interact in the ways that they do?

2. What gender stereotypes are being reinforced or undermined in Sedaris’ story? How does this story either reflect or distort the place of men and women in society?

3. What role does gender identity play in terms of who possesses power in this story? Do you see any potential shifts in power that can be understood through a feminist lens?

Take notes on each of these and be prepared to discuss them during tomorrow’s class period.
Name: Franco Fionni

Week of 1/14/13

Grade/Subject: English 3

WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Detail of Daily Activities/Student Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MONDAY - WEDNESDAY</strong> (Keystone Exam Administration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THURSDAY</strong> (Small Group Discussion and Note Taking Session)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students will use the guidelines for this week writing that were distributed to students via the Edmodo class forum (see above) to develop a Gendered/Feminist reading of Sedaris’ short narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students should use the handout titled “Literary Theorist: A Sampling of Critical Lenses” and notes from last week’s textbook lecture to support this work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students are being given direct instruction in literary criticism as a way to help them to develop frameworks for engaging in deeper levels of analytic understanding and discourse around the literature we cover in the ELA classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FRIDAY</strong> (Whole Class Lecture &amp; Discussion Periods)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Students will lead discussion of the notes taken during the previous day’s period, and teacher will develop process notes on the class Smartboard that capture the major arguments and supporting evidence during this session.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Session notes will be posted on the class Edmodo forum. (See below for a copy of notes retrieved from the Edmodo forum.)</td>
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**CLASS DISCUSSION NOTES:**

Gendered/Feminist Reading of David Sedaris’ “Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities”

Below are notes from both sections’ discussions of this text.

**Gender Roles: Expectations**

The narrator - Questioning his masculinity; American son trying to follow in father’s footsteps in order to please, challenged by both males; identifies with feminine more than the average man; submissive to father and to Mancini (e.g., taking up the guitar and changing the name of guitar); subtle rebel (shows an internal rebellion against fathers/societies’ ideas of what is masculine and feminine).

The father - Heterosexual male, professional status, wants children to have some relationship with his interests; man of the house; thinks his decisions are what’s best for family and society, leader, especially when compared to the mother’s role. An influence regarding raising children; stereotypical 1950’s heterosexual male (working professional, casual drinker).

The mother - papered in this story, “typical” housewife and cook, limited sole actions described but silent (voiceless); seems to lack influence over the father.

Mr. Mancini - Heterosexual male, homophobic; hyper fixation on women, self-identified “ladies man” but comes across as a liar (lies to himself) and the narrator to boost his own masculinity; man “trapped inside a boy’s body”; little man; false sense of pride; objectifies the opposite sex for the purpose of boosting his own sense of masculinity; uses the opposite sex for the purpose of assuaging his own guilt; possessive traits of loneliness, anger, and aggression that seem to stem from his inability to be what society imagines or expects from men in terms of physical stature or physique.

**Stereotypes Reinforced/Undetermined:**

- Men should not be “masculine” (in charge, paying women, assertive, heterosexual)
- Homosexual/questioning men are seen as different not “normal”
- Should remain with people who share that gender identity
- Women are singers
- Men are instrumentalists
- Women are cooks/housekeepers
- Some songs, instruments, styles of music are associated with masculinity and/or femininity (and men/women are expected to attend to this distinction) this is linked to whether an instrument is “loud” “nibl” “elegant” “delicate”
- Men have dominant power in households
- Interest in music is male-centric
- Men should be interested in women and sex
- Men should not be interested in music/playing, interior design
- Men/women are expected to have certain physical characteristics (tattoos)
- Fathers cook and are the breadwinners; when they come home, they come home to relax
- Mothers are cooks and housekeepers
- Fathers instruct boys, mothers instruct girls
- Parents live vicariously through their children
Lesson Plan for Week of 2-18-13

Name: Franco Fiorini
Grade/Subject: English 3

WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Lesson Plan for Week of 2/18/13

Name: Franco Fiorini
Grade/Subject: English 3

Quarterly Goals For the Third Marking Period of the Academic Year (as outlined in the PA Common Core Planning and Scheduling Timeline)

- At the beginning of this quarter students will recognize and understand how literature reflects the social, historical, and political attitudes of an era.
- By the end of this quarter students will have analyzed political and social influences of a historical period, compared writers’ attitudes and themes, and explored historical research. Additionally, students will analyze and respond to another author’s point of view.

Materials/Resources/Readings

- Assigned Texts
  - Critical Elements in High School English (Deborah Appelman)
  - The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (James Weldon Johnson)
- Supplementary Readings:
  - The American Dream (for in-class discussion)
- Laptops (made available to students as needed)

Instructional Goals/Teaching Objectives

Reading Schedule:
- Chapters I - IV (pp. 1-90) due Monday, January 28, 2013
- Chapters V - VIII (pp. 91-180) due Monday, February 4, 2013
- Chapters IX - XII (pp. 181-270) due Monday, February 11, 2013

Focusing Questions:
- What theory (or theories) of race does Johnson develop in his novel?
- How might examining this text through lenses of gender, class, power, history, culture, and human psychology help us to analyze the role that race plays in this novel?

Alignment with Common Core Standards for English Language Arts

☐ 1.1 - Foundational Skills
  - Students gain a working knowledge of concepts of print, alphabetic principles, and other basic conventions.

☐ 1.2 - Reading Informational Texts
  - Students read, understand, and respond to informational text— with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.

☐ 1.3 - Reading Literature
  - Students read and respond to works of literature— with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with a focus on textual evidence.

☐ 1.4 - Writing
  - Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear, focused texts that convey well-defined perspectives and appropriate content.

☐ 1.5 - Speaking and Listening
  - Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.

Weekly Writing Assignment:

The following writing assignment will be posted on the class Edmodo forum:

PAIRED BREAKOUT: EXAMINING CHAPTERS 9 - 11

For these final chapters of Johnson’s novel, move back into your collaborative pairs and spend more time to develop and post-cited notes the following questions:

1) What are the most significant events that comprise the closing chapters of his novel? Explain for each what you believe the significance of those three to be.
2) What major realizations about race, gender, and/or class does Johnson explore in the following sections of these chapters:
   a. his time in Paris,
   b. his travels by train across the South,
   c. his journey into the interior of Georgia,
   d. his return to NY?
3) What questions are you left with at the close of his novel? How do you interpret the concluding statement that he makes in the final lines of Chapter 11? (“I cannot express the thought...”) Hint: These lines contain an important allusion. You should identify it and explain its significance.

Allegation: An indirect reference to person or event that is widely recognizable from history, literature, religion, politics, sports, science, or popular culture that bears special significance in the context in which it is used.
WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Name: Franco Fiore

Week of 2/18/13

Grade/Subject: English 3

Monday (1/29)

TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY, & THURSDAY (Whole-Class Discussion/Analysis Workshop)

- These sessions focus on last week’s writing prompt, which asked students to track the development of Johnson’s narrator as a dynamic character in chapters 5 through 8 of his novel.
- The focus of these sessions will be on assisting students in the development of well-supported analytic statements that effectively address the prompt that has been provided to them. The benefit of doing so is that a whole-class discussion is the opportunity that students who have authored these notes will have to elaborate both with peers and with the instructor over the phrasing and content of these documents.

Addendum: At the close of these sessions, the following set of notes was posted on the Edmodo class forum. They capture the class discussions that took place over these three class periods:

CLASS NOTES (2/19, 2/13, 2/21, 2/15): TRACKING DYNAMIC SHIFTS IN CHARACTER

Below are notes from our class discussion this week. They may be useful to you when asked to compose a final written piece for your reading of [WJ].

CHAPTER 6

Passage 1 (pp. 41-42): This passage centered on the narrator’s arrival in NYC, his metaphorical description of it, and the change in direction in life and life goals that this potential shows.

- We looked closely at the metaphor of the “great white” and charted the paradoxical quality of this description. We aligned the “whiteness” of the city with “good/positive” and focused on qualities like beauty and refinement (to come) and temptation (to stay). We aligned “white” with “evil/negative” qualities and focused on the “whiteness” of the city embodied in working slavery, a lack of control, and the dehumanizing nature of this kind of manipulation.

- We noted that to show the shift in the narrator’s character we would have to look back at his time in Jacksonville and compare how this characterization of NYC as an exciting place where he feels like he is beginning a new chapter in his life, follows from his time in the South. What has changed about who he is that leads him to desire a life in this new city? What past learning has led him here?

Passage (p. 43): This passage shows how the narrator is affected by the environment of NYC and introduces some key changes in his personality.

- It foreshadows his addiction to gambling and the impact this will have on the way he views himself, and it will bring him to a critical realization of a kind of vanity that we did previously see in him.
- It captures his realization of the impact that living in a particular environment can have on identity.
- It shows the character’s development as he begins to see himself, which foreshadows his future in a more cautious manner.
- The shift in his character, and his own realization of the need for caution, enacts some key changes in his personality.

Passage (p. 44): On this page, we tracked the shift in the narrator’s experience with the word “nigger” that contrasts with an earlier scene in the novel where his mother confronts him about the use of the term.

- We felt that this passage shows a new sense of comfort with the word “nigger” and others around race.
- It shows a new connection that he makes with others around his racial identity.
- It shows the difficulties and thought processes involved in adapting to a new environment, its people, and their use of a potentially derogatory term in a different and potentially positive way.

Passage (p. 47): Here the narrator focuses on the impact that ragtime music has had on him, the way in which it captures the essence of the colored races in America, and his thoughts about its significance with regard to those.

- He uses the term “sensible” (something that restricts or confines, purists) to describe the process by which experience travels through the mind of the artist and becomes a poetic work. This provides some insight into the narrator’s ongoing understandings about that it means to create.
- This passage also may portray the kinds of goals that he has for himself as an artist and how those goals have been shaped by his introduction to the ragtime genre.

Passage (p. 48): The passage we selected on this page shows a change in the narrator’s interactions relative to the new social environment he has been exposed to in NYC (the “Club” culture).
WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Name: Franco Fiorini

Week of 2/18/13

Grade/Subject: English 3

The narrator describes his initial state when immersed in this culture as his "dread in darkness," and we said that this darkness might indicate any of the following: a) a lack of knowledge about his social position, b) a lack of privilege (in terms of money, opportunity, or fame), c) the condition of being unknown/obscure by others.

We noticed that the narrator seems to describe a transition from dwelling in darkness to dwelling in light (or enlightenment), and identified three stages in this process: moving from lack of acknowledgment by others into a period that involves "faking" knowledge in order to be accepted into the group and finally to membership in the "Cub" culture. We summed this transition up by describing this change as involving him moving from an "object of pity" (his words) to one of power.

We argued that this show that the narrator is willing to pretend to be someone/thing that he is not and is driven by his desire to gain power and control.

Passage (p. 50): This captures the narrator's thoughts about the nature and impact of the self-destructive lifestyle that he slipped into while living in NYC.

He uses the example of an unnamed doctor caught in the grips of this lifestyle to describe how the "spell of the underlife" can "enervate and deaden" one's morals.

His telling of this anecdote about the doctor, in fact, may help to reveal the narrator's own understanding about the ways in which his early experiences in NYC and his addictions to gambling and drinking had a demoralizing impact on his character.

Passage (p. 55): This passage captures something significant about the narrator's identity development as a musician and shift from soloist to accompanist.

This contrasts from his childhood days in music when his identity as a performer was defined by individual recognition he received for his abilities and shows him coming to the realization that he is not (and never will be) the center of attention.

It shows that the narrator is developing a newly formed comfort with this role as a performer who plays in support of another artist in this new context (NYC).

We noted that this is significant in that it shows a deep connection between his racial identity and his identity as a musician (i.e. a young musician whose voice is heard by others as being both musically talented and colored), he received special recognition, now that the "special" importance of his non-white status seems diminished, so does his ability to be seen as something special in terms of his musical ability.

Homework: Perform any necessary revisions to last week's weekly reading and note-taking assignment from last week by Friday, February 22, 2013.

FRIDAY (Laptop Period: Construction of Structured Notes)

➤ Students are given time this period to begin drafting structured notes in fulfillment of the Weekly Writing Assignment. Specific guidelines for the ways in which these notes should be structured will be provided to students at the beginning of the period. They are as follows:

1. Quote each passage from the text and include citations (p., para., l.)
2. Include a detailed analytic statement for each passage (for a total of 4). These should come from the notes that you developed during your discussion sessions and should be approximately 3-5 sentences in length. These statements should address how these passages illustrate the changes that occur in the character of the narrator. For these, you should focus on how Johnson's diction (word choice) serves to communicate the changing identity of his narrator by indicating (e.g., specific words, phrases, images, and/or figurative language from the passages you have chosen.

➤ Teacher will circulate, monitor, and offer advice/critique as needed.

➤ Weekly writing assignment must be posted to the Edmodo forum by Monday morning.

WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Name: Franco Fiorini

Lesson Plan for Week of 2-25-13

Grade/Subject: English

Quarterly Goals For the Third Marking Period of the Academic Year (as outlined in the PA Common Core Planning and Scheduling Timeline)

- At the beginning of this quarter, students will recognize and understand how literature reflects the social, historical, and political attitudes of an era.
- By the end of this quarter, students will have analyzed political and social influences of a historical period, compared writers' attitudes and themes, and reported historical research. Additionally, students will analyze and respond to another author's point of view.

Materials/Resources/Readings

- Assigned Text(s) - Critical Elements in High School English (Deborah Applemann); The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (James Weldon Johnson)

Instructional Goals/Teaching Objectives

Reading Schedule for Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912)

- Chapters I - IV (pp. 1-50) due Monday, January 28, 2013
- Chapters V - VII (pp. 51-96) due Wednesday, February 6, 2013
- Chapters VIII - XIII (pp. 97-206) due Monday, February 11, 2013

Weekly Writing Assignment:

The following writing assignment will be posted on the class Edwards forum:

ANALYTIC PAPER: JAMES WELDON JOHNSON’S THEORY OF RACE

The term theory is used to describe an organized system of accepted knowledge that applies in a variety of circumstances and that serves to explain a specific set of phenomena (observed occurrences). If written well, it should provide a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world.

For this final writing assignment for Johnson’s novel, you will work independently to compose a short paper that develops an explanation of the theoretical foundation for Johnson’s ideas about race and social identity.

Your paper must include a strong thesis statement that presents major arguments that you believe Johnson makes about race and social identity and body paragraphs that provide supporting evidence that substantiates those arguments. You should use the three rounds of structured notes that you have taken during your reading of this novel to help with this.
**WEEKLY LESSON PLAN**

**Name:** Franco Fiorini  
**Week of 2/25/13**  
**Grade/Subject:** English 3

**Detail of Daily Activities/Student Work**

**MONDAY, TUESDAY, & WEDNESDAY** (Whole-Group Discussion/Analysis Workshop)

- These sessions focus on last week's writing prompt, which asked students to track the development of Johnson's narrator as a dynamic character in chapters 5 through 8 of his novel.
- The focus of these sessions will be on assisting students in the development of well-supported analytic statements that effectively address to the prompts that have been provided to them. The benefit of doing so via a whole-class discussion is the opportunity that students who have authored these notes will have to deliberate with peers and with the instructor over the phrasing and content of these documents.

**Addendum:** At the close of these sessions, the following set of notes was posted on the Edmodo class forum. They capture the class discussions that occurred these three class periods:

**COMBINED CLASS NOTES 2/25/13-2/28/13; [JW] CHAPTERS 9 - 11**

Below are the complete class notes from both sessions that we completed this week on the last three chapters of [JW]'s novel. Use these notes for the kinds of notes you might take when assigned sections of texts to read accompanied by objectives.

1. **What are the most significant events that comprise the closing chapters of [JW]'s novel? Discuss the significance of each.**
   - p. 66 - shopping in Paris: had an impact on how he saw/ruled himself; interactions w/ people in Paris about a different equality of status vs. that based on racial identity, in the rights of Paris, the narrator the millionaire w/ a new fascination or sense of nostalgia about them; made relationship w/ millionaire more equal/humane-like
   - p. 62 - @ the opera & meeting father in Paris; memories of mother and childhood reawaken his love for music; shows the narrator what is most important to him and moves him toward making a decision on his life. Why silent? Possible answers: a) He "knows what is his relationship," b) He may fear what it might bring up, c) "What would he have to say?" d) "Why should he make the first move?"; made him reflect on his role w/ more felt distanced; felt satisfaction; a sense of closure.
   - p. 60 - decides to pursue music in the U.S. during his time: realizes that one must right here on the African American music (Negro spirituals, slave songs)
   - pp. 67-68 - concert w/ millionaire helps him to analyze his motives for moving to the U.S.
   - p. 70 - 73 - conversation w/ black doctor may encourage narrator to be "that model"; conflicting ideas about changability in people and about what it means to be successful
   - pp. 74-78 - concert w/ white Texas & G.A.R. man (Civil War Union Army vet); realized that very little separated the differing views of the North and South narrator praises the brave speech of the Texan
   - pp. 80-81 - reflection on "Southern characters": the North sees the Negro pop, in abstraction but fails to see the reality of their situation in America; (false hope); the South shows outright hatred but is capable of an intimate liking of individual members of the Negro community
   - p. 82 - 85 - "big meeting": realizes that the black people seem to be refreshingly certain about certain aspects of their culture (like singing) even though these are the most potentially powerful aspects of it; he says that perhaps they are "too close" to the conditions that produced them
   - pp. 87-88 - lyceum; solicits his decision to identify fully as white; decision based in shame;

- (climax) adds a human reality to the condition of blacks in the South
  
- p. 90 - settles on returning to NYC
  
- p. 92 - discussion of earning a thousand dollars
  
- p. 94 - tells wife about his racial background; big step b/c he doesn't know how she will react
  
- pp. 98-99 - marriage & death of wife; a "new dozen" of a shortening associated w/ his race
  
- pp. 99-100 - choosing family and white identity over black identity & music

2. What major realizations about race, gender, and/or class does Johnson explore in the following sections of three chapters: a) his time in Paris, b) his travels by train across the South, c) his journey into the interior of Georgia, d) his return to NYC?

**In Paris**

"I should have greater chances of attracting attention as a colored composer."

The narrator hopes to move to the hope and ambition of the Negro. Through music, he realizes a) that he must go to greater lengths to be better than a white person at that time in order to attract more attention and this involves challenging himself to go back to America; b) that the greater expectations that society has for black artists means that if he does something great as a black man it will seem greater than if he had done the same thing as a white man; c) that his personal success has the potential to benefit the race at large.

"We walked a short distance up the Champs Elysées..."

The narrator realizes that to the establishment racer and class are unimportant. What is important is what he (his narrator) can contribute to their relationship. In this moment he realizes that (money) and (the class status that comes w/ it) isn't the most important thing and that the cultural experience is more important to him. 2) Because he doesn't feel the same level of discrimination during his travels in Europe, he may realize that there's a difference in the worldliness of the people in these situations when compared with those living in America during this period.

(Comparison between London & Paris, p. 64) Realizes that the people and culture of a particular place elevate the places themselves. These places embody the spirit and culture of their peoples. We see here that the narrator is treading back the "hypocrisy of the Anglo-Saxon race" to its roots in his description of London.

During train travel:

"Northern white people love the Negro in a sort of abstract way... Southern white people despise the Negro..." (p. 90) Here the narrator realizes just how differently the North and South see the place that members of the Negro race hold in society, especially with regard to their ability to progress and gain (economic) status, and the "race" that they have this minority group.

"The sentiments of the Texan... fell upon me like a chill..." (p. 77) The narrator realizes that although his gift is being denounced by the prejudicial speech of the Texan, he "has admiration" for the principles held by that man because the narrator also has principles beliefs that he too supports. He starts to think more deeply about the sources and supports of these principles. He realizes that all of the horrid conditions for blacks result because of a mindset that supports the inequalities that exist between the races. Changing the conditions is about changing perspectives and truths that are accepted about the superiority of the white race.

(Traveling through Georgia)

336
WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Name: Franco Fiorni

Week of 2/25/13

Grade/Subject: English 3

FRIDAY (Active Reading Period)

➢ Distribute copies of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” to students.

Reading Schedule:

Chapters 1 - 3 due Monday, March 11, 2013
Chapters 4 - 6 due Monday, March 18, 2013
Chapters 7 - 9 due Monday, April 1, 2013

➢ Students use this class period to work towards the completion of the first three chapters of Fitzgerald’s novel.
➢ Students should use the remainder of this period for active reading and note taking.

Homework: Continue weekly reading assignment. Weekly writing assignment must be posted to the Edmodo Forum by Monday, March 11, 2013.

