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Outspoken Tomboys and Arrogant Women: Four 10th-Grade Girls' Talk about Female Characters in English Class

by Pamela Hartman

When Peter¹ asked me to visit his 10th grade Honors English class, I was excited. He knew that I was interested in issues of gender and literacy, and he described his class as “priding itself on focusing on a variety of multicultural issues.” He felt that this focus was particularly important since his school, while located in a first-ring suburb of a large city², was 97% white. He explained that through literature students could discuss topics such as race, class, religion, and gender, leading, hopefully, to greater awareness and acceptance of cultural differences.

When I looked at Paul's syllabus, however, I was immediately struck by the fact that except for one text, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, all were written by men. When I asked Peter about this, he said it was the only text by a woman that was approved for the 10th grade. I began to ask myself how the girls in his class perceived the predominately male-authored texts that they read in their English class? For instance, did they identify with the male characters or search for women's experiences in minor women characters? I also wondered how the girls perceived the representations of women that did exist in the texts. In other words, did the female characters seem to reflect the experiences of actual women? Also, I questioned how the girls related their own experiences with the representations of the women's experiences in the texts. I wondered if the texts challenged or supported the girls' understanding of gender.

With these questions in mind, I began a 9-week (one marking period) observation of Paul's 10th grade Honors class. I talked with four girls in his class about what they thought about the literature they had read in high school thus far. By examining these four girls' perceptions about the literary characters as well as their ideas about gender, I uncovered how the girls actively sought out women characters and applied sometimes contradictory notions of gender to their interpretations.

Identifying with Female Characters

If classroom research (Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990; Finders, 1997; Hartman 2001) is correct in concluding that girls' definitions of gender identity are influenced by the women characters they encountered reading in English class, then the girls that I interviewed must have formed their understanding of these roles from a very small pool. All four of the girls said that they could “hardly remember” any female characters in their high school literature thus far. With the exception of Scout, the female protagonist in the Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (read in 10th grade), and Juliet in the Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (read in 9th grade), women and girl characters seemed to play a limited and largely insignificant role. Females were described as not having a “big role,” not being “really important,” and representing groups of people rather than being developed as individuals. For example, Laura discussed *Inherit The Wind*, by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, as one of her favorite texts, saying that Melinda, one of the only females in the text, “pretty much represented like the younger half of the citizens there. . . . I think that's why they put her in. But she wasn't really important.” She went on to say that not only was Melinda one of the only females in *Inherit The Wind*, she was also one of the only female characters Melinda could even recall from the texts she read in 10th grade.

Although the overwhelming number of characters that the girls encountered in school were male, all four girls identified female characters as the individuals that they found the most interesting and the most important from the texts they read. When the girls were asked to discuss the literature that they had studied over the course of this year, all of the girls named Scout as their favorite and as the most memorable character. Their descriptions of Scout were very similar. They described her as being outspoken, smart, independent, and a tomboy.

Ann: She's a tomboy because she, like at the beginning of the book, she got offended

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² By first-ring suburb I mean one of the suburbs bordering the city limits.

when her brother called her a girl. I think she's just used to being around her brother. . . . I like her attitude. She just won't let people do what they want with her. She has a mind of her own.

Laura: She was like a tomboy. She didn't know what was going on in the world, like a little kid. It was really cool as she learned everything that was going on, really. . . . She's like outspoken. She just yells out whatever.

Becky: I liked Scout. I thought she was like a typical tomboy. Because she had an older brother, she wanted to like be a guy sort of, but her feminine qualities were still like coming out in her towards the end. You saw it more. She'd be more the motherly type because she didn't have a mother. She'd be like, "Well, I don't think you should do that. That's bad news." And he'd [her brother Jim] be like, "You're being such a girl." And she'd be like, "Oh yeah." And then she'd stop, and she'd go back to being like a tomboy. [Scout was] funny and fun to be with. Kinda like sporty, like outdoorsy. She'd rather be outdoors than indoors. [She was] nice, caring, considerate, nonracist.

Kim: She was like kind of mouthy and she was kind of tomboyish. She did what she wanted even though what people [might say]. She seems open-minded. . . . And she was opinionated. She didn't really hold in what she thought. She would just say it. And she was a tomboy. She did a lot of stuff guys do. And she dressed like a guy and she didn't like to wear dresses.

Most strikingly, all the girls characterized Scout as a "tomboy." In addition, she was described by all as being smart, naive, outspoken, independent, and disdainful of being called "a girl." The 10th grade girls said that they all liked Scout and seemed to like these qualities about

the character. Becky noticed and admired that Scout possessed "feminine" and "motherly" qualities toward the end of the novel, but she also recognized that Scout was criticized for these qualities.

Besides liking Scout for her personality traits, two of the girls said that they chose Scout as their favorite character because they could relate to her as a person because she reminded them of someone they knew. Specifically, Scout reminded them of female family members, and two of the girls said Scout also reminded them of themselves. "She is kind of like my sister was, when she was younger," recalled Ann. "We were like tomboys. . . . She [my sister] was really like outspoken. . . . So she reminded me of [Scout]. . . . I liked it about [them]." Becky also recalled liking Scout because the character seemed familiar:

She [Scout] would play like outside a lot, and I remember that I used to love to play outside a lot, and also I couldn't wait for summertime. And she used to run around without shoes on, and I used to also do that. I didn't use to wear shoes ever when I was little. . . . She just sounded like a fun person to hang out with.

All of the girls expressed the idea that Scout seemed like a real girl either because she reminded them of a person they knew and/or because of, as Laura puts it, her "human" character traits. Laura explained that even though Scout is "outspoken," she can also admit that she was wrong. For example, Laura said that "she [Scout] makes a lot of mistakes but she can like open her eyes to what happened and be like 'Oh I did do that wrong.' And she'll learn from it. She listens to what people have to say and tries to accept it. That makes her more human." The girls explained that it was these "human characteristics" that made Scout "interesting," "likable," and "easy to identify with."

In addition to Scout, all the girls talked about Juliet, who they read in the 9th grade. However, only two of the girls said they admired her and that she was "strong-willed." In contrast, the other two girls thought Juliet was "weak" because she did not take control of her life. What was important to their choices, then, was not the characters themselves but the way in which each of the girls constructed the characters. Laura and Karen liked Juliet because they interpreted her as being independent. "She did whatever she wanted," stated Karen. On the other hand, Ann and Becky did not find her remarkable.

Ann thought that Juliet was “forced into things” and was more “stereotypical.” Becky thought that Juliet seemed less real than a character like Scout.

I would argue that the girls did not passively read the texts, accepting the characters as they were given, but instead actively constructed the meaning of the characters’ roles. They admired the young female characters that they found to be assertive and frequently rejected the characters they found to be weak. The girls’ analysis, however, seemed limited in scope. They all identified with characters they interpreted as independent and outspoken. However, the girls seemed to only accept independence and outspokenness in child characters, not in adult women. Scout was labeled a “tomboy,” but was expected to become more “ladylike” when she grew up. The girls did not seem to have difficulty with the idea that what they found to be strong in a female character could also lead to her downfall. For example, Juliet was admired because she did what she wanted to do, with little regard for the wishes of others. Laura found little trouble reconciling this with the fact that Juliet’s actions later led to her death.

Conflicting Discourses of Gender

As the four girls reflected on the texts, it became apparent that they were maintaining two seemingly contradictory beliefs about femininity and female characters. On the one hand, they talked about how they admired young girls who were strong and independent, outspoken and straightforward. On the other, the girls said that these female characters must give up these personality traits as they grew up and became women. The girls seem to possess competing discourses--one informed by mainstream feminism and the other informed by traditional cultural roles. First, the girls talked about how females should be independent, speak their minds, and stand up for what they believe in. But they also said that women should do what they were told, keep their opinions to themselves, and sacrifice themselves and what they believed in for the wishes of their husbands, lovers, fathers, and families. While these two sets of beliefs would appear to be in total opposition to one another, the girls embraced both. In some cases the girls were able to resolve the conflict by requiring the female character to fulfill both roles at different times. In

other cases, the girls were unable to resolve the conflict, but maintained the two discourses, nonetheless.

The girls were able to resolve this conflict with Scout by claiming that she would eventually change. As previously indicated, all of the girls described Scout, as a young girl, as being outspoken, independent, and a tomboy. While the girls saw these characteristics as being not only acceptable for a young girl but also preferable, they also viewed these traits as inappropriate for an adult woman. Ann made the strongest statements about the necessity for Scout to change:

I liked it [that Scout was a tomboy and outspoken]. I think you might not like it when [she] gets older but usually people grow out of it. I liked it since she was so young. . . . I think they [girls] should realize they’re not like boys. They have to grow up and, you know, they can’t just get away with doing all the things like guys do. Like when boys used to like fight, like when Scout would want to fight with the boys, it was kind of like—I don’t know. When she gets a little older she won’t be able to do that anymore. They [boys] shouldn’t fight] but it’s more, uh, stereotypical³ for them, I think, to fight. But, it’s not really any better, but it just seems like she shouldn’t be.

Ann not only has different expectations for males and females but also different expectations for women and girls. It’s all right that Scout as a young girl roughhouses and speaks her mind. It will not be all right for Scout as an adolescent or adult to act in the same manner. Later in the interview, Ann stated that when Scout grew up she would have to be more “respectful” to “get things” she wanted in life. The very traits Ann seemed to admire in Scout, and many of the other young female characters she mentioned, she claimed were not appropriate traits for adult women. Ann did qualify her statements about Scout by stating that Scout, as an adult, would “be going to college and . . . have high goals for herself and [wouldn’t] settle for anything less.”

Kim, too, voiced a strong opinion that Scout would have to change as she approached adulthood:

She [Scout] might like settle down and learn how to like hold her tongue and not say everything. She might learn the hard way. I don’t know. And she’ll probably be more like a girl and stuff. She’ll

³ I later talked to Ann about her use of the term “stereotypical.” In many cases, as in this one, she actually meant to use the term “typical.”

probably change. . . . She'll dress like a girl and she won't do all the guy stuff. . . . She won't wear overalls. She might wear like dresses and things. She'd probably want to be inside and do more things like with other girls. Because like all she really has is the guy fun. She might have girl fun.

When I asked Kim for an example of the "girl fun" that Scout might engage in as an adult, she suggested that Scout would enjoy dressing up and attending tea parties, as Scout's aunt did in the novel. Kim did recognize, however, that this change in Scout's role would not come without a cost, namely the close relationship Scout had with her brother, Jim. She said that with this change, Scout would "probably grow away from Jim." Kim was able to justify this outcome by claiming that Jim had already begun to emotionally separate from his sister. "He [was] growing older too, and he [was] growing apart from her." Kim saw this separation as an unfortunate yet natural and acceptable result of the two children taking on two different, gender-appropriate adult roles.

Both Ann and Kim were able to expand their definition of what is appropriate feminine behavior to include both of the competing discourses of femininity by separating what is acceptable for girls from what is acceptable for women. By doing this, Scout can be admired and both discourses are left intact.

Becky was the only girl out of the four who saw that Scout's changing from outspoken to passive was not inevitable. When I asked her about what type of person Scout would be as she reached adulthood, Becky described a woman who was more complicated than the descriptions given by the other girls.

Becky: I think she's going to be a little bit bitter maybe because of what happened with Tom Robinson.⁴

Pamela: That's interesting.

Becky: [Scout would be] kind of angry, angry at the world, because why should [Tom] suffer when he was innocent? She'll have a different outlook on life. Like she might not like some people. Like before she didn't hate anyone. I mean, there were people at school that she

didn't like that she would beat up, but maybe she'll look down more on Whites, and she'll be like, "Look what you're doing to those people—they're people." And she might be a little bitter because of it. I think she'll be fun to hang out with though at our age. I don't think she'd be bitter about people her own age. But again the old people sit on their front porches and are like, "You bad black person." She might be like throwing rocks at them at 15 still. I think she would because she's that kind of person. She wants to stand up for everyone that's different.

Pamela: And you still think she'll be that way when she's older?

Becky: Uh-huh. I think she'll always be that way because that's how the father was, Atticus. Atticus was like that, and I think that's how she would be.

Unlike the other girls, Becky not only was able to include being opinionated and outspoken in her definition of what was acceptable for young girls but also in her vision of what was appropriate for at least some adult women.

When the girls talked about the women characters, rather than girls, in the literature from English class, the conflict between the two discourses became more apparent. The women who exhibited the very traits that the 10th-grade girls said they admired in young girls, including being a tomboy and outspoken, were the characters that the girls seemed now to dislike and reject. I asked each girl about her impressions concerning Portia, a main character in *The Merchant of Venice*. The girls read the entire play during the time of the study and Portia was one of the only adult female characters they had encountered that year as well as in this play. None of the girls particularly liked the character, although they all thought she might be a "nice" or "good" person.

Ann: I think [Portia] is the opposite of Scout. Like when she was younger I'm sure she wasn't a tomboy. Because of the way she acts now. . . . [She is] kind of

⁴ Tom Robinson was convicted of a crime he did not commit because he was Black. He was shot and killed in prison before his case could be appealed.

- prissy. Like you know she has money. She has possessions. But she's also caring about people. I think she's overall like a nice person.
- Laura:** I think she's sort of stuck-up, like she acts arrogant. . . . After she [was] married she was telling [her] husband what to do still. . . . She's sort of bossy.
- Becky:** I think she's kind of got a big head. She knows she's rich. She knows she's like quote-unquote pretty. She knows that she can like, guys are like lining up and risking to lose ever getting married just to marry her. I think she kind of gets a big head about it, like "All these people want me, and I'm rich. . . ." I just didn't like her.

The girls interpreted what might have been seen as Portia having a strong will and being outspoken, traits they claimed to admire, as her being "stuck-up," "arrogant," "conceited," and "bossy."

Ironically, the characteristics that the girls said they liked about Portia were the complete opposite of what they appreciated in young girls, such as Scout. For instance, while they liked it when younger female characters were outspoken and acted as tomboys, the girls said that they appreciated that Portia acted mature for her age and was "lady-like." And although all of the girls had expressed that they admired younger characters that "did what they wanted," two of the girls stated that they liked the fact that Portia obeyed her dead father's wishes by allowing her future husband to be selected by chance, even though this might have resulted in her marrying someone she didn't know or love. Kim was particularly adamant that Portia should be admired for obeying her father.

- Kim:** Well she [Portia] didn't like protest not having a choice [about who she married] pretty much so I guess she was like OK that way. She was open minded, I guess, like going by her father's wishes. That's how he wanted it to be done even though he wasn't alive. She was obedient to her father by doing that. And she was taking a risk

that she would marry someone that she didn't love or anything.

- Pamela:** What do you think about that?

- Kim:** That's good. It's respectable that she would do that even though [she was] taking a risk that she would, because I wouldn't.

- Pamela:** So you think it was a good thing she was doing?

