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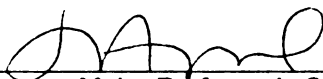TEXTUAL INVITATION & REPERTOIRE IN READER RESPONSE

presented by

VALERIE STRUTHERS WALKER

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of the requirements for the

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REREADING DIS/ABILITY IN ADOLESCENT LITERATURE:
TEXTUAL INVITATION & REPERTOIRE IN READER RESPONSE

By

Valerie Struthers Walker

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Curriculum, Teaching, and Educational Policy

2009

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ABSTRACT

REREADING DIS/ABILITY IN ADOLESCENT LITERATURE:
TEXTUAL INVITATION & REPERTOIRE IN READER RESPONSE

By

Valerie Struthers Walker

This dissertation draws on textual reader response theory and humanities-based Disability Studies theories to explores the ways in which preservice teachers participating in a course called "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" and their instructor, who is also the researcher, made sense of representations of disability in two pieces of adolescent literature: *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Ryan, 2004) and *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (Choldenko, 2004). For each text, the researcher considers the complexity of how preservice teachers' in her class responded to the text in small group discussion. The researcher then "rereads" each focal text through a Disability Studies framework to consider what alternative meanings are available in the text. Rather than positioning the latter reading as a corrective to the preservice teachers' readings of the literature, the researcher suggests the generative and educative value of considering multiple readings of the same text.

This dissertation challenges a common assumption in educational literature that it is possible to clearly identify accurate or authentic representations of disability in children's literature. Rather, the researcher argues that the preservice teachers' readings of the focal texts for accuracy and authenticity can be better understood through Iser's concept of "literary work" in which authors draw on socially available resources to offer textual invitations to readers and readers mobilize repertoires of personal and

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professional knowledge to create meaning. The "literary work" of the preservice teachers in this study allowed them to explore their assumptions about what constitutes a "realistic" depiction of a character with a disability and challenge each other to define and clarify what they value in these representations. Rather than leading to clear-cut evaluations of the texts, the readers generated new questions and dilemmas that they related to their future work as professionals.

Additionally, a small group's discussion of the use of metaphor in *Al Capone Does My Shirts* and the researcher's "rereadings" of the focal texts through a Disability Studies framework suggest an alternative way of reading "dis/ability" in children's literature which foregrounds the ways in which literary form and social meaning intersect. These readings suggest that dis/ability is produced both through literary tropes and in one's selective reading of a text. The small group's interest and frustration in pursuing this type of inquiry suggest the potential value of incorporating Disability Studies theories more formally into the curriculum and providing students with opportunities to develop reading strategies which would allow them to pursue this type of questioning.

This study concludes that scholarship and teaching of literature which includes representations of dis/ability would be enhanced by continued efforts to explore the particular ways in which children's literature invites readers to understand dis/ability, readers respond creatively to those textual invitations, and students and teachers expand their literary repertoires to incorporate new ways of reading dis/ability.

Dedicated to my husband, Curtis.

Thank you for the long walks, flowers, and extra loads of laundry.

Your support made this project possible.

I am the lucky one.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not have been able to write this dissertation without the cooperation and support of my students, committee members, colleagues, and friends and family.

I am especially grateful to the students in the "Issues of Diversity and Children's Literature" course for their willingness to share their responses to the literature we read together in class. Their questions and commitment to challenging each other in discussion taught me a great deal about what it means to read critically and with passion.

This dissertation would have been impossible to write without the guidance and support of my dissertation committee. As the chair of the committee and the facilitator of the children's literature team, Dr. Laura Apol supported this project even before we called it "research". Her tough questions and honest feedback made this a stronger project. Although each committee member did much more than I can describe, I am particularly grateful to Dr. Lynn Fendler for encouraging me to imagine what it might look like to work in the intersection of humanities and social science, Dr. Janine Certo for helping me think of the dissertation as part of a larger research agenda, and Dr. Susan Peters for introducing me to Disability Studies as a dynamic field of scholarship.

I have been fortunate to participate in a community of scholars at Michigan State University in which hard work and friendship go hand in hand. A special thanks to the members of the children's literature team whose commitment to teaching always inspires me. In particular, Jackie, Suzy, and Tom have my thanks for knowing whether to offer advice or chocolate chip cookies. Likewise, I would like to thank the members of my weekly writing group—Ann, Denise, Kathy, and Kelly—for their feedback on drafts, as well as their emotional support.