"My conversation with this young man..." (p. 80). The narrator comes to the realization that a lot of intelligent colored men are almost too absorbed in thinking about the "race question," and he thinks that if all members of the race had this attitude, this would hinder the progress of the race. He suggests, instead, that members of the colored race need to develop a sense of humor about their condition. He may be saying that in order to overcome the oppression in this situation, creating the urge to get mixed in the honors of the situation is needed.

"I walked a short distance away..." (pp. 80-81). The narrator realizes how easily, cruelly, and inhumanly blacks are oppressed in the South and how different this is from what he has experienced. He further realizes the depth of the hypocrisy that is the "great example of American democracy", in that how could a country that is supposed to espouse equality and standards of freedom and liberty allow the kind of atrocity to persist. He also comes to some potential understandings about why some is perpetuated in non-white communities; it may be a result of the brutal culture of crime and abuse that surrounds the lives of those people.

For his return to NYC:

pps. 90-91: "I would avail myself of every possible opportunity..." He realizes that you’ve got to be white to make money and to be successful and access certain opportunities.

3) What questions are you left with at the close of this novel?

➢ How would Johnson’s novel have been different if his narrator had taken more advantage of his white side earlier on? Or, alternatively, what if Johnson had extended this novel to provide more insight into the narrator’s life living as a white man in the North?
➢ What would his mother’s thoughts have been on the narrator’s choice to embrace his white side? How would his life have been different if he had involved his father in a part of his life? What if he had spoke up in Paris?
➢ Would it have made a difference if his mother’s and father’s races had been inverted (mother as white, father as black)?
➢ Did his marriage to his white wife and her subsequent death prevent him from doing the work that he might have done in his own racial community?
➢ What would happen potentially if he were to be in a situation where someone from his past questioned his racial identity? How does anyone whose skin color may not conform to what is "normally" thought of as indicating a particular race deal with questions about their racial identity?
➢ What roles does music play in the narrator’s sense of his own racial identity?
➢ How closely does the narrative follow JWW’s life?
➢ What impact might the narrator’s own history with his parents had on his choices in terms of his own relationship?
➢ Why did the white side of his race win out? How did his ideas about how his life would have been different had he made a different choice affect his choice?

Homework: Perform any necessary revisions to last week’s weekly reading and note taking assignment from last week by Friday, March 1, 2013.
APPENDIX D: “GIRL” (JAMAICA KINCAID)

GIRL

WASH the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don’t walk barefoot in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little clothes right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn’t have gum in it, because that way it won’t hold up well after a wash; salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that your sister benna in Sunday school? always eat your food in such a way that it won’t turn someone else’s stomach; never try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to white-rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father’s khaki shirt so that it doesn’t have a crease; this is how you iron your father’s khaki pants so that they don’t have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing okra, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don’t squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don’t pick people’s flowers—you might catch something; don’t throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make bread pudding; this is how to make dumplings; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don’t like, and that way something bad won’t fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn’t work there are other ways, and if they don’t work don’t feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn’t fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it’s fresh; but what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread? you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread? —JAMAICA KINCAID

“Fellow Clemonians . . .”
Literary Theories: A Sampling of Critical Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways in which people read texts. The proponents of each theory believe that their theory is the theory, but most of us interpret texts according to the "rules" of several different theories at one time. All literary theories are lenses through which we can see texts. There is no reason to say that one is better than another or that you should read according to any of them, but it is sometimes fun to "decide" to read a text with one in mind because you often end up with a whole new perspective on your reading. What follows is a summary of some of the most common schools of literary theory. These descriptions are extremely cursory, and none of them fully explains what the theory is all about. But it is enough to get the general idea.

Archetypal Criticism. In criticism archetype signifies narrative designs, character types, or images, which are said to be identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even ritualized modes of social behavior. The archetypal similarities within these diverse phenomena are held to reflect a set of universal, primitive, and elemental patterns, whose effective embodiment in a literary work evokes a profound response from the reader. The death-rebirth theme is often said to be the archetype of archetypes. Other archetypal themes are the journey underground, the heavenly ascent, the search for the father, the heaven/hell image, the Prometheus rebuff, the scapegoat, the earth goddess, and the female fatale.

Gender/Feminist Criticism. A feminist critic sees cultural and economic disabilities in a "patriarchal" society that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities, including women's cultural identification as merely a passive object, or "Other," and man is the defining and dominating subject. There are several assumptions and concepts held in common by most feminist critics:

- Our civilization is pervasively patriarchal.
- The concepts of "gender" are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs, affected by the omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilization.
- This patriarchal ideology pervades those writings that have been considered great literature. Such works include autonomous female role models, are implicitly addressed to male readers, and shut out the woman reader as an alien outsider or solicit her to identify against herself by assuming male values and ways of perceiving, feeling, and acting.

This type of criticism is somewhat like Marxist criticism, but instead of focusing on the relationships between the classes it focuses on the relationships between the genders. Under this theory, you would examine the patterns of thought, behavior, values, enfranchisement, and power in relationship between the sexes. For example, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been" can be seen as the story of the malicious dominance men have over women both physically and psychologically. Connie is the female victim of the role in society that she perceives herself playing—the coy young lass whose life depends on her looks.

Social-Class/Marxist Criticism. A Marxist critic grounds his or her theory and practice on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially on the following claims:

1. The evolving history of humanity, its institutions, and its ways of thinking are determined by the changing mode of its "material production"—that is, by its basic economic organization.
2. Historical changes in the fundamental mode of production effect essential changes both in the constitution and power relations of social classes, which carry on a conflict for economic, political, and social advantage.
3. Human consciousness in any era is constituted by an ideology—that is, a set of concepts, beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by which they explain what they take to be reality. A Marxist critic typically undertakes to "explain" the literature of any era by revealing the economic, class, and ideological determinants of the way an author writes. A Marxist critic examines the relation of the text to the social reality of that time and place.

This school of critical theory focuses on power and money in works of literature. Who has the power/money? Who does not? What happens as a result? For example, it could be said that "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is about the upper class attempting to maintain its power and influence over the lower class by chasing Ichabod, a lower-class citizen with aspirations toward the upper class, out of town. This would explain some of the story's descriptions of land, wealth, and hearty living that are seen through Ichabod's eyes.

New Criticism is directed against the prevailing concern of critics with the lives and psychology of authors, with social background, and with literary
history. There are several points of view and procedures that are held in common by most New Critics:

1. A poem should be treated as primarily poetry and should be regarded as an independent and self-sufficient object.
2. The distinctive procedure of the New Critic is explication, or close reading; the detailed and subtle analysis of the complex interrelations and ambiguities of the components within a work.
3. The principles of New Criticism are fundamentally verbal. That is, literature is conceived to be a special kind of language whose attributes are defined by systematic opposition to the language of science and of practical and logical discourse. The key concepts of this criticism deal with the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.
4. The distinction between literary genres is not essential.

Psychological and Psychoanalytic Criticism. Psychological criticism deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. The assumption of psychoanalytic critics is that a work of literature is correlated with its author's mental traits:

1. Reference to the author’s personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work.
2. Reference to literary works is made in order to establish, biographically, the personality of the author.
3. The mode of reading a literary work itself is a way of experiencing the distinctive subjectivity or consciousness of its author.

This theory requires that we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text (although to apply an author’s psychology to a text can also be considered biographical criticism, depending on your point of view). For example, alcohol allows the latent thoughts and desires of the narrator of "The Black Cat" to surface in such a way that he ends up killing the self-control imposed by social norms and standards and becomes the man his psyche has repressed his whole life.

Reader Response Criticism. This type of criticism focuses on the activity of reading a work of literature. Reader response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meanings to the responses of readers to the text. By this shift of perspective a literary work is converted into an activity that goes on in a reader's mind, and what had been features of the work itself—narrator, plot, characters, style, and structure—is less important than the connection between a reader's experience and the text. It is through this interaction that meaning is made. Students seem most comfortable with this school of criticism. Proponents believe that literature has no objective meaning or existence. People bring their own thoughts, moods, and experiences to whatever text they are reading and get out of it whatever they happen to, based on their own expectations and ideas. For example, when I read "Sonny's Blues" I am reminded of my younger sister who loves music. The story really gets to me because sometimes I worry about her and my relationship with her. I want to support her and am reminded of this as I see that Sonny's brother does not support Sonny.

Other theories we'll be discussing in class include the following:

Deconstructionist Criticism. Deconstruction is by far the most difficult critical theory for people to understand. It was developed by some very unconventional thinkers, who declared that literature means nothing because language means nothing. In other words, we cannot say that we know what the "meaning" of a story is because there is no way of knowing. For example, in some stories (such as Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?") that do not have tidy endings, you cannot assume you know what happened.

Historical Criticism. Using this theory requires that you apply to a text specific historical information about the time during which an author wrote. Historical, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual climate of the time. For example, William Faulkner wrote many of his novels and stories during and after World War II, a fact that helps to explain the feelings of darkness, defeat, and struggle that pervade much of his work.
### Literary Theory Cards

#### Gender Criticism
**Assumptions**
1. The work has no objective basis, so an author's intent, audience, and context of writing are irrelevant.
2. The work's themes and ideas are influenced by the author's own concerns, which are at the center of the work.
3. Men and women often differ in their reading of texts. These differences are significant.

**Strategies**
1. Consider the gender of the author or the characters: What are the gender roles in this work?
2. Analyze how gender stereotypes might reflect or constrain society.
3. Look at the effects of power dynamics inherent in the text.

#### Social Power/Market Criticism
**Assumptions**
1. Karl Marx argued that the way people think and behave in any society is determined by economic factors and market forces.
2. In this view, the production of people and their view of society is controlled by economic and political systems.
3. Marxist criticism applies these arguments to the study of literary texts.

**Strategies**
1. Evaluate the way different groups of people are represented in the text, considering the level of social coercion and social injustice depicted.
2. Analyze the social effects of the literary work.
3. Look at the effects of power dynamics inherent in the text.

#### Biographical Criticism
**Assumptions**
1. Because authors typically write about important people and events, the context and circumstances of their lives are often reflected in the literary works they create.
2. The context for a literary work includes information about the author, his or her background, and the society of which the author is a part.
3. Interpretation of the work should be based on an understanding of the context. Context can provide insight into themes, historical references, social experiences or movements, and the creation of fictional characters.

**Strategies**
1. Research the author's life, and note the data available about the work.
2. Research the author's time period, including history, economics, and society.
3. Research the context of the literary text and add your own interpretation.

#### Archetypal Criticism
**Assumptions**
1. Gabriel Andrew defined archetypes as universal themes, symbols, and patterns that are found in literature, art, and life at all levels.
2. Archetypes are used as a basis for understanding the psychological and emotional aspects of literature.
3. Archetypal criticism has been applied to a wide range of literary works.

**Strategies**
1. Consider the use of archetypal elements (e.g., love, death, and the hero) and how they affect the narrative.
2. Look for archetypal motifs and symbols, such as the hero's journey, the hero's transformation, and the hero's journey.
3. Consider the structure of the story, with certain patterns in the text.

#### Reader Response Criticism
**Assumptions**
1. An author's intentions are not reliable indicators of meaning; they are not the value of a text.
2. The interpretation of a text is a process, and descriptions of that process are valuable.
3. Understanding a text as a whole, including interpreting the subjective and personal response, is important.

**Strategies**
1. Read through the text with an open mind, imagining the experience of an informed reader.
2. Read the text in a way that you understand it, with your own responses.
3. Relax to the text as a whole, embracing the experience of interpreting the text.
Structuralist Criticism

Assumptions
1. Language is not the result of cultural evolution but the product of unconscious patterns reinforced by common symbols.
2. Language is a system of arbitrary signs that are used to communicate ideas and emotions.
3. Signs are structured in a way that reflects the underlying logic of human thought.
4. The structure of language is invariant, and it is possible to classify languages based on their internal structure.

Strategies
1. Focus on the relationships between signs and their meanings, and how these relationships are constructed and maintained.
2. Identify the underlying patterns and rules that govern the use of signs.
3. Analyze the way in which signs are used to construct meaning and how they function within a cultural context.
4. Consider the role of social, cultural, and historical factors in the construction of meaning.

Decompositional Criticism

Assumptions
1. Signs are arbitrary and can be replaced by any other sign that is functionally equivalent.
2. The meaning of a sign is determined by its relationship to other signs, and it is possible to break down complex meanings into simpler components.
3. The meaning of a sign is not fixed, and it can change depending on the context in which it is used.

Strategies
1. Identify the components of a sign and analyze their relationship to each other.
2. Examine the way in which signs are used to construct meaning and how they function within a cultural context.
3. Consider the role of social, cultural, and historical factors in the construction of meaning.

Formalist Criticism

Assumptions
1. The meaning of a literary work is determined by the structure of its language, and it is possible to analyze the work without reference to its cultural context.
2. The meaning of a literary work is determined by the relationships between the parts of the language, and it is possible to analyze the work without reference to its cultural context.
3. The meaning of a literary work is determined by the way in which the parts of the language are combined to produce a whole, and it is possible to analyze the work without reference to its cultural context.

Strategies
1. Focus on the relationships between signs and their meanings, and how these relationships are constructed and maintained.
2. Identify the underlying patterns and rules that govern the use of signs.
3. Analyze the way in which signs are used to construct meaning and how they function within a cultural context.
4. Consider the role of social, cultural, and historical factors in the construction of meaning.

Humanist Criticism

Assumptions
1. The meaning of a literary work is determined by the author's intention and the social and historical context in which it was written.
2. The meaning of a literary work is determined by the author's intention and the social and historical context in which it was written.
3. The meaning of a literary work is determined by the way in which the parts of the language are combined to produce a whole, and it is possible to analyze the work without reference to its cultural context.

Strategies
1. Focus on the relationships between signs and their meanings, and how these relationships are constructed and maintained.
2. Identify the underlying patterns and rules that govern the use of signs.
3. Analyze the way in which signs are used to construct meaning and how they function within a cultural context.
4. Consider the role of social, cultural, and historical factors in the construction of meaning.

Poststructuralist Criticism

Assumptions
1. The meaning of a literary work is determined by the way in which the parts of the language are combined to produce a whole, and it is possible to analyze the work without reference to its cultural context.
2. The meaning of a literary work is determined by the way in which the parts of the language are combined to produce a whole, and it is possible to analyze the work without reference to its cultural context.
3. The meaning of a literary work is determined by the way in which the parts of the language are combined to produce a whole, and it is possible to analyze the work without reference to its cultural context.

Strategies
1. Focus on the relationships between signs and their meanings, and how these relationships are constructed and maintained.
2. Identify the underlying patterns and rules that govern the use of signs.
3. Analyze the way in which signs are used to construct meaning and how they function within a cultural context.
4. Consider the role of social, cultural, and historical factors in the construction of meaning.
APPENDIX F: TRANSCRIPTS OF CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

Class Discussion, 9-20-2012 (Section A): Create Dangerously

The class began with me explaining some of the norms for note taking that are part of my participation as the class instructor. I explained to students that during these sessions, I actively take notes about what is said either on the class Smartboard or on the whiteboard (both located in the front of the classroom).

This particular discussion took place the day after students had engaged in small group discussions about writing they had completed in response to the first six chapters of Danticat’s book. Groups were based on prompt selection (student who responded to the same prompt were grouped together by me). Prompts to which they responded included:

- What images of what society is and/or the possibilities for what it might become does Danticat portray in her writing?
- What aspects of Danticat’s identity come through her writing? Choose a moment [or two] where you feel like you were able to understand her through her writing and discuss.
- Choose one issue related to the lives of those living in the diaspora that Danticat addresses in her writing. Has reading her words changed your perspectives on that issue?
- How does Danticat achieve a sense of realism in her writing? [Be specific about techniques she uses.]
- Pick a question about identity that Danticat raises in her writing. What answer[s] [or reasons for the lack of answers] does she offer?
- To whom is Danticat writing? For whom does she write?

During the previous day’s small group discussions, students were instructed to structure their conversations according to the following guiding questions:

1. What were some of the major ideas/arguments in response to the prompt that group members developed in their writing?
2. What passages were most important in supporting those arguments? [Make note of page numbers for reference purposes.]
3. What questions, issues, etc. came up either during your writing or during your discussion that you want to bring to the larger class conversation?

The discussion that followed was organized around the prompts, which were used as topics, and members of student groups reported on their discussions.

Me: We don’t need to start with any specific group, but what I want to try to you today and what you’ll notice me doing during these conversations is usually track what you’re saying or what the class is coming up with, and a lot of times what I’ll do is I’ll either use a wireless keyboard or I’ll sit on a stool near my desk and I’ll take some notes on the Activeboard. Um, today I’ll just do it on the whiteboard.

And what I usually do is I repost those class notes on Edmodo. So, if you’re not here and
you want to, you know, know some of the stuff we talked about, like some of the topics we raised and the page numbers we pointed to—things like that—it also helps for you to research and keep track of things we talked about and the flow of conversation.

Uh, so what I'm going to track today is just some of the kind of topics you raised based on these questions. Uh, we do eventually want to start talking about theme, all right? And the best way to get started talking about different themes in a text is to look at the overall topic raised in a text and to start to construct ideas about themes from those topics. Okay? So, I'm just going to keep track of things up here while we're talking, and um you'll see how it goes.

Um, so does anyone from [at this point discussion was interrupted by an announcement about a faculty lunch meeting] hmm, lunch period powwow [some laughter from students] so some of the questions related to her identity…related to issues in society…so again are there any groups that have—uh—that want to start us off talking? Just tell us what you talked about and maybe point us to some things in the book? What was interesting? Yes? [silence from students] We gonna do the silent standoff again? [laughter]

All right, so I'll pick a topic. [pointing to student volunteer] Oh, yeah, go ahead, Amir! Uh, what did your group talk about? What question?

Amir: Our group, we did uh [inaudible over class noise]

Me: What did this text reveal about Danticat's identity? Okay, good. So Amir.

Amir: “What did this text reveal about Danticat’s identity?” That’s what we did. And with our group, we kinda focused it on the same, like uh like thing.

Me: Okay

Amir: About…about. Okay, okay yeah yeah I got it, I got it, I got it. [another student says, “Come on, Amir.”] About how she felt like this...[other students speak to him informally] What? Oh yeah, and like me, I said, um, I said that she was living like a double life because when she’d go into New York...[again other students around him speaking in asides with him] When she’d go to New York and be like um yeah people would associate her with her home in Haiti and then when she would go to Haiti, people would, they would call her diaspora and kinda [inaudible on recording]

Me: [while writing on the board] That’s interesting.

Amir: So, and she talked about being a like Lily said, like an artist and um [again, he consults people around him, some light laughter and a pause].

Me: Good, that’s interesting, so a topic that definitely comes up in this text, right? Uh, I don’t want to call it a novel. It’s really not a novel, it’s a collection of essays...so in this collection, all right? Uh, something about misplaced or maybe displaced. Uh, you said “misplaced” and I wrote “displaced.” I like this idea, or I like that you pointed out that they
called her by the name of this group of displaced people. They call her literally “the diaspora” right? Uh, and so diaspora becomes what—this might be a term you want to kind of keep in your um notes. [turns towards the board and writes.]

It becomes like an identity marker. What does that mean when I say that? What do you think I mean when I say “an identity marker?” [while process writing on the board] Yeah, like instead of like...just like your name marks something about you, specifically, okay? Your name is tied to you, right? If someone stops calling you by your name and started calling you by, um, some other descriptive term, okay? Um, it could become like an identity marker.

We’re going to read a book by Sherman Alexie called The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, right? [a student near the front of the class can be heard making an “oooh” sound] And so for him, all right, uh or for his character—Sherman Alexie’s character—[teacher indicates some students who are chatting] focus—okay, For Sherman Alexie’s character um part-time Indian becomes his identity marker, it becomes something that—a way of describing him, all right? Um, and so and actually, I’m going to ask you to think about identity markers for yourselves as we go on in this unit because you're going to do some writing um about uh identity and things like that. Okay? Uh, so that’s very interesting. Um and the idea of a double life, okay, it definitely comes through in a lot of her writing too as well, so um, I think, you know, I think that’s definitely a good jumping point for us.

Um, other things either about her identity or about anything else other groups discussed? [looking around the room for volunteers] Uh, let me get Parker, and then...[trailed off]

Parker: Um, so my group discussed “for whom was she writing for.” But, um, I think that she like mentioned it in like three different essays that even though they might be free, they really don’t have like freedom to like say things because people will come after them. Like for the um commenter [sic], the radio commenter [sic], he got assassinated for saying like things that he um like without filtering like what he feels and um, the woman that got—that they tried to kill because her husband was you know voting for this one guy, this candidate. So, I think that they all kind of tied in with the first chapter that she was talking about.