- Kim:** It's good but not good. It's not a good thing that she would get someone she didn't love, but it's a good thing that she's following her father's wishes, and she's doing it anyways even though I don't know if she really agrees with it.

- Pamela:** You said it was good that she was doing it because "I wouldn't." Would you consider her—I don't know how to phrase it—would you consider her a better person than you because she let her father choose her husband?

- Kim:** Maybe, because she follows what her father says. If my father told me to, and I didn't, she would probably be a better person. But then she wouldn't be marrying for love, she'd be marrying for having to marry the person.

- Pamela:** Is that a good thing or a problem?

- Kim:** Probably a problem.

- Pamela:** But then you said that she was a good person for letting her father—

- Kim:** Well, it's better to obey your parents but I mean I wouldn't. Because it's not good to disobey your parents. . . , but she's not being exactly good because she's not standing up for what she believes in if she believes that she shouldn't have to marry like that.

Kim stated that Portia is a good person because she follows her father's wishes. However, Kim could not reconcile this judgment with Portia's inability to do what she herself wants, which is to marry the person she loves. In Kim's eyes, Portia could not be "exactly good" no matter what course she chooses.

Even though Becky expressed her dislike for Portia, she too admired her for following her father's wishes, even though she too says she would never do it herself.

If I were Portia, I would have been like, "Sorry, Dad. I know you're in heaven or below, but I'm—no boxes for me." Because I would want to choose the person that I love, that I wanted to marry. Instead of just kind of like getting stuck with him. . . . She's kind of—trustworthy. . . . And I guess she must have loved her father a lot if she trusted his system of finding a husband for her. I don't think I would have done that. . . . I think that she's a good person for like keeping with what her father says.

The girls respected Portia for following her father's wishes even though they said they would never do it themselves and despite the fact that they admired younger characters when they did what they wanted to do regardless of what others opinions, especially their parents, wanted. This apparent contradiction may have indicated a conflict in their conception of the proper gender roles of women and girls. On the one hand, the 10th-grade girls seemed to believe that women should be independent and make their own decisions based on what they believed. Thus, Portia is found to be lacking because she does not follow her heart. On the other hand, the girls seemed to assent to the traditional belief that women should trust and obey their fathers and husbands. Thus, Portia is again found to be lacking when she shows independence in her choice of a husband. In this instance, the girls cast Portia as prissy, bossy, and arrogant.

In another example, the girls seemed to be trying to define the borders of appropriate gender roles. While reading *The Merchant of Venice*, they became uneasy when the gender borders began to blur in the scene in which Portia dresses like a man in order to go to court (women weren't allowed in the courts at that time) to save a friend. Below are excerpts from the conversations I had with two of the girls, Becky and Kim, as they attempted to describe their uneasy reactions to this scene.

Becky: She [Portia] dressed up like a man and

pretended to be a lawyer. She kind of scares me a little. Because she dressed like a man and pretended to be a lawyer. I don't know—

Pamela: [laughter] Which part bothers you?

Becky: I find that very odd. I mean, I know that women weren't allowed to go to trials, but what would possess you to do that? Dress up like a man and be a lawyer? I don't understand why she would do that.

Pamela: I'm not sure I if I'm following you. What bothers you about it?

Becky: The dressing up like a man part maybe.

Pamela: Oh.

Becky: Why [would she dress like a man]? I just don't understand that.

Pamela: What do you think she should have done instead?

Becky: I think she should have—I don't know. Maybe she shouldn't have even gone to the trial at all. She should have just stayed home, or done something else, or prepared for the wedding after the trial was over. It wasn't her husband that was going to be murdered, was it? It was his friend, right? I don't understand.

Upon my suggestion, Becky brought this issue up in class the next day. She asked her teacher, "Why did Portia dress up like a man?" Her teacher replied, "Because women couldn't go to court back then." Unfortunately, Becky looked down at her desk and did not pursue the question further. Later she told me, "We don't talk about that stuff in class."

Kim also discussed Portia in the trial scene. I asked her if Portia was a convincing female character. After thinking about it for a moment, she replied, "She didn't. From what I've read [in this scene], she doesn't seem extremely feminine really. She played the part of the guy

really well so I don't know.”

In both cases, the girls were uncomfortable with the fact that Portia had not only pretended to be a man but also had gotten away with it. She crossed the boundaries of appropriate feminine behavior and did it successfully. The girls were unable to fit this behavior into their definitions of femininity and were perplexed by the conflict.

One explanation for the girls' differing reactions to Scout and Portia may be that the girls respond to the characters' different stages of sexual development. As a child, Scout is allowed to be androgynous and can try out different sexual roles. She can speak her mind and stand up to her brother and male friends because she is only looking for playmates. There is plenty of time for her to develop more traditionally feminine characteristics in order for her to fulfill a traditional role as a wife and mother. However, Portia, who has reached sexual maturity, must fit a role which society has deemed appropriate for women. When Portia speaks her mind and stands up to her husband, she is said to be bossy and arrogant. Outspokenness and independence, which the girls say they admire, clash with their image of women as being more passive and obedient, which they see as necessary traits for women to get along with men. To attract men, women must become more feminine.

Conclusion

Although most of the texts that the four girls encountered in school were predominately about boys and men and their experiences, the girls that I talked to stated that they liked and identified with the female characters that they did read about. The girls did not blindly accept the roles in the text, but instead actively constructed interpretations of these characters. They admired young female characters who were active, outspoken, independent, and described as tomboys. The girls seemed to challenge traditional feminine roles. However, this challenge was limited. The girls had difficulty allowing adult female characters to be strong and independent when they had to be passive and agreeable in order to attract men.

If girls are going to be able to become equal members in society with equal benefits, they must be able to envision themselves in new, more equal roles. When the four girls described the female characters in the texts, they spoke of what they perceived as appropriate roles

for girls and women and how the characters either fit or did not fit their definitions. The girls, however, were often unable to resolve the conflict when the characters either simultaneously fit into both their competing discourses or when they went completely outside the boundaries of what they defined as feminine.

Teachers need to provide students with the tools to find the contradictions in their beliefs about gender. The students also need the knowledge necessary to analyze these contradictions. And, while reading literature that represents more diverse roles for both women and girls is certainly appropriate, it is even more vital that we have critical conversations about gender in our classrooms. In this 10th-grade English class, they did not talk about gender issues, and the girls were unable to effectively examine their own conflicting discourses on gender. If students begin to see female characters differently, they may be able to see new possibilities for women and themselves.

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Welcoming and Educating Students' Emotional Responses to Disturbing Literature

by Alexandra DeSiato and Elaine O'Quinn

Too often in teaching we dismiss the emotional needs and experiences of our students. While men are not immune, women can be especially vulnerable to such treatment because of overall cultural tendencies to silence them. This silencing frequently occurs around issues that make others uncomfortable: sexuality, personal experiences, and disclosure of private matters. Because traditional models of teaching are typically built around rationalized structures manipulated from expert points of view, it is easy to dismiss student response that stems from an individual perspective. In the study of literature, this can mean an approach to texts that marginalizes the emotional experience of students as merely "personal" and favors authorial intent, scholarly critique, teacher-centered interpretation, and culturally rigid constructs of what constitutes knowledge. While it might be argued that traditional methods have a place in classrooms meant to encourage the learning of "objective" information, attempts to eliminate or ignore the emotional impact of certain texts result not only in flawed critical understandings, but also stunt the growth of some students and silence the voices of others desiring to respond in public from a place of personal meaning and understanding.

Declaring texts "feeling neutral" or emotional response as less valuable than cognitive reaction negates not only student interpretation and insight but community development as well. Teachers who choose not to consider the emotional issues brought forward by texts that portray disturbing topics are guilty of subordinating questions and concerns that may lie at the very core of a text for some students, while modeling a method of teaching that potentially ignores and betrays alternate ways of knowing. For women in particular, such a stance reflects an oppressive, patriarchal culture that disempowers by privileging stories as aesthetic artifacts without moral meaning and fixed entities that cannot be questioned, rather than as vehicles of exploration meant to interrogate social codes and individual belief systems.

The texts we refer to here are those that deal with highly-charged material likely to be especially disturbing to women (and some men) who may be victims of, or who are in relationship with, those who have experienced

acts of sexual violence such as abuse, rape, or incest. Texts like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970/1994), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), or Alice Sebold's *Lucky: A Memoir* (1999) are examples that readers may know. It is our experience that when acts of sexual violence occur in a piece of literature, the tendency of the class is not only to suppress emotional expression but to actively try to step away from it. We believe that if English teachers are going to expose students to texts that are potentially explosive, they must consider ways to do so that do not silence the students who may become emotional in the reading and discussion, and that they do not by default recreate the power structures of the society at large that lead to such silencing. If thoughtfully handled, these texts can thwart cultural distributions of power and publicly penetrate the silence that is so often imposed in the situations presented.

Our interest in the pedagogical handling of emotional texts came about when one of us was in a class where an interpretation by a female student of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955/1991) was categorically dismissed by male students in the class as incorrect. The dismissal began with the rolling of eyes and the shaking of heads, but quickly progressed into a verbal assault that then escalated into an outright hostile attack on the speaker and other women in the room who supported her. When the presenter suggested that *Lolita* was the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of the deceitful and unreliable narrator, Humbert, who, the speaker contended, clearly had raped *Lolita*, it became obvious that most of the men in the class disagreed with this reading. They talked over the speaker and interrupted her. They made reference to girls they knew that "acted like *Lolita*", and they aggressively challenged others in the class who dared speak in her defense.

Tension filled the room as the presenter and other women in the class became emotionally upset at what they believed was a rejection not only of their interpretation of the text, but also of their emotional sensibilities about the topic itself. The climate of the class became icy, and the women became noticeably uncomfortable; many of them fell silent and retreated

into themselves. Some women, like one of the authors of this paper, felt denied, shut down, confused, and even shamed by their display of feeling. The dismissal and redesignation by dominant voices that refused to acknowledge what so many of the women were feeling had succeeded in not only bringing the emotional response to a halt, but had, in a zeal to defend the more “intellectual” and “witty” interpretations of the text, propagated and defended the oppressive, disenfranchising kind of behavior to which women are so often forced to defer. A number of women in the class expressed to each other later that the experience was traumatic and left them feeling the classroom was not a safe space to express their honest feelings and interpretations, and several of them choose not to speak up again much in the ensuing classes. What had begun as an expression of public outrage at the treatment of a young girl was morphed into a site of personal weakness because of gendered notions of meaning attached to emotional response. The teacher, it should be noted, did nothing to ameliorate the attacks. In fact, he later claimed it as one of the best classes of the semester.

The self-doubt that arises on the part of women students in incidents such as the one we have just related is not the only concern we should have as classroom teachers. While we know that reports like Myra and David Sadker's (1994) *Failing at Fairness* show that “[f]rom grade school through graduate school female students are more likely to be invisible members of classrooms” (p. 1), we also know that teachers have the ability to do something about such findings, though they often do not. We believe that with only a few adjustments, teachers can change classrooms in ways that value responses from both genders, equitably. Because we are advocates of reader-response and whole-language theory which contend students should be allowed to come to classrooms and reading with their life experiences, and because we actively support feminist theory that holds that men and women are socialized to behave differently, we maintain that including women's emotional responses to texts while illustrating for males a more appropriate way of investigating emotional issues can responsibly and purposefully elicit classroom discussion of emotionally charged texts that help relieve rather than contradict the experiences of those involved.

In their study, the Sadkers' found, among other things, that girls and women are often subjected to

sexual harassment in schools (p. 13); they are given less attention in classrooms (p. 65); and they are given less class time to respond than males (p. 57). The result of all of this is that girls and women “learn to speak softly or not at all; to submerge honest feelings, withhold opinions, and defer to boys . . . Through this curriculum in sexism they are turned into educational spectators instead of players . . .”(p. 13). Clearly, how women are treated in classroom environments often mirrors the patriarchal American culture rather than challenging it. If we believe schools are spaces that should encourage women, then we must reexamine the accepted and embedded practices of our classrooms that silence women with the aim to divorce emotional lives from intellectual ones. Women must be allowed to give accounts of their lives just as men do, even when it means navigating the relationship between the emotional, intellectual, and expressive self.

Pedagogical strategies that frown on emotional response and expression, devalue student input, allow men to dominate class discussions at the exclusion of women, and literature assignments that focus only on theoretical, mechanical, and hyper-intellectual scholarly critiques of texts at the exclusion of content that can be read emotionally in a gendered manner must be scrutinized if teachers truly want to allow women equal voice in the classroom. Emotional honesty and vulnerability should be modeled if the goal is to disrupt established dynamics and power structures and encourage authentic learning from women and men. The benefit for all is deeper, more perceptive teaching and learning. This is in keeping with Rosenblatt's concept of the text as a transactional, active event, whole-language advocacy for classrooms as sites of holistic communication, and feminist concepts of pedagogy that advocate for consciousness-raising and cultural critique.

When teachers open a space for authentic emotion, they are engaging in a dialogue that has major ramifications not only for classrooms, but also for the larger educational institution. Megan Boler, in her text *Feeling Power* (1999), describes the pejorative stance academia typically takes toward emotion: “to address emotions is risky business—especially for feminists and others already marginalized within the hierarchy. . . . In this hierarchy, emotions are culturally associated with femininity, ‘soft’ scholarship, pollution of truth, and bias” (p. 109). She goes on to say that by inviting women “to articulate and publicly name their emotions, and to

critically and collectively analyze these emotions not as 'natural', 'private' occurrences but rather as reflecting learned hierarchies and gendered roles," we can "reclaim emotions out of the (patriarchally enforced) private sphere and put [them] on the political and public map" (p. 113).

Certainly, such thinking would have led to far different understandings of *Lolita* in the class described above. When we open up the English classroom as a locality of public articulation of emotion, we provide students a space for critical inquiry into social norms, gender roles, and power structures, among other things. Although most traditional models of pedagogy do not actively prohibit this kind of classroom exploration in words, they do not encourage it in deeds. As David Bleich suggests in his text, *Readings and Feelings* (1975), the traditional model of teaching in part serves as a method of subverting emotional expression:

[L]arger classroom routine serves an important function: it averts the emotional demands of the classroom situation, it denies our uncertainties with regard to how to handle our feelings and those of our students, and it replaces our uncertainties with the simpler elements of exercising authority. (p. 2)

Because the issues of rape, incest, and sexual abuse are so raw with emotion and are (unfortunately) familiar to many women, there is no doubt that when considered in the classroom they may threaten the comfort level for discussion. However, when such issues are left unexamined and unchallenged in textual assessment or are overlooked in classroom practices as real and potential public happenings, teachers, as Bleich suggests, unintentionally reinforce the structures that allow for such atrocities to take place.