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My family and friends also deserve great thanks for the hours they spent with me in person and on the phone as I went through the ups and downs of writing. I would like to thank my mom for praying for both me and the readers of the dissertation; my dad for sharing law school stories which I had never heard; my siblings, Mark and Sandra, for listening to all of the details; and Darlene for her perspective as a practicing teacher. Finally, my husband Curtis did whatever I needed to keep writing, including more than his share of the housework and endless hours of listening to me talk about reader response, disability, and adolescent literature.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction to the Dissertation

My initial teaching dilemma

The first time I taught TE 448: Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature, an elective course for preservice teachers, I was caught off-guard by my students' responses to *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (Choldenko, 2004). The story takes place in the mid-1930s and is told from the perspective of Moose Flanagan, a twelve year old boy, who lives with his family on Alcatraz Island where his father works as a guard. Moose's sister, Natalie, is autistic and a significant portion of the plot is driven by the conflict that Moose feels in reconciling the resentment he feels towards his sister with his growing recognition that she is a person who deserves to have her needs met.

As I visited small groups of students who were discussing the book, I heard one student announce confidently, "Well of course Natalie was misunderstood in the book. They hadn't discovered autism back then. Now we know better." As I continued to listen to small group discussion, I heard many conclude that discrimination was a thing of the past and that we were "lucky" to be living at a time when our medical knowledge allows us to understand and treat people with autism. When we reassembled for a large group debriefing, I asked students to talk about whose voice was heard in the text and how that shaped our understandings of Moose and Natalie as characters. Students responded by saying that it was "obvious" that Natalie couldn't be the narrator of the story. Moose had to tell the story because he was "normal". This response concerned me because it seemed to suggest that it was natural and unproblematic for people without disabilities to speak on behalf of those with disabilities. As I reflected on the discussion later, I also noted that

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the tone of the classroom seemed different that day. In contrast to other class discussions that semester, students had seemed both more passionate and confident in their readings of this particular book.

The point of this anecdote is not to critique the students' responses; the students in this class were a caring and dedicated group who spoke passionately about the need to include positive representations of disability in children's and adolescent literature. Rather, I've shared this story because it made me realize that I knew very little about how students in my class understood the concept of disability: Was it a medical designation? A pedagogical problem? A social construction? It also made me reexamine what I had done as an instructor to frame the topic: What were my goals for the session? How did my selection of a piece of historical fiction, told from the perspective of a character without a disability, shape our conversation? And why had the topic of disability felt "different" than the other "issues of diversity" that we explored in the course? As I considered my role in framing the learning experience, I began to think about how "ability" and "disability", along with "normal" and "different", were being constructed in our classroom space. With these reflections in mind, I redesigned the session for the following semester and made plans to systematically collect data as a part of the self-study which became the basis for this dissertation.

Historical context of scholarship on disability in children's literature

Scholarly interest in children's literature which includes representations of people with disabilities began in response to the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1975 in the United States and the passage of the Education Act of 1981 in England. Both pieces of legislation called for an end to the segregation of children with

disabilities from their "normal" counterparts in public schools. As parents and teachers prepared for new "full inclusion" environments, they began to ask librarians for literature which included characters with disabilities, citing both the need to use literature in which students with disabilities could "see themselves" and the presumed need to educate students without disabilities about their new classmates (Andrews, 1998; Baskin & Harris 1977; Quicke 1985). This interest in recognizing quality children's literature which includes representations of disability has continued to be evidenced by a special issue of *Bookbird* titled "Books for Children with Disabilities" (2001), the establishment of the American Library Association's Schneider Family Award in 2004 which recognizes literature that "embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences" (http://www.ala.org/ala/awards/awards.cfm, accessed May 6, 2008), a themed issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* (Winter 2004) on "Disability Culture in Children's Literature", and in a special session on disability in children's literature at the Modern Language Association's annual conference in 2008, with a second call for a proposed session to take place at the 2009 conference. Yet, despite this increased interest in children's literature which includes representations of disability, virtually no work has been done theorize the ways in which texts invite readers to understand disability and how readers make sense of these texts.

The goal of any self-study is to explore the relationship between theory and practice; to achieve a "balance between the way in which private experience can provide insight and solutions for public issues and troubles and the ways in which public theory can provide insight and solution for private trial" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Although this inquiry was inspired by questions generated in my teaching, the focus of this study

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also extends literature related to recent calls for teachers to address inequities related to ability and disability in schooling (Everelles, 2000; Banks & Banks, 2005; Dansforth & Gabel, 2006; Hehir, 2002; Hehir, 2005). In particular, this project extends scholarship related to evaluating and responding to representations of children's literature to include analyses not only of the "invitations" to understand dis/ability that different texts might provide, but also how readers actively respond to those texts in ways that are grounded in the values, experiences, and reading strategies that they bring to those texts.