Me: [writing notes on the white board] Mmmhmm. [pause] Okay there’s something about freedom and repression and especially where speech is concerned. And the topic that you focused on was...or the question that your group focused on was which one?

Parker: Um, “To whom was she writing for?”

Me: Did this come out of that?

Parker: Um, yeah.

Me: In what way? Like how did that connect to “whom?”

Parker: I think that cause she was probably trying to like show, like everyone that even, like what’s really happening maybe that they might not be aware of. So...[trailed off]
Me: [writing] Okay. So people outside of Haiti—you felt like she was writing to. Okay. Uh, Nyah? You had your hand up. Yeah?

Nyah: Um, it’s about her identity. I was thinking that like to me she didn’t have her own—well no she did have her own identity but she wanted to represent like people…like to me, a lot of women especially. And like she wanted to have a face. Kinda like I said in my essay. It was like…it just reminded me of like a quilt with like pictures or like fabrics of different women who went through different things. She kind of just like stitched them all together to make the whole—to make the whole book. To make all series of stories that she’s telling.

Me: That’s interesting. Stitching together images. And you said specifically of women.

Nyah: Yes. That’s just—I know she did talk about the um two men, but I think I got more captured in the part when she wrote the letter to the character in her book. She wrote a letter to a character that she wrote about. About the girl who—that we all know—yeah—with the mom and the finger. That’s what I was thinking—that. And then she was saying that people were saying that she was telling—was telling all of like—telling negative things about Haiti only. And she said—she said um—isn’t that the part about fiction to make characters—men and women—represent the everyday figures? So that’s why I…[trails off here]

Me: Yeah, can you point us to that, actually? That passage in the book? Maybe we can take a look at that.

Nyah: [looking in her copy of the book] I think it’s on…

Me: The other class was interested in this one as well.

Nyah: Uh, page thirty-two.

Me: Yeah, let’s take a look at page thirty-two. Everyone get there and then we’ll…

Nyah: The last paragraph.

Me: Why don’t you pick that passage there that you want to read?

Nyah: Okay, can I read the last paragraph?

Me: Yeah! Sure. All right? We’ll all get there. We’ll wait for everybody. Page thirty-two. Um why don’t you…can you start actually with a few paragraphs up, which is the virginity testing element?

Nyah: Okay. [reading from the text] “The virginity testing element of the book led to a backlash in some Haitian American circles. ‘You are a liar,’ a woman wrote to me right before I left on the trip, ‘You dishonor us, making us sexual and psychological misfits.’ ‘Why was she taught to read and write?’ I overheard a man saying at a Haitian American fund-
raising gala in New York, where I was getting an award for writing this book. ‘That is not us.
The things she writes, they are not us.’ Maligned as we were in the media at the time, as
disaster-prone refugees and boat people and AIDS carriers, many of us had become overly
sensitive and were eager to censor anyone who did not project a ‘positive image’ of Haiti and
Haitians. The letter writer was right, though. I was lying in that first book and in all the other
pieces of fiction I have written since. But it isn’t that what the word fiction or novel on the
book jacket had implied? Isn’t even the most elementary piece of fiction about a singularly
exceptional fictional person, so that even if that fictional person is presented as an everyman
or everywoman, he or she is bound to be the most exceptional everyman or everywoman
fictional person of the lot? And how can one individual—be it me or anyone else—know
how nine to ten million other individuals should or would behave? Furthermore, though I
was not saying that “testing” happened in every Haitian household, to every Haitian girl, I
know many women and girls who had been “tested” in that way.”

Me: So, reactions to that passage in terms of you know, representing Haitian identities in
women? Yeah, go ahead.

Amir: [much of the opening of his statement is inaudible; he reiterates the point Nyah has
just made] I think what they were doing was wrong overall because who would—why would
you…[pause] If you want your country to be known for other things than AIDS and you
know being poor people and all that, then why would you want…ah I can’t say it. It makes
sense in my head, but I’m trying to have it make sense for everybody else.

Me: Hmm.

Amir: Uh, if you don’t want people to think…

Me: Who’s “you?”

Amir: Other…not other Haitian people…people that’s not Haitian. If you want non-Haitian
people…

Me: No, but who’s the “you?” If who wants non-Haitian people?

Amir: If the intellectuals who said, “Why would they teach her to read…”

Me: Oh, so these people who were criticizing her? If her critics…right, go ahead.

Amir: If you want them to have a positive kind of idea of Haiti [pause] I can’t, it makes sense
in my head, but I can’t…

Me: So you think they were wrong to criticize her.

Amir: I think they were wrong to criticize her.

Me: Okay, because if they wanted other people to have a positive view of Haiti, then what?
What do you think was…?

Amir: Why not just say the whole truth? That’s what…that’s what I’m saying…

Me: Okay. I think you’re on the way to something. Yeah, Gabby?

Gina: Yeah, I agree with Amir that, um, you gotta take the good with the bad and stuff like that. And you know, Haiti’s not gonna be this…like they want it to be like this hugely positive outlook on everything Haitian, pretty much is sort of what they’re saying.

Amir: [interjecting] And that’s not what it was.

Gina: Even though its exaggerated, and that’s not how its gonna be, no matter where you go. So I think it’s just…And she, she’s allowed to write whatever she wants. I mean it’s her story and if she wants to write about this, which it probably did happen, she shouldn’t be criticized for it because you’re not going to find the perfect paradise in Haiti or anywhere.

Me: Can you…is there someone who…or can we think of a reason why these concerns were legitimate? Or, you know, can we get inside the mind, maybe, of why her critics said what they said? Like, what were they…what were their motivations do you think for feeling so offended by the images that she was putting forth? Kiera?

Kiera: I think people were just overly sensitive. They were like aware of the negative perception of their people in like America. And so, they kind of just…I think they pretty much overreacted because they didn’t want people to think that everyone in Haiti was that way even though like it was obviously a fictional story, they you know, some people don’t think that way, they just…[inaudible, trailing off]

Me: Why do you think…yeah, go ahead.

Lily: To back what Kiera said, I mean. I think that they wouldn’t want to be criticized in a bad image of themselves because of the violence, you know, the diseases and all of that stuff that happened over there. And they just want to be like…for a foreigner to look at them and say, “Oh, you know…”—they kind of in a way criticize them for, you know, what she reads. So you know that’s kind of the way I think the criticizer gets kind of motivated by this cause they don’t want a bad image of their people and themselves.

Me: Yeah, go ahead, guys.

Gina: Like as of right now, Haiti gets a lot of help from different places because of all the stuff that’s happened to them. So maybe they feel like if they ever did need help before this—this is a while ago this book was written right?

Me: Uh, I think it’s not that far back, but the events in it occur in the past.

Gina: So they don’t want other places to have a negative outlook on them and say like, you
know, even though they already have all this bad stuff to them, like they have a dictatorship, like all the people dying and stuff, like not being [inaudible]. They don’t want this negative outlook because people might now be…like they might not feel like they have to help them. You know what I mean, not think they’re good people or something like that. Like they just want all that violence and stuff to not define them cause they don’t want a bad look.

Me: Interesting. Amir and then Nyah.

Amir: I still think that the people were criticizing them was [that] they were too proud. I don’t think they were oversensitive, I just think they were too proud and they were scared of what other people may have thought of them, you know. They were being proud of who they are and you know, where they come from. I don’t think there’s nothing wrong with that. But you can’t rewrite history, and what happened, happened, and what’s gonna happen is gonna happen. So, might have to get over whatever feeling they have.

Nyah: Tegan can go before me cause her hand just popped up.

Me: You want to go Tegan? Go ahead.

Tegan: No she can go.

Nyah: You sure?

Me: Go ahead, Nyah.

Nyah: Um, I was gonna say that I think the word that missing in this conversation to me is *exposure*. Only because like maybe they didn’t think—maybe they think that she is exposing them instead. I don’t want to necessarily say that they actually think that what she’s writing about isn’t going on. Because they know, cause they live there. I think that they were more so afraid and hurt that she’s telling, you know, us—I’m saying, you know, people in New York or America about what goes on over there. And I think its like this—I don’t know, that’s just what I think about it.

Me: Tegan. I’m just writing…I’m listening, I’m just…I’ll talk about what I’m writing down here. Go ahead.

Tegan: Well, I was kinda—sorta supporting what Nyah said that there’s—that she’s exposing them to a dark part of their culture that they might not the world to know. But, uh, like didn’t it say that the critics are Haitian Americans as well?

Me: Yes.

Tegan: So I was gonna say that oh maybe they felt because she’s not necessarily fully Haitian, because she’s Haitian American, that she doesn’t have that right to because she [inaudible] but because they’re Haitian American as well, that doesn’t really…
Me: Good. All right, so I wrote a lot here. There’s a good question there. Who has the right to tell this story? Right? Or the story. [writing on board] You know this or the story of Haiti. So we’re talking about stitching together images of women, about representing Haitian identities and for who this is written, and so we’re raising a lot of questions about problems with this that she’s encountered, right? So problems with this include…[pauses to explain some shorthand on board] critics of her. I mean we look at that passage on page thirty-two and thirty-three and these Haitian American commentators who were critical of her about her writing. And so, we’re trying to get at like what is their fear? Like why…where is this criticism coming from and is it justified? Can we understand it? Um, is she able to understand some of it? And so, I think you’re getting at some really fundamental things here. I mean about fear of how your country is going to be perceived, um about um, you know, a lack of exposure that maybe Americans have had to Haitian society. Think about, for instance, the story she tells in chapter six, I think it is, where she talks about how her whole like the books she read as a young girl were mostly these Western European, white writers. Right? The first time she picked up a book by a Haitian author was when she was like sixteen or seventeen living in Brooklyn and she went to the library and found that one rack of book, right? So if you think about in terms of a whole library of books that there was…that the number of books dedicated to Haitian-born writers occupied a single rack right? I mean that really exemplifies just how limited exposure Americans had to Haitian writers. And so, the fear of these Haitians, these Haitian Americans, uh, might be that in light of the fact that Americans have such a narrow view of Haiti, um, to put forth further negative views, all right, might be frightening and scary to them. It might hurt their pride in that sense, you know?

And so, what I wrote up here is part of their fear might be “the risk of being essentialized.” I want you to make note of this term essentialized and I’ll talk to you about what that means. This is an important term if you’re studying culture and race and ethnicity. What do we mean when we talk about “the essence” of something? [someone says, “Its value?”] Yeah, uh a lot of it has to do with value…okay, can we get a little bit closer maybe to a more literal meaning of what the essence of something is? Yeah. [inaudible comment from student] Yeah. The fundamental thing that it is. Okay? And so, although we’re all human, right? We all have incredibly different personalities and histories and characters. Um, we have different families, and cultures, and ethnicities that we come from. We each have our own individual day-to-day experiences…things that we experience. And so, when we try to group people together into ethnic groups, racial groups, or any other kind of demographic, some will argue that we run the risk of essentializing people and saying that all people of this type are one way. [comments from students inaudible] Like a stereotype. A stereotype is one way of essentializing someone. So the essentializing is the action, the stereotype is the thing, in a sense. And so, I think part of what you’re getting at here about the fear that these Americans, or these Haitian Americans have about Danticat’s subject matter and the things that she portrays is that they’re afraid that all Haitian women will be essentialized as victims of virginity tests, as victims in general, maybe. And so, I think that’s a really interesting analysis there that you’re coming to.

So, be aware of that term, all right? And that goes along with Tegan’s—kind of—the question she raised that who has the right to tell the story? How do we decide what story to
tell? The fact that it’s fiction, does that let her off the hook or doesn’t it? And I think she’s struggling with this. She doesn’t have an answer necessarily. Or maybe there are answers emerging in her text somewhere. Yeah. [acknowledging a student]

Frazier: [partially inaudible] we were talking...in what she was intending by writing about Haiti and about why she wanted to write this [inaudible] ...so the thing that we were trying to figure out was if she really wanted...if she wanted to just, you know, write for the Haitian people and how people perceive that, do you think that she was completely committed to, you know, writing for the Haitians or for people she knew, or was it...or do you think that she at all wanted...cause it talks about how she felt guilty for writing maybe more a little bit for herself, and do you think that had any...?

Me: Well that’s a good...let’s ask that question to everybody. What do we think?

Amir: I think she was writing this, like she said more for herself than for people, because in the beginning of the book she even admits that—well she don’t admit that she’s writing for herself, but she says that writing is therapeutic—no, wrong, wrong book. That was in Mr. T’s book. Maybe that writing will seem more therapeutic and that it will help her get through stuff. And I think that what she was doing is making fiction stuff up, and it was in away—all right, it was in a way helping her with her own [inaudible]...

Nyah: What was the question?

Me: So, the question is, like—Who is she writing for? is the question they were trying to answer. And so, the possible answers that Frazier was trying to present there were, is she writing it for the Haitian people? Or, is she writing it for herself? Is she writing it for some mixture of the two? And, you know, which one do we think is the stronger intended audience, maybe? So were talking a little bit maybe about authorial intent. What are the intentions of the author? Right?

And before I get to Nyah, just a comment on what Amir said. It’s—um basing your critique of this on something you read in another book is totally legitimate. I think that in this book you can see her writing for therapy. You know, for therapeutic reasons. Right? I think we can explore that. So, authorial intent, you know, um, I’m gonna put here [writing on the board] “therapeutic” with a question mark. You know, is there something therapeutic about this? Not just representative of people, but also kind of like exploratory in that sense? Do we know the word *cathartic*? [writing on the board] Do we know this? [some mixed talking from students among themselves, no students volunteer a definition] Okay, this is a good vocabulary word for you—and I didn’t forget about you Nyah. Just give me a second. So [reading from the board] c-a-t-h-a-r-t-i-c this comes all the way back from the ancient Greeks, this word. Let me ask you this: Do you know what a catheter is? [several students laugh and a few say, “Yeah!”] Yeah, so Gabby, what’s a catheter?

Gina: It’s for old men who can’t pee. [laughter from teacher and students]

Me: [in an overly dramatic tone] Now, I want you to *listen* to that definition. “A catheter is
A catheter is a tool used primarily for older men who cannot pee anymore. Well I’ve never seen it on a woman. Me: Well, [repeating her comment and laughing] I’ve never seen a woman one...that’s interesting. Okay. [laughter]. Uh, a catheter is a tool or an instrument—a medical instrument—that is used to assist any patient—man or woman—with removing urine from the body if they can’t—if you’re not able to. If you’re hospitalized for some things you might be catheterized, okay? Because you can’t get out of bed. Um, and so—very medical [referring to the definition just given; laughter from class] and so, uh, yeah. All right? So the reason we call the tool a catheter is because the root of the word means “to flush or expel.” Okay, so it’s a tool that’s used to help you expel the urine from your body. Okay? The term cathartic has the same root. And what it means is to get out the emotions—to use something a way to get—to sort of cause an outpouring of emotion. So, the Greeks believed when they wrote tragedy—Greek tragedy—that the one of the goals of Greek tragedy was catharsis. Catharsis is the feeling of having—going through this. Okay? [writing on board] So cathartic is the adjective; catharsis is the noun for the experience. —sis at the end, okay? Catharsis. Um, and so when you talk about tearjerkers, right, a drama or something that’s a tearjerker. [some laughter] Don’t make a face there, Riley. We’re talking about something that forces you to cry, in a sense. Right? It gets—it helps you get out emotions. [a number of students start to talk to each other in response to this example, one student exclaims, “Yes! That’s so sad”] And so, the idea is, right, that drama, film, and plays and books can be cathartic in that they’re meant to get you to explore emotions that might be inside you and to get those things out. And I think what we’re getting at her is there’s something cathartic for the author in writing this in that she’s able to get some emotions out through this writing, in that sense. And in that sense it might be therapeutic for her, as well. Okay? So we’re talking about the goals of writing, and we’re talking about the goals of writing not just for an audience but for herself.

So, I don’t think there’s one potential answer, there Frazier. I think there are multiple, you know, reasons. Nyah, do you remember what you wanted to say?

Nyah: Mmmmm, I remember. Um, I thought that her audience—even though I picked the other question, but I still talked about her audience because I think that’s part of her identity—I think that she was writing kind of for people just—you know how she kept saying, “quietly, quietly?” So, I thought she was writing for people who are like on the edge and weren’t afraid to take risks, like her. And that, I don’t know, I kinda felt like she was writing for people that just didn’t really have the—a say, or couldn’t really come out of this emotional and physical shell that they were in because of this harsh dictatorship that they were under. And just because of the lifestyle in Haiti, I guess. And that’s why I thought she was writing for kind of the underdog and then for people that were gonna read for the same reason that she wrote.

Me: [indicating the whiteboard] I wrote “writing for the silenced” writing for people without
a voice—the voiceless maybe? For people who aren’t allowed to have a voice? That’s interesting. Yeah?

Aria: Um, I did that question, and I kinda did the same explanation as Nyah, but I did it for like the people who create dangerously. And I tried to explain what I meant by that, but um basically its people who knew the risks of reading a book like this and the risks of writing a book like this. That’s what she wrote it for, so that she can reach out to people who have the same passion as her and so they can like—it can motivate them to like take a chance and to know that they can speak out.

Me: Okay, so for other potential dangerous creators—other potential artists. [writing on the board] For other potential creators or artists or creators or artists who face danger, let’s say. Cause they’re not doing—they’re creating dangerously, they’re not creating danger. Um, someone else had their hand up over there. Yeah, Parker?

Parker: Yeah, I just want to go back to what Aria said, because there’s a passage in the book that says “create dangerously…”[trailing off].

Me: Yeah, um let’s look…what page is it on so that we can look at it? [inaudible answer] What page, Parker?

Parker: Ten.

Me: Ten. All right, let’s get to page ten here. Yeah, why don’t you read—read that—maybe if not the whole paragraph, at least some parts of it here.

Parker: “Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them.”

Me: Mmhmm. Good. No, I think, I think that’s probably good. Um, you know. I think at the bottom of that page where she continues and says, “Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, a future that we may have yet to dream of, someone may risk his or her life to read us. Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, we may also save someone’s life [or mind] because they have given us a passport, making us honorary citizens of their culture.” That’s an interesting idea that a writer can make you an ‘honorary citizen’ of a culture. You know? Yeah? [Frazier references another passage on page fifteen, but much of what he says is inaudible] Yeah. Go to page fifteen here. Good, [scanning book] Frazier, where are you? Second paragraph there?

Frazier: [scanning book] Yeah, the part where she quotes—well I guess—yeah that’s…

Me: [scanning book] Yeah, okay, whatever. Yeah, what’s—what did you want to talk…

Frazier: Uh, basically that she— [interrupted by announcement from principal about free food in the faculty room]
Me: [joking in response to the announcement] And he called the music staff first. That’s what that was. Second class citizen, right here [indicating himself]. I see how it is. [laughter from students] Seriously, though this is what always happens. This is sidebar. 11/12 teachers always get their lunch last, and whenever they bring in like leftovers or lunch or anything like that—what are you laughing about back there? Um, it’s like we go down there and there’s like one sad little sandwich like all like picked over, like…okay let me grab this I guess. We always get the short end of things, here. Okay, go ahead Frazier, sorry we were distracted.

Frazier: Um, how the writer said, “I would always answer that I took the nationality of my reader, which means that when a Japanese reader reads my books, I immediately become a Japanese writer.” So there…

Me: Yeah.

Frazier: So by writing you know, they want to tell—I guess she wants to tell her story and she would agree with him that, you know, regardless of who is reading it, there—kind of there’s a cross—there’s kind of a connection between reader and writer even though they don’t actually interact. Like through the book, you know, even if it’s written in a completely different culture…someone else will…

Me: [writing on the board] I’m putting something separate here. So, like writing can connect cultures? Or can connect people and cultures?

Frazier: Yeah.

Me: I said to the other class, I need like a whiteboard the size of that whole wall, um if I’m really gonna use it effectively. That’s why it’s useful when I use…I usually put up a Word document, and then I can scroll. But one whiteboard isn’t—doesn’t do enough. Yeah, Amir?

Amir: I don’t know if I agree with that, right? People connecting people and cultures. Because, I mean I see how you get that, but I also see how—but it also can like—it can separate people and put people like you said, like in exclusive places, and like—and…I don’t know, I just don’t get that…

Me: Okay, [writing on the board] so let’s say “writing can connect or separate” [some side conversation and laughing between Amir and those around him]. So it can connect people and cultures or separate, maybe. So then maybe we need to explore—I mean I think you may be seeing her focusing on both. You know, in some ways. Yeah?

Nyah: Can I ask him a question? [indicating Amir]

Me: Yeah! Yeah, please ask each other questions. Talk to each other.