While all voices should be heard in the classroom, it is the voices and experiences of women and those who have been "othered" that teachers must purposefully work to welcome. Literature, with all of the issues that arise in literary texts, offers the perfect opportunity to change the way emotion is perceived in the classroom, using reading, writing, and discussion practices.

Realizing full well that when we begin thinking about teaching texts that deal with sexual violence in a manner congruent with reader-response and whole-language theory as well as feminist pedagogy and sympathy we step onto dif cult terrain, we also understand the importance of considering how we teach such texts in spaces that have typically silenced and

ignored women. It is a challenging, but not impossible task. To our mind, teachers need three things to teach these texts: (1) clarity on theoretical ideas that explain feminist conceptions of emotion to inform intuitive and anecdotal understandings as well as clear understanding of Rosenblatt's theory of transaction between readers and texts; (2) an understanding of why such texts must be taught, no matter the risk; and (3) specific classroom practices as suggested by theories like whole-language that promote classrooms as places that facilitate empathetic teaching through active listening, and open discussion. We have already explained our belief in the theoretical components of feminist concepts, reader response, and whole-language. We encourage readers to consider even further, through their own understandings of the theories, the helpfulness and effectiveness of all in creating the kind of classroom we are suggesting. However, what we would like to consider in more detail now are points (2) and (3).

In *Teaching to Transgress* bell hooks (1994), writes: "Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. . . (p. 21). As teachers interested in feminist pedagogies, we accept the potential challenges to authority that come with instructor vulnerability. It is often a frightening position for teachers, and we both have had days when we felt our teaching would be easier if we removed life experiences, personal uncertainties, and passion from the classroom altogether. Perhaps it would be easier, but our belief is that students would learn and engage less with the real and critical issues of certain texts, missing the potential carry-over into their lives, which is, after all, one of the main purposes of reading literature.

Our own experience has taught us that reading and teaching literature can never truly be an exclusively aesthetic experience. We are attracted to literature for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it is an incredible art form—but a more important reason, and the one that pushes us to make teaching our life work, is that we believe literature is a site for political and moral discourse, a reflective space for understanding and critiquing culture, and a site for personal growth and expression. It is impossible to take the experiences of rape, incest, and sexual abuse and turn the ugliness such experiences create into a mere gem of literary worth—to

do that is to forget that art imitates life and that the many literary characters who have felt the horror of uninvited touch, forced sexual intercourse, loss of power, shame, fear, and sadness represent the many real people who also have felt these things. If we do not acknowledge the terrible impact of these acts as portrayed in literature, we are reduced, as readers, to mere spectators rather than active social participants capable of grappling with the significance and impact of the acts themselves.

It is important to consider here what happens when emotions that arise from texts such as the ones we have been describing are not welcome in a classroom. By silencing or dismissing particular interpretations, we can unwittingly do damage to students who have experienced such abuses. We also propagate the same kind of victim blaming that is prevalent in our society when it comes to these types of abuses. On the other hand, by welcoming such emotions when they do arise, we can promote the healing of some students and a move to action by others as we consider these stories in real life contexts. When we read the text as a telling that casts characters like *Lolita's* Humbert as merely an innocent lover, we are doing a grave injustice to women and men who have known Humberts in their lives. Not to see the possibility of Humbert as a villain is to refuse to validate those students who themselves have been survivors of such manipulative persons (Patnoe 1995). Opening the door to these kinds of conversations in the classroom is not especially comfortable for teachers, but as Patnoe points out, "by not contending with the readers' or *Lolita's* trauma in the classroom, the criticism, or the culture, the trauma is at once both trivialized and intensified for individual readers because they suffer it alone, without forum" (p. 87).

As teachers, we are taking the risk that intense emotions may explode in our classroom should we allow full student response to be expressed, but we risk something even greater if we do not recognize the reality of sexual victimization or if we inadvertently deny it by not talking about it. As feminist educators, we feel we should not contribute to the social silence surrounding issues such as sexual violence by being complicit in masking the literature about it under the guise of aesthetic posturing. To do so is, in essence, to dismiss emotional response because of our own limits and our perceived limits of the text; it is to perpetuate a practice that in the end contains its own act of violence. We do not believe a text can be value neutral, and to treat it as such is to assign only culturally scripted

powers to it. Once emotion is dismissed, there is the risk of oversimplifying particular responses as feminine sentiment, rather than validating them as the real feelings that arise from such disturbing matters.

Again, we do not pretend that journeying these roads is an easy task; while encouraging healthy displays of emotion and emotional involvement with the text, teachers are also responsible for tempering emotional responses that could potentially shame or shatter. The path is narrow, but critical to walk. It is the place where literature's ability to transact with and possibly transform students' lives takes hold. It is the place where we ask students to examine larger issues of morality, culture, politics, and contingent social constructions. To ignore the traumas experienced in so many lives is to send the message that these experiences are so shameful as to be unspeakable. Teachers can and should do better, if they are to claim any moral authority.

It is important to give students workable frameworks for texts that have the potential to be explosive. In the case of the kinds of texts we describe, sharing with students some basic theoretical insights is helpful and does not have to be highly technical. Using examples from media is one way to immediately alert them to feminist concerns with cultural constructs that devalue women and degrade them as sexualized objects. It is also a way to help male students understand their own identification with the sexual escapades society assigns as "normal" for men. Film, music, and print media are readily available and students will be able to find examples of sexual stereotypes easily on their own. Once they begin to see the patterns of inequity in the daily world they inhabit, it is not such a jump into the world of texts. Advance writing assignments can also be useful in opening up safe spaces for the discussions that will come with the reading of the text. Again, with an eye toward the characters and the situations they will encounter, students might do anything from simple journaling to short essay writing about the times in their own lives when they felt a loss of power, were especially frightened by events out of their hands, felt unprotected, isolated, or alone. They might consider times when they felt they were not being heard or that others were not in touch with what they were feeling about a particular situation or event. By putting students in touch with their own feelings about comparable matters early on, they are more likely later to be able to empathize with characters experiencing similar tensions.

Once students begin reading the text, paper assignments that include looking at the circumstances of the textual events through a particular character's eyes might prove helpful. Understanding who is empowered in social transaction and who is not can help unveil stereotypes rather than reinforce them. Simply having students consider the limits of stereotypes that evolve even for those who have power can be insightful and invigorating to them. More creative tasks might include writing found poetry on some of the especially difficult passages that could elicit high emotion, or having students write in the voice of one of the characters about a difficult scene could also prove useful. In safe, but formative ways, students may begin to peel back the layers of texts that allow them to see more than the surface and encourage them to respond beyond their cultural masks.

By giving students some much needed, yet relatively safe tools to deal with disturbing materials, we also give them new frameworks for liberating themselves and others from prescribed responses and oppressive understandings. Inviting them to do some research in advance on issues presented in the text will provide a segue into discussion that may help distance students from the topic in appropriate ways, while assuring that the impact and effect of the issue at hand is not marginalized. The internet is a great resource for gathering information about the topics we are concerned with here, and if by chance there is a student in the room who has been a victim of any of the abuses discussed, they might find useful and helpful information, including sites that offer counseling support. Projects for students can include making posters that alert others to the signs of victim abuse and provide contacts for intervention purposes, or they might even debate the social trends that encourage sexual violence and abuse. As we can see, the possibilities for assignments and discussions are endless; none of these ideas are especially new and many are used daily in classrooms to get to other ideas and understandings of texts. In order, however, to make use of them in meaningful ways, teachers need to be willing to consider in advance what might work with their own students.

Processes such as the ones we mention are at the heart of a classroom that allows students to engage in public spaces in emotional and personal ways. Such groundwork asks students not only to consider difficult issues, but frees them to think about and speak to such experiences in a manner that does not advocate confession or allow humiliation, yet encourages thinking in a broad cultural

capacity. English teachers know that many students will find a way to write about painful experiences from their past if we give them any opportunity at all to do so. Therefore, it behooves us to anticipate this and prepare assignments that make such revelations as supported as possible. Again, we are not suggesting that classrooms become places of therapy, but there is no reason they cannot become sites of healing and understanding. Because creating a false chasm between emotion and reason is an accepted part of the traditional classroom, teachers are habitually hesitant to validate emotional response and provide opportunities for reflection on those responses. But it is imperative we understand that when we do not listen to women and their stories of powerlessness and abuse, we risk acceptance by omission of the lot of the *Lolitas* of the world and of our classrooms.

When we bring texts that are potentially volatile to discussion, we must be conscious of the effect of these texts on all students—the women, the men, and the survivors of horrific episodes of violence and violation. To teach these texts without a concern for how they will make students feel is to ignore an important part of the educational experience, for students learn more than academics in the educational system; they learn ideas and moral codes that guide their lives. When we do not designate time in our classroom for full consideration of issues such as these that affect our students profoundly, we contribute to the social silencing of significant and important topics. Indeed, when we exclude emotion from the classroom, we model a patriarchal mode of learning that includes the suppression not only of emotion, but also of empathy and compassion. Considering that it is education that informs much of our students' lives and actions, the implications for what sort of a world we would have them create and share should be of great concern.

We cannot allow our own fears of a messy and emotional classroom to silence students who have either experienced sexual trauma or who care about it in passionate ways. It is our job as educators to create classrooms that enable and validate meaningful conversation, and that can only be done consciously. As instructors interested in issues of power, gender, and emotions, we must encourage others around us who have not thought about these issues in the context of their students' lives to begin thinking about the implications of such important matters. Such thinking cannot be relegated only to the sphere of women's studies or feminist

classrooms; it must be a part of all classrooms. Only then will students truly learn the importance of literature in their lives and only then will our students—men and women both—be truly educated to the best of their abilities.

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Waves

by Pamela Waterbury

Long after the car disappeared,
I still waved goodbye to her
as my grandmother waved off my mother,
and my mother me,
each of us leaving for another world.

Once my daughter's hand held in mine,
we waved "bye-bye" to her grandmother.
With those leavings came returns,
like waves on Lake Michigan's shoreline
until the final no return
of her grandmother's life.

On summer days, my daughter followed the waves,
out and back to shore on sturdy legs.
Water tumbled grainy sand
and quartz against her ankles
while riptide currents lurked just beneath.

At the grade school, I stood watching
her disappear behind heavy doors.
On the surface she floated back, but already
the current tugged her into deeper water.

Now she carries her belongings
to a new room, a new life,
on a distant shore,
our visits ending with my hand raised
to her receding form.

Watching the stillness of frozen water
bent and peaked on the lake
in this gray February cold,
I imagine the currents underneath,
the thaw, and once again waves
against the shore.

Running in Montpellier:

Winter

by Pamela Waterbury

Like a widow layered in black, weighted,
under hat and mittens, disguised and hidden, she
runs into this snow world. Prepared for hills, but
not this storm. Not the below zero
air harsh in her lungs. Not this danger lurking
under each safe-seeming surface.
Constant surveillance for bumpy ground,
slick packed-snow, and black ice patches
exhaust her.

In the city, the murky slush
slows her pace; the stop-start
of dodging a woman lugging groceries,
a stalled truck makes her feel the dampness from
neck to toe. Not the freeing summer wetness from
even pacing, long strides—
vigilance earns this sweat.
Like a burka, her tightly wrapped scarf
conceals her from strangers' stares.

No digressions on these runs, predictable
patterns. The exterior world a blur,
only feet lifting and lowering and breath.
Heavy clothes sealing off the cold
weight her body
as she ascends the hill,
feet allowing only brief spurts of runs.
Her mind focuses on the in and out breath—
pants of labor.

No triumph of a quick spurt ends the run,
only the plodding of one step and the next
brings her to the top of the hill. Pulling off the veil
of her hood she looks back at the frozen world. In
her room, clothes shed,
she's momentarily lightened, returned

Grandmother's Hands

by Pamela Waterbury

As teens my hands slept
slathered in Vaseline and white gloves.
I wanted them lacey to utter
like a light breeze through aspen leaves;
hands elegant among the china she gave me;
delicately fingering facets on cut glass bowls; or
a lover's sinewed back

not these competent hands, gifts
from my Germanic grandmother,
tarnished with wrinkles, prominent blue veins,
arthritic angles and bumps,
square-shaped with stubby fingers fanning
off a broad palm.

Forgetting gloves, they
scrub kitchen floors, scrape crusted food
off pans, twist stubborn lids,
dig in garden dirt rooting out weeds.
They leave trails of pencil conversations
on student papers, knit a daughter's scarf
for years at a time.

Nails never perfectly groomed,
reveal the white ridges of my grandmother's.
Each day I watch for the familia tremors—
legacies she gave to my mother, a shaking
that kept her from her paints—
to overtake my hands as they lift
a coffee mug or put down the first line of a poem.

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Childhood Readers of the Classics: A Narrative and Biographical Account

by Jane M. Gangi

It is sometimes assumed classic literature is not relevant for children, and may do more harm than good. Too much too soon, it is thought, could have the effect of making children associate the classics with deadliness and boredom. This assumption is promoted in some of the textbooks written for teachers and librarians, making it possible that newly-credentialed teachers and librarians leave their professional programs rejecting the classics as inappropriate for children. Not to make available the classics could be as damaging to some children.

In *Edging the Boundaries of Children's Literature* Winters and Schmidt (2001) try to define "children's literature," which is a daunting task:

The commonality in children's literature is a concern on the part of the author and illustrator to deal with the experience of the child in a way that the child can access, understand, and enjoy. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* may in many ways be about childhood, among other things, but neither is written with a child audience in view. More than one reader has had the experience of having a book "ruined" by a too early reading. (p. 6)

Similarly, Lukens (1999) recounts the story of an eight-year old whose parent proudly stated her child was reading *Moby Dick*. Lukens comments that the parent and the teacher who allowed this "were failing to make a distinction between the capacity to decode, sound out, or recognize words and the capacity to understand and take into oneself the significant ideas.... *Moby Dick*, a classic, was never for children" (p. xix). Lukens is right, as are Winters and Schmidt, of course, if a student is merely decoding words, if the text is inaccessible to the child. However, to outright discount such books for all children is mistaken.

In this article, I share my own love, as a child, of *Jane Eyre*. Then, by consulting biographies and autobiographies, I consider classics that were most meaningful to others, mostly writers, during their childhoods, and why these books exerted a powerful influence—often before their readers had reached sixth grade.

A Childhood Discovery of *Jane Eyre*

Blocks of unpretentious rowhouses surrounded the Leith Walk Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland in a working-to-middle class neighborhood during the 1950s when I attended school there. The Leith Walk school library—a dusty, modest room—contained a small selection of varying genres: fiction, biography, nonfiction, and some picture storybooks, like *The Five Hundred Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*; the publication explosion in children's literature was yet to come. In 1959, when I was nine years old and in the fourth grade, I found in Leith Walk's little library Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a book I read and reread over the next several years.

Thirty-three years later, after my father died in 1992, I began to understand the magnetic attraction *Jane Eyre* held for me as a school-age child. If the developmental stages in today's cognitive psychology had been in place at that time, it is doubtful *Jane Eyre* would have been thought of as developmentally appropriate for a nine year old girl and, therefore, not available. For me, the book opened doors no other book could.