Defining key terms

Before describing the structure of this dissertation, I would like to explain my use of several terms in my writing. As Linton (1998) suggests, the language we use to discuss "differences", particularly in discussions around education, is political. Linton notes that the language of disability studies may be different than the language that teachers are currently being encouraged to use in schools (i.e. "special needs", "exceptional", or "differently abled"). Despite the negative connotations of the prefix "dis", I have chosen to use the word "disability" or "people with disabilities" deliberately because it has historical and social significance within the disability rights community. I also deliberately distinguish between the term "disability", which I use in cases when the context seems to suggest a stable category and "dis/ability" when I intend to foreground the ways in which disability is discursively produced in reference and opposition to "ability" or what is considered "normal." As Anderson and Merrell (2001) discuss, using the "/" is an act of inviting the reader to consider the relationship between the terms in a variety of ways: disability "and" ability, disability in relation to ability, disability "or" ability.

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Overview of the dissertation

The introduction might be misleading because it might suggest that this will be an ethnographic account of what happened during the next semester's class, how I "intervened" in the meanings I found problematic in "successful" or "unsuccessful" ways. However, as I will describe in chapter 3, this project has a different emphasis: to share the ways in which my readings of transcripts of student response to focal literature prompted me to conduct "rereadings" of dis/ability in a variety of texts, including the focal literature itself. The multiple readings of dis/ability that result from this process both suggest the value of acknowledging the ways in which texts invite readings and the ways in which readers actively construct meanings in those texts. The goal of this analysis is not to present "corrective" readings in response to the work of the students', but to problematize the idea that any one reading is correct.

In chapter two I argue that scholarship on representations of disability in children's literature has been shaped by the assumption that representations of disability should be evaluated by assessing the degree to which they are stereotypical, authentic, or accurate. To a lesser extent, some work has also drawn on theory from disability studies which interrogates the ways in which dis/ability is constructed in children's literature. Next, although very little has been written about reader response to representations of disability, I consider what those studies have to say about how teachers make sense of that literature and how those studies also suggest a particular set of values and "ways of reading" teacher response. Finally, I propose the educative value of considering disability in children's literature through two complementary theoretical frameworks:

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Iser's (1974; 1978) textual reader response theory and Mitchell and Synder's (2000) theory of narrative prosthesis.

In chapter three I tell "the story of the research", including the dilemmas and affordances I have found in conducting an inquiry which draws on both elements of social science traditions and those of literary analysis to imagine what conducting "textual reader response research" might entail. I describe how I came to this project, the context in which students read the focal texts, and the process through which I generated and "read" texts as a method of analysis. Since the intent of this project is to present a variety of ways in which the focal texts, *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Ryan, 2004) and *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (2004), might be read, I also invite the reader to evaluate this project as educative and persuasive, rather than through criteria which is more common to social sciences. Finally, I discuss some of the choices I made in the writing of this text and describe the ways in which I have attempted to create a text in which I acknowledge that different readers may come to their own readings.

In chapters four through six I explore the variety of ways which students responded in small group discussion to focal literature and how the process of analyzing the transcripts of these discussions led me to new rereadings of the focal literature and course. In each chapter I begin by completing a close reading of excerpts from transcripts of small group discussion to illustrate one or more of the ways in which students mobilized different resources in their responses to texts. I then turn back to the text to consider how the text may have invited such responses and, in some cases, how I might have supported students in developing even more complex reads of the text. In chapter four I consider the ways in which a small group of students responded to the character of

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Owen in *Becoming Naomi Leon* as a "disabled" figure. I then turn back to the book to consider alternative reads of Owen's character as "dis/abled" that are made possible by mobilizing different scenes in the text. In chapter five I take a somewhat different approach and draw from several small group discussions to illustrate the variety of ways in which students in the class discussed the character of Natalie as a "representation of autism" and Mrs. Flanagan as a "representation of motherhood" in *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. In addition to rereading the focal literature to consider how the text invited these characterizations, I also read the students' responses against scholarship which suggests that these readings can be understood as part of a broader pattern of representations of autistic children and their families. Finally, in chapter six I consider the implications of one student's reading of *Al Capone Does My Shirts* in which she argues that Choldenko employed metaphor to "help the reader understand Natalie". I begin with a close reading of her group's discussion of this reading and then extend her analysis to consider how reading the metaphors in the text in different ways yields multiple possible readings of what autism signifies in the text.

Finally, in chapter seven I consider what can be learned from considering how students in the course mobilized concepts of accuracy and authenticity in their readings and how mobilizing theories from disability studies yielded alternative meanings. I argue that acknowledging the potential of multiple, "legitimate" interpretations of any one text which includes representations of dis/ability complicates both how one might evaluate such texts and how one might take up the work of teacher education around this topic. I also consider the limitations of this project, as well as the ways in which it suggests future inquiries into the ways in which particular texts invite readers to understand

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Chapter 2:

Scholarship on representations of dis/ability in children's literature

Introduction

How we read and evaluate representations of dis/ability in children's literature is related not only to our particular purposes for reading, but also to our values and the types of analyses that we undertake as readers, teachers, and scholars. Despite the rise in interest in this literature, scholarship related to disability in children's literature is relatively recent and rare and the field, as a whole, remains undertheorized. In fact, many of the articles reviewed in this chapter come from just two sources: the *Bookbird* (2001) special issue on "Books for Children with Disabilities" and the *Disability Studies Quarterly* (Winter, 2004) special issue on "Disability Culture in Children's Literature".