Nyah: Nah, I’m saying, um. Are you saying that separation is always a bad thing? Are you saying that some separate, like just her culture—like if Gabby wrote a book about something
it’s just going to separate her culture, I mean it’s gonna bring separation between her and me, because we’re two different—I’m just trying to figure out what you said.

Amir: Uh, it’s up to the person that’s the upset person not it’s not up to—you know what I’m saying? Like the writer can write whatever he wanna to write, but it—one person reads it, like Nyah said, if she reads Gabby’s book then ultimately that’s like her feelings that’s gonna be hurt or not—I mean that she’s gonna separate from whatever.

Nyah: Cause I know all sixth grade we read like Jewish books, and I felt so out of the loop when we would read those stories.

Me: Hmm. Okay…what was that—where do you think that feeling came from?

Nyah: Well, it—I loved—I love Ms. R—probably one of my favorite teachers, but she—the—we read Jewish books—we read soo many Jewish books—and we did like Jewish projects, so it was just a little like ‘I don’t get it.’ Like I get the importance of it like that. I didn’t really care that much—no I cared about the uh—I’ve always cared about the Holocaust, like I think that’s such a horrible thing. But the book—and we were supposed to make—we had to make this box and put like stars in it and stuff, and I was like ‘Okay?’ And some people were like, ‘Yeah! I got all this stuff at home!’ and I’m like ‘I gotta go buy it. I don’t have a—a like that little hat in my house.” [laughter from class]

Me: So, do you think it was—uh, so you think that it was um, because of a lack of diversity in that sense? With the things you were reading…

Nyah: Yeah, I think I had—this is the first class, you can ask Layla. Soon as we was like you were giving us a Haitian book and an African American book, or something—cause one of my friends was like, ‘Oh, you’re actually happy now reading a book for…’ I was like, ‘Yes.’ Because last year—I mean none of our authors—all of our authors were white. It was just so annoying. [addressing another student] Shut up, Logan, cause I can hear you all the way from over here, and I’m just saying. That I think—[other students jump in with comments] I was just saying that I think an author of a—I want to read something from a author that’s not just white. I’ve been doing that since I’ve been in [this school]. It’s like a little sickening. That’s all.

Me: Okay. Um, and I can speak to a little bit about why that might be. Uh, not why it’s sickening [laughter from class] but why you might be getting um all white authors, but uh let’s move around a little bit more. Yeah?

Scarlett: Well I was gonna say that I, um [inaudible] the prompt how did she create realism through her writing and I think that because she is—like Nyah was saying—like sometimes you can’t find and connect, but if the writer has really good technique, sometimes they’re able to bring you to that place. I mean I’m obviously not Haitian, but I felt like when I read her essays and her stories that I kind of experienced it too because she was super descriptive, and she was like—she made sure she told you about some superstitions and how they relate to culture. And if a writer is able to do that, then you can kind of find more of a connection.
Me: Yeah, and that was kind of going to be my question too, Nyah. Like, is it about—cause
you said you think it was about diversity and right away you said that definitely has
something to do with it—my next question was going to be, Do you think it had something
to do with the texts themselves and whether or not the writers were—whether the—either
the job the writers were doing as writers or your, you know, response to them as the reader
of their writing? You know, um—and you don’t have to answer that question, but that’s I
think a question also that’s being raised here about whether or not you connect with a text—
that it may be about who we are and—

Nyah: It’s who I am.

Me: Yeah! And it also may be about [laughter from class at Nyah’s quick interjection] and it
also may be about, um, and that could be true for—to a greater extent, or not—for the
individual, you know? And it may also be about the quality of the writing too, and stuff like
that. I mean that’s a possibility.

Nyah: [side talk with other students around her regarding trying to remember the title of a
book they read in a past class]—about that Caucasian lady that read—you know—no, not A
Raisin in the Sun…

Me: [overhearing them and offering a possibility] To Kill a Mockingbird?

Nyah: To Kill a Mockingbird.

Me: Yes, yes.

Nyah: That was really good. That was a book, you know, I liked that because of what I’m
forced to read in school…that’s why.

Me: Okay, yeah, that’s completely legitimate.

Frazier: I understand how you can see like look at something that you know is different, or
from a different culture or whatever, and you know, be more inclined to read something
that’s closer to your perspective, but at the same time, like its talking about here [indicating
Danticat’s book] when you read it’s important to kind of, you know, think about it in terms
of a writer. Or, you know, how—that’s, that’s the way I like to—I mean it says you “must
come Greeks, Romans” whatever, you know, because that’s—you know, if you’re going to
read, you should try to think about it from the perspective of, you know, where the writer is
coming from and not only necessarily your own perspective on it. So it’s, I think, it’s
important to…[fading out]

Me: Yeah, all right, so the point Frazier is raising is that part of what it might mean to read is
to become [someone comments from the group] no, not to become the writer, but to
become sensitive to who the writer is and to the culture, and to try to become engrossed in
that culture. I think the point that Nyah is raising is that if you’re not exposed to a diversity
of writers and cultures—or not, not that—if you’re not exposed to writers who have anything to do with who you are and that’s all you ever get, you know, then it’s very hard to develop, um, that way—that, that level of engagement, maybe. You know, and I think that’s getting back to that scene where she talks about her, um, exploration in the library or Haitian writers, I mean I think that kind of captures a little bit of what Nyah is getting at, that you know, for the first time she finally was able to find writers who were writing about who she was. And maybe if she had had that along the way, that would have built her ability or capacity as a reader to be more engaged with a diverse group of writers. Although, she seems like she’s just the type of a person who from the gate was a very engaged reader. I mean, she fell in love with all of the white writers that she was reading in Haiti, you know? But, she’s one person. That may not be true for other people. Other people may have the reaction that Nyah said she had, which was, Why do we keep reading the same thing? You know, or about the same people? You know, and Nyah, I’m not…I’m just using you as an example because you brought it up, but I’m sure many people have had that experience of feeling as though they are not represented.

Nyah: In African American History last year, I heard a lot of people said, [with a mocking tone] “Why we gotta take African American History? I don’t want to take African American History!” [sporadic laughter from girls around her] And of course they gonna feel like that! They don’t want to sit there and her about it over and over again.

Me: Mmmhmmm. Yeah, yeah that may be. You know, um, and so there’s a question there about why do we teach the things that we teach? How do we build curriculum? You know, and that’s actually the focus of my research—is how do I choose texts for the students I’m teaching? You know, how do I build a curriculum that’s responding to them? If you look at the sheet that I gave you and the syllabus addendum, a lot of the questions are about how do I understand my students and who they are and then pick texts that will be, um, significant to them and engaging and that can—you know, have that kind of—that can allow them to have that kind of engagement with literature. You know, so um this is a great point that you raise. Yeah, Amir?

Amir: All right, this is, uh, for Frazier, sorry but uh I don’t mean to pick on Frazier, but… [laughter from class]

Me: [jokingly] I don’t think he minds, so…

Amir: What he said again, I don’t think it—that as a reader that you have to become a citizen—to live their writing, because I feel like if you do that, then you are basically saying that you can just ignore it [inaudible] like I feel like that just takes away the whole, the whole purpose of reading a book. So…

Me: What do you think the purpose is?

Amir: So you can establish your own ideas and you can feel like your own type of view on life. Like Mr. Whatshisface at the episcopology or whatever its called. You can have…
Me: Epistemology?

Amir: Epistemology. You can build your own epistemology on stuff like that, so…

Me: [other hands go up in the classroom] Okay. I see you guys.

Amir: By me saying I'm just going to ignore it, I'm just gonna be sensitive to this writer and work, that is so ridiculous.

Me: Okay, I'm going to get Tegan and then Ma. Yeah, go ahead Tegan.

Tegan: It was just like Amir said, I mean part of—like if you delve into your own internal opinion about something, you might like just sit there and say, “Oh, that’s not true, I don’t agree with that.” And then like you just disagree with the entire book, and you can’t really look at the book as kind of—I’m saying like to a certain extent, I think you have to kind of ignore your opinions about certain things. Like especially if its like a controversial topic. So that you can kind of open your mind to what the other side might be saying and like other ideas and other cultures and stuff. And I mean just because you have your opinions, it’s not that you’re ignoring that, but it’s like you have your opinion and it kind of like blocks some of that if that’s your opinion. And then like you can after you’re done reading the book or whatever, you can think about how that relates to your opinion, and then you can like change your opinion on that and… [trailing off]

Me: So for you, developing your own epistemology means coming at this with openness and blending your own, uh, your own identity in a way that’s a little bit more…does that make…?

Nyah: That makes sense. [inaudible talking…period bell rings]
The class began with me explaining some of the norms for note taking that are part of my participation as the class instructor. I explained to students that during these sessions, I actively take notes about what is said either on the class Smartboard or on the whiteboard [both located in the front of the classroom.

This particular discussion took place the day after students had engaged in small group discussions about writing they had completed in response to the first six chapters of Danticat’s book. Groups were based on prompt selection [student who responded to the same prompt were grouped together by me]. Prompts to which they responded included:

- What images of what society is and/or the possibilities for what it might become does Danticat portray in her writing?
- What aspects of Danticat’s identity come through her writing? Choose a moment [or two] where you feel like you were able to understand her through her writing and discuss.
- Choose one issue related to the lives of those living in the diaspora that Danticat addresses in her writing. Has reading her words changed your perspectives on that issue?
- How does Danticat achieve a sense of realism in her writing? [Be specific about techniques she uses.]
- Pick a question about identity that Danticat raises in her writing. What answer[s] [or reasons for the lack of answers] does she offer?
- To whom is Danticat writing? For whom does she write?

During the previous day’s small group discussions, students were instructed to structure their conversations according to the following guiding questions:

1. What were some of the major ideas/arguments in response to the prompt that group members developed in their writing?
2. What passages were most important in supporting those arguments? [Make note of page numbers for reference purposes.]
3. What questions, issues, etc. came up either during your writing or during your discussion that you want to bring to the larger class conversation?

The discussion that followed was organized around the prompts, which were used as topics, and members of student groups reported on their discussions.

Me: All right so, um, what’s our reading schedule? All right, so these were the questions that you wrote about, uh over the weekend. Uh, I’m just gonna kind of go down, uh, there were groups, uh there was a group that talked about issues of society and possibilities for what it might become. Is that group out here somewhere? Even if you’re scattered now, that’s okay but who was in that, or in Amelia’s group, talking? Okay. So, uh, maybe we can start with kind of that group, um, so what were some of the things that you talked about? You know, what passages were most important to you when you were talking about that stuff? What was, what was coming up there?
Amelia: Um, some of us said, um, about dictatorship and about it really affected the society and everybody and how it corrupted the society, and we all basically agreed with that.

Me: [writing on the whiteboard] Okay, so was she showing possibilities for, you know, what society might become in light of these dictatorships? Where did your conversation go in terms of like, you know—all right so their living in this oppressive society, you know like, where do you go from there, maybe? Or if you didn’t talk about it, what do you think about it? Like, what are your thoughts kind of on this issue of, of living in this society, maybe? And this doesn’t just have to be that group. Like if you have thoughts about this, about dictatorships, they can get us started. [Pause] All right you know so a big that topic that’s coming up this book is definitely corruption in government you know, dictatorships specifically, uh, Duvalier, right?—this this Poppa Doc okay figure—

Amelia: Because people living under that dictatorship they weren’t able to express themselves in a way like, like you know like cause like they’re like, like journalists and writers they’re like not able to write something but like they do. I think that’s what like um, eh, she means by like “create dangerously,” like if you are able to take that risk you know even though you are like you’re not sure about the consequences or what may not, like…

Me: Interesting. So with regard to these dictatorships and these corrupt governments, you know, we’re talking about creation and about taking risks and specifically kind of referencing the title of the book. So, what are some of the risks these people take? Or, what are you noticing? You know, do you see any kinds of like patterns or anything going on there? Yeah, Sebastian?

Sebastian: Well, they risked their lives by just like voting for things. Like the leaders such as that one girl who voted—her husband voted against the one guy and he apparently sent out people to go kill people who voted against him, and the husband left, and basically, they took wife and kind of [inaudible, Amelia talking over him]

Me: Right, she meets her when she’s back in Brooklyn, um, and talking to people who were survivors of these events. [A student asks where in the book that occurs.] What’s that? Uh, let’s take a look. Do you have a page? Want to point us to it?

Amelia: Um, seventy-three.

Me: Seventy-three.

[Amelia asks about the pronunciation of the name of the woman, Alèrte Bélance, who she has been referencing. I assist her with this.]

Amelia: But um the one thing I noticed that carried my attention was that there was that one person that did help Alèrte. Like there was still like that one person, there is like hope in society for change, because people still will help each other even though…[inaudible].

Me: [writing on the board] Huh, “the singular” it says. The singular or one person who will help. So there’s that, that kind of image of that one person in that chapter at least. Do you see that in any other chapters? Is that something we can trace through things that we’ve
read? Do you see like the kind of like evidence of one person who is significant maybe? Or something like that?

[One student references the same event that we’ve been discussing.]

Yeah, well that’s the same person that Amelia’s been talking about. Is there any other kind of time or sort of space in this novel where you see that? Yeah. [One unidentifiable student mentions the individual who built a school.] Okay. School builder [writing on board].

Interesting. Okay, let me get Sebastian and then Alejandro.

Sebastian: I just think that throughout the whole book each chapter is about a different person in her life that she thinks had an impact on something. [He references two instances from the novel where individuals are central to enacting some change or making some difference in the lives of Haitians.]

Me: [in an attempt to get a more precise reference] Yeah, where was that? Can you point to that? What chapter is it? [Students respond that is chapter five]. Chapter five also? So, um, there is the passerby and then there’s also the doctor [continuing to take notes on the board of chapter references]. All right, and then the soldier, we should say. We should be specific. Soldier. Interesting. Okay. Yeah, Alejandro?

[Alejandro also mentions the doctor and then Isaac brings up another example of a radio announcer.]

Isaac: Yeah, the other one really early in the book when…[trailing off]

Me: What chapter would that be?

Isaac: Chapter three.

Me: Chapter three. Thank you. The announcer. Okay. Other ideas?

Julian: Um, wasn’t there a government official who was trying to help… [trailing off]

Me: So in the “I Am Not a Journalist” chapter? Is that correct? Okay. [Students talk inaudibly over each other as they debate who the character was.] Oh, the president? Right, right, right. So, Chapter three. So that’s the same chapter as this one. So the announcer, but also the president. Okay. So, I like this. This is really…this is like a significant. This is an example of a theme that we might see working through this collection of essays so far, is the theme of a singular person who has the ability to make change or at least, you know, maybe tries to make change and finds some success? Maybe doesn’t find success sometimes? Or finds success and doesn’t realize that their finding success? Um, you know, I think the doctor is maybe an example of someone who feels as though things are so big that they can’t, you know, kind of make the change that they want to. But maybe there’s a message there that they in a small way, they’re doing something. Yeah?

Dylan: I was going to say, I like the idea of a group of people helping.
Me: Okay, so we have maybe the singular person. We also have like groups who you know are making...groups making change. All right. What's an example of that, Dylan?

Dylan: [beginning of his response is inaudible] ...I don’t know the chapter, but um when she was on the plane, someone had a heart attack and how everyone was helping...

Me: All right, uh the plane passengers. Anyone remember what chapter that might have been so that we can kind of track it? [Some back and forth over the correct chapter] Was it Chapter six? Okay. Any other groups? Yeah, Alejandro? You had a question? Yeah, go ahead.

Alejandro: Jean is mentioned Chapter five, but didn’t he already die?

Me: Yeah, so these things are not chronologically organized—in strict chronology or time—in terms of time. [A number of students talk over each other, and an inaudible question is asked about the pronunciation of the name “Jean.” I take a minute to explain the French pronunciation before we continue with the discussion.] But is it the same Jean in both of those chapters? That’s just because she is shifting back and forth in time. She’s choosing specific essays to place in front of others, but that doesn’t mean they are chronologically organized in terms of her life experiences. Okay, so it’s just a lot of jumping. That’s a good question.

[Amelia comments on another section of the book where a group of people come together to make a change at a radio station, but this is inaudible because others are speaking around her.]

Me: So the radio station employees are an example, okay. So where was that? What chapter was that?

Amelia: Chapter three, page 65.

Me: All right. I like the page reference. That’s great. All right, any other group solidarity? Yeah?

[I take a few more examples from students of sections from Danticat’s writing where people came together to enact change. Much of the student comments are drowned out by side talk among members of the class surrounding them.]

Me: [indicating the board] I wrote up here “solidarity.” Do we know this word? Okay, so this might be a vocabulary work you should know. “Solidarity,” s-o-l-i-d-a-r-i-t-y, can someone give us a dictionary definition of that? [students begin looking up the word in desk dictionaries] I should have like little candies or something for people who find them first. Yeah, go ahead, Addison.

Addison: “Complete unity as of opinion or feeling.”

Me: All right, [writing on the board] so complete unity as of opinion or feeling, so people who are working in unity in terms of their opinions or feelings and coming together. And so,
what we might see is maybe that like…or what we might ask is, is there a relationship between these singular people and these groups? Do some of these singular people have membership in some of these groups and, you know, what’s the relationship maybe between groups making changes and people—and individual change? Okay? You don’t have to answer that question, but it’s something that maybe we can put out there as a question. [indicating the board] You know, what’s the relationship between these individuals and these groups? Good. So you know I kind of started us off with the first bullet point [from the list of questions that guide this discussion], but other people, if you just want to talk about things you talked about in your group, you know, we can talk about any issues that were raised in the book. If you had questions, if you want to talk about her identity, if you want to talk about, you know, an issue related to the lives of the diaspora… Yeah, Cassidy.

Cassidy: Um, well I asked my group did they think that Danticat considers herself to be on the other side of the water? And the answer that, um, she [indicating another student] thought that Danticat—like the fact that she is a diaspora—is a bad thing, and Isa said that it isn’t necessarily a bad thing, uh and Victoria said that like being part of the diaspora gives you more points of view and just expands like you as a person. It isn’t necessarily like a bad thing.

Me: [writing on the board] Okay, so another topic is membership in diaspora. You know, in the—or I guess “a” diaspora—in that group. So, it can be seen as potentially negative or you know, your feeling was that the way that she frames it, the way that she talks about it is—there’s a lot of negative to it. But, uh, you said who else in the group was talking?

Cassidy: Uh, Isa.

Me: Isa pointed out that there are multiple perspectives that can be gained through being a member of that group? That’s interesting. So, maybe there’s a question here. [writing on the board] So, is it positive or negative? You know, um, is there an idea about multiple perspectives that can be gained? Does it open up that possibility? [aside] I need a whiteboard that’s like the size of the classroom—I fill these up fast. So, again, membership in diaspora—is it positive or negative? Can we gain multiple perspectives?

A lot of times when we do these sessions, I’ll use this board [indicating the digital Smart board in the classroom], and I’ll put up a Word document. I’ll just type all of this so that it makes it easier because it scrolls, and then I’ll post that on Edmodo so that you can see the class notes. Okay? I didn’t do it today just because I wanted this to be up here, but otherwise it gets too cluttered.

Okay, that’s an interesting topic there. Anything else people want to add maybe to that idea of being a member of the diaspora? Any other significant things come out of that there? Yeah, Cassidy?

Cassidy: Well, I think that they often feel like outsiders and like aliens and they don’t belong because you know they have the guilt of [inaudible] and maybe their families feel like it’s hopeless, and the people that they actually come from, they don’t feel like they’re actually Haitians [inaudible]. And like Isa said, Isa said that…
Cassidy: Um, okay. “The virginity testing element of the book led to a backlash in some Haitian American circles. ‘You are a liar,’ a woman wrote to me right before I left on the trip, ‘You dishonor us, making us sexual and psychological misfits.’ ‘Why was she taught to read and write?’ I overheard a man saying at a Haitian American fund-raising gala in New York, where I was getting an award for writing this book. ‘That is not us. The things she writes, they are not us.’” So, um, when I brought that up, I was like… Okay, Isa said that people [looking through her copy of the group notes] okay, Victoria said that. She said that because she is a part of the diaspora that women just like want to attack her because what if they were Haitian? I don’t think that they would be…feel so angry about the book. I don’t think they would see it as an attack. But since shed isn’t directly from Haiti, they wanted to attack her because they don’t see her as really Haitian. They don’t think she has a right to speak on behalf of Haitians.

Me: Yeah. What like. So, what was her argument about writing that stuff and why it was, you know, valid for her to write that?

Cassidy: Um, in her letter to her character…

Me: Right.