No doubt I chose the book because her name was Jane, as is mine. Already an avid reader, I sometimes lied to my mother, who was a teacher, telling her I was sick so I could stay home and read, for the dozenth time, such books as *Heidi*, all of the Laura Ingalls Wilder series, all of Andrew Lang's fairy tale books, and a plethora of biographies: Molly Pitcher, Clara Barton, Florence Nightingale—women who did dif cult and heroic things, but who also enjoyed and loved life. I must have been quite the child actress; my mother seems to have believed my so-called illnesses, invented to avoid school and gain time for experiencing the fantastic worlds of literature.

The activity of reading—and reading *Jane Eyre* in particular—helped me to move beyond a perplexing, sometimes abusive, and often lonely childhood. My family left our home in North Carolina to move to Baltimore when I was six. At the time, I was sure I was the only girl in the world to undergo the acute suffering

of being separated from my grandparents, whom I dearly loved and who were like parents to me.

Our tiny Baltimore rowhouse was a much smaller arrangement than either of my country-bred parents had grown up in. There had been “bad” business between my father and his brother, and my father began in Baltimore a new career as an engineer in the space industry. Although my parents both had good jobs, there was throughout my childhood little money and much tension, sadness, and anger. My mother clearly despised my uncle, but it wasn’t until I was in high school she told me why: He had embezzled money from my father. How much, I asked? After a cryptic pause, she answered, “Several thousand.” Not only had my father “lost his shirt” at the hands of his own brother, she told me, he had also assumed other debts incurred by my alcoholic uncle in their family business. Too proud to claim bankruptcy, my father made sure other investors and creditors in the business did not lose their shirts, too. I accepted my mother’s explanation but, for many years, I thought my father could get over having lost several thousand dollars to his brother. He should just put his troubles aside and get on with his life. To me, “several thousand,” in my mother’s words, meant two or three thousand dollars.

When my father died, I had to learn more about his experience with his brother. I climbed the steps to my mother’s attic where my father’s boxed-up and wire-bound records lay. Using wire cutters, I opened them, something I would not have dared while my father was still alive. In those yellowed, old records from the 1950s I learned what my mother called several thousand was, in fact, about \$50,000. My father’s brother and a bookkeeper had embezzled \$30,000 from my father, and my father had assumed an additional \$20,000 in business-related debts my uncle owed to others. Thirty-eight years of my parents’ mystifying behavior began to come clear.

I also found letters between my father and an attorney, spanning from 1953 until 1956, indicating there was enough evidence to take my uncle to court. After three years of correspondence with the attorney, my father decided not to do it. My mother said he wanted to protect the family name and to spare his widowed mother and two sisters the public humiliation and small-town gossip of a court case. My father and my mother carried this devastating emotional and economic

burden throughout my growing-up years, while trying to project to others that we were, if not well-off, at least middle class. In the attic I found the bank note, dated 1984, showing my father finally paid off his debts, thirty years after his troubles began. He had gone through the high school and college graduations of his daughters, two weddings, and the birth of three grandchildren as financially strapped as a young person starting out, despite having worked for several decades as a professional engineer. I now understood why there’d been few gifts at graduations and other celebrations. Many years after the event, after my father had died, and because one of my sisters pointed out that my parents had never done so, my mother gave me a high school graduation gift (a pair of earrings).

My parents did not discuss with my sisters and me their terrible betrayal by my uncle, but instead, kept a festering silence. They were, in the words of one of my maternal aunts who vaguely knew the situation, “more ill to you.” Their responses to our childish irresponsibilities and misdemeanors were far out of proportion to the offenses. Their bewildering nonverbal behavior was as devastating as their words of anger: scowls, knitted brows, frowns of disapproval. I did not understand their fury. Reading was an escape for me and authors offered helping and sympathetic hands towards an awareness of other potentialities in life.

Laura Ingalls Wilder’s books showed me family life could be different, full of love and comfort, even in the face of life-threatening difficulties. *Jane Eyre* gave me even more. Although the circumstances were different from my own, I found in Brontë, though long deceased, an adult friend who understood what it was to suffer unjustly and invisibly. Her tale and her characterization of Jane created a bridge between me and a larger world than the one I knew.

At the beginning of the novel Jane, left an orphan, lives with an impatient and cruel aunt, the mother of spoiled and selfish cousins who act vindictively towards Jane. In this household, however, she meets Bessie, a servant, who though stern with Jane, becomes her friend. Listening to Bessie’s stories and songs are a comfort to her. She says of Bessie: “Even for me life had its gleams of sunshine” (p. 42). I had that, too, because of my kind and generous relatives who lived in North Carolina. Although they were far away, they brought (and continue

to bring) much cheer into my life.

Jane is prone to rebellion, as was I, and so is sent to Lowood School for orphans, where she experiences brutality at the hands of the hypocritical minister in charge, fashioned on the actual minister, Carus Wilson, of The Clergy Daughter's School where Brontë and her sisters were sent. At Lowood Jane makes her first friend, Helen. Because she loves Jane, Helen counsels her to put the past behind her concerning her experiences in her aunt's home: "Would you not be happier if you tried to forget her severity, together with the passionate emotions it excited? Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity or registering wrongs" (pp. 60-61). Here Jane struggles with conflicting feelings, both her rage at unjust treatment as well as her desire to live a life without blight. With profound insight Helen tells her: "You think too much of the love of human beings. . . . If all the world hated you, and believed you wicked, while your own conscience approved you, and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends" (p. 72). Helen helps Jane develop a sense of self that has the possibility of becoming its own source of comfort and companionship, no matter the circumstances.

Helen was probably modeled after Brontë's older sister Maria, who along with another Brontë sister, died of neglect at a young age at The Clergy Daughter's School. To Charlotte Brontë, Maria exemplified all that is of value in the Christian life, but there is in Brontë's writing a sense of something beyond the Christian pilgrimage, as is revealed in Helen's coaxing—of a conscience that matters in the scheme of things. Berry (1990) writes, "The task of healing is to respect oneself as a creature, no more and no less" (p. 9). By the end of the novel, *Jane Eyre* has achieved this respect. Mrs. Reed, Jane's aunt, calls on her deathbed for Jane to visit Gateshead. Returning after many years to this stronghold of bitter memories, Jane reflects, "I still felt as a wanderer on the face of the earth; but I experienced firmer trust in myself and my own powers, and less withering dread of oppression" (p. 230). The very circumstances in which she first knew that sense of dread made evident her growing ability to distance herself from it.

At Lowood School Jane meets Miss Temple, her first real teacher and mentor, intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. Jane sees in her a woman of compassion

who, though sensible of injustice, lives a balanced life. Eventually Jane says of her teacher: "I had imbibed from her something of her nature and much of her habits: more harmonious thoughts: what seemed better regulated feelings" (p. 87). Sporadically, I, too, encountered teachers about whom I could say the same. One of them, Mrs. Wills, was my fourth grade teacher the year I first encountered *Jane Eyre*. When Mrs. Wills caught me reading under my desk instead of paying attention to her lecture on the spawning habits of salmon, she did not scold me but instead held me up as an example to my classmates. Later, she gently and privately remonstrated me to pay more attention during science class. Mrs. Wills broke her hip that year; my mother made her chocolate cupcakes. My handsome father and I delivered them to her home in Baltimore (yes, there were happy times, too). I missed Mrs. Wills terribly. The substitute teacher handled my wayward reading habits differently; when she caught me reading under my desk, she screamed at me in front of the class, which left me mortified and humiliated.

As a southern girl I was socialized by my mother to perform numerous and dreary household tasks, many of which seemed then and seem now useless and unnecessary, such as turning my father's socks inside out each week before they went in the wash and then reversing the procedure once the socks were dry. In my child's view, this kind of drudgery took away my time for reading, for escape. I sometimes overheard my father say in annoyance to my mother, "You oughtn't let her read so much." I was too vulnerable to argue with him, too much in withering dread of oppression, but surely this passage from *Jane Eyre* was meaningful to me:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrowed-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary

for their sex (pp. 112-113).

Charlotte Brontë knew how I felt, even if my own parents did not. This passage, no doubt, came out of her own strongly felt emotions as a child. The Brontë biographer Juliet Barker shares this excerpt from a letter Charlotte wrote:

Throughout my early youth the difference which existed between me and most of the people who surrounded me, was an embarrassing enigma to me which I did not know how to resolve; I felt myself inferior to everyone and it distressed me. I thought it was my duty to follow the example set by the majority of my acquaintances...yet I felt myself incapable of feeling and behaving as the majority felt and behaved...all my efforts were useless; I could not restrain the ebb and flow of blood in my arteries and that ebb and flow always showed itself in my face and in my hard and unattractive features. I wept in secret. (pp. 417)

When Jane meets for the second time Mr. Rochester (having first met him on the moor without realizing his identity as her employer), he says to Jane after hearing of her stay at Lowood School, "Eight years! you must be tenacious of life" (p. 125). The knowledge of her tenacity I think must have contributed to some of my own. Rochester's mercurial behavior and moods discomfited her. Perhaps I recognized Jane's description of him: "I thought there were excellent materials in him; though for the present they hung together somewhat spoiled and tangled" (p. 150). So my father seemed to me. He had qualities I loved and admired (after all, he took me to deliver cupcakes to my favorite teacher); his disapproval, sadness, and tempers I could not grasp.

Like the documentation of my father's troubles stored in the attic, so, too, was kept Rochester's nemesis from the past, his mentally ill wife Bertha, living in the mysterious upper regions at Thornfield. In a typical passage, Jane describes Rochester: "He ground his teeth and was silent: he arrested his step and struck his boot against the hard ground. Some hated thought seemed to have him in its grip, and to hold him so tightly that he could not advance" (p. 145). I well remember at age four while we were still living in North Carolina, a year after the embezzlement, observing my father similarly paralyzed. He had taken me to a place where molasses was made and let me play by a stream. I looked up at

him, standing on a wooden bridge with no railings, and saw things, troublesome things, in his face I had never seen before. Surrounded by tall pines and the cumulous clouds in the North Carolina cornflower blue sky, he seemed to be searching the heavens as if trying to find an answer. I did not know how to ask him what he was thinking, and knew he would not answer. Jane reflects, "All I had gathered from it amounted to this,—that there was a mystery at Thornfield; and that from participation in that mystery, I was purposely excluded" (p. 167). Screams and groans in the night, an inexplicable fire in Mr. Rochester's bedroom, the knifing of an unwelcome guest—these incidents were more dramatic than what went on in my household but resonated with my experience nevertheless.

Rochester says to Jane: "To live, for me, Jane, is to stand on a crater-crust which may crack and spue fire any day" (p. 218). The volcanic metaphor she did not yet comprehend, nor did I understand my father's volcanic explosions. After their attempted wedding, spoiled by Bertha's brother Mason, Rochester tells Jane of his future in-laws' knowledge of Bertha's insanity. Nonetheless they did nothing to warn him, "for they were silent on family secrets" (p. 294). It seemed to me, too, not only were my parents silent but my grandmother, aunts, and uncles were as well. Yet the strange innuendoes and odd looks on my paternal grandmother's, aunts', and uncles' faces during family gatherings made me wonder about our family secret.

The ultimate betrayal came from Rochester's own family. He explains to Jane: "My father and my brother Rowland knew all this [Bertha's insanity and her family's predilection towards madness]; but they thought only of the thirty thousand pounds, and joined in the plot against me" (p. 308). So, it seemed to me, was my father forsaken. Although their silence was not motivated by greed, upholding appearances and keeping the family name out of the gossip mill was more important than acknowledgement of suffering and expressions of compassion.

I have mentioned Jane's sense of an interior life and self as friend, yet in light of the romanticism of her time, Brontë also depicts nature as friend. Upon leaving Thornfield after the miscarried wedding, Jane resides for a time with St. John Rivers and his sisters. A pastor, Rivers falls in love with Jane; she refuses him in part

because he does not share in her expansive notions of the possibilities of life and self, nor does he share her friendship with nature:

I think . . . that Nature was not to him that treasury of delight it was to his sisters. . . never did he seem to roam the moors for the sake of their soothing silence—never seek out or dwell upon the thousand peaceful delights they could yield. (pp. 353-354)

This passage reflects Brontë's own passion for the moors around her home in Haworth, England. Though strikingly different environments, the setting and daily cycles of my grandmothers' rural homes near the western hills of North Carolina both enchanted and comforted me: The soft contours of the countryside, the coo of the mourning dove, the ethereal blue of the morning glory, the flickering golden yellow of the fireflies in the evening (we called them "lightning bugs") and the strong, gentle winds of the midafternoon when the cicadas reassured me summer would never end and I could always be my grandmothers' child. The Yorkshire moors with their wide and hilly fields of bracken and heather, sheep ever-grazing in unlikely nooks, and wind that swoops together earth and sky, were a constant source of delight for Brontë and her siblings; I shared her love of place.

The poverty-stricken Riverses had their family troubles too. Jane was present when news came of an uncle's death. None of the Rivers appeared perturbed. Then Diana explains:

Jane you will wonder at us and our mysteries . . . and think us hard-hearted beings not to be more moved at the death of so near a relation as an uncle; but we have never seen him or known him. . . My father and he quarreled long ago. It was by his advice that my father risked most of his property in the speculation that ruined him. Mutual recrimination passed between them: they parted in anger, and were never reconciled. (pp. 359-360)

Nor were my father and his brother ever reconciled.

Because of her difficulties, Jane was able to recognize gifts of far more value than money. While living with the Rivers, the first real "family" she had ever known, she reflects: "Glorious discovery to a lonely wretch! This was wealth indeed!—wealth to the heart!—a mine of pure, genial affections. This was a blessing, bright, vivid, and exhilarating;—not like the ponderous gift of gold . . ." (p. 387). I found in Jane Eyre a

passionate woman of intellect, integrity, and feeling.

Though she had been deceased for over a hundred years, I felt in Jane Eyre's creator, Charlotte Brontë, an adult far closer to me than my parents; her humanity extended across the centuries to me. The discoveries held in this novel, four hundred and fifty-six densely written pages, illuminated and continue to illuminate my life.

Classics and Other Childhood Readers

Having explored the importance of Jane Eyre to me, I wondered what classic books were meaningful to other childhood readers. However, first a consideration of "classics."