In this chapter I investigate scholarship on dis/ability in children's literature in order to understand the scope of how scholars have analyzed these texts, as well as the implied values or purposes of such scholarship. I characterize scholarship related to children's literature in one of three ways: as the search for *positive representations of social realism*, as concerned with *reimagining dis/ability*, and as documenting *reader response*. Finally, although my intent in this review is to suggest that these approaches to scholarship are complementary, I suggest that two theoretical approaches, Disability Studies and textual reader response theory, provide a way to investigate the two questions that have guided this project: How did students in the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course respond to adolescent literature which includes characters with dis/abilities? How might an analysis of the textual invitations in the focal literature used in the course complicate how we make sense of those responses?

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Representation of disability in children's literature

Positive representation: Contrasting stereotypes with "realistic" representations

Scholarship on representations of disability in children's literature is

overwhelmingly concerned with evaluating books for the purposes of selecting literature

which includes "positive representations" of people with disabilities (Andrews, 1998;

Ayala, 1999; Aveling, 2004; Baskin & Harris, 1977; Baskin & Harris, 1984; Blaska,

2003; Dobo, 1982; Landrum, 2001; Myers & Bersani, 2008; Prater, 2003; Quicke, 1985;

Roberston, 1992; Saunders, 2000; Saunders, 2004; Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Tal, 2001;

Ward, 2002). As I described in the chapter one, this scholarship was a response to the

perceived need and value of using literature as a way of countering negative stereotypes

of disability in society and preparing children for new, full-inclusion school

environments. This scholarship shares a number of common methods of inquiry and

goals: to document trends in the representation of disability in children's literature, to

provide educators with titles and critical reviews of available literature, and to establish

criteria and frameworks through which to evaluate representation of disability in new

literature.

Baskin and Harris' *Notes from a Different Drummer* (1977) and *More Notes from*

a Different Drummer (1984) have become the foundation for much of the scholarship on

disability in children's literature. Between the two books the authors offer a

comprehensive review of children's books which include characters with disabilities that

were published from 1940-1981. They begin by contextualizing their 1977 study by

identifying the ways in which people with disabilities have historically been stereotyped

and the ways in which canonical and contemporary literature treats "people [like]

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devices" by romanticizing them, diminishing them, representing "suffering as payment

for grace and enlightenment", and using them as "catalysts in the maturation of others"

(pp. 25-34). Baskin and Harris suggest that literature which "avoids distortion and that

accurately reflect the reality of impairment help readers separate the disability from the

false superstructure imposed by society" (p. xv). Baskin and Harris' work is significant

in a number of ways. First, it provides a comprehensive discussion of the trends in

representations of disabilities over a forty year period and includes detailed reviews

which address the literary quality and representation of disability in 659 pieces of

literature published during that period. Second, although they do not provide a

"checklist" of criteria for evaluating literature, the themes they addressed in their

evaluations (accuracy, literary quality, attention to symbolic use, etc.) were taken up in

later studies and articles addressed to educators and has become a model for content

analysis studies and annotated bibliographies. Andrews (1998) describes these themes in

evaluation as falling into one of three categories related to: accuracy of information

about the social experience of people with disabilities; avoidance of stereotypes,

particularly those which present extremes such as characters as "pitiful and pathetic" or

the "Super Crip"; and literary quality. Additionally, several studies have focused on

extending Baskin and Harris' work to include more contemporary titles and discussions

of trends in representation (Robertson, 1992; Ward, 2002), others have shifted the focus

of Baskin and Harris' inquiry to include cultural and linguistic variation (Ayala, 1999),

representations of African Americans with disabilities (Daniels, 2004), gender (Saad,

2004), cognitive disabilities (Heim, 1994; Dyches, et al., 2001), and criteria specific to

representations of learning disabilities (Prater, 2003).