Cassidy: …she said that um, “I guess I have always felt, writing about you [Sophie], that I was in the presence of family, a family full of kindness as well as harshness, a family full of love as well as grief, a family deeply rooted in the past yet struggling to confront an unpredictable future.”

Me: This is page 34 at the top, guys. Go ahead, yeah.

Cassidy: “I felt blessed to have encountered this family of yours, the Cacos, named after a bird whose wings look like flames. I feel blessed to have shared your secrets, you mother’s, your aunt’s, your grandmother’s secrets, mysteries deeply imbedded in you, in them, much like the wiry vetiver clinging to the side of these hills.” So, I mean basically she wrote it because, you know, she felt like it’s Haiti and it reminded her of her family and stuff, and it reminded her of like of Haiti.

Me: Okay. Interesting. Yeah?

Julian: Uh, I remember uh, I think it—I think it was on that page where she writes that she knew—she wrote that because she knew childhood friends who also had that virginity test that she had, and that’s the reason why she included it in her book. But it was half on those Haitians and half on personal experience.

Me: Yeah, so jumping off what Julian said there, so that reaction that she received from these individuals—these Haitian individuals—was the reaction about feeling as though she
was representing all Haitians by writing this? Where, as a writer, she was trying to represent, you know, individual stories—individual people’s stories in that?

So there’s a term for the way that, uh, potentially these individuals may have felt reading her book, and that’s a term essentialized. This is an important term if we’re going to talk about cultural studies and the way that we talk about people and cultures and ethnicity. When you essentialize someone, what you do is “essentially” break them down into an essence. So if you were to make the comment that “all Haitian women feel this way” or “have experienced this,” what you’re doing is making a very stereotypical comment that essentializes Haitian women. It breaks them down into an essence. And the problematic—what I think these people are pointing out about this—is that what is so problematic about that is that everyone has—as humans—we all have different experiences. And not every woman in Haiti experienced that virginity test. And so, if you’re a Haitian woman and you’re reading Danticat’s novel, and Danticat is professing to be by her status as a novelist a representative of a community, it can become very problematic for you as reader to read that and say, “other people are going to see Haitian women this way.” It’s kind of like the way that some people feel when they watch television shows that portray a particular ethnicity in a certain way. Italian Americans as mobsters. Sure, there were Italian Americans who participated in organized crime, but that doesn’t mean that every Italian American is a member of an organized crime group. Or, whatever ethnicity is being portrayed a certain way, when you see those kinds of images they risk essentializing a group. And so, I think this is a really important thing to point out, you know, when we’re talking about identity and being an insider or an outsider. If she [Danticat] is struggling with whether or not she is member of the Haitian community or a member of some other community that’s writing about the Haitian community, this reaction that she’s getting from her readership is a really important struggle that she might be undergoing as someone who writes about or for that community. So this also has implication for who is she writing for and who is she writing to. Is she’s writing for Haitians, she’s getting some push back about that potentially from Haitians.

Let me get Isa and then Sebastian.

Isa: I just had a question, because she was writing about an individual family. She wasn’t writing about groups of families. Like if you read a story about a particular family in America, you’re not going to think all Americans do the things that they do. So why did they receive that reaction when it wasn’t like different stories about different families all from Haiti? Like it’s just one family, so everybody experiences something different, so why was it assumed that she was generalizing about Haitians?

Me: What do you think? Yeah, Cassidy?

Cassidy: It was the same thing that you brought up. That if she isn’t from there, they’re just going to have a reason to not approve of what she’s gonna write and put out.

Me: So maybe just discrimination in general that forces these comments. That’s a possibility. And any other possibilities? I didn’t forget about you, Sebastian, I’m just going to follow this trail a little bit before…Yeah, go ahead.
Julian: I actually think that it’s more of that Haitians are a minority and there aren’t that many stories about them and that get read by most people in, say, a pop culture world. So that if you’re going to read a book and let’s say it’s the only book that you’ve ever read about Haitian culture, you’ll assume that. Now, stuff like American culture and European culture—that doesn’t happen a lot because it’s a very—most people experience it and that’s what most of the books are about. So if it’s a minority culture, that’s what’s going to happen. That’s the reason why people are worried about it. It wasn’t that she being discriminated against entirely, but some of it has to do with that.

Me: Yeah, we talk about the United States culture, the American culture, as being a widely exported culture, you know? And so, I think it’s a fair point, the idea that there may be a really authentic sense of fear on the part of people who are Haitian citizens or are Haitian-born that if Americans are only picking up, you know, or only have access to or, you know, are only being sold or marketed books—a few, you know, a very small cross section of books—that, you know, well this is the image you’re going to see of us. What image are we giving them—that readership?

So I think it’s really a powerful moment in the first six chapters that forefronts this is when she is living in Brooklyn and there’s only one, you know, rack in the library dedicated to Haitian writers, and she was how old before she started reading any Haitian writers? She said she was in her teenage years, I think seventeen or something like that? Sixteen or seventeen? So imagine growing up your whole life reading only white male or white female writers from Europe or America, and then all of a sudden discovering at your age [indicating the class] that people from your country, your nation, write and produce literature, write about your experiences. You know? So I think it’s a fair point. I think both are. I think there’s a feeling there of real, you know, potential discrimination, potential resentment at people who may have “gotten out” or who have abandoned that nationality, that ethnicity. It might be a mixture. There might be other things.

Sebastian, what was your question?

Sebastian: I was thinking about the gay movement and when she was writing about [inaudible] and she was just talking about her being away from her country. I was thinking about her as a person, as a human being, she just feels as if she doesn’t belong, because on page 49, she was talking about how—

Me: Let’s all—let us get there first. So on 49…

Sebastian: She was talking about how she thinks that her family would say, “Why do you [Victoria suggests “what do you know about it…”]—yeah, what do you know about it?” And that shows that even the people close to you and important to you—that maybe she felt that she wasn’t as, like I don’t know, like she didn’t fit in. That’s what I was thinking it was just her being away from her country—it was just her being—feeling like less of a person, I guess.

Me: Yeah, Victoria?
Victoria: I still feel like it’s not fair that she should have to feel that way because it’s not really her fault that she had to leave, you know? It was like a choice. In the book I think [inaudible] it says that she had a choice between exile and death, so of course you would choose to leave the country that you could potentially be killed in just for doing [inaudible] things because of the dictatorship that she grew up in.

Me: Yeah. Amelia.

Amelia: Yeah, she had to leave at the age of twelve in that dictatorship, and she feels like she would get—she had to like accept the fact that people were calling her and feeling like “you’re a member of the diaspora” or whatever. And people—Jean said to her it kind of means you’re from both world—that you’re from this place but you don’t have to be ashamed of that [inaudible].

Me: Okay. Interesting. [pause approx. 6 seconds] Other issues that came up? There’s a lot of stuff there [indicating the notes on the board] under the topic of membership, and group membership, and you know, what are these—how do we straddle this? How do we deal with that status? All right? So that’s definitely going to be a big topic for us. And the other big topics that came up talking about this stuff: realism? What did you think—there was a group that focused on the way she writes? Yeah?

[inaudible comment from student in the back of the classroom]

Yeah so we want to be really focused on that the writer does—on how the writer does it basically.

Aidan: All three of us [inaudible] talked about her technique and the description that she uses and like how she describes everything makes you feel like you’re actually, like, there.

Me: Did you have some moments where you felt that that was particularly true?

Aidan: Yeah, Alèrte her moments when she was describing like how she looked with her arm and like her face chopped off. Like that, and Mila was saying in the beginning when they were getting executed, like how she talked about the blood dripping out of his mouth and how they like walked down—like she was really good at imagery. That’s another one that kept coming up.

Me: So a lot of imagery there. So, if we’re talking about realism in terms of the visual aspects of reading something or your ability to visualize something, she gives you a lot of that. Are there any other ways in which she makes this feel real through her writing? Yeah.

Aarav: I didn’t do this question—

Me: That’s okay, yeah?

Aarav: How she survived the virginity test and how the girl [inaudible because of distance away from the microphone and other background noise]
Me: So you felt as though she was able to communicate something about—particularly about her sex in that sense. Her sex in terms of being a woman. Right, well I mean that’s significant. I mean if you felt as though you were able to understand her experience, you know, in those terms by—what do you think about the way she described—was there something about the way she described it that?

Aarav: [response inaudible]

Me: So the bluntness she used? So the way that she’s not afraid—she doesn’t like mince words. You know what that means, “mince words?” It means to try to beat around the bush…[student offers a suggestions]. Yeah, sugar coat things, thank you. Yeah, she writes with a very—her style, we’re talking about her style here, okay—she writes with a very blunt, straightforward style. She’s not, you know, trying to sugar coat, trying to make things that way. So yeah, I think that’s a very fair reaction there. All right, let me get Alejandro and then Victoria.

Alejandro: Yeah, in Chapter 5, the one part where the lady’s house [inaudible] and the little boy came up to the camera and said about taking a picture of the person, “this is my mom and you’re not my mother.” It’s very touching [inaudible].

Me: Yeah, so I mean, you know, recounting moments—so she uses specific, you know—the way that she interweaves these moments from her memory, you know, into the story really helps to bring home the emotion behind what she was experiencing. Something I thought was really powerful was when the child asked to be in the interview, I think, and he said one thing—let me see if I can find it. I can’t remember exactly—this is Chapter 6. That’s right, I believe, that last chapter. [a student calls out a reference to the passage] Do you have it? Yeah, Aidan? Page 82…Oh so it’s not Chapter 6. Chapter 5… [inaudible comment about the passage from Aidan] Yeah. I mean, you know, like I guess when I was expecting him to want to say something, I don’t know what I was expecting. I wasn’t expecting that, you know? He says that as a repetition of what? [several students all out “of his dad”] Of what his dad said, you know, and that makes sense, of course, for a young boy to in that moment, you know, just pick up something that his father said and repeat it. But there’s something about that repetition, maybe, in the voice of a child that really, I thought, was powerful in terms of that moment. Yeah?

Aarav: Yeah another thing was the paragraph right after it when they all began to cry even though they didn’t know what he had said, I mean I thought that was a very kind of just—I—I don’t know.

Me: Yeah, so like language not being a barrier there almost to their emotion in a sense, which is just pretty significant to think about that. Yeah, let me get Victoria first cause she had her hand up for a while. Yeah, go ahead.

Victoria: Um, yeah we talked a little but about her style. Charlie was saying that he liked how her writing style was very flowing, and she kind of skips around a lot as far as time-wise and that just shows even more how flowing her writing is. Because you know, like when you’re talking to someone, like I’m not going to describe to you exactly like my entire life’s timeline.
I’m gonna like skip around of course, because you remember this as you go, and it seems like it’s—her book is like a more organized way of just, um, thinking of more stuff as you go.

Me: That’s interesting. So it really captures the storytelling nature of what it means to tell someone a story. You jump back and forth, you have memories that come up, and you talk about them. That’s interesting. But I like how you said like a more organized—or in that group conversation you talked about how it was a more organized version of that, you know, because it’s not stream of consciousness. We’re going to talk about stream of consciousness as a narrative mode, where you just write about what goes through your head. There are some elements of stream of consciousness to it, but it’s much more organized and structured than a real stream of consciousness piece of writing, and we’ll look at some of that stuff. Yeah, let me get Sebastian and Charlie.

Sebastian: When she was describing—

Me: What page?

Sebastian: Like with the radio—

Me: Oh yeah—

Sebastian: When they were saying like how he was on the radio when her husband died and then she got done, she was like calling out to him, it just made me think of like all the movies where like it was so descriptive that it made me think of like movies where it’s always like someone doing the same thing, it just made it like…

Me: Interesting. Yeah. Charlie?

Charlie: Like Sebastian was saying, I think the author of the book—like the way she writes—it shows a lot of dark imagery in it. I think it speaks value to how much [violence was happening] at that time, because you know the things that were happening, like people being mutilated and with the death and executions, I think it speaks value to, you know, how powerful it was. And like ultimately, [how it] just changed the minds of the Haitians. You know, and I think that’s why sometimes when she came back, they were just like, “Why are you here?” And I think it was like another interpretation of what they were going through while she was, you know, she was in America. So, I think it was like their way of—what they had experienced and she didn’t know anything about it—that what happened during the days when she was in America.

Me: Yeah?

Levi: I agree. Like what she did in Chapter 1, she writes from like this third person narrative. It’s almost um—she sounds like an announcer when she’s doing it, like somebody that’s like talking over a news station or over the radio. And she gets into like a lot of detail. There’s Chapter 3, I think it’s the first paragraph: “Radio, print, and television journalists are summoned. Numa and Drouin are dressed in what on old black-and-white film seems to be the clothes in which they’d been captured—khakis for Drouin and a modest white shirt—” She goes on this whole descriptive thing about—it’s very blunt. There’s no personal things
in there. And she just does this entire thing. I think that’s the reason why the entire execution scene captures you because there’s just fact after fact after fact and no opinion at all. So you’re just getting a broad sense of imagery of what’s happening.

Me: Yeah, and what’s interesting about that is like what’s the term that she keeps being called by her—is it her grandmother or her aunt? She calls her a journalist, right? And she says one of her, you know, one of her chapters is actually is called” I Am Not a Journalist.”

Addison: I though that was a reference to Jean—

Me: It is, but I’m wondering if it’s a reference, you know, to her resistance to being called a journalist. I think that there’s a lot—that that’s a really powerful chapter—title of a chapter, because it captures both the woman who spoke it—he spoke it, Jean Dominique, right? He spoke those words, but also something about her identity, right? But yet, the way she reports on that execution is very much in the style of a journalist, possibly. So, there’s this kind of debate over what does it mean. And this is something about her identity too as well, you know? What does it mean to be a journalist? Is she a journalist? Is she a journalist at times? You know, it’s kind of an interesting debate over if she isn’t a journalist. And Jean Dominique says that he wasn’t, but technically he was. I mean he was a reporter, you know, he died reporting, right? He took the ultimate danger in hand, and so I felt like reading that there was a little bit of her trying to separate herself from people who create more dangerously maybe than other people.

You know, for her creating dangerously is about in one sense, public opinion. You know, it’s about having to cope with the things that you’re writing about. It’s dangerous—kind of—to the self. You know, Jean Dominique had—there was a whole other level of danger that he was taking on, you know, by creating: the danger of execution. If you think about the wife or the husband of Alèrte, his creation was his vote, right? Or speaking out politically, that was the danger for him, and the reason why he fled and why his wife ended up being mutilated in the way that she was. You know, so we could also think about what are all of the different types of creation that happen in this book. All the types of dangerous creations that happen in this book. That’s another way that we might think about a topic that comes out of this.

Wyatt: One of the things that came up was in the very last chapter. It’s after her aunt dies and she’s—I really liked how kind of a human emotion that was—not a lot of light was shined on like regret—and she just—she—I liked the way it was very powerful. Because I think regret gets overlooked a lot as a [inaudible], and everyone—generally everyone has regret, and everyone wished they could go back in time and change what they did. And I thought it was very cool like the way she was—like instilled into a moment in her life when it was so powerful [inaudible], and that she wishes she could go back and really spend more moments with her.

Me: Yeah, and she captures it through what? In talking about what, specifically? Which I think is really interesting. How does she capture that regret? What is she talking about that captures that there? You know, what won’t happen for her again? She won’t be called…

Wyatt: A journalist.
Me: A journalist by her—she won’t be called a journalist by her. She won’t taste the coffee, right? So, she uses like these very specific things that tie her to this woman and to Haiti as a way to express that regret, which is you know, I think really significant—or really crea—artistic. You know, there is also—she doesn’t call herself a writer a lot. She calls herself an artist, which is interesting. That’s an interesting kind of phrase or identity marker that she gives to herself, right? We could trace all different identity markers in this book: journalist, artist, writer, other possible identities that come out.

Just to close this off, what was difficult about reading these six chapters? Where there parts that you found to be more challenging than others? Yeah?

Addison: Well not challenging. Just like Chapter 5 was disturbing. Like I was having trouble getting through it.

Me: Yeah, the subject matter is definitely a challenge, you know, in terms of reading this kind of book. Yeah, go ahead.

Levi: The beginning of Chapter 2 was a bit slow.

Me: Okay. The beginning of Chapter 2? That’s interesting. When she visits her grandmother? Okay. Just kind of the action slowed down for you? All right, yeah, Isaac?

Isaac: [inaudible]

Me: Yeah, okay, chronology was an issue? Yeah, Sebastian and then…

Sebastian: I found it hard getting into the book because as soon as I started reading the first chapter—all that information at once…[trails off inaudibly]

Me: Yeah, there was a lot of front-loading—okay, we call that front-loading when a lot is put up front initially. Yeah, Seth?

Seth: Compared to the things that we've read before in school, this is actually very easy to understand, and I didn’t have to keep like going back to find out what I just read like I usually do. Like I was able to go straight through and understand it, but it was just so depressing! It makes you like—

Me: Yeah, the subject matter’s tough. Um, something that I found difficult is that I don’t know that much about Haitian writers and history. And so, a lot of the names just kind of flew through my head when reading, so I just had to be patient and go with it, you know, and I think maybe that was an issue for some people as well. Yeah Mike?

[inaudible response]

Me: Yeah well that’s the problem with the chronology. It seems like she’s constantly flying back and forth, right? So, you kind of have to get used to that kind of thing. In terms of the subject matter, I chose this partially because we’re focusing on race and ethnicity and identity
for this unit. The next book that I’m planning on having you read—I’m hoping the shipment comes in soon—is Sherman Alexie’s *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Some people may have already read it. If you haven’t it’s a really easy read in terms of the language and the way it flows, and there’s a lot of illustration. And the subject matter, while it’s still heavily about identity—it’s about a ninth grader, basically—it’s a year in the life of this ninth grader—it’s not at the level of murder and mutilation, so it’ll be a little lighter, is my point. [bell rings] Thanks, guys, that was awesome!
Class Discussion, 2-19-2013 (Section A): The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

Whole-Class Discussion/Analysis Workshop

This discussion focused on last week’s writing prompt, which asked students to track the development of Johnson’s narrator as a dynamic character in chapters five through eight of his novel. The directives for the assignment read:

STRUCTURED NOTE TAKING: DYNAMIC CHARACTER (JWJ, CHAPTERS 5-8)

Preliminary In-Class Work:

• Independently or with a partner, select four passages from chapters 5 through 8 (one from each chapter) that you argue capture moments of significant change in the identity of the narrator.
• Take detailed notes on how these passages illustrate this change. Focus on how Johnson’s diction (word choice) serves to communicate the changing identity of his narrator through specific words, phrases, images, and/or figurative language.

For Edmodo Submission:
Create an organized outline structured in the following way:

• Quote each passage from the text and include citations (p. #, para. #)
• Include a detailed analytic statement for each passage (for a total of 4). These should come from the notes that you developed during your discussion sessions and should be approx. 3-5 sentences in length. These statements should address how these passages illustrate changes that occur in the character of the narrator. For these, you should focus on how Johnson’s diction (word choice) serves to communicate the changing identity of his narrator by indicating (quoting) specific words, phrases, images, and/or figurative language from the passages you have chosen.

The pedagogical focus of this session was on assisting students in the development of well-supported analytic statements that effectively address the prompts that have been provided to them. The intended benefit of doing so via a whole-class discussion was to provide students who have authored these notes with the opportunity to deliberate both with peers and with the instructor over the phrasing and content of these documents.

Me: Okay, so let’s deal with—let’s just kind of go chapter by chapter to see who chose what—which groups chose what from what chapter. Anyone choose anything from Chapter 5 for this session at least? Yeah?

Camila: Well we had to choose one—

Me: Yeah, I know, but for this session, I’m asking you to choose one of the passages you chose, right? So, for this session. Okay? Yeah, Layla?

Layla: [over the sound of turning pages and shuffling papers] Um, there was page 34 paragraph two —
Me: Yeah, say that again? Page?
Layla: Thirty-four, thirty-five.
Me: Thirty-four, thirty-five?
Layla: Yeah.
Me: Paragraph two. All right, so everyone get there.
Amir: Thirty-four—on what page? Thirty-four or thirty-five?
Nine: Thirty four.
Me: Paragraph two.
Amir: Thirty-four to thirty-five?
Nine: Yeah.
Nyah: [loudly, with a tone of exasperation] Thirty-four, paragraph two.
Layla: Yeah, “Through my music”—
Me: Okay, so the bottom for thirty-four. Okay. Last paragraph on thirty-four. Okay, can you
give us a reading of that little paragraph there?
Layla: [reading from text] “Through my music teaching and my not absolutely irregular
attendance at church, I became acquainted with the best class of colored people in
Jacksonville. This was really my entrance into the race. It was my [pause] initiation—” right?
Me: Initiation.
Layla: Initiation. “It was my initiation into what I have termed the freemasonry [stumbling
over pronunciation] of the race.”
Me: The freemasonry of the race, right.
Layla: That’s pretty much all I used, and I said he was like coming in touch with the black
side—his black side more and living with his landlords—that Hispanic guy and the landlady.
Me: okay. All right, so let’s put this down I’m going to ask you to go little further on that one
all right. So page 34 on 235. Okay, you said getting in touch with his black side okay and he
said this had to do with where he was living. Okay, with his landlady itsand who else?
Layla: her husband.
Me: an husband. Writing on the board. What does it mean quote the freemasonry of the
race? We think that means? Some chatter from students you looked it up?