For several decades, controversy has raged over the questions: What is a classic? For whom? Consensus is not forthcoming and, most likely, never will be, nor should be, in our pluralistic society. Here I speak of classics as those books that have enduring appeal for many generations of all kinds of people, usually because they resonate with the deepest questions, thoughts, and feelings humans have. For a long time, the authors of classics seemed to have been mostly of European descent. However, that has changed, and continues to change: The writings of James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and others, have been with us for almost a century. And, as more and more historically underrepresented and marginalized authors find their voices—and their publishers—more books by authors of color will become classic. Part of the reason there seem to be fewer "classics" by authors of color has to do with the obstacle of breaking into a publishing field, the gatekeepers for which have been and continue to be mostly white and, therefore, do not always appreciate the aesthetics emanating from cultures not their own. Childhood readers of various ethnicities have found solace and wisdom in "classics" while trying to make sense of their experiences of grief, loneliness, isolation, abuse, and rejection. Most of the childhood readers I consulted grew up during a time when children's literature was not the full-blown market it is today, and the reading they did would be considered rarified by today's standards.

By the time Charlotte Brontë was five, she had lost her mother; in the next few years, she lost two of her sisters. As a child, Brontë read Sir Walter Scott, after which she thought other novels "worthless" (Gordon,

1994, p. 30). Another Brontë biographer, Gérin (1969), describes the reading Patrick Brontë made available to his precocious children:

Besides Homer and Virgil in the original there were Milton's works, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, Thomson's *Seasons*, Goldsmith's *History of Rome*, Hume's *History of England*, Scott's *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*... and the works of Byron, Southey, and Cowper. (p. 24)

Gérin observes, thanks to Brontë's father's intellectual passion combined with the isolation of the Yorkshire moors, Brontë "was given a liberty to evolve such as few children... ever enjoyed" (p. 30). Her extensive childhood reading and writing combined with the early loss of her mother and sisters shaped her adult writing, in which the motherless child strongly figures.

Numerous writers have described books significant to them in childhood. For the Antiguan author Jamaica Kincaid, one book was *Jane Eyre* because of "her rebelliousness, her sense of self... of never giving if in if you think you are right. I identified with that completely" (National Public Radio, 2004). For Maya Angelou, it was Shakespeare, whom she found in a poverty-stricken town in Arkansas:

During these years in Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love. Although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois' "Litany at Atlanta." But it was Shakespeare who said, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." It was a state with which I felt myself most familiar. (p. 11)

For the daughter of sharecroppers, Debra Dickerson (2000), it was, among others, Maya Angelou:

I was almost out of elementary school before I discovered the huge central library downtown [St. Louis] and saw my first book by a black person: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. I read it five times. It had never occurred to me that blacks could write books. With this discovery, my desire for serious modern literature burst into flame.

I lost myself in the Harlem Renaissance. (p. 65)

Dickerson adds, however, "I always came back to the canon, those Dead White Men who got me through my

childhood: Dickens, Maugham, Melville, Steinbeck, Balzac" (p. 65). At an early age, through a neighborhood library, Dickerson discovered those dead white men who became her own "treasure room" (p. 33). Once, after her father had severely beaten her, she sought asylum in her room:

I stretched out on the floor for as long as I dared. Bleak as my immediate future was, I enjoyed knowing that, for once, no one would bang on the door and invade my privacy. I did what I always did when I managed to be in a room alone back then; I recited passages from the books I loved. Dickens was my current favorite. I recited the beheading scene from *A Tale of Two Cities*, just to make sure that the good twin's bravery would still bring tears to my eyes even as I faced my own angry mob. It did. (p. 46)

After another beating, "I ached for C.S. Lewis, or Dickens. Even a Brontë" (p. 49). Dickerson also read the Bible in depth, sometimes memorizing long passages. Of all the qualities the classics offer children, perhaps *comfort* should be at the top of the list—comfort because, in eloquent and aesthetic renderings, a vulnerable and as yet inarticulate child can recognize another's experience of injustice and petty tyranny.

Growing up in an anti-intellectual and, therefore, difficult (for a future professor) environment, bell hooks (sic) (1996), who is today a public intellectual and professor of English, found books that made her feel "less alone in the world" (p. 77): James Baldwin, Frank Yerby, Ann Petry, and biographies of George Washington Carver, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Booker T. Washington. She read Laura Ingalls Wilder and all she could get of Alcott (p. 76). Her family regarded her as a problem child and "blame[d] it all on books" (p. 77). Though there were always books in her home, she was told that books were for when she was "older" (p. 76), and family "warned her that books could drive people crazy" (p. 120).

Also someone who endured a loneliness and isolation during childhood, Esther Hautzig (1968) recounts her childhood experience of being deported when she was ten years old to Siberia from Poland, along with thousands of other Polish Jews during World War II. Her sufferings were made more bearable by the surprising discovery of a warm and well-stocked library

in the far reaches of the bleak, barren, Siberian cold: Dumas, Shakespeare, Mark Twain. “It was between the library and two extraordinary teachers,” she writes of her reading habits between ten and twelve years of age, “that I developed a lifelong passion for the greatest Russian novelists and poets. It was there that I learned to line up patiently for my turn to sit at a table and read, to wait—sometimes for months—for a book. It was there that I learned that reading was not only a great delight, but a *privilege*” (p. 180).

Anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston (1990) describes the “great anguish” brought on by early reading: “My soul was with the gods and my body in the village. People just would not act like gods.” She wanted most to be like Hercules; however, “[r]aking back yards and carrying out chamber pots, were not the tasks of Hercules” (p. 41). Despite the hardships, she found pure pleasure in the “lyin” sessions of the menfolk where the African-American folk tales were kept alive (p. 48). When she was in the fifth grade, Hurston made such an impression on a group of visiting white ladies when she read aloud the myth of *Persephone and Demeter* they later sent her gifts and books which included the Grimms’ fairy tales and collections of mythologies: Greek, Roman, and, most beloved, Norse myths, and *Gulliver’s Travels*, which she read and loved.

Clearly, making the classics available to today’s children is a worthwhile effort on the part of teachers, librarians, and parents. In the nineteenth century Sir Walter Scott said, “There is no harm, but, on the contrary, there is benefit in presenting a child with ideas beyond his easy and immediate comprehension. The difficulties thus offered, if not too great or too frequent, stimulate curiosity and encourage exertion” (qtd. in Rigby, 1990, p. 20). Doing so potentially provides a way for children to manage their problems, diminish their isolation, begin to understand the complexity of human personality, nourish that which will eventually become their careers and, often, for young girls, female mentors who defy constricting expectations.

In her study of sharing the classics with a small group of women in Tehran, Azar Nafisi observes the “main complications of the plot” are caused by the female protagonists’ “refusal to comply” (p. 195). Making decisions about compliance confront Iranian women on a daily basis—Nafisi’s departure from

the university where she was a college professor was because of her refusal to wear the veil—which is perhaps one of the reasons why the classics have an appeal to Middle Eastern women, who Nafisi calls heroic, in the twenty-first century. Because of their artistic greatness, these books can and are revisited with the passage of time; with each rereading, more riches are discovered. Libraries and classroom libraries—not only the adult and young adult sections—should provide classic books, making it possible for children to find them, as easily as Maya Angelou found them in Stamps, Arkansas during the Depression, as Esther Hautzig found them in Siberia during World War II, and as I found them at the Leith Walk School in Baltimore, Maryland in 1959.

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Literacy as a Means for Re-imagining a Woman's Identity

by *Mariana Souto-Manning*

If we are to go beyond first world representations of third world women as passive, subservient, and lacking in creativity, then clearly one important task for feminist ethnographers alert to and respectful of the differences between women is to listen well to the stories that other women have to tell, capturing the key images and offering interpretations that mirror the narrative forms they themselves use to tell their life stories. (Behar, 2003, p. 272)

Awakening

Growing up in Brazil, I never thought about questioning the system in place. I had a nanny; there was a maid who cooked my meals and cleaned my room. What I didn't realize at that point was that being a maid or a nanny was just one of their identities, and most importantly, I didn't realize it was not a self-identified or chosen identity, but an identity imposed on them by social, economic and political conditions (hooks, 1994). In this paper, I investigate the relationship between power, Discourses, literacies and cultures as seen by Madalena (pseudonym), a maid in my mother's house, and by me, a former early childhood teacher whose students in the Southeastern United States came largely from Latin American immigrant families. Further, I describe a model currently in practice in rural cities of Northeast Brazil that may help some of the parents with discourses whom I work.

I first became aware of the disparity between my life and Madalena's when I was a teenager. Reading about the United States as the first world power house and the oppressor of countries such as Brazil in my world history classes, I realized that the oppressed can also be oppressors. I certainly couldn't articulate this idea then as clearly as I can now, but I had a feeling that there were inequalities everywhere, starting in my own house. It was a very relevant issue, an issue with which I was uncomfortable, but I just didn't know how to get started trying to address it. At that time, it was easy to ignore it and move forward with my life. Although I say I ignored it, there wasn't one day I wouldn't think about

Madalena's situation. Madalena was a permanent fixture in my mother's house—or at least, it seemed like she was. She had worked in my family home for almost ten years. She made less than two thousand dollars a year, yet well above the minimum wage. She seemed happy, but could she be satisfied with the life she was leading? How had she gotten there? When these questions arose, we started talking. "We talked. We listened to each other. We knew that the answers were in the engagement. We knew that the engagement was the answer. We talked." (Fecho, 2003, p. 92) Those were topics I could no longer ignore as I tried to find answers to the social oppression present in the Southeastern United States, the oppression that affected so many of my students' parents.

Engagement as the Answer

As Madalena waited on me one morning during the summer of 2003 and served my breakfast, I hesitantly asked her to sit and talk. Overcoming some awkwardness and reluctance at first, our talking sessions became routine. Eventually, I began tape-recording our conversations with her permission. At first, because of our class difference, Madalena expressed concern as to whether or not her experience would be relevant to someone who held more knowledge than she did. The class differences were never couched in terms of money, in terms of haves and have-nots, but in terms of literacy as a tool for personal and professional growth.

While there was sameness in that we were both from the same geographic area, there was also much otherness in that sameness. I got to know Madalena better, and as rapport developed, Madalena told me her life story. She told of the Discourse she learned, the role of the multiple identities she took and the importance of the piece that wasn't there—literacy, as couched in terms of learning a secondary Discourse (Gee, 1996), more specifically the Discourse of power. James Paul Gee defines Discourse as "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes" (1996, p. 127). She couldn't, therefore, use

a particular Discourse to critique other ones. This lack of acquisition of the Discourse of power is the base for resistance to oppression and inequality (Delpit, 1996).

Madalena's story denotes the fact that in Brazil, neither governmental nor nongovernmental adult literacy education prioritize women's education (Rosemberg, 1993). She told me that when she was a child she had gone to school.

Madalena: Where I lived there was only one school, only one really, and it was only until fourth grade. So, I went to school until the fourth grade. When I finished fourth grade my teacher wanted me to go to Campina [pseudonym] to the 5th grade. I cried much but my mother didn't let me. Girls didn't go to Campina. Only boys really. Then, my teacher let me repeat the fourth grade two times. I couldn't do anything, anything really. My brothers went to the 5th grade and I couldn't. Can you imagine?

In Search of New Possibilities

Madalena proceeded to tell me about the reason why she had come to Porto (pseudonym), the capital of the state and the city where she had lived for the last 15 years or so. Her motivation lay in the prospect of having the opportunity to further her education.

Madalena: When I had sufficient age [was old enough], I came to Porto. I was happy, [you] know. I thought I was going to school again, but working in people's houses, I never got out early to go to school.

She had been told there were schools everywhere. What she had not been told is that she would probably have no chance to attend school, not even in the evenings. To maintain herself, as arranged before she had left her own house, she would work as a maid in a family house. She was told she would have her own room and she wouldn't have to pay for rent or utilities. What she hadn't been told is that as long as she was in the house she was on duty. There was no start time or finish time for her day. She had not been told the low salary she'd make.

I always thought people became maids because they

didn't go to school, but I never thought about them being denied the opportunity to go to school and ending up in Porto looking for a way to further their educations. I talked to six maids who had come from rural areas, a common practice. All of them had come searching for more education; all of them had difficulty reading and functioning in the power Discourse. The unsettling thing is that none of them ever furthered their education by even one grade level. I believe there is a political agenda behind it all. The power Discourse does not want to lose the convenience of maids. I started thinking about the situation of illegal immigrants in the Southeastern United States; how different is their situation from the situation of these maids? The reality is that "we are experiencing a rapid "Third-Worldization" of North America, where inner cities more and more come to resemble the shantytowns of the Third World" (Macedo & Costa Freire, 1998, p. ix). I started wondering if there was anything at all being done and if things had changed any from the time Madalena went to the big city, about 15 years ago.

Pernambuco's and Madalena's Realities

In Pernambuco, Northeastern Brazil, there were very few literacy or basic education programs specifically directed to women (Ballara, 1995).

Madalena: There weren't any special classes, like today, in some places. I heard today if you don't get out in time and miss class you don't have to repeat the year...you don't have to see it all again.

Women-focused literacy programs target those women who have problems participating in typical adult education programs. "They tend to be...poor women who work in domestic tasks and the care of small children. These women's literacy groups establish more flexible classroom schedules, but their participation still requires support and cooperation of all family members. When women do manage to accommodate domestic labor and child care with their studies, those with family responsibilities and reduced autonomy choose to attend programs close to home" (Stromquist, 1994).

Until the point when we last talked, Madalena had not yet enrolled in an adult literacy program satisfactory to her. Themes that surfaced in our conversations

regarding the deficiencies of programs she had previously attended were: classes having too many youngsters (teenagers), which made her feel inappropriate; lack of child care, since her husband works until 11PM as a security person; and lack of a program that is close to her home. These were common obstacles she would have to overcome in order to finish her education and change her life situation.

Lack of Success in Schools and in Literacy Programs

Madalena still hasn't given up hope that one day she can go back to school, which is admirable. Her story is one of strength and persistence—15 years trying to continue her education. Although she repeated fourth grade, she has limited reading and writing skills and regrets not being able to help her son, who is in Kindergarten, with his homework.

Madalena: I think the teacher thinks all the children come from the same place. I pay for my son to go to school. It is a very big sacrifice, but the teacher thinks I don't care because I don't help him. Then she decided to make him repeat the year. He is in Kindergarten again this year and I am paying it all again. I don't know if he will go to first grade, you know, because I can't help him.

After Madalena's comments, I started thinking reflectively about my own practice as a teacher. Was I respecting each child's culture? Was I conceiving parental involvement as school involvement or as real parental involvement (anything a parent does that will affect the present or the future of the child)? Are we as educators blaming parents for our failing of their children? Is success a socially constructed concept in which children such as Madalena's son are not successful if they don't assimilate the power Discourse? According to Au, "when children learn to read, or fail to learn to read, they do so in a particular social, cultural, and historical environment. Their success or failure in reading cannot be understood apart from the environment" (1997, p. 184).

What is, then, a successful literacy program? How do we construct one? Gee (1996) argues that it is a balance of acquisition and learning that should be the goal of a strong literacy program in school. To understand what

Gee is proposing when he defines a strong literacy program, it is important to look at his definitions of acquisition and learning:

Acquisition is a process of acquiring something (usually, subconsciously) by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching. It happens in natural settings which are meaningful and functioning in the sense that acquirers know they need to acquire the thing they are exposed to in order to function and they in fact want to so function.