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Many of these studies combine this type of textual analysis with suggestions for discussing literature with children (Andrews, 1998; Blaska, 2003, Quicke, 1985; Saunders, 2000). For example, Quicke (1985) grounds his analysis of disability in children's literature in the rationale that children will learn prejudicial attitudes about people with disabilities unless teachers intervene through reading and discussion. In a similar fashion to Baskin and Harris, he rejects what he considers to be stereotypical representations of disability in favor of more complex representations of the disability experience. He also emphasizes that books be evaluated based on their representation of "human relationships, rather than on technical information about disability" (p. 166). Quick uses detailed reviews of books to explore ten themes related to disability and family, friendship, love, and identity that might be discussed with children. One distinct feature of Quick's work is that he argues that teachers themselves need to address their own assumptions and prejudicial attitudes in the process of reading (p. 162). Saunders (2000) creates a more analytic model, the DISCEY code (Disability, Images, Control, Society, Enabled, Young carers), as a framework for both evaluating texts and generating discussion questions to use with young readers. Both Quick and Saunder's models reflect an interest in understanding disability through a social model, rather than a medical model. Although Landrum (2001) organizes her criteria somewhat differently by organizing questions around plot, character development, and tone/language used, her framework also focuses on the degree to which those literary elements are used to develop balanced, complex, and "realistic" representations. Blaska (2003) provides a revised "Images and Encounters Profile" with a checklist of ten criteria to be used to evaluate the storyline, language, and illustrations of depictions of disability; as well as

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suggested language to use when discussing disability (i.e. "person first language"), ideas

for thematic units related to disability (i.e. "alike and different"), and annotated book lists

which are organized by theme. The thrust of her message is that negative attitudes and

stereotypes about people with disabilities can be changed through reading and discussing

quality children's literature. The selection criteria developed in these studies are often

included in articles aimed at teachers and parents to be used as tools for selecting and

evaluating children's books for the home and classroom (Myers & Bersani, 2008; Tal,

2001; Williams, Inkster & Blaska, 2005).

Surprisingly, scholarship on disability in children's literature rarely intersects with

on scholarship from the field of multicultural literature. One exception is Tal (2001) who

identifies a number of negative stereotypes to watch out for when selecting literature

which include stereotype, didacticism, sentimentality and using characters with

disabilities as "a vehicle for the growth of the main character" (p. 31). She also questions

whether disability should fall under the umbrella of "multicultural literature" given the

diversity of experience among people with disabilities and the question of whether people

with disabilities can be described as having a "common culture" (p. 31). Although she

gives little attention to what might constitute a "positive representation", she does imply

that books written from the point of view of the person with disabilities are preferable to

those told by "others in a caretaker status" and that positive representation would include

"a glimpse into the world of individuals struggling to lead a full life despite [sic] their

disabilities" (p. 32). More recently, Myers & Bersani's (2008) "Ten Quick Ways to

Analyze Children's Books for Ableism" links scholarship and trends in the field of

multicultural literature to the evaluation of representations of disability. Myers & Bersani

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use the Council on Interracial Books for Children's (CIBC) seminal "10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism" as a model for their own evaluative criteria. Although the criteria they suggest is virtually identical that in other frameworks, it is distinct in that it links the "problem" of stereotypes in the concept of "ableism" (Hehir, 2002).

Although both the selection criteria provide readers with resources to help them question representations of disability more carefully, these textually-based studies have several major limitations. (See table 2.1.) First, there is some variation in whether they clearly define the "problem" of disability as personal, social, or some combination of the two. For example, Blaska (2003) provides a great deal of medical/therapeutic information to the reader, despite the fact that her criteria is based on social representations and never addresses possible tensions between medical and social discourses of disability. In contrast, Saunders (2004) calls for scholars and reviewers to read texts to determine whether they represent disability as either a medical or social problem. She models this process by contrasting the construction of disability in several contemporary pieces of adolescent literature and argues that children should be offered literature which locates the "problem" of disability in social contexts and relations which discriminate against people with disabilities.

A second potential limitation of this scholarship is that it presumes that if readers are given books which include "realistic" representations of disability, they will develop positive attitudes about themselves and others. As I will discuss below and in the next chapter, reader response studies suggest that readers respond to diverse literature in unexpected ways that don't always match readers' expectations.

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Table 2.1   **Affordances and limitations of scholarship in children's literature**

Scholarship on children's literature	Investigates	Offers	Limitations	Examples
Positive representation as social realism	Trends in representation, contrast between stereotype and "realistic" representations	Annotate bibliographies, evaluative criteria, teaching resources	Uneven theorization of disability, assumes passive reader; transmission model of reading	Andrews, 1998; Baskin & Harris, 1977/1984; Blaska, 2003; Myers & Bersaini, 2008
Reimagining dis/ability	Dis/ability as a discursive system, literary form as connected to meaning, texts that disrupt binaries or dominant representations	Potential to challenge normalcy and/or reimagine disability as positive.	Connections to education remain unexplored. Little uptake in educational literature	Coats, 2001; Foertsch, 2009; Keith, 2001; Mills, 2002; Quick, 2008
Reader response & **Reception studies**	How meaning is constructed in transaction between reader, text, context.	Implied reader as textual invitation, actual reader as empirical complexity.	Few studies, varied knowledge claims.	Cypher & Martin, 2008; Brueggmann, et al, 2001; Ware, 2001; Ware, 2006