Gina: I looked it up while I was doing it. I can’t remember, it’s like something—it’s like the whole, I can’t remember. I know—like—you know what I mean?

Me: well, you’re doing something with your hands—that captures what Amir said. What did you say it was, Amir?

Amir: a group of people, a society.

Me: Yeah, so a society, a group of people, a kind of fellowship of people coming together. It’s usually in—around some kind of trade, okay? Right, so the Freemasons are still a society that exists, and there like this kind of fraternal order of people who come together all right? And there are certain, I guess, requirements to being part of the Freemasons, all right? So what would the freemasonry of the race involve then do you think?

Amir: Singing? Like the gospel—church.

Me: Oh, so for him part of that is the singing and the music and that central kind of aspect of it. Okay, that’s interesting. Okay, so I’m going to put this term down. This is an important concept that he’s coming up with “freemasonry of the race”. So what do I mean when I say this is “an important concept”? What is a concept? [Some talking from among the students] someone look it up for us in the dictionary, what a concept is. [Pause while students pull out dictionaries and look up the word] yeah, all right, focus. Go ahead, Charlotte.

Charlotte: [reading from the dictionary] “An idea, thought, or abstract notion”—

Me: [writing on the board] “An idea, thought, or abstract notion” yes. So the idea, thought, that’s a pretty broad way of thinking about this. This [indicating the board] is closer to the way that he’s using it here, this “abstract notion”, okay? So the idea is that a freemasonry is a literal group of people who come together, okay? You know, the freemasonry of race, there’s no organization that is the group of, you know, Black persons—at least not at this time. Now, you can say that there are several organizations, you know, currently that would probably call themselves part of a formal organization or freemasonry of a specific race, one being the NAACP. Okay? So, that’s a little bit different, but—so what we want to do is track, then, what does this membership mean? And Amir kind of came up with something that central to this concept of the freemasonry of the race which is the interest in singing and music, okay? What else does the—is he showing us or is possibly part of this—coming to be a part of this freemasonry? What else does he—is he seeing being a part of what it means to be Black for him? Anybody? [Pause for a few seconds] let’s continue reading that passage. Let’s see if there’s more information there. Layla, can you continue where you left off there? “I had formulated…”

Layla: [reading from text] “I had formulated a theory of what it was to be colored; now I was getting the practice. The novelty of my position caused me to observe and consider things which, I think, entirely escaped the young men I associated with; or, at least, were so commonplace to them as not to attract their attention. And of many of the impressions
which came to me then I have realized the full import only within the past few years, since I have had a broader knowledge of men and history, and a fuller comprehension of the tremendous struggle which is going on between the races in the South.”

Me: Okay, so he says I started to observe things, all right, that didn’t—that were commonplace, that didn’t attract my attention before, okay? Can we quit our fingers on what some of the things that he begins to observe are as he’s living now with—this is where he’s with the Cuban workmen in the factory, is that correct at this point? Certainly what is he observing with the Cuban workmen in the factory? Like, what is he starting to see it means to be non-White, I guess in this country? [Pause] yeah, Victor?

Victor: Struggle.

Me: Struggle in what sense? Howard Lee’s Cuban workers struggle—struggling, sorry. And anyone can pick up on this if they sense that there is struggle there as well. Yeah, Camila, what’s that?

Camila: Financially?

Me: Okay, financially. Where do you see—do you have a moment where that comes through?

Camila: Well, it depends—it starts on that page, but it says that it depends on the amount of cigars that they make in one day, and it depends on how much paid yet.

Me: Yeah, so we could say [writing on board] “the cigar quota”. Okay, you have to have a quarter of how many cigars to make. All right so there’s some sense of struggle there that’s part of this freemasonry, there’s—what role does singing or music played for the Cuban workers? Why are they singing? Does anyone remember? [some talk among students] yes, what’s take a look at where this is—where this comes up in the chapter. Okay, can anyone find where he talks about the singing and what role-plays? Where is it?

Pearl: It’s right in the paragraph above –

Me: Oh, that’s right in the paragraph above. Can you read it for us, Madison?

Pearl: Where it says “the reader”?

Me: Sure, wherever you think the right way is.

Pearl: [reading from text] “The “reader” is quite an institution in all cigar factories which employ Spanish-speaking workmen. He sits in the center of the large room in which the cigar makers work and reads to them for a certain number of hours each day all the important news from the papers and whatever else he may consider would be interesting. He often selects an exciting novel and reads it in daily installments.” Keep going?

Me: Yeah, keep going there.
Pearl: “He must, of course, have a good voice, but he must also have a reputation among the
men for intelligence, for being well-posted and having in his head a stock of varied
information.” Keep going?

Me: Yeah. Keep going. Do one more sentence there.

Pearl: “He is generally the final authority on all arguments which arise, and in a cigar factory
these arguments are many and frequent, ranging from the respective and relative merits of
rival baseball clubs to the duration of the sun’s light and energy—cigar making is a trade in
which talk does not interfere with work.”

Me: Yeah, so I would add to this singing, music, and also talk, okay, is very fundamental to
being part of this, all right? And in particular, you know, the talk has a lot to do with how
these men in the cigar factory are able to get what? Well, get work done, and pass those long
hours you know, when they’re doing this. But what else are they getting from this talk? What
does the reader do that the other men, you know, can’t do during his long hours?

Amir: Read.

Me: Read what?

Amir: In English.


Me: Stuff about what? He’s very specific here. What kind of information is he providing to
these men?

Camila: Current events.

So through this they’re getting—you know through the—I’m just going to kind of go here
and put down [writing on board] “the reader”, okay? And he is the reader in this factory or
eventually becomes the reader. Okay, the reader gives them news. What else? Novels. So,
fiction, you know, literature. What else did Madison read there?

Camila: He has authority in all arguments. He has the final say—

Me: Ah, okay so he gives them leadership in terms of—you know, in terms of conflict.
[writing on board] “Leadership in conflict” let’s say. What other kind of information does he
give them? [long pause] After the arguments—what kinds of, you know, arguments that
come up? About what? What’s the examples he gives? [someone comments inaudibly from
the class] Yeah about baseball clubs, which is what? Which deals with what, generally?

Pearl: Sports.

Me: Sports. And what else is the other thing? [some comments from students] Sports to
science. [writing on the board Okay. So these guys—the reader is providing a really
important function in the cigar factory, right? He’s able to do a whole lot of—to give a whole lot of information, make the day pass quickly by adding a—you know, a kind of other world in terms of fiction, okay, and giving them these stories from some place where they aren’t. Okay, and is also able to negotiate whenever somebody has any type of agreement all the way from sports how bright the sun is and how much light it gives. Okay, so he’s got this very powerful position. So what is the reader—so what role does the reader play in the freemasonry? You know, what’s the job of the reader in this organization, in this society? Yeah?

Lily: I think, is like the leader is trying to hold down the weight that is like the race—like the flaws and stuff. Like I don’t how to say this right, but like he—he’s kind of had to lead every body to the right place—like hold the weight of the whole race down so that he can, you know, have a better future for them.

Me: Yeah, okay, so you know we can say that singing, music, talk are important to this freemasonry, okay? The struggle is something that comes out of this freemasonry, right? And that part of this freemasonry requires a leader [writing on board]—”requires leadership”. Part of being in this freemasonry, okay? And this, potentially, is what James Weldon Johnson sees not happening in, you know, society. That there aren’t enough people who are coming out and helping to move their fellow members of the colored race (in his words) into the newer rounds of understanding, and to make them valuable—and to help them become valuable members of society. I mean when Layla read for us there, Layla you finished with—where it says “between the races in the South”? Layla: Mmhmm.

Me: Yeah, if you go on, it says, [reading from text] “It is a struggle; for though the black man fights passively, he nevertheless fights; and his passive resistance is more effective at present than active resistance could possibly be. He bears the fury of the storm as does the willow tree.” Okay? “It is a struggle; for though the white man of the South may be too proud to admit it, he is, nevertheless, using in the contest his best energies; he is devoting to it the greater part of his thought and much of his endeavor. The South today stands panting and almost breathless from its exertions.” Okay, so part of all of this—part of what it means to be part of this freemasonry here is—involves what he calls “passive resistance” [writing on board]. The cigar workers aren’t rising up, okay? They’re not leaving their tables, going outside, and going on strike. Okay? They’re not in some way actively resisting the roles of days and placed into. But by not just sitting there quietly doing their cigar rolling, by finding ways that are not meaningless, but that have value—either in providing news, in providing an outlet in terms of fiction and literature, in providing a way to understand the world when conflict arises, and by establishing a leader in that context to do that—they are advancing themselves in some ways. And so this change that Layla pointed to in James Weldon Johnson—and Layla, you worked with Aria?—that Aria and Layla pointed us to in James Weldon Johnson where he’s getting more in touch with what it means to be part of the colored race, this is a good passage to show that. That part of that is this membership in this freemasonry that’s exemplified by the cigar factory and what was going on with the working class in the South—the working-class members of the non-White races in the South. So passive resistance is a very important concept too, that they are doing this. And what do you think people who own the cigar factory, you know, think about all of this? Let me ask you
that. So, let’s assume that a white individual owns the cigar factory, which I think is a very fair assumption. Does he talk about ownership of the cigar factory? No, all right, I’m going to say that it’s probably owned by a White individual.

Kiera: I thought that guy he lived with was the owner of the cigar factory. The way he was like, oh yeah, he gave me a job.

Me: Oh, that’s interesting.

Kiera: It didn’t say that…

Me: Yeah, I think he’s probably a guy who works there and has been working there for a while—maybe somewhere else on the ladder that brought him in.

Kiera: Right, that makes more sense.

Me: Yeah, I don’t think he was the owner. He wouldn’t be living with the owner, first of all.

Kiera: Yeah, that’s true.

Me: What do you think the owner thinks about all this—what’s happening in his factory? [Kiera says something inaudible about “making money, so”] Yeah, say that a little louder.

Kiera: He probably doesn’t care. Cause he’s making money, so why does he care?

Me: Yeah, as long as they meet this [pointing to the word “quota” on the board]. Right? What about this reader, this guy who’s reading these stories and reading the news and doing that stuff? What do you think? How do you think the owner sees that? What do you think he makes of all that? Yeah?

Lily: He probably thinks it’s a waste of time, and he thinks, you know, just make my cigars and I’ll get a profit out of it. He doesn’t care for that race, or that person who reads them news and stuff. Cause it—basically he thinks it’s garbage because what really matters is him getting his profit, you know, that’s what I think.

Me: Okay, Frazier?

Frazier: Well, I mean maybe he might. I don’t know, but he might see as a sign of like intelligence. Because, I mean to them, they are regard it as like they kind of respect the person whose doing it. So, I mean maybe he sees it as oh this person is actually taking initiative to read things and to make—and to settle arguments and to keep kind of the peace.

Me: Okay. Tegan?

Tegan: Might also see it as helpful because it keeps the workers motivated.

Me: Okay, so it’s a useful kind of tool for motivation? Parker?
Parker: I was going to say what Tegan said so.

Me: Okay, so three possibilities here. You know, and we don’t know. We can’t, but maybe we can make some inferences about it’s. You know, he may see it as meaningless. Okay, and I’m going this goes so far as to say that it’s a he that probably owns this place, okay, given the time and place. That this owner probably sees it may be—could potentially see it may be as just meaningless kind of stuff. He may have a more, you know, capacious view of the workers, okay? I’ll give you a good adjective here if you don’t have this in your vocabulary stock old [writing on board]. What’s the root of *capacious*?

Amir: At the end.

Me: Well the –*ious* is the end. *Capac*?

Nyah: Capacity

Me: Capacity.

Nyah: That was me. That was Nyah.

Me: I gotcha, Nyah. All right, what does it mean to see that someone has the capacity to do something?

Amir: The ability to do something.

Me: The ability, okay. To see worth in that person. So if you have a capacious view of someone, you are trying to see the ability they have—the capacity they have to do something. So if—it’s possible but the cigar owner might see this as something that shows a higher intellectual quality in these men then maybe most people think. And then the question would be, what might he do or not do about that knowledge if he sees it that way? All right, the third option—and there may be more than these—might be that he sees this as useful, okay? Because it’s keeping the workers busy, it’s keeping them, you know, working and productive. If you want to take a negative view, we could save keeping them docile. Okay? So it’s keeping them in their places. But, it’s worthwhile to think about, you know how the other person in this novel, the person who is kind of looming there, or that we don’t really get the insights of, which is that larger White superstructure there—that White society. How does—how might White society see these kinds of things, all right? Since this is so fundamental to be part of, you know, Black society—or, really not Black but non-White society because these men are from Cuba, they are not African Americans, they’re Cuban-Americans—so you know, he’s really engaging with people who are not just solely from Africa or from those regions of the world.

Good. All right, so you are writing about dynamic character for me, and you chose this passage. You want to get into this stuff. If you’re talking about the fact that he feels membership in a freemasonry is a change in him—if I’m reading this, I’m going to say, “All right, so what changes is he seeing and what does this membership mean to him?” And so, you want to go through and say, “All right, well, there’s singing and talking involved; there’s something at the heart of that has to do with struggle; and then we see him as being the
leader as part of one of these freemasonry groups—or freemason groups of the race.” And so, then we want to look at well, what does it mean for him to be the “reader”? Well what is the reader doing? Reading news, reading fiction, reading literature, you know, he is a leader in times of conflict. Then, so what does James Weldon say about this? He calls it “passive resistance.” So, you then want to describe, you know, what is he learning about himself? He’s learning an act of passive resistance. That’s the change. This is—[pointing to the words “passive resistance” on board] this is the big fundamental thing that potentially is coming out this—is this [circling the words “passive resistance” on board], you know, and to some extent this [circling the words “leader in times of conflict” on board]—to some extent, that [pointing to the two phrases again]. All right, and so part of him coming into this is a change he’s seeing in himself—that he can be a leader to some extent. Right? He gets a voice in this. It’s a really big thing for him to be the leader of these men who are working there. So, you might even say, Layla if you were going to do—and Aria—if you were going to do a good opening sentence, a good thesis statement, that this passage shows that he’s developing this quality: leadership. Okay? And he’s doing it by discussing what it meant to be part of one of these little freemasonry societies and what that involved. All right? So use these notes when I’m asking you to write something. These notes turn into things that are more formal arguments about stuff. That’s what we are trying to get to here.

Chapter 6? Somebody have something for chapter 6? Thank you, ladies [indicating Layla and Aria]. Will do it on this board [indicating the whiteboard in the classroom]. Any group choose anything from chapter 6? I need a third hand.

Kiera: What does that mean?

Me: I said I need a third hand. I’ve got too many things in my hands.

Kiera: You do, Mr. Fiorini.

Nyah: Scarlett and Kiera want to say—

Me: Yeah, Scarlett and Kiera, go ahead. [Pause for a few moments while Scarlett and Kiera gather their notes from Edmodo and reference the correct pages in the novel.] Tell us where you are, yeah.

Kiera: Page 42, paragraph 2.

Me: Yeah, I’m going to take you back.

Kiera: What?

Me: I’m going to take you back a little bit, okay? [laughter from the class] I want you to get into that paragraph. I like that paragraph, all right? So I want to take you back a little bit. I want you to start on page 41.

Kiera: Okay. What, do you want us to read it?

Me: Yeah. I want you to go halfway down 41 in chapter 6 where it says, “New York City
is…” Okay? And read from there to wherever you stopped.

Kiera: All right.

Me: All right, everybody get on 41. This is a really fantastic passage right here, okay? It’s one of the most beautiful descriptions I think in this novel. Okay? Go ahead.

Kiera: “New York City is the most fatally fascinating thing in America. She sits like a great witch at the gate of the country, showing her alluring white face and hiding her crooked hands and feet under the folds of her wide garments—constantly enticing thousands from far within, and tempting those who come from across the seas to go no farther. And all these become the victims of her caprice. Some she at once crushes beneath her cruel feet; others she condemns to a fate like that of galley slaves; a few she favors and fondles, riding them high on the bubbles of fortune; then with a sudden breath she blows the bubbles out and laughs mockingly as she watches them fall.”

Me: Good. Pause there for one second. Now, you’re going to start on the next paragraph for your analysis.

Kiera: Yes.

Me: I just wanted you to read that. What is he doing there? What’s he describing?

Kiera and Scarlett: New York City.

Me: New York City as a what? [Some students call out “as a female”; others “as a person.”] What kind of female?

Scarlett: As a white female.

Me: A white…?

Camila: Witch.

Me: Witch. Okay? This is important. This is a beautiful metaphor. Okay, and what does he say about New York City as the white witch? What is—why is New York City that figure to him? [pause for a few moments; an unidentifiable student who has been coughing says, “I’m dying.”] You’re dying? Like seriously? Start living. [laughter from the student] All right, what’s the deal with the white witch? Well, look at it! Don’t look at me! Go back to 41 and look at what he says about the white witch. I’m not going to answer for you—this question.

Kiera: Is it like kind of—it says, she’s showing her “alluring white face and hiding her crooked hands and feet”—is it kind of like it looks really good from the outside, but then but then on the inside—

Scarlett: It’s rough, and its raggedy, and…not a good time.

Kiera: Yeah.
Me: Good, so there’s a kind of outward persona and an inward person. Okay, so there’s something here about the outward versus the inward. On the outside you see what?

Kiera: This beautiful, like—

Me: Beauty [writing on the board]. What else?

Scarlett: It’s all enticing.


Victor: Like immigrants?

Me: Like immigrants, exactly. It tempts them to do what? To stay. That when they get there, they don’t leave. Okay. So, [writing on board] “temptation to stay.” So, let’s qualify these [indicating what has been written on the board]. Okay, [reading from the board] “enticement to come”, “temptation to stay”, and “beauty”, you know, is part of this whole—this this part of, you know what does this. Okay. Inward, though, is what? Instead of beauty—what’s the opposite of beauty? [Some students volunteer “ugliness.”] Ugliness. [Amir says something to students around him, and they laugh.] What is embodied in this ugliness—in the metaphor? [pause] Well, what is ugly about New York?

Amir: It’s a devil thing.

Nyah: Maybe he’s talking about—

Me: Take a look on 42, because that’s when he talks about that stuff.

Nyah: Yeah, he just guessin’ [indicating Amir]. [Amir says something back to Nyah.]

Me: Do not guess. Look. Yes, Victor?

Victor: Is it the “galley slaves” like they can hardly leave, themselves?

Me: Yes! Very good. So what do they get when they get to—when they come here? A kind of slavery [writing on the board]. And that could be about, you know, the work. All right, what else do they get? “Victims of her caprice”—what is caprice?

Amir: Oh, I know that means—distaste, something like that.

Me: Nope.
Amir: It’s just like—

Me: Look it up!

Amir: Is one of my SAT words. I know this. Wait a minute.

Me: Look up *caprice*. A Chevy Caprice, why would they name a car the Chevy Caprice?

Amir: A sudden change in character. Is that it?

Me: That’s good. Sudden changes. Yes. Sudden changes or whims, okay. So I would say a whim is the best way to talk about it. A whim is, you know, you do something here, you do something there. Why would they name a car the Chevy Caprice? [with an effected tone] Ehh, he does get in the car and drive wherever you want to drive! [laughers from class] You know? That’s the idea. You know go out and do what you want to do! It’s supposed to have this like idea of freedom.

Amir: That’s why I am going to drive that car.

Me: All right? Why would they call a Dodge—shh quiet down, this is important, guys. This is part of the artistic quality of the things around you. Why would they call a Dodge an Intrepid? What does it mean to be intrepid?

Amir: I don’t know, fast? [Other students offer some suggestions.]

Me: Not unbeatable, but unafraid, okay, in that sense. Okay? If you know the Dodge—what’s Dodge’s symbol?

Kiera: It’s a ram.

Me: Yeah, the ram, right? So look at all their cars and their names. Okay? What are they called? What are some Dodges?