. . . *Learning* is a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching (though not necessarily from someone officially designated a teacher) or through certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection. This teaching or reflection involves explanation and analysis, that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytic parts. It inherently involves attaining, along with the matter being taught, some degree of meta-knowledge about the matter (Gee, 1996, p. 138).

Often, schools focus on learning and assume that acquisition happens at home. Yes, it does happen in the homes of middle class families, but this is not the case with Madalena's son. She regrets not having read to him, but she doesn't read fluently. Besides, by the time she got home, she had to wash her family's clothes, cook and clean. She had to bathe her children and put them to bed. Then, she had to go to bed herself, to wake up early the next morning. Assuming that acquisition was happening at home was failing Madalena's son at school.

It is my belief that literacy (the skill Madalena's son is struggling with) is related to cultural identity and reflects social and cultural differences, and the impact of these differences on school success as "readers and practices of reading are situated within histories of locality. . . and class. Literacy learning is part of these histories, not something that children do as a cognitive task divorced from their lives" (Hicks, 2002, p. 37). Ignoring these only means benefiting those children whose home culture is the culture of power, the culture reflected at school. For children whose home culture is not that of those in power, home and school cultures often require different Discourses. That's what was happening in Pernambuco. Madalena's story was coloring my take on what literacy is and what it ought to be for that

region—Northeastern Brazil. According to Laubscher and Powell, “richer learning is possible through attention to such politics of difference” (2003, p. 221).

Along with acquisition, learning is an essential part of a successful literacy program, as there can be no critique of a Discourse without learning; for it is through the process of learning that meta-knowledge can be developed. Learning is part of teaching for social justice. Madalena talked about the fact that her son is starting to disrespect her, “*because I don’t know what’s important [at school].*” When there is a mismatch between the definition and significance of literacy as they are represented in a person’s cultural identity and in the learning situation, the individual is faced with a choice: to either adopt the perspective of the school and risk undermining their cultural identity, or to resist the externally imposed activities at the risk of becoming alienated from the school (Nieto, 2002). Madalena’s son, as she reports, is clearly conflicted as to whether he should choose the school culture or the home culture. I thought much about behavior problems displayed by children whose home Discourse is not the school Discourse. I thought about the display of those so-called inappropriate behaviors, and whether they happen at home or only at the school. I continued to think. My thoughts were starting to scare me as I thought about the many children whose home Discourses differ from the school Discourse, and how many of these children ended up in Special Education.

I personally experienced this deficit-oriented belief towards Discourses that differed from those employed in schools while in the hospital right after giving birth. One of my good friends came to see the baby; she asked me if I was going to teach him my native language. I enthusiastically said yes. She looked down and told me that there was a good possibility that he would end up in Special Education, speaking with a voice of authority as she herself is a Special Education teacher in a neighboring county. Then I started asking myself, is bilingualism a disability? Are students for whom English is not their native language treated as having a disability? Is a disability the lack of ability or willingness to conform to the power or school Discourse? As I come to think of it, using their home Discourses at school is considered a misdemeanor or wrong. What teachers don’t see is that they are forcing students to make a choice.

To choose between their home culture and their school culture puts them at an educational disadvantage. If students choose the school culture, they will be outsiders in their own cultures. If they choose the home culture, they will likely not fare well enough at school. I started thinking about how to deal with this issue, as a mother and educator. We teachers need to instill respect and tolerance for cultures and languages, therefore respecting bilingualism in schools. Teaching the power Discourse to enable students to critique it is the goal Delpit (1996) defends and I have tried to embody.

In any culturally diverse society, there will be different conceptions of what it is to be literate, that is, there are multiple literacies (Gee, 1996). By conversing with Madalena, I realize that one of the problems she is experiencing is related to the restricted definition of literacy that many teachers have. We must, as Gee (1996) highlights, promote multiple literacies.

Madalena defines herself as illiterate; that is one of her identities—besides her identity as a maid and mother. I asked her why, and she said that she can’t read or write. Yet, she functions quite well in her community and is very smart and astute. She can calculate her budget and plan a meal for the family plus guests. She can carry on a long conversation and have a deep understanding of political issues:

Madalena: ...the politicians only think about us when it is time to vote, but you can’t learn like that, it takes longer than their campaign, you know, and once they are elected, they don’t care about us anymore all we have to give them is our vote...they always promise but don’t always do what they promise.

Literacy as a Tool for Social Change

In Pernambuco, women with limited literacy skills “continue to be a large group, the majority of Brazilian women possess limited schooling, and discrimination persists in terms of educational access for the subgroups of low-income women, and especially . . . [those] who live in rural areas and the North and Northeastern regions of the country” (di Pierro, 2000, p. 66). According to Paulo Freire (1985) literacy should be a tool for personal transformation and social change, and it can only be so if what the students are learning is directly related to

their lives. If the idea is that education and knowledge have value only if they help people free themselves from oppressive social conditions (Freire, 2000), this is a situation in which education would have much value—by providing the tools for social change. Madalena is reading the world before reading the word; but how can she make this transition?

Círculos de Educação e Cultura (Circles of Education and Culture) is a current program that takes place in the rural area of my state, Pernambuco, where Paulo Freire started his journey as an educator who believed in literacy as a means of social change. As a self-identified “illiterate person,” Madalena would qualify to participate in this program if she still lived there. The program educates adults who are generally workers in the rural sugar cane farms in the state of Pernambuco. Many of them had to drop out of school to work in the fields to sustain their families—many never even went to school. Girls, as in Madalena’s case, were not allowed to continue their education, as middle schools and high schools were scarce and required students to walk a long time to get to school, something only boys could (or should) do. Since children could start working and making money as early as they could start school, school was not a priority as working was essential for their survival. This program has made it possible for thousands of rural workers to open their minds to a new world.

The areas in which Paulo Freire developed participatory literacy programs have been supported by government-sponsored programs and by non-governmental organizations (called ONGs in Brazil) throughout the world. The program discussed here is supported by both the government of the state of Pernambuco and many non-governmental organizations (ONGs).

Before this program was implemented, the rural workers would complain that they would work the whole day in the field, and could not cope with going to school to learn things that were not important in the field. School was regarded as a luxury, or as something that gave people something to do until they could find a job. The underlying thought was that if you already had a job, you did not need to go to school, because you go to school so that you can find a job. In 1996, at the implementation of these circles by the state government

with the support of some ONGs [NGOs], 34% of the population of the state was illiterate. Even worse, 59% of the population in Pernambuco’s rural areas was illiterate (Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, Governo do Estado de Pernambuco, 1997).

Something had to be done to counter the effect of secular socio-political-economic conditions that did not work for the benefit of the people in the Northeast of Brazil. Fortunately, even though these people had lived under such harsh conditions, and worked so much and for so long, they still had hopes of better days. They really stand behind the saying “*nunca é tarde pra aprender*”, which translates into “it is never too late to learn”. That is exactly what the *Círculos de Educação e Cultura* (Circles of Education and Culture) have been proving: it is never too late to learn.

Students determine the curriculum taught. Teachers facilitate. While in Pernambuco, during the months of June, July and August, 2003, I observed the teaching of very practical skills such as learning how to sign names and calculate salaries based on the number of hours worked, among other skills. Some of the very functional skills that many students were particularly proud of was being able to read the signs that indicate where the bus is going, where a car is from (by reading the license), and the fact that they could read and write the name of the surrounding communities. The first things taught were very practical and functional aspects of reading and writing. I can understand how these skills are important to the students—using public transportation and knowing where they are—but I cannot imagine how a teacher would include those skills in the curriculum if the students weren’t the ones to dictate the curriculum. That is a very good aspect of this program. Its pedagogical intent is still the same: to democratize education and culture. More than formation, it tries to promote the social competence of people of low socio-economic status (SES), and improve the quality of life. These circles take place in many locations. Primarily, they take place wherever it is convenient for most of the members. Some of them take place in schools, clubs, syndicates/ unions, and even in churches. They take place whenever and wherever it is convenient for the community.

More specific technical skills are also taught. The workers in the sugar cane fields discuss their techniques and practices as well as the purpose of their techniques

and practices. They come to truly understand what they are doing and become specialists in their area. The technical words learned in the field are reviewed in class, making the literacy learning in the circles directly related to their lives.

The rich experience of each of the individuals is respected in the circle. There isn't a member who doesn't know anything; every person has important life experiences to share. These experiences become the themes for the meetings. The people are not classified as illiterate, but as learners. Each one of them brings knowledge, explanations, ideas regarding themselves and their worlds. They bring and share their dreams, wishes, fears, questions, doubts, and frustrations, and those are the starting points of the educational action. The contents must be common to the community—the prayers, the syndicates, the social behavior of the group—nothing should escape the attention of educators.

Teachers must know and believe that dialogue is the essential condition of their work—the teacher's job is to coordinate and to facilitate, and never to influence or impose. The teacher's role is to facilitate the entrance of men and women into the world of knowledge and literacy, a world in which there is no absolute knowledge (Harding, 1986), but a world in which partial knowledge (Hill Collins, 1990) is celebrated.

Final Thoughts

While Madalena is eligible for this program, it is not yet in place in Porto (pseudonym), the city where Madalena lives. When told about this program and asked if she'd be interested in participating, she said, *"If I can take my children with me, if I won't feel 'burra' and if there are people of my age there, I want to go. When can I start going? W-where is it?"* Unfortunately, this program has not entered big cities yet. It is taking place in rural areas, areas such as the one from which Madalena came. Women like Madalena, third world women, besides their exclusion from sites of knowledge, also suffer from the stereotypes associated with third world women.

According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991), "the texts of non-Western women's lives written by feminists in the West tend to present portraits of the third-world woman as ... being 'third world'

(read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)...while subliminally portraying themselves as "educated, modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions." (p. 56)

I believe that American feminists must recognize stories such as Madalena's, stories of great determination and strength, and fight for rights that will erase these stereotypes by providing women with education, with literacy, with the tools for social and personal change. We (including first and third world women and men) must promote different "culture[s] and [their] relationship[s] to literacy learning...that examine how the social organization of learning influences learning outcomes...in how children learn to read and become literate." (Gutierrez, Asato, Pacheco, Moll, Olson, Horno, Ruiz, Garcia, & McCarthy, 2002).

The education of rural workers in the Northeast of Brazil and the education of English Language Learners living primarily in urban cities here in the United States may at first seem completely unrelated matters. In reality, both groups are lost in a strange world. When a Brazilian who is illiterate enters a big city, it is as Rosa Soares, a 61-year-old member of a circle said: "It is like I am blind and mute at the same time, not being able to understand what's around me" (trans. by author, Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, Governo do Estado de Pernambuco, 1997). That is exactly the feeling that English language learners who are illiterate or have had only limited education in their mother language feel.

I propose that local public schools look at Paulo Freire's theory in practice in Northeast Brazil, and come up with a better way to address a similar problem that can no longer be ignored—the illiteracy of adults (citizens or not) living in the Southeastern United States. "It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them" (Macedo & Araújo Freire, 1998, p. xi). Freire invites American educators "to re-create and rewrite [his] ideas" (Macedo & Araújo Freire, 1998, p. xi). Developing a pilot program with the characteristics described in this paper by offering those adults who are English Language Learners an education that is drawn from their real-life experiences would empower them as learners. Creating programs similar to the circles of education and culture in the Southeastern United States

would serve as a way for English Language Learners to make their lives better, and to promote social change.

Statistics and demographics show a substantial and growing immigrant population who need to be recognized and valued for their languages, cultures, and literacies—today and even more so in the future. In my opinion, the methods of Paulo Freire and of the researchers and theorists mentioned earlier would empower immigrant parents to take a more active role in their own children's education. This would ultimately improve the overall education being offered to English Language Learners.

Stimulating cooperation between home and school requires time and effort, as well as human and financial resources. It is my strong belief that in today's world, traditional assumptions defining parental involvement at school must be re-examined. Cooperation requires a commitment to providing participation opportunities to all families regardless of the parents' native language, level of education, or experience with a school district's policies and procedures. School staff requires support from administration, resources, and time to encourage the cooperation of their students' families. Researchers as well as practitioners should focus on finding more practical ways for effective parental involvement, because ultimately students benefit, and everyone involved receives significant rewards.

"[I]f our goal, as literacy educators..., is to work for social change, then our work is never done. We must continue to interrogate relationships between literacy performances and power dynamics... with the understanding that justice lies in the perpetual interrogation." (Blackburn, 2003, p. 488). Let's continue questioning and interrogating these relationships between power, Discourses, literacies and cultures, and in doing so, let's try to come up with ways in which the Madalenas in this world can have room to improvise with their identities, and acquire wider means for re-imagining who they are (Holland, 1998).

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Chanting Flowers

by Zsuzsanna Bacsa Palmer

Ha folyóvíz volnék
Bánatot nem tudnék
Hegyek völgyek között
Zengedezve járnék

Ahol kiterülnek
Virágot növelnék
Hegyek völgyek között
Virágot növelnék

Leányok leszednék
Bokréta kötnék
S az o' édesiknek
Kalapjára tu'znék

If I were a river
No sorrow would I be knowing
Between mountains and valleys
I would run forever chanting.

Where I would leave the riverbed
I would make flowers grow
Between mountains and valleys
I would make flowers grow.

The maids would pick the flowers
Tie them into a bunch
And pin them onto the hats
Of their sweethearts.

trilingualism,
Dreisprachigkeit
háromnyelvűség:
native-like control of
three languages

It hasn't always been like this. *Es war nicht immer so. Nem volt mindig így.* In the first half of my life, I was able to think in one language only. I did not have to constantly and unconsciously go through each thought in order to fully understand all the connotations it may have in my three languages. That is the hard part; the thinking, talking to yourself when there are no listeners. Seeing all the hues of colors that appear with each translation, smelling all the odors, scents, and bouquets.

I admired people speaking many languages and assumed that they could use them at their liking, but their mother tongue would always prevail as the deepest inner voice. And now that I am in this same situation, I know that songs and prayers stay monolingual. For me, they will always be in Hungarian. However, I also learned that emotions, caresses, and embraces are above any language. Now, as a mother, giving my tongue to my children I am made aware with every word and silence of the gift I am giving them.

A flower contains a plant's reproductive organs. The male parts of the flower produce tiny grains of pollen. These are carried to other flowers by the wind or by visiting animals. There, the pollen fertilizes the ovules (clusters of female cells), and seeds are made.