Reimaging dis/ability: Considering how texts "work" to (de)construct difference

A second type of scholarship focuses on the ways in which texts reflect and

produce ideological systems of difference. Scholarship around this type of inquiry tends

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to come out of English and Disability Studies departments. These projects take two forms: those which examine how texts reflect the ideologies of the historical contexts in which they were written (Dowker, 2004; Foertsch, 2009; Hubbard, 2002; Keith, 2001; Kolba, 1984; MacLeod, 1984) and those which examine the ways in which difference is constructed in contemporary texts (Coats, 2001; Christensen, 2001; Haberl, 2001; Quick, 2008; Mills, 2002). Often scholarship in the latter group also includes texts which the authors feel succeed in disrupting binary or dominant representations of disability.

In the first group, scholars tend to focus on the historical context in which texts are written shapes the ideological messages in the texts. For example, Keith's (2001) study, *Take Up Thy Bed & Walk: Death, Disability and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls*, provides a historical analysis of the ways in which disability acts as a trope demanding "cure or death" in books such as *Jane Eyre*, *Heidi*, and *Little Women*. Keith concludes that, although these tropes arose out of a desire to educate readers in Victorian Christian values, the construction of disability as "moral blemish" continues to resonate with contemporary readers and persists in contemporary writing. In contrast, Foertsch (2009) explores the ways in which representations of polio in historical fiction set in World War II reflect tensions among valuing historical accuracy, nostalgia, and contemporary ideals of "positive representation" associated with gender, polio, and war. Hubbard (2002) contrasts the ways in which Helen Keller is depicted in biographies for children with the historical record of her life and accomplishments. She argues that the limited depiction of Keller as a child who "overcomes" her disability not only obscures the significance of her accomplishments as an adult, but also reflects contemporary, ableist reading

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preferences and contributes to stereotypical representations of people with disabilities as childlike, innocent, and brave.

A second group of scholars have focused on the ways in which ideas around how dis/ability is constructed in contemporary literature (Christensen, 2001; Coats, 2001; Gilbert, 2005; Greenwell, 2004; Haberl, 2001; Kendrick, 2004; Kidd, 2004; Mills, 2002; Muller, 2006; Quick, 2008; Solis, 2004) . Unlike the scholars who I have categorized as "Positive representation as social realism" who focus on characterizing trends in representation, these authors each review a select number of books to illustrate contrasting ways in which disability is employed in the discursive production of systems of normalcy/difference and dis/ability and tend to advocate for a particular type of reading, rather than suggesting "evaluative criteria". For example, Christensen (2001) analyzes representations of children with Down syndrome in picture books to determine how those books present those characters as "normal" or "different" for particular purposes. She identifies one group of books as those which present how a child with Down syndrome is similar and different than a "normal child". The purposes of these books seem to be to "educate" an implied, "normal" reader and often lack artistic merit or discernable plot. A second group of books explore the "consequences of being disabled" from the perspective of a sibling or friend. These books often have a theme suggesting that there are both rewards and challenges associated with living with a person with Down syndrome. Again, the intended audience of these books seem to be readers without disabilities. Finally, Christensen uses *How Smudge Came* (Gregory, 1997) as an example of a book which includes a character with Down syndrome in a story that is neither dependent on the main character's disability, nor ignores the social context in which she

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lives. Christensen concludes by questioning the impulse to offer children books so focused on establishing the parameters of "normal" and "different". Coats (2001) draws more directly from on scholarship from disability studies to explore how characters with disabilities are constructed for particular purposes in children's literature. Coats contrasts children's books in which the disabled figure exists to provide a mechanism through which another character achieves "normality" with those in which characters with disabilities "become catalysts for community in their inclusion" (p. 16). Although she finds the latter books hopeful, she concludes by noting that "Rather than setting people in a place of unquestioning human value regardless of the status of their embodiment, we still figure that the disabled among us must be here for a reason" (p. 16).

Several of these authors suggest that, rather than implying that people with disabilities change, people without disabilities need to reevaluate their conceptions of "normal". Mills (2002) considers the ethical implications in representing characters with mental disabilities in various ways. She identifies a number of typical, textual treatments ranging from the familiar "dumb, fat, and stupid" stereotype to creating compensatory strengths to "balance" the implied deficit in the character to using characters with disabilities to illustrate an able character's growth to implicitly valuing ability and achievement. To illustrate an alternative ethic of representation, she draws on Gantos' depiction of a character with ADHD in *Joey Pigza Loses Control* to argue that "Gantos shows us that the real problem lies not with Joey's abnormalitites, but with how we... define and deify the "normal" " (p. 541). In Haberl's (2001) survey of German and Austrian children's literature, she found that characters with disabilities were often represented as "outsiders" to a group. She then contrasted two different plot resolutions:

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one in which the character with the disability changes (becomes more "normal") in order

to gain acceptance and one in which the group's norms become more inclusive. Quick

(2008) considers representations of obesity [sic] through the lens of disability studies.