Camila: Challenger. Charger.

Me: The Challenger, the Charger, Intrepid, what else? Anything else? No? Well, just deal with those three. What do they all have in common?

Camila: Durango.

Me: They’re all about what?

Victor: Power

Camila: Strength

Me: Power and strength and like hammering away at whatever. That’s Dodge’s image is—if you look at their cars—the Challenger, the—what is it?
Camila: The Durango, like the Charger.

Me: The Chargers—they’re big-bodied cars, they usually have a large grill—like Dodge is known for having like these really large grills in the front. Okay? You know, they have the body—the body embodies the idea. You know, if you guys are going to go into one day marketing, or go into, you know, advertising, or design, product development, or things like that. You know, understanding metaphors that you encounter in literature is fundamental to that practice work for that. Why English class? Well, English class helps you to understand the way that words transition into images in a lot of ways, okay, and how we use words effectively to get an image out there. So, this is an important metaphor, this idea of New York as the witch, the white witch. Even the great alliterative phrase the w, w, right? [writing the phrase on the board and underlining those letters] Because it’s kind of oxymoronic—a witch, you think evil; white, you think good, right? The white is the outward; the witch is the inward. You’ve got the beauty and ugliness; enticement, temptation. You’ve got slavery, and you’ve got caprice. “Lack of control” [writing this on board next to the word slavery] okay? Whatever she wants to do to you, she does. All right? You getting this? All right, slavery, lack of control, anything else there? Yes?

Victor: When they talk about the bubbles.

Me: The “bubbles of fortune,” good! What’s that all about?

Victor: Basically what you just said.

Me: Yes, this goes with the caprice. The Caprice goes with that image of the “bubbles of fortune.” Okay, fortune is a force that you can’t control. Okay? It’s going to be whatever happens, happens. All right, there’s something else that’s a quality of the witch part of this. Do you see it in there at all?

Camila: [quoting the text] “She blows the bubbles out and laughs mockingly”—?

Me: Yeah, so part of that is, you know, you’re demoralized, in a sense. What does it mean to be demoralized?

Kiera: Demonic?

Amir: Like the damned.

Me: No, not demonic. Yeah, to be beaten down [in response to an inaudible student suggestion]. Yeah, when you—if you’re a sports person and you try to demoralize your opponent, okay, you taunt them, try to get them to think less of themselves so they won’t perform as well. And so, he’s saying there’s a demoralizing quality of this slavery, lack of control in work as well, right? And he also uses a very important, kind of, sexual term there when he says she fondles you. Okay? The idea is that there’s something kind of dirty there too about the way the city treats you. So think about all the metaphors of New York that you know, all the songs that talk about New York and what New York is about, okay? This captures a lot of that—that kind of like oxymoronic—not oxymoronic, but paradoxical
writing the term on the board] quality. What is a paradox?

Amir: Um, it’s like two things that can’t be in—[trailing off]

Me: Yeah, it’s inherently contradictory to itself. Okay, so New York is the place of opportunity, it’s that white, shining place where everyone wants to go to make money and become, you know, famous and big, but underneath there are things that are—there’s a dark underbelly to it. Okay? So that’s why I asked you ladies to read that. I know I dwelt a long time on that, but it’s a really important—if I were to choose one description in here that I think is like a really one of the most artistic, like I said, parts of this novel is that description of New York.

Kiera: In the whole book?

Me: The whole book. I mean, he’s very artistic throughout, but that one in particular I love, of New York City as the white witch. All right, read what you were going to read for us, and then we’ll pick up talking about it tomorrow.

Scarlett: “Twice I had passed through it, but this was really my first visit to New York; and as I walked about that evening, I began to feel the dread power of the city; the crowds, the lights, the excitement, the gaiety, and all its subtler stimulating influences began to take effect upon me. My blood ran quicker and I felt that I was just beginning to live. To some natures this stimulant of life in a great city becomes a thing as binding and necessary as opium is to one addicted to the habit. It becomes their breath of life; they cannot exist outside of it; rather than be deprived of it they are content to suffer hunger, want, pain, and misery; they would not exchange even a ragged and wretched condition among the great crowd for any degree of comfort away from it.”

Me: Okay, good. All right, so we have a couple of minutes. So, what change do you see happening as is entering the city? What do you see captured there? What did you guys talk about?

Kiera: It was like at the end of the chapter. What is this, chapter 6?

Me: Yes.

Kiera: At the end of chapter 5 he was saying about how just as he was getting settled in—where was he? Somewhere in Florida, Jacksonville?

Me: Yes.

Kiera: Jacksonville. He was thinking about—

Kiera and Scarlett: —getting married—

Kiera: —and working in the cigar factory for the rest of his life, you know, moving up the chain. And that’s what he wanted then, and as soon as he comes to the city, he’s like, “I want to be here.”
Me: Okay.

Kiera: So, it was like his desires completely changed.

Me: So a shift in desire. Gotcha, [writing on board] a “shift in desires”. Okay, you know, and in kind of life path, I heard you talk about. Good, all right, and so when you would do then, you want to say—you want to talk maybe about the opening to chapter 6 captures, you know, an important shift and the desires of how the narrator is going to, you know, run his life. And then, you can talk about, you know, maybe this image has something to do with that compared to Jacksonville. You may compare the two cities and what the qualities of the cities were. So that would actually be a good way to discuss this. If you’re talking about a shift—if you want to write about a shift, you have to say what the a was and the b is [writing these two integers on the board], okay? The a here being Jacksonville; the b being New York City. You might want to go back and look at well what was life like in Jacksonville? What is life like in New York City as he describes it? And why is this shift important? Now, to write that you need to read rest of the book, because you then need to see what happens to them in New York City and why this shift is important. But yeah, I would say that definitely captures some important shift in his character, and the key here is being clear about the b and them also the a (Jacksonville), which you have to go, again, back and look at. Right? Is everyone clear on that? [looking back over what has been written on the board] Metaphors, guys, are very important—they function in very important ways a literature. They help to convey very deep aspects of something by comparing it to something that it is not. Wyatt city is not a witch. A witch is a witch, and New York City is New York City. But, by comparing two things that are unlike each other—and that’s what metaphors and similes do—you can find deeper likenesses. And those deeper likenesses are the things that actually make you feel and understand those two things very much differently—or the thing that’s been compared differently. They’re tools for artistic creation in that sense to help you have that level of understanding. Okay, tomorrow we’ll deal with seven and eight.
Class Discussion, 2-27-2013 (Section A): The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

Whole-Class Discussion/Analysis Workshop

This discussion focused on last week’s writing prompt, which asked students to track the development of Johnson’s narrator as a dynamic character in chapters five through eight of his novel. The directives for the assignment read:

**STRUCTURED NOTE TAKING: DYNAMIC CHARACTER (JWJ, CHAPTERS 9-11)**

**Preliminary In-Class Work:**

Working independently or with a partner, students examined the final three chapters of the novel (9 through 11) as they prepared to write capstone analytic papers on the theories of race that Johnson explores in his novel. The following questions guided this work:

- What are the most significant events that comprise the closing chapters of JWJ’s novel? Discuss the significance of each.
- What major realizations about race, gender, and/or class does Johnson explore in the following sections of these chapters: a) his time in Paris, b) his travels by train across the South, c) his journey into the interior of Georgia, d) his return to NYC?
- What questions are you left with at the close of his novel? How do you interpret the concluding statement that he makes in the final lines of Chapter 11?

Students were asked to take notes and reference key passages in relationship to these and to come to this wrap-up discussion prepared to present their findings.

[This discussion opened with a question posed by student that asked how the novel would have been different had Johnson’s mother been White and his father Black. The first few comments by students were not recorded due to human error in starting the device.]

Nyah: He didn’t know what it felt like to be White, but he knew a long time ago in the story that being Black was obviously something like worse. Like he knew that being White was superior, and like I just don’t agree with the whole “if you grew up with somebody that’s how you think” because like I’ve read books—but it’s like you can’t—the Whites that back then believed in slavery and like their children will be like “oh my gosh, that’s bad, but like I don’t think—I don’t think that’s good.” I’m just saying that just because you grow up with somebody that thinks a certain type of way doesn’t mean that you’re to think like them or act like them.

Me: Okay. Responses? Let me get Frazier he had his hand up for a while, and then I’ll come back around.

Frazier: I mean, I agree with Nyah. It comes down to what influences—I think, you know, either parent, you know, might think a certain way, but like, you know, it doesn’t necessarily mean that he’s going to, you know, think that way. But then, I do think, you know, it would’ve been different obviously if [inaudible] But I don’t know how. But I don’t think
necessarily that he would have been changed in a way. I mean he could have been.

Me: Okay. Aria?

Aria: I just want to mention—because until that girl in the class—when the teacher was like “sit down,” he didn’t even know he was Black. So until that him and his mom were on different pages about race. Because he still hung out with the White kids.

Me: Okay. Other ideas? Yeah, Gina?

Gina: Well, I mean I think it would be interesting for that to happen cause it would kind of be the same concept where like—I thought that he found out that he was White, was the big realization. Wasn’t that what it was? That he was half White? Cause already knew he was Black, because his mother was Black.

Me: Well, I mean, I think he found out both in some way. I think that race was not something that he actually necessarily—it wasn’t a concept that he understood at a young age. I think that his introduction was with him being identified as black, and then his mother kind of intimates something about his heritage. If you look at the passage when he has that conversation with his mother, his mother never says, “You’re White.” Right? She says something very specific.

Nyah: She said…this is what she said.

Me: Yeah?

Nyah: She said you’re not White—she said but your dad—she said something like your dad’s a noble man, and you have like the best blood of the South in you.

Me: Very good! Good memory. That’s exactly what she said. She says you come from some of the best blood in the South. Which doesn’t—which is an interesting comment—why is that—I mean like why is that significant, do you think—that comment you come from “the best blood of the South” and not an answer that says, “No, you have White blood in you too?” Why is that—?

Alexander: She’s trying to differentiate the narrator from the rest of—from a normal White guy.

Me: Okay, but the Whiteness doesn’t even come into the comment. Amir?

Amir: I think the reason why she doesn’t—this may be a little off—but I think she still was in love—her feelings for his father was the reason why she said you have the best blood or the noblest blood in the South. I think that was her feelings for his father.

Me: Okay. Let’s just find that passage so we get the right wording for it. Let’s see if we can look that up. [long pause while class members search for the page in the text] I mean, I think it’s an interesting question about the difference between whether the mother would be—if the mother had been White and the father Black—about this inversion and how that would
have changed things. Go ahead, Nyah, what does it say?

Nyah: Where do you want me—do you want me to—

Me: First of all, it’s chapter one right?

Nyah: Yeah.

Me: And it’s page—in our book it’s what?

Camila: Eight.

Me: Eight. Okay, in Nyah’s book it’s—?

Nyah: Ten.


Nyah: [reading from the text] “No, my darling, you are not a nigger.” Should I start there?

Me: Yeah, sure.

Nyah: Okay. [reading from the text] “No, my darling, you are not a nigger.” She went on: “You are as good as anybody; if anyone calls you a nigger, don’t notice them.” But the more she talked, the less was I reassured, and I stopped her by asking: “Well, mother, am I white? Are you white?” She answered tremulously: “No, I am not white, but you—your father is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you—” This suddenly opened up in my heart a fresh chasm of misgiving and fear, and I almost fiercely demanded: “Who is my father? Where is he?” She stroked my hair and said: “I’ll tell you about him some day.” I sobbed: “I want to know now.” She answered: “No, not now.”

Me: Yeah, so it seems like she’s about to say—okay—”but you are”—you know, maybe—”White.” Right? But instead, she stops herself, it seems, in a way that interjection happens and says, you know, “your father”—instead of what you are—”your father is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you.”

Amir: Maybe—

Me: Yeah, go ahead.

Amir: Maybe she didn’t want to confuse him. Because how old is he when they’re talking about this?

Me: That’s a good question. [a number of students talk over each other to offer suggestions] He was in the third grade? So the third grade is what? Nine?

Amir: Yeah. That’s kind of confusing as he’s sitting there, and especially for the time that they’re in, you know Blacks and Whites—he’s not stupid—they could like marry or mix—
especially in the South. So it might be confusing for him to understand where he lies in the spectrum of America. And it would be confusing to know oh, my father is a rich and powerful Southern White gentleman, and my mom is a poor slave.

Nyah: She wasn’t poor.

Amir: Well not—a slave, a woman. Whatever.

Me: Okay.

Nyah: She wasn’t a slave.

Me: So you think it would have been—[a small argument breaks out between Amir and Nyah over how to characterize the mother’s status]—so you think it would have been more confusing—so you think it would have been more confusing for her to say, “but no, you’re also White”—you know, “your White as well”? Like trying to explain a biracial identity, you think, would have been confusing for a third grader?

Amir: Yeah. Real confusing.

Me: Are there any other ideas about why she may have resisted saying, you know, that “you’re White”?

Amir: Because she loved the—oh wait, no. But I can understand why she would have said that you’re White—because she loves the father.

Camila: Maybe she didn’t want him to put himself above the other people.

Me: Okay, maybe she didn’t want to put him—him to put himself above the other students in the classroom?

Nyah: He already was. I mean, he already thought he was the [inaudible] stuff because he was White, so he was talking about the boy.

Me: Well kind of, but—yeah—yeah, right.

Nyah: Kind of—yeah.

Amir: Okay, calm down.

Nyah: No, we’s having a discussion.

Me: Yeah, Pearl?

Pearl: I think that maybe she just didn’t want to open up the door to have the discussion about his father with him yet. She just wanted him to get older so that then he would understand the situation better.
Me: So she just kind of shit it down by saying you’re from “the best blood in the South,” in general. Yeah?

Alexander: Yeah, I think like in general she didn’t want to put—to have him think of a label for himself.

Me: Yeah.

Alexander: So, you know, she answers “no” to the first question—you know, no to—he’s not a nigger, and also that—also she doesn’t go on to say he’s White either. So I think she just kind of doesn’t want—you know, by saying “the best blood” she kind of wants him to think of himself differently than a certain—like a label for himself.

Me: Yeah, than a racial label—

Alexander: A racial label.

Me: —in that sense. That’s interesting. I mean another thing that you got me thinking about too, Alexander, is that, you know, gender is also linked to power in society, and certainly in this society and in our society as well. So if the mother had been White and the father Black, you know, I wonder if he would have even been living the same kind of life, you know? If a White woman had had sexual relations with a Black man in the South during this time—

Nyah: The Black man would be killed.

Me: Yeah, it’s very much likely, and that she would also have maybe been threatened in some way, even to the point of her life for having had relations with a Black man. Okay, so really its actually a very—it could have changed a lot, I think. It’s a very significant choice, there.

Nyah: It’s a completely different story—

Me: Say that again?

Nyah: It would be a completely different story.

Me: Yeah, I think it might be a completely different story, but I think it did lead us—the question led us to a good area just in terms of what the story is by looking at, you know, him coming to that understanding, you know, and what his mother—how his mother tried to frame that for him, and why she may have framed it that way—in the way she did when she talked to him that way. Good. Any other questions at the end of this thing that you had? Just about the novel, in general, about why it was written the way it was written, any other things? Yeah, Lily?

Lily: For the last chapter, I had a question about like what if he didn’t meet his wife? Cause his wife is White, and once she died he kind of gave up on pursuing that Black power, I guess.

Me: Yeah…
Lily: And he wants—he kind of gave up on that—and he says like on page 99 that “after my wife’s death [reading from text] “I have gradually dropped out of social life; but there is nothing I would not suffer to keep the brand from being placed upon them.” But he—basically for me he kinda abandoned his goals in life. Like cause he wanted to pursue music, and he wanted to like be a role model for his race and do, I guess, extraordinary things and make an indentation [sic] in American society. And he kind of gave up on that after, you know, his wife died cause she gave birth to his second child—their second child, and she died from that. And so, I really think what if he didn’t meet her? Like would he still continue that work that he wanted to progress on?

Me: So does this make sense what I wrote here? [indicating process notes taken while Lily was speaking] The question I hear kind of going there is ‘Did his marriage to his White wife and her subsequent death prevent him from doing the work that he might have done in his own race community, in that sense?’ Is that kind of where you’re going with this? [Lily nods.] Yeah? [brief comments from student in the back of the classroom are inaudible] I mean, it’s interesting. It’s a big question too about how relationships form and for what reasons. I mean, it goes beyond this book when we think about who do we partner with, and how does the way society sees who we partner with impact the work that we do, the lives that we live, the kinds of choices we make, you know? Any thoughts about that at all?

Nyah: What’s the question again?

Me: So, Lily’s question—I kind of after listening to her, I made it, “Did his marriage to his wife and her subsequent death prevent him from doing the work he might have done in this world?” And I said it raises—for me it raises a question about the impact that the way society views race has on the way that we choose partners, the way that that affects our life, you know, the way that we raise children, potentially—or certainly the way we raise our children—

Nyah: Certainly.

Me: You know, I think that may be something to consider.

Amir: If his wife was Black would he have—would have continued—I don’t know…

Me: Continued his work?

Amir: Yeah—made more of an impact on the Black community?

Me: Do you have thoughts on that? Anybody? So would it have made a difference if he had married a black woman and—now are you saying had he married a Black woman and still identified as White in the North, or are you saying had lived in the South and identified as—you know, maybe joined that congregation that he—or that community that he founded in Atlanta?

Amir: Or maybe, he would have just said, ‘Oh! They realize I’m Black up there in the North too instead of White in the North or White in the South. I’m Black everywhere.’ [laughter from
students around him]

Me: [reiterating what Amir has proposed] Or, if he had lived in the North as a Black man.

Amir: Yeah.

Me: All right. Frazier?

Frazier: It might have actually, you know, kind of lived as more of a White—if he had married a Black woman. I mean, maybe not, but if he had maybe it would have been helpful—beneficial if he was living more as a White man, because he would—there was that whole thing of, you know, marring someone lighter than you.

Me: Yeah. Can we get a sense of why he married the woman he did? Is there any indication of how that relationship formed in the book? I can’t remember. Scarlett?

Scarlett: Well I think they were out together and they ran into Shiny, and he realized that she wasn’t prejudiced to him. So he figured that she wouldn’t be prejudiced towards him if he told her what his true heritage was.

Me: Okay. Let’s see if we can find where that occurs. Elijah? Yeah?

Elijah: I think that music—

Me: There was a connection to music? Yeah?

Elijah: She was like singing—

Me: Oh, she was a singer.

Elijah: Yeah, and they met up, and they were talking about how he played piano and then they introduced themselves to each other.

Me: Okay, yeah. I’m trying—for some reason I drew a blank on this—on how they actually ended up—oh yeah, it’s ninety-four. [reading from the text] “During this time we were drawn together a great deal by the mutual bond of music.” This is at the bottom of ninety-four. “She loved to hear me play Chopin and was herself far from being a poor performer of his compositions. I think I carried her every new song that was published which I thought suitable to her voice, and played the accompaniment for her.” What does this remind you of—this relationship with her? Does it remind you of anything prior in the novel?

Layla: The other girl—the little girl.

Me: Yeah! It’s kind of like he’s come full circle back to when he was a kid first playing and the infatuation or the feelings he had towards the girl that he was performing with, yeah. It’s kind of interesting. He’s got this thing about accompanying—being an accompanist to the singers, right? That’s his like—his—
Nyah: That’s his thing.

Me: His thing. All right? That’s the way he operates.

Amir: Weirdooo!

Me: Look at the top of ninety-four. [reading from text] “Instead of taking the car, I walked home. I needed the air and exercise as a sort of sedative. I am not sure whether my troubled condition of mind was due to the fact that I had been struck by love or to the feeling that I had made a bad impression upon her.” My question—the reason I asked about this was I wanted to see if like love was at the center of this relationship, or race, or something else was at the center of this relationship. But he does say that I was love. Okay? So you know, speculating about whether or not his wife—had he married a Black woman or a White woman might be interesting—did he—was the young girl that he played—that he accompanied when he was young, do we know about her race? Was she White or Black?

Aria: She was Black.

Gina: I thought she was Asian.

Aria: She was Black.

Me: She was Asian?

Gina: I thought she was. [laughter from students]

Me: I don’t know about that one. Let’s go back and take a look here. [laughter has turned into a number of students laughing and making comments] I’m wondering why that may have—I’m wondering why that sticks in your head though if she were—

Gina: I don’t know why, I do think that she was.

Me: All right, this is in Chapter 2, maybe? Yes, Chapter 2. She had brown eyes, we know that.

Nyah: Well, she is Black.

Me: That doesn’t mean anything!

Amir: She’s Black.