~~Ibolya.~~ (In English: ... I can't think of it. Have I seen any here? Yes, back in the woods, a few of them, not quite as purple as those in my childhood's forests. Maybe the word is violet. I have to ask Ralph: "*Wie heißt diese Blume das man im Frühling p ück?* You know, *lila farbig, da hinten bei dem pond.* What is that flower you can pick in the spring? You know, purple color, back there, next to the pond.") ~~Violet.~~ Sweet smelling. Who can hold the biggest bunch in her hand? Over there, a lot of them, I can just sit down and pick them until they are so densely packed in my tiny hand that they can no longer breath. But that is all right, violets don't have to breath in, all they need to do is exhale their sweet incenses into my mother's presence. "*Ezt mind neked szedtem.* I picked all these for you," I said proudly, giving her a beaming smile as an additional gift for mother's day. My hair is combed strictly into two pony tales, a straight, unyielding line in the middle, my grandma's creation. "*Neked is hoztam egyet.* I brought one

mother tongue,
Muttersprache,
anyanyelv:
one's native language

for you, too,” and I tiptoed to my grandma, hugged her and sang this song:

Orgonaága, barackfa virága
Öltözzetek új ruhába
Anyák napja hajnalára
Illatosan.

Twig of lilac, blossom of peach tree
Dress up into your new clothes
For the dawn of mother's day
And spread out your bouquets.

Pollens are dust-like plant particles produced by a flower's anthers. Pollen contains male sex cells, which fertilize female sex cells. It is made up of microscopic grains and often looks like yellow or orange dust.

Pipacs *Poppy*. Before the endless summer vacation started, I went to the ruins of the old castle with my two girlfriends every day. We had to follow the steps of our ritual religiously: walking through wheat fields and gathering the unopened buds of poppy flowers. Each of us had to have ten. We also looked for marigolds, those were the best to play: “He loves me, he loves me not.” Then, hidden under the shades of the torn down walls, we waited anxiously for our turn to force open the poppy buds. When the green sepals were opened, the poppies preparing their petals for the big show emerged in many different hues of red. Some were a light pink, some were orangey, a few had the red-purple color of sky before a windy day. A white one, once in a while. All were caught at a different stage of their preparedness. And all were witnesses to teenage girls' restless apprehension. The flowers fell victims to our impatience.

A typical flower contains male and female sex organs surrounded by a collection of flaps. The female sex organs (carpels) contain ovaries, which in turn contain ovules. The male sex organs (stamens) have a pollen producing structure called an anther, which releases pollen when ripe. The sex organs are surrounded by petals, and also by another set of flaps called sepals.

Frühling. *Spring*. I rolled down the window of the '85 VW, and inhaled the spring air. The first sunrays of dawn illuminated the orchards on both sides of the curving road. The peach trees were blossoming, displaying their pink beauty in full awareness of this moment's importance. This was their chance. This was their only opportunity, lasting just a few days, to attract their pollinators and ensure their future as a fruit. The appeal of their dazzling appearance and the sweet smell to people was only a byproduct of these flowers' life. But I felt as if these blossoms were blooming for me and to celebrate the day. I held Ralph's hand, and followed the lines in it with the same exhilarating and smooth touch that came from it stroking my hair just an hour ago. There, in the small loft apartment, as his hand rested on my hair, I felt like it was a flower stem delivering energy into my petals. There was something intrinsic about it, something natural, carrying inevitable change with it.

The car strolled slowly among the hills and approached the sign:
“*Willkommen in Schwaikheim*”. *Sparkasse*. *Postamt*. Nobody on the streets yet, just the aroma of freshly baked bread coming from the *Backerei*.

“*Wir sehen uns in der Sprachschule*. We'll see each other in the language school.
Tschüß Bye. “

foreigner,
ausländer,
külföldi:
situated outside one's
own country

Flowering plants, also known as angiosperms, are by far the most successful of terrestrial plants, with around 80 percent of all plant species. They have colonized almost every habitat; from deserts to rain forests and mountain peaks, and they are the dominant type of vegetation in most places. They occur in almost all conceivable forms - herbs, shrubs, trees, vines, and epiphytes.

Akácfaék. Robinien. Locust trees. Bystanders to many of my memories. Locust trees, in front of my grandparents' house, provided the shades to my practice as a ballerina. Having returned from kindergarten, I quickly devoured the meals my grandma spent several hours to make and headed out to the brook side. I walked up and down the cement railing rehearsing each movement of my imagined ballet performance. Not that my body was built for ballet. Not that I cared. At that age everything seemed possible.

Blossoming locust trees created the atmosphere of another memory, fifteen years later. The air of Nürnberg was filled with their sugary fragrance. The smell penetrated every corner of the city, from the Burg, down to the curving alleys by the old town wall. It made me feel intoxicated. This was the first time Ralph and I walked hand in hand. Each of us was far from our home, embracing what we hadn't found there. I could see that displaying our love publicly made him feel intoxicated, too. Our newfound euphoria was only disturbed by the shrill voice of a woman, as we unknowingly entered the red light district:

“Was schaust du denn so? Hast du noch nie eine Hure gesehen? What are you looking at? Have you never seen a whore before?”

This was sobering, but we didn't let go of our hands. She couldn't smell the blossoming locust trees sitting on display behind her immaculately clean window.

A year later, a flowering locust tree looked on as I was living in the future. It stood outside my window, in the courtyard of the century old apartment building. Within a square mile, it was the only tree. It stood by while I wrote my literature papers, in both my German and Hungarian major, and untiringly learned my new words in English. I counted the days left until our next get-together. *Onehundredthree. Onehundredtwo. Onehundreone.* I inhaled the fragrance that invaded my room. I inhaled it deeper and deeper as time went by. A sweet, intoxicating smell. It's been many years, that I smelled it the last time.

The division of Anthophyta (to which flowering plant belong) is split into two classes -- the monocotyledons (or monocots for short) and dicotyledons (dicots for short) -- depending on whether the embryo plant within the seed possesses one or two leaves.

**language acquisition,
Spracherwerbung,
nyelvtanulás:**
*the process of learning
a language by one's
own effort*

**visitor,
Besucher,
látogató:**
*a person who goes
to see something or
someone*

Jégvirág. Ice flower. The windows of the cab I took at the airport were covered with them. I traced the curving lines of ice forming delicate flower patterns on the glass. The first time I came here, it was winter, the coldest winter in decades. But I had to visit Chicago. Who would have ever been interested in my stories about Elkhart, Indiana? Skyscrapers started to emerge behind the slowly evaporating curtain of ice crystals; I was here, in the Windy City. I had not known before that this was Chicago's nickname, but soon I experienced its real meaning. Walking down Michigan Avenue, Ralph and I had to step into every second store just to get a break from the cold. I recalled my mother saying:

“Vigyél magaddal elég meleg ruhát. Épp most hallottam a rádióban hogy szörnyen hideg van Moszkvában. Pack plenty of warm clothes, I just heard on the radio that it's extremely cold in Moscow.”

I should have listened to her motherly advice, even though it did not make much sense. Then, I wouldn't have to wear all three of my nice pants on top of each other. But even if I were prepared, I couldn't have anticipated that my Kleenex will freeze in my purse. This was the only indication to me what “30 below zero” really means. Even now, ten years later, I can still only appreciate how hot or cold it is when I know the temperature in Celsius.

The ice flowers were there again on the window of Ralph's truck when he drove me back to the airport. By then, I greeted them with joy. It was the same joy with which we

greet friends we have known all our lives. These ice flowers were familiar, unlike all the things I experienced during this first visit. Everything was different here: the streetlamps, the doorknobs, the lights with a ceiling fan, the cars, and the people. No major differences, just little things that when added together require a lot of adjustment.

Dicots (class Magnoliopsida) are a diverse group found in all parts of the world. They include both herbaceous (nonwoody) species, such as poppies and daisies, and woody species (shrubs and trees) such as sycamores and oaks. Dicots have seeds with two cotyledons (seed leaves), leaves with a main vein that divides into successively smaller branches; and flower parts (such as petals) arranged in groups of four or five.

Geraniums. Even after a year of living there, our house still seemed bare. I wanted to make it more welcoming for my parents, who came to celebrate my engagement with Ralph. I stopped at a greenhouse on the roadside displaying flowers in every color of the rainbow. A pale pink geranium caught my eyes right away, so I took it up to the checkout clerk.

“This is a nice, fresh color. Really springy,” said the young woman at the counter to start the usual small talk.

“Yes, I like it too. It will t the light blue paint of our living room,” I answered adding some detail to be an obedient participant in this tradition of talking about nothing.

“You have a beautiful accent. I really like it,” she replied.

This was the ultimate comment. Every time I hear it, I never know how to respond to it. Although I am sure that she and all the others making the same comment say this to be nice, I am also sure they don’t think of its implications. In my dictionary, these implications can range from: “I recognize that you are not from here,” and “I hear your English is not like (or as good as) mine” to “Although you don’t look different, you are different. Try as hard as you can, you won’t be able to hide it.”

The words: accent and beautiful have meanings to me with a very different charge. They are almost opposites, like hot and cold. The stiffness of my tongue is not something I would call beautiful. But every time it is mentioned, it always makes me think about how there are two words for home in my mother tongue. “Itthon” which means “here at home” and “otthon” which means “there at home. The second word has a distancing quality. It is the word I use when I describe my home in this country.

The geranium I bought on that day, bloomed without a pause for several years. It only stopped blooming when my mother decided during one of her visits that the original pot is too small for it, so she moved it to a bigger pot. Then, it started too lose all its leaves. The pink geranium did not survive the transplantation. I deeply sympathized with this flower. I know the challenges of transplantation all too well.

Asszony lesz a lányból, a bimbóból rózsza
Sok-sok édes percből sok-sok boldog óra
Az órából napok, a napokból évek
Fekete hajából lassan hófehérek
Lassan hófehérek

The girl becomes wife, the bud becomes rose
Many sweet minutes will be many happy hours
Days will be from hours, years will be from days
Her black hair will have more grays
It slowly will have more grays

Meg nem állíthatjuk az idő múlását
Késő ősziében virág hervadását
De jöhet a tél is, a szírom lehullhat
Csak a mi szerelmünk soha el nem múlhat
Soha el nem múlhat

We cannot stop time from passing
In autumn the flowers from wilting
But even if winter comes and all petals fall on the oor
Our love will stay forever more
It will stay forever more

accent,
akzent,
akcentus:
*a distinguishing
manner of
pronunciation*

immigrant,
Einwanderer,
bevándorló:
*one who comes into a
new country to settle
there*

Flowering plants scatter their seeds by forming fruits, which can be soft and fleshy, or hard and dry. The seeds of fleshy fruits are usually distributed by animals, whereas the seeds of dry fruits are spread mainly by wind or water.

Autumn. The parade of fall colors couldn't be seen in the small, windowless room. I was only trying to picture it to avert my attention from my pain, but the image of colorful leaves fell apart as soon as I heard the nurse's voice.

"The anesthesiologist should be here in a few minutes, pretty soon you will see that baby."

Eszter. I always wanted to call my daughter Eszter. Even before I met Ralph, even before I was biologically ready to bear children, or before I knew what it entailed to have a child. She will wear her brown hair in a ponytail and her middle name will be Katalin, after my mother. She will pick wild flowers, paste them into her diary with a heart shaped lock, and be comforted in my arms when her heart is broken.

"But what if it's a boy?" I asked Ralph, brought back from my daydreaming by the unbearable pain of labor.

"*Statistisch gesehen, das ist sehr unwahrscheinlich*, Statistically, that is very unlikely," he answered in a convincing voice "*wir haben schon zwei Söhne*. We already have two boys."

Yes, that was very compelling, but I wasn't a true believer of numbers. "*Aber, sagen wir, es wird doch ein Junge. Wie werden wir ihn nennen?*"

But, let's say it will be a boy, what are we going to name him?"

This question hung in the air, unanswered, when a nurse aid entered and rolled my bed into the operating room. A few pokes, exhale, the pain is gone. The perfect little baby, enveloped in a white moist Im was wrapped into blankets. Between the small, curled up legs, I saw the sure sign of his sex: another boy. Boxing the air with his reddish fists, he burst the last bubbles of my dreams about ponytails and big bows. The high chords of his powerful cry marked the intensity of the moment when a new life begins. His profound presence made the dreams of the past completely irrelevant.

But he did not have a name for two days. We wanted him to have a Hungarian name, like the other two boys, so they preserve part of their heritage in their name. But we could not agree on a name we liked. We called each other several times a day, only a few hours apart asking the same question first: "*Hast du einen Name?* Do you have a name?"

Ralph insisted on Farkas -- an old name, meaning wolf -- but I couldn't possibly give this gruesome sounding name to our sweet little boy.

"*Wie wäre es mit Csaba?* How does Csaba sound?" I asked during one of these phone calls.

"Everyone would call him chubby" he objected.

"And what about Lóránd?" I hoped he would like this. It sounded noble and unique. It sounded like the right one to me.

"What is the nickname for that?" he wanted to know.

"Lóri".

"That is a woman's name here. *Auf keinen Fall*. No way."

Soon enough I ran out of names. But when they brought my son to nurse and on his crib there was still only the number 2064, I became creative. I didn't want to completely give up the name Lóránd, so I came up with the name Roland; it had the same letters. It sounded like a hero from medieval ballad. This name wasn't particularly Hungarian, but it was used there too, just as it was used in Germany and in the US. It did not feel like a compromise, but rather like the representation of the fusion of our different heritages and languages.

Flowering plants are vascular (they possess specialized tissues to conduct water and sugars) that reproduce sexually by forming flowers, fruits, and seeds. The ovule is fertilized and

**name,
Name,
név:**
*a word or phrase
by which a person,
thing, or class is
known*

develops into a seed in an enclosed ovary, which is usually part of the flower. This is in contrast to the gymnosperms (such as the conifers), the other main group of vascular seed plants, in which the seeds develop exposed on the surfaces of cones.

Petuniák. Petunias. I planted them around the house. I remember trying to sit on my heels ~~while kneeling~~; planting is no easy job. In all other flowerbeds, perennials were growing, but around the house I liked to have petunias. I enjoyed inhaling their poignant smell while sitting on the porch. Every time I entered the garden through the back gate, I received their greetings with pride. I waved. Their heads bowed deep in the western wind, as the colorful flowers fanfare a welcome to the lady of the house.

The petunias displayed their luscious dyes faithfully, every summer, unconstrained by weather conditions. Only this summer, there seemed to be fewer flowers than usual. I suspected my three-year-old twins, and the tiny footsteps in the flowerbed seemed to prove my suspicion.