She begins with the understanding that "disability exists because the world is constructed,

both physically and in attitudes toward disabled bodies, to render a disabled body

abnormal" (np). She analyzes five young adult novels to determine "whether or not any

of them move beyond the simple self-acceptance message to an active deconstruction of

the normal/abnormal, ugly/beautiful binary in relation to obesity" (np). In three of the

novels she finds characters who learn to accept themselves and others "despite" their

weight, thus implying that thinness is normal and desirable. In two novels, she finds

characters who reimagine and redefine beauty and worth against societal norms.

Although this type of scholarship seems promising in that it offers potential

critiques of medical-therapeutic models of disability, it doesn't seem to be taken up in

educational literature and rarely considers the ways in which children's literature might

differ from adult literature as a genre (Nodelman, 2008).

Reader response to representations of disability: Reading texts against self/world

Reader response approaches focus on the ways in which different meanings are

constructed as particular readers read books in particular contexts. In this category I have

included both reviews in which the author or authors are identified as having come to a

particular understanding of a text because of their identities and experiences (Atunrase,

2004; Brittain, 2004; Gervay, 2004; Keith, 2004; Richards, 2004; Saad, 2004; Sanders,

2004; Walker, et al, 2008) and empirical studies that explore the complexity and

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variability of readers' responses (Cypher & Martin, 2008; Ware, 2001; Ware, 2006; Brueggemann, et al, 2001).

Saad (2004) investigated gendered representations of chronic illnesses in books published between 1970 and 1994. What differentiates Saad's study from those categorized as "Positive Representations", is that Saad matched texts to "insider" readers based on the illness represented in the text. She then used those readers' responses to evaluate the accuracy and authenticity of the representation in the text. In a similar study, Brittain asked Deaf readers to assist her in reviewing picture books with Deaf characters. Brittain then categorized those books as either being "about Deafness" or "for Deaf readers" based on authenticity and the degree to which the textual features (primarily pictures) were likely to resonate with Deaf audiences.

In Keith's (2004) scathing review of a popular young adult novel, *Stuck in Neutral* (Trueman, 2004), she argues that her perspective as a person with a disability shapes her response to the book in significant ways. The story is told from the perspective of Shawn, a teenager who has cerebral palsy. Although Shawn has normal intelligence, his family assumes that he is "a vegetable" because they have never successfully found a way to communicate with him. Shawn's father believes mistakenly believes that his son's seizures cause him pain and Shawn believes that his father plans to kill him to "put him out of his misery". While the book has been praised for its cliff-hanger ending (Will Shawn's father murder him?), Keith argues that the implication that Shawn is at peace with whatever his father decides to do is unethical. She writes, "As a disabled person, I look at the world differently and there are questions I want to ask about Stuck in Neutral which are apparently irrelevant to other reviewers; issues and ideas which are crucial to

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me, but apparently insignificant to them" (np). Her conclusion to the review poses a cliffhanger of its own: "Is it really so simple as to say that... there are two types of readers; those who are disabled themselves... and those who are not? Are there only these two ways of looking at the world? Readers must decide for themselves (np).

A second set of studies focus on examining the process and complexity of reader response to representations of disability in literature (Cypher & Martin, 2008; Ware, 2001; Ware, 2006; Brueggemann, et al, 2001). These studies suggest both the complexity and promise of paying attention to how adult readers respond to such texts. Unlike the scholarship I reviewed in previous categories, I have included one article from composition studies which deal with disability in adult literature because it illustrates a topic that seems to be neglected in this scholarship: the way in which multiple identities are evoked by literature (Brueggemann, et al, 2001). Each of the following studies are reported in the form of scholarly essays in which the authors explore the significance and teaching dilemmas they experienced as they considered their college students' or colleagues responses to representations of disability in literature. My primary interest in reviewing these studies is to consider the types of questions that one might bring to a close analysis of reader response to children's literature.