Me: Oh, but listen, how about this? Look at page sixteen [over this, Nyah can be heard talking about who in her family has brown eyes and equating to race] or in the other book just maybe like five or six paragraphs before the end of Chapter 2. It’s Chopin all over again. He’s playing this Chopin waltz. Chopin get’s him going, I guess, right? [laughter from some students]

Amir: Chopin got a shout out!
Me: [reading from text] “My mother was all in smiles”—let’s see if we can figure this out. [long pause while searching through novel] We’ve got to keep going back. Maybe thirteen or twelve—[someone from the class says, “Google it”]

Frazier: It says she has a “pale face.”

Me: She has what?

Frazier: A “pale face” on thirteen. But I don’t know—

Me: Oh, on thirteen it says she has a “pale face.”

Frazier: But I don’t know if that—

Me: Is this that chapter—that paragraph where it says, “one afternoon”? 

Frazier: No, the one under that.

Nyah: [to those around her] I could have sworn that girl was Black.

Me: All right, shh, hold on, hold on, hold on.

Frazier: Oh, oh, actually it’s—

Nyah: [to those around her] Aria said she light.

Amir: [to Nyah] Aria said she had a pale face.

Nyah: I have a pale face; I’m Black!

Me: It doesn’t say.

Frazier: Well, it doesn’t really say.

Me: It doesn’t really say. Okay? She had brown eyes, he says her face was pale. Where is that? Oh yeah, [reading from text] “framing her pale face and her slender body swaying to the tones she called forth…” All right? Well, we don’t know. Dark hair. Pale face. You know, but there’s really no indication of her race. The reason I asked about the younger girl was I wondered if we were going to track some kind of a—you know, the fact that he was attracted potentially to a person of a certain race or not, but the author doesn’t really lead us that way.

Amir: Well, we can say he likes lighter women.

Me: Potentially—

Nyah: Maybe he likes Black women.
Me: —It could be that, but there’s no indication either way is the idea—no clear indication. But either way.

Amir: Can I say something?

Me: Yes, Amir.

Amir: [addressing the group around him] Cause pale faced? I’m gonna say she’s White.

Charlotte: She’s White.

Amir: The girl—he got a prob—he got a thing for White women. I think it’s easy to say that. [one of the students near him says, “So does Amir”] Shut up! Shut. Up. And I think that is just him—this thing for a White woman is his justification for him wanting to express his White side. He’s always known he’s half White. But I think him liking White women is just his reason for wanting to be more White, or whatever.

Gina: [sotto voce, sighing] Oh, my God!

Nyah: Oh, so you think he wants to be more White?

Amir: I think he’s always wanted to be more White.

Nyah: I agree. I’m glad you said it first.

Me: You think that—you—that that’s—where do you think that comes from—that desire?

Amir: His desire to be White or his desire for White women?

Me: [not hearing him fully] We’re doing a psychoanalytic analysis here. Yeah, where do you think that comes from?

Amir: His desire to be White or for White women?

Me: Well, you think it comes from a desire to be White, you’re saying—his attraction to White women.

Amir: Well not—I think it’s just a—

Me: I mean, do you see—do you think there’s anything in his experiences that makes that—

Nyah: I think this all started when his mom—when his mom said that thing about his dad. That right there was just putting him on a pedestal—that whole description there. [mimicking the mother in the novel with a hyperbolic tone of praise] “I know. I’m not White, but your dad…nmnm be Jesus.” [laughter from students around her] I know! Like, what?!

[students speak over each other around her] No, I’m not saying like—[pause] She put him—she put him on a pedestal.
Me: And the implication that his dad was White you think made him want to identify more with the White race than the Black race?

Nyah: Kinda sorta. Cause that, right there, was to me saying that dad is—like she didn’t say nothing about herself. But I guess he knew—he knew her. But I’m saying, the way she talked him—yeah, it was making him superior.

Me: So, do you see other times in the novel where the Black race is held up in comparison to the White race, where the White is placed as the better of the two and the Black is placed being inferior to the other?

Amir: When he decided he was White—when he woke up and said, ‘Oh, I’m White.’

Me: Lily?

Lily: No, it was the time— [interrupted by a great deal of crosstalk]

Me: Shh shh shh. All right let’s let some other people get some ideas in. Lily?

Lily: Because the thing was, when he dropped out of college, and he went to some place, and then he was in that hotel with the other guy, he—like they went to the restaurant right?—the segregated restaurant, and then they went in there and they were treated like—the foods was bad, the sanitation was bad here the Black restaurant was. But then, he tried to go—like him, the narrator tried to go to a White restaurant—like everything’s all nice and pretty and stuff, and it’s showing that, you know, White is superior in the way that they try to—the elegance and their food and stuff—

Me: Yeah, well, but I meant that was just a reality of the—of what the world was like, right? I mean, my question is do you see him purposefully having a bias that places—in the way that he discusses race—that places Whiteness as something that is—something to be obtained, maybe, and him not embracing the Black or colored part of him—of his biracial identity? Frazier?

Frazier: I think to me, it’s like—it’s not he thinks one is kind of—

Me: Superior?

Frazier: —superior. It’s just that he identifies more, maybe, with White, and he’s been trying to see—find the like Black side of him—or find what, you know, things about him that he can identify with as Black. But I think he sees more like in himself—like a few times he talks about how he thinks about himself as White, I think. Or, he thinks of himself as sometimes more as—sometimes being Black. And some other people also think of him as—

Me: Yeah. And I’m wondering where that thinking of—where do you decide that, maybe? So if you are of biracial identity, right? Where do you decide that you identify with—at what point in your life does that like, maybe, happen? And is there a point we can track in his life where that happens in a big way? Pearl, and then I’ll come back to—
Pearl: I think his mother had a big thing to do with that, because of the way like she didn’t let him really see the Black side of him until after. So, he grew up like in that type of environment—like understanding that. And yet, even though he tried to understand the other side—that you can’t really go from living one way to completely changing your whole entire situation.

Me: Nyah?

Nyah: I think we decide when you find out what’s the world’s preference. What do they want you to be? For some people—if you’re a human, how—which one is going to be the easier way? If my life’s going to be easier being White—I’m a White. Like, for real for real? If I was back then, and I like could dye my hair, I would be White and just like try to be White for a little bit. And try to live like the life. [Aria echoes her sentiment by nodding in affirmation and adding, “Mmmhmm.”]

Me: Now, do you think that’s embedded in the comment that you pointed out to us that you’re from “the best blood in the South” like that was an early indicator of what society values, in that sense? Is that—does that go along with that comment that you made? [Nyah nods in assent.] Yeah? Yes? Others? Other ideas about that? Yes, Amir.

Amir: I think it just all goes back to—I think life made him decide that he wanted to be White. It’s—

Nyah: That’s what I said in the first place.

Amir: I know—yeah, preference, or whatever. Cause it’s all just goes—all just goes back to the thing—this whole idea that white is right, brown, stick around, and black, get back. Like— [A number of students exclaim, “What?!” Laughter erupts from the class, and someone from the back of the room shouts, “It’s the truth! Another student says, “I never heard it.”] Well I have—

Me: Where does that—where does that saying come from?

Amir: I have no idea.

Me: I mean, where did you pick that up?

Amir: [mishearing my question] I didn’t make it up.

Me: No, I said, “pick it up?” Where did that—yeah?

Amir: Oh, my dad. My dad.

Me: From your dad?

Amir: [to others around him] Yeah, my diddy. [laughter from class] And I think that is where this whole White—it all comes down to that. And life may have decided, “Oh, this is what
I’m a be.” And I think if his mom, because she was Black, she would have expressed that blackness or whatever more—

Nyah: She didn’t embrace it!

Amir: Then he would have been able to say, “Oh, you know what? I am Black.” Or, would have just been able to say, “I’m both.” As confusing as it is, the world isn’t always going to be able to understand “I’m one or the other”, so you can just say it yourself, “I’m both.”

Nyah: You said it, boo.

Me: So all of this—all of this leads me to the question, like do you feel as though this is a realistic portrayal of—now I know that you’re not living in the early twentieth century, all right, clearly—but maybe taken out of time for a second, you know, do you feel like this is a realistic portrayal of someone’s life living as a biracial individual?

Nyah: Kinda, sort of. Yeah.

Me: I mean, are there things that are more realistic than others? Do you feel like there were times when you weren’t—you didn’t believe the narrator or you didn’t find, you know, this to be a believable account of someone’s life? Or, times where you thought that it was really real, maybe?

Amir: Yeah.

Nyah: Yeah.

Me: Can you point to aspects or—

Nyah: Yeah, the part I picked out yesterday, that was a part—

Me: What was that? Say that again? Or remind us.

Nyah: About the light—how light you are. Like how we had the discussion about how it puts you like higher sometimes. Or like with the marriage present and stuff like that.

Me: Mmhmm.

Nyah: Like that’s—that’s not how people think, but like—I don’t even know how to say that—

Me: You think that still exists?

Nyah: Yeah.

Me: Or, you know that still exists.

Nyah: Yeah, it does. Some people automatically think like if they see somebody—like cause
you light-skinned, you might think you prettier or something like that cause you lighter. [some low volume comments from people near her] That’s what some people think like—

Amir: You right.

Me: So, the fact that ideas about beauty are linked to color of skin and tone—skin tone—is something that comes out in this? So, the fact that he’s identifying with these lighter-skinned women you think might reinforce that stereotype? That’s interesting. Anything else? Yeah? Lily?

Lily: I kind of disagree on that, because the whole like—

Me: [quieting down side talk] Listen please.

Lily: Almost half of the book he talks about like how he wants to fight for the Negro race and everything, and right? It’s just at the very end of it he kind of gave up on it. But in the middle and in the beginning he identifies as a Negro, and he wants to better their lives and do great things for them, and I don’t understand why people are telling—are saying that he’s White because he kinda—he in some ways, in aspects, yes he has some characteristics that you can identify him as White, but the whole—almost all of this book talks about is him being Black. And he wants—he talks to a lot of—he interacts with a lot of Black people, and he wants to enforce that he is this kind of race. And [with great confidence] that’s what I believe, and I don’t care what people say. [laugher from some around her]

Me: I’m so glad you’re so passionate about it. In fact—and I don’t think you’re wrong. I’ll comment in a minute. Let me get some other people. Frazier?

Nyah: Pick Gina!

Frazier: He talks about that a lot, but I think it’s more like he’s trying to understand it, and that’s why there’s so much in this book dedicated to talking to other people about race and stuff in their culture. But I think he’s trying to understand it, but at the end he realizes that he’s—he’s kind of grounded, you know, in his Whi—I don’t know, maybe he’s—

Me: So there’s a struggle between—

Frazier: There’s a struggle—

Me: —his goals as a person of color who is part of—that is part of him—and the incredible goals that he has—like Lily pointed out—to really do great work and to do this kind of stuff, and at the other end pulling at him is this desire to make a better life for himself—in the sense that what Nyah pointed out—about the fact that, unfortunately, identifying with that White part of him will give him some kind of power in society. So, you know, I think, you know, Lily is opening this up to maybe, you know, pointing to the fact that this is a really—that the Black-ness is a really important part of his life. But you know, I think that the other comments are equally valid in the sense that, I think, what you’re all coming together to figure—or to point to is that struggle, in a sense. Gina?
Gina: This might not make sense, but like I hate things like this. Because not even just—like this guy is equally as White as he is Black. By like—technically his is 50% White and 50% Black. So, this entire book is so like—maybe cause I’m not biracial, I don’t understand as well as someone who is, but like I feel like so many people today and, you know, back then like if they’re biracial, they’re either Black or White, which isn’t—isn’t like—they identify themselves as either Black or White. Like a lot of sports players who are “mixed” usually say, “Oh, I’m Black” or “Oh, I’m White.” You know what I mean? When like—it’s I think—it’s just you should—it’s not, you’re not, you’re not are—you’re not just are—

Amir: You are! It is a law in America! That’s—

Me: [trying to get students to speak in turn] Shhh shhh shhh. Wait. Let’s—let’s keep this—

Amir: If you are a percent Black, then you are Black!

Me: Let’s keep this—

Gina: [to me] You know what I’m saying?

Me: Yes, I do. So, what I—what I would say is maybe we want to think about why that is. [classroom phone rings] If you’re noticing that is the case—as someone like me—like many people who are not of biracial identity but maybe notice that there’s some tendency to go one way or the other. Hold on. [answers phone; conversation between students continues in the background]

Nyah: Kiera, what are you? Irish?

Kiera: I’m Irish. Polish.

Me: [returning to conversation after passing on an announcement to students to visit the guidance counselor] Maybe—so my idea about that is, Is there something that society does to discourage people from acknowledging that we are both and not just one or the other? I don’t know it’s just a question.

Gina: But don’t you think that it’s like—

Amir: [to Gina] No!

Gina: —it’s so like unnecessary. You know what I’m saying? Like you’re both. You’re Black and you’re White. You don’t have to—

Nyah: What you call Obama?

Me: Okay, hold on. Shhh shhh.


Nyah: Wait, wait!
Gina: Obama was raised by a White woman.

Nyah: What do we call Obama? [Several students start to speak over one another.]

Amir: Yeah, but he never said his mom was White, what would you have thought he was? Halle Berry never—[he is drowned out by an increasing number of students speaking over one another]

Me: All right, sbbbbb, one at a time, please. One at a time. Nyah, what were your comments going to be before you were interrupted?

Gina: [to another student] Sbbbbb! It doesn’t matter.

Kiera: It’s always a race war. It’s always a race war with this class!

Me: This is not—sbbbbb [responding to some overlapping comments that this has turned into an intense discussion and then, acknowledging those comments] That’s good, there’s nothing wrong with that. As long as—listen, listen—there is nothing wrong with having these kinds of discussions. These are the kinds of discussions that we should have, alright?

Nyah: [in agreement] I’m just saying!

Me: As long as they’re done in a respectful manner, okay? [student crosstalk begins to come down in volume] Go ahead, Nyah.

Nyah: If I asked Gina, “What’s Obama?” [in response to Gina giving her a dismissive look and expression] No, for real. If I had asked you two weeks ago, “Gina, what’s Obama?” You would say, “Black.” Nora, what’s Obama?

Me: Well, you can’t tell her what she would say…

Nyah: [getting an answer from Nora that can’t be heard on the recording] Okay, you’d say Black or White? Okay, what would you say, Pearl?

Pearl: He’s Black and White. He was raised by his White grandmother—

Nyah: [querying one student after another] So would you say Black? Would you say Black?

Me: Nyah—Nyah. [again the class erupts in crosstalk] So I think the point—sbbbbb. I think the point Nyah is trying to make. [letting the conversation die down] Sbbbbb.

Nyah: What was Obama? The first what president?

Aria: Black.

Kiera: Black president.
Me: Well, we do describe him as being the first Black president. Yes, absolutely.

Gina: Yeah, because he’s the first Black president—president who has Black in him.

Nyah: I’m just saying—this just what I’m saying and then—

Me: Can I—?

Nyah: I’ll be quiet. We go with the minority.

Me: I know what you’re saying—I think that—

Nyah: It’s whatever you’re mixed with—whatever you’re mixed with, the minority is always what you go with. *Whatever!*

Me: I think that’s a valid point! I think that is a valid point.

Nyah: [over a great deal of crosstalk] Why are we like, “Oh, you’re Black?” cause we mixed?

Me: That’s absolutely is a valid point. [waiting for crosstalk to dissipate] Okay. *Sbbbbbhhhh.* Settle down for a second.

Gina: [with an exasperated tone] Ohhh man!

Me: Let’s do this in an orderly way. Okay? So, this is what I’m hearing so far before I get to the three people with their hands up. I will, okay? What I’m hearing so far is a kind of acknowledgment that there’s something about society that has us identify people as one or the other, and very often, it’s based on something that is very non-definite about someone’s skin color. But if we feel as though their skin is of a certain hue, there’s some kind of threshold where we automatically say, that person is now Black.

Amir: Yes!

Me: Okay. What Gina’s—

Nyah: Are you talking about—what type of society? I mean you’re just saying a society in general?

Me: Let’s say American society.

Nyah: The girls I know love to say they’re mixed. Cause that’s a part of the [inaudible]

Me: Well, then maybe—maybe it’s—maybe mainstream society? Is that more accurate?

Owen: Yeah.

Kiera: Yeah.
Aria: Yeah.

Me: Maybe.

Nyah: Yeah, I guess so. That’s correct.

Me: Maybe White society? [A male voice says, “Black.”] I don’t know. All right, but there’s also another perspective here. That there’s something—there’s a problem with, potentially, with—that if people are noticing that—that biracial identification isn’t happening in the sense of “I am of a biracial background” rather than “I am—either White or Black.” And the question is—Where is that coming from? Maybe it’s going to be a more productive way rather than just trying to poll people about “Do you think this person’s White or Black?” Okay? Because that’s just reinforcing, you know, whatever that problematic aspect potentially is in society. All right. Let me get Amir, and then Pearl, and the Frazier. Go ahead, Amir.

Amir: All right, if Obama never once said his mother was White, and you just looked at him—just like you was saying a specific hue, or whatever—

Me: Right…

Amir: You would have automatically thought, “Oh, this guy is Black.” [A male voice says from the back of the room says, “That’s what I’m saying.”] If Halle Berry—

Me: Why?

Amir: Because he looked it.

Me: So it’s—

Gina: That’s not what I’m saying.

Me: [to Gina] I know, I know. Okay.

Amir: He got the nose, he got the facial features—[he is drowned out by another round of crosstalk; Gabby asks to add something]

Me: Shhh. You can in a second. We’re going one by one here.

Amir: All right? All right? He got his skin.

Me: Yes.

Amir: You would have thought he was Black.

Me: Okay.

Amir: Halle Berry has never said she was—
Me: I know, but these hypotheticals aren’t getting us anywhere. Okay? We get the point—we get the point.

Gina: I’m not saying like—

Amir: [to Gina] You say that they should acknowledge both sides, but why should they have to? Why?

Gina: It’s not about how you look.

Amir: [Lily tries to add something, and he raises his voice to her.] I’m trying to SPEAK, Lily! Can I SPEAK? [A few people around him say, “Oooo” in disapproval.]

Gina: [in response to his tone toward Lily] Oh my god!

Amir: Let her speak in my turn? [as if to caution me not to do so] It’s my turn!

Nyah: It is his turn.

Amir: They don’t have to acknowledge both sides if they don’t want to!

Lily: That’s racist!

Gina: But why wouldn’t they—why—?

Me: We won’t have future—excuse me! I will negate turns to speak if you are rude to each other. [to Amir] And that includes you.

Amir: Well I wasn’t being rude until Lily had to hop in it! [in a playfully angry tone] Thanks, Lily!

Lily: [to Amir] I really don’t think you should give that tone to me, cause I didn’t—[people around her erupt in agreement]

Me: This is true. Amir—

Amir: [over a great deal of crosstalk and argument between class members] It was my turn to speak!

Me: Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me. [Some members of the class shush others until the cross talk comes down in volume.] Now, I’m having these conversations with you cause I’m assuming a level of maturity.

Nyah: Not when we got race—

Me: Well, I think we need to get there. I mean we need to get there.
Amir: It’s—it’s just—

Me: *Everyone*—everyone needs to stop talking over everyone else. Okay? *Everyone* does. Amir, your point is well taken. Okay?

Amir: The extreme factor—

Me: Your point is well taken. The hypotheticals about seeing people is just reinforcing the point that’s already been made that there are some stereotypes that people have when looking at each other that have us identify something essential about that person’s race that we can’t possibly identify just by looking at them. I think the better point that you made somewhere in that craziness that just happened. [laugher from class] Okay? Was that it should be up to the person to self-identify. The question—the better question is how does Barack Obama or Halle Berry self-identify? And what can we do as a society to stop placing those labels on people and letting those people identify their own identities and put those as what should be understood about who they are. The question that Gina raised, I think, is that sometimes the way people identify themselves—or maybe every time or all the time the way they identify themselves—has to do with the way society has already set up those rules for how we are identified. So, whether or not you choose “White” or “Black” is sometimes because society asks you to choose one or the other. Okay? And maybe there’s something that’s problematic about that. Before we leave, I want to get the last two comments. Go ahead, Pearl.

Pearl: [waiving off the invitation to speak] No, I was just— [indicating the area where the argument occurred]

Me: Ahh, okay, you were just trying to mediate there, okay. Frazier? [He shakes his head.] You’re good? Lily, did you want to add something?

Lily: No.

Me: Listen, you’re all doing really good work here.

Amir: It’s the truth!

Me: Listen, you’re all doing excellent work here! These are no easy things to work through, all right? But we need to be respectful when we’re doing this.
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