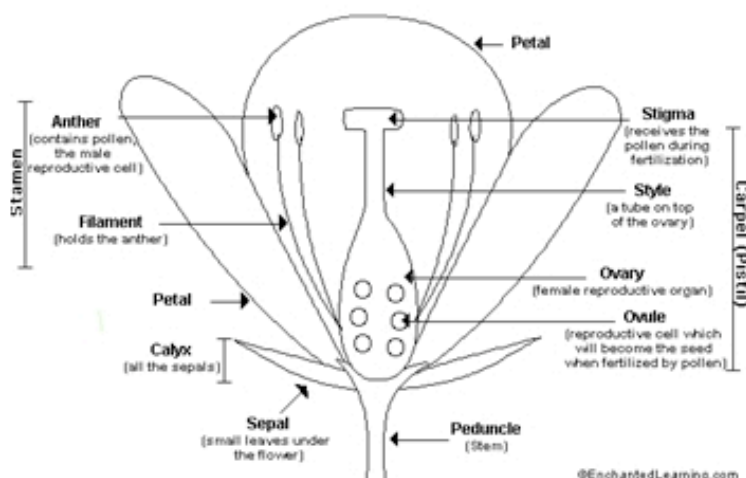
“Anya azért ültette ezeket a virágokat mert szépek. Anya szereti őket nézni itt a kertben, és szomorú lesz ha már nem lesz több virága. Mom planted these flowers because they look nice. Mom likes to look at them here in the garden, she will be sad if she won’t have any flowers,” I told my boys, trying to save the handful of flowers left.

With these words, I went inside the house. A few minutes later I heard András and Zsolti knocking. As I opened the door, they stood there with a beaming smile, their tiny hands filled with petunias.

“Ezt mind neked szedtem. Anya már nem szomorú. I picked all these for you. Mom isn’t sad anymore,” they said proudly.

The petunias, that so far had merely been spectators of our lives, became heralds in my sons’ hands. These heralds told me about the true meaning of gardening in a language spoken by none but understood by all. It was the language of flowers, not perceptible by ears but resonating deeper, on a level indescribable by any human language.

*language,
Sprache,
nyelv:
human speech or the
written symbols for
speech*



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Getting to Here from There:

One Woman's Journey from the South Bronx to the Academy

by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz

I came of age during the 1980's in the South Bronx. Other than its fame as the birthplace of rap music, my neighborhood was similar to many hoods in America. It was a poor community rich in potential and possibility because of its youth. I was privileged to grow up at a time when rap music was a guiding principle in defining and redefining what it meant to be young and Black in Urban America. The "godfather" of rap, Grandmaster Flash lived a few blocks away, and a member of the Cold Crush Brothers, one of the first widely-recognized rap groups was a family friend who lived five floors above. Our neighborhood of housing projects and tenement buildings enveloped the youth of my community in security. We were young, we were Black, and we had dreams. Our parents "made a way out of no way," and it wasn't until we grew up and moved out of the neighborhood that many of us realized we were quite poor.

My father occasionally owned a business. Sometimes he was proprietor of a liquor store or dry cleaners, and when those businesses failed he worked for a man named Maxi, whom I later came to know as Uncle Maxi. Uncle Maxi was a full-bellied, gray-haired Greek man who was a loan shark to many and a numbers runner to most. He became very close to my family, and I'm certain that for many years he was my father's only friend.

My mother was a stay-at-home mom. This was out of necessity since she was taking care of my two siblings, me and my diabetic grandmother. Besides, my dad was adamant that mom be home to watch us. He did not want us to become latchkey kids who roamed the streets and got into trouble while both parents were at work. Although he rarely kept a steady job despite his skills and education, his sketchy employment record didn't seem to matter when it came to this topic. The subject was not open to debate. According to him, and those who subscribe to the 'cult of true womanhood' philosophy, a mother's place was in the home; her job was to take care of her husband and children. I think during those years my mother was so overburdened with raising the three of us, dealing with the drama my father put her through, and caring for a sick mother that even if she had the

inclination to protest "her place," she probably didn't have the energy to sustain her objection.

Time has a way of making things apparent. As I've gotten older, I've come to realize and fully appreciate that my parents did their best for us. My siblings and I managed to have a somewhat pleasant childhood (most of the time) and create decent lives for ourselves with our partners in spite of witnessing many sour moments between my parents because of lack of money and my father's infidelity. He and mom were often at odds about money, especially during those high-pressured "back to school" moments; however, my maternal grandmother and uncles managed to rally together their funds and guarantee that my siblings and I return to school each year in the flyest gear. It wasn't just about the clothes, although this was very important to most kids in my community, particularly those who went to the schools in the neighborhood. The start of the school year was the one chance to rock fresh gear for a least a week straight, and give the impression that your family was "better off" than most of the families in the community. It was also a chance to show off, get noticed and get respect. In spite of his saking out on our "back to school clothes" money for several years in a row, we never believed that our education was not important to father. Both our parents made one thing clear to us: there were things they could not afford to provide; however, a solid education would grant access to those things and offer us a passport to the vast world that existed beyond the boundary of our South Bronx neighborhood.

My father, a Bajan, migrated to the United States during the late 1950s. He was a licensed pharmacist on the island of Barbados, and received a full scholarship to continue his studies at Columbia University in New York City. Shortly after arriving to The States, he met and fell in love with my mother. A few months later mother was pregnant with my sister, and my father's college plans were postponed. He decided to look for work and become a family man. With every passing year the hope of going to Columbia faded. By the time I came along, he was faced with the task of caring for a family of three children, a wife and his sick mother-in-law.

On the surface dad and mom seemed a mismatch. My mom, a southern girl from Alabama, left home and a life of poverty at the age of 16 for a new start in New York City. My dad, who didn't come to New York until he was in his early twenties, was forced to leave Barbados after a tragedy which resulted from a medication he prescribed. His family was middle-class and well-connected and therefore able to get him off the island. Though their lives seemed worlds apart, together, mom and dad were the exact parents my siblings and I needed to get us through the toughness of the South Bronx, and on our way to becoming productive citizens. The truth is my father threatened us if we didn't get good grades, and he was serious about following through on his threats. My mother was motivated by a determination that we each would go further in school than she did. I'm not quite sure what influenced me most back then: the threat of being beat with a stalk of sugar cane by my father, or the disappointment that surely would fill my mother's eyes if I brought home failing grades. In any case, I brought home grades of 90 through 99; my mom was ecstatic, my dad asked where the 100's were.

Mom continued to encourage us with a remarkable dedication to our success. Each morning she would rise early, make us toast with peanut butter, serve us a glass of juice and send us on our way. Mother didn't depend on the schools to feed us. She saw that as her job. From her impoverished childhood days she learned that a child cannot concentrate in school if she is not fed. My mother knew nothing of Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*, but she understood that her children needed to be fed and properly cared for if we were going to reach our full potential in school. Although her devotion was not enough to prevent my brother from dropping out of high school, as many young Black males do for various reasons, it was what was needed to encourage my sister to complete her A.A.S. in nursing and convince me to buy into the notion of lifelong learning.

My sister received fairly good grades and passed through school in an uneventful, middle-child-syndrome sort of way. But school had to be different for me. I had to excel. It was the only way to show my mother what her dedication meant to us, and to help heal the wound that my brother inflicted on her heart when he dropped out of high school. Although I was the youngest child, I felt this immense pressure to make up for my brother's failure and uphold the family's definition of educational

success. I began to bring home report cards with 100s in many subjects, entered and won local and national storytelling contests, and secured a place in a weekend gifted and talented program at the elite Fieldston School in Riverdale. I wrote poetry, short stories, joined the debate team and the weather club; my participation in the weather club even won me 15 seconds of fame on a local television news program. By the time I was in my last year of junior high school, I realized that my mom had sparked what already lived in me: a love of school and a passion for learning.

I was considered an excellent student in junior high (I was bestowed the honor of valedictorian of my eighth grade class) and I did very well in high school (I graduated with a 98 average); however, it was during my first year in college that I began to experience the effects of my inadequate public school education. All was fine when I academically competed against other poor Black and Latino kids from communities like mine, but when I entered the collegiate arena and suddenly had classes with white and Black middle- and upper-class kids, excelling became a challenge for me. I realized that my classmates knew much more than I did; they'd read books I'd never heard of and visited places that I had only seen on television. There was a significant gap in the quality of our education, and my education was clearly on the lowest end of that gap. I played catch up during my four years in college and managed to graduate (after taking remedial math and writing classes my first year) and finish with a 3.3 grade point average. My G.P.A., along with my personal statement, and in spite of my GRE scores, managed to get me into Teacher's College, Columbia University. I was no longer new to the game, and though I clearly was deficient in many areas that my classmates were not, I found a way to excel at Columbia while holding down a full-time job as a marketing manager. I worked hard, embraced the challenges before me, and made a vow to earn my Ph.D. even before I fully understood or could imagine what it meant to complete the terminal degree.

Though I continued to love learning, I cannot say that my first four years of college were easy for me. I had just started at Columbia, married and moved to Manhattan's Greenwich Village. I was an evening student at Columbia and worked for *The New York Times* as a marketing manager during the day. I made a decent salary, but without my Ph.D. — the degree I vowed I would earn

a decade before—I was not completely satisfied. After spending seven years at *The New York Times* I went to work for another media company, and then a large college. I was earning a nearly six-figure income when I decided to walk away from the money and the career I had carved out for myself and become a graduate student at New York University's School of Education. I was about to become a doctoral student and I was determined to not let anything — a successful job or lack of money — stand in my way.

Now that I am a Ph.D. and working at a community college, I'm still not completely satisfied. Once again, I am faced with the "inadequacy" of my education as I compete for grants and tenure-track jobs at four-year institutions against Ph.D.'s who attended a more "prestigious" college than I. Although NYU is highly regarded and I received a decent education there, I am aware of the hierarchy which exists in academe. The school where you complete your doctorate has everything to do with the institution where you'll ultimately teach, and besides there are not many options for a junior assistant professor from New York who wants to remain in New York. My decision to work at a community college is additionally driven by my desire to make a difference. Part of making that difference, I think, is to care enough about each student and their personal story and offer space for them to share their experiences. Just as writing has allowed me to make peace with my past, I believe my students benefit from writing about those people, places and moments that impacted their lives. Thus, the educational autobiography is at the center of every course I teach.

To do this type of work (particularly in a community college setting where the class load is heavier than in senior colleges) with students who come from different cultures and struggle against uncertain futures, requires a lot of energy and steadfast belief that students can work through their issues via the narrative process. In particular, my load of three composition classes and one literature class, an administrative assignment, and my participation on several college-wide and department committees puts a strain on my energy level. Since I am one of only five full-time, African American tenure-track faculty among the 65 in the English department, I am often selected to be on college-wide committees and called into department meetings that involve issues concerning Black students. It is rewarding for me to

take part in these projects; however, my involvement puts a strain on my scholarly work. I recently read an article about how few Black women actually make it in academia, and those who do make it become the workhorses of their departments. These women are overloaded because they are often designated the voice for the few students of color in their department or on their campus. They are overwhelmed with committee work, student advisement and teaching. Because of this they rarely find the time to work on their own scholarship. Naturally, when their time comes up for tenure, their names are not on the short list.

I tackle this disturbing news and my current responsibilities by using the same approach I perfected during my early college years — I work hard and focus on what can be and not what is. I also find that writing helps me sort out many issues and helps me construct a happy ending to the narrative I wish to write for my life. When I write I create a path for myself; I construct a space where tenure at a Research 1 University is a possibility for a young Black woman like me. With each lecture I give, each conference paper I deliver and each article I submit, deep down I know I can do more and even do better. But for now I take some comfort in where I am on this journey, and in the fascinating possibility of just how far this little Black girl from the South Bronx can go.

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz is Assistant Professor of English at Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York. Her research interests include race in education, Black college reentry women, and culturally relevant curriculum. Her articles have appeared in *Kappa Delta Pi's Educational Forum*.

Acceptance Speech for the Rewey Belle Inglis Award, November 2004

Read by Leila Christenbury at the CEE Luncheon in Indianapolis for Patricia P. Kelly

I regret very much that I am unable to be at NCTE this year to accept the Rewey Belle Inglis award. I'm both honored and humbled by being selected. At the moment I am flying from Africa, where I have been working for the last five years with a USAID project in Malawi, a subSaharan African country, to strengthen primary teacher education. Malawi is one of the three poorest countries in Africa. Famine has occurred for the last three years because of drought. Most of the 12 million people are subsistence farmers living on about a dollar a day. A high rate of HIV/AIDS leaves the country with orphans and young people. Yet Malawi is a beautiful country, and its people, quick to smile, have earned it's being called "the warm heart of Africa."

Through better primary education, we hope to improve basic literacy and access to education especially for girls. The majority of girls drop out of school between grades 2 and 4 to work in the fields and home. They marry young, often at the family's direction. Girls who do stay in school must contend with not only doing their class work but also cleaning the school including latrines, and then carrying a heavy workload at home. Secondary schools are either residential schools or necessitate a long, unsafe walk from home to school. Secondary schools are, for the most part, tuition-based, which makes it even more problematic for many girls to attend. The colleges are overwhelmingly male by design with few hostels (dormitories) built for young women. Government offices, banks, and businesses are almost all run by men. Even in primary teaching, men predominate.

We know that educating girls impacts not only the education level of the families they will eventually have but also raises the economic level of those families. It is said that, if you educate a boy, you educate an individual, but if you educate a girl, you educate a family.

However, woman primary teachers also need advocates here. When we selected six teachers to come to the US for doctoral studies, not one woman was chosen initially by the interviewing committee. Only after some strong negotiation were two women included. The same was true when selections were submitted for an in-country master's programs. Finally six women were chosen out of 24 candidates. Just last week I again heard from a committee of male instructors, explaining why only six women out of 30 had been selected for the new bachelor's of education program, even though the goal was 50 percent. "We can't sacrifice quality," they said. How many times have all of us heard this same excuse in other contexts! I didn't know whether to laugh, or to cry, or to just get mad.

So it is for the young girls and women teachers in developing countries, and for my students whose accomplishments have made me so proud, and for my WILLA friends who through their teaching make a difference in children's lives that I accept the Rewey Belle Inglis award today. *Zikomo*, which means "thank you" in Chichewa.

The Women in Literacy and Life Assembly
of
The National Council of Teachers of English

Call for Manuscripts

The Women in Literacy and Life Assembly of NCTE welcomes contributions to WILLA, a journal that represents varied perspectives, formats, and voices focusing on the status and images of girls and women. WILLA publishes critical essays, research reports, teaching strategies for all levels, bibliographies, interviews, personal essays, short stories, poetry, and other creative works including black and white photography and drawings.

- Each manuscript should be no more than 12 double-spaced, typed pages in current MLA style.
- WILLA is a blind, peer-reviewed journal. Place the author's personal and institutional identification including an e-mail address on the cover page only. Send three copies of the manuscript and a self-addressed stamped envelope.
- In addition, please attach a copy of your manuscript in Word, subject heading, WILLA, to mstyslin@gwm.sc.edu.
- Submissions will not be returned.

Deadline for submission for the spring 2007 issue of WILLA is December 15, 2006. All submissions postmarked by this date will be considered. Send manuscripts to:

Dr. Mary E. Styslinger
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