Cypher and Martin (2008) share their students' responses to children's literature in their teaching of an interdisciplinary college course called "What's Wrong with Normal? The Body, Normalcy and Social Justice". Their students read Hubbard's (2003) article "Who's Helen Keller? Do Children's Books Distort the Truth about Helen Keller's Life" in which Hubbard argues that the story of Helen Keller as a child who "overcomes" her disabilities with the help of an inspirational teacher has become the dominant

disabled figure in children's biography. Hubbard critiques this figure as not only

obscuring Keller's adult accomplishments as an intellectual and social activist, but also

directly contradicts Keller's frequent statements that she did not want her experience to

be used as the basis for an inspirational "disabled" figure. When Cypher and Martin

invited their students to discuss this article, they were taken aback by their students'

strong rejection of Hubbard's critique of they way in which Keller is depicted in

children's literature. Cypher and Martin came to the conclusion,

> Keller wasn't simply a topic; she was a reality in their worlds. So the critique
> offered by the reading wasn't simply a critique of children's books,
> representations of disability, or ableist worldviews; it was a critique of them. They
> had read those books, saw the movie and believed those things about Keller. The
> disability studies critique proved to contain a significant threat to their own
> subject formations. (np)

Although Cypher and Martin use this account as a way of exploring a tension they

experienced between "the interrelation between disability studies and the pedagogical

objective of critical thinking" (np), their work also illustrates the ways in which readers

bring personal reading histories, desires, and identities to their evaluations of

representation of disability in literature. Given that students were not only responding to

the representation of Helen Keller in children's literature, but also to scholarship from

disability studies that critiqued that representation, their work also suggests the need to

consider how all texts evoke "response". Additionally, since one of Cypher and Martin's

pedagogical strategies was to engage students in "meta" conversations about their own

responses, the account also foregrounds the ways in which response itself can be

analyzed and become the text of a course. They report, "As one of our students, Brianne,

said after a particularly heated class discussion, 'I'll never look at [...] children's books

in the same way again.'" One of the limitations of the methodology of such as study is

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that its primary emphasis is on the conclusions the authors reached, rather than reporting

or reflecting on the complexity of reader response. For example, the reader has no

opportunity to hear what happened in the "heated discussion" that led Brianne to

reconsider disability in children's literature. As I will suggest in the next chapter, I

believe that it is both ethically and educatively valuable to explore the process of reader

response.

Ware (2006) describes her efforts to encourage critical dialogue in two

educational contexts with practicing and preservice teachers on the topic of disability

through literature discussion. The first setting she describes is a 5-week summer institute

on disability and the arts. Here teachers had the opportunity to read both canonical

literature written by authors with disability experience and the young adult novel *The*

Curious Incident in the Night-time with the Dog (Haddon, 2004). Ware found that in

both cases teachers responded by "diagnosing" characters and valued medical accuracy in

literature, to the exclusion of other types of discussion. She speculated that the

professional culture of teaching had shaped the teachers' responses. In a second setting,

she attempted to disrupt this professional socialization by developing a curriculum in

which she asked teachers to analyze the construction of disability in film and literature.

Here she found that providing teachers with questions such as "How might we explore

the ways that disability informs the works of these writers and artists?" (np) and giving

them opportunities to read texts against one another led students to understand disability

as culturally constructed. Ware concludes that teacher educators should practice

pedagogies which equip readers with ways of understanding disability that go beyond

medical diagnosis. In contrast to Cypher and Martin's illustrated how readers' personal

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commitments to Helen Keller shaped their responses, Ware's work suggests that teachers' professional commitments shape their responses.

Ware's earlier work also considers the complexity of how both teachers and students respond to representations of disability in school settings. Ware (2001; 2002) collaborated with a 9th grade creative writing teacher, Tom, to teach a unit called "Writing, Identity, and the Other". During this unit students read and responded to poetry, film and short stories which included representations of disability. Ware's analysis of the unit includes vignettes that illustrate both students' responses to those texts and reveals some of the tensions that Tom experienced as he taught the class. Ware found that by the end of the unit students recognized patterns of how people with disabilities are represented in the media, as well as engaging in critiques of the ways in which normal and different are constructed across social differences such as race, age, class and disability. Although Ware saw the project as successful, Tom revealed that teaching the unit had been challenging for him to teach for several reasons. First, teaching the unit brought up personal and professional memories of encounters with people with disabilities that made him uncomfortable. Second, he felt he "lacked the authority" to teach about disability because he did not have a background in special education (Ware, 2001). Later, Ware learned that the social worker in the school had expressed concern that a student with disabilities in the class would feel marginalized in the unit. Although the student in question experienced the opposite effect and was relieved to be able to discuss all of her experience, the topic of "disability" felt initially "dangerous" to Tom (Ware, 2002). Particularly given the focus of the class on the *cultural* construction of disability, Ware concluded that teachers need opportunities to consider their own

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dis/ability histories, that teacher education programs need to reexamine the divisions that are created between "regular" teachers and special educators, and that *all* students be given opportunities to write from their own experiences. Ware framed the significance of this work as part of the critical project of humanities-based disability studies that seeks to challenge the dis/ability binary, recognize the cultural construction of disability, encourage understandings of disability that go beyond the clinical orientation towards disability, and explore resistance to considering disability as part of critical pedagogy.

Finally, writing from composition studies, Heifferon suggests the need to consider how multiple identities are evoked in reading. This study examines her composition students' verbal and written responses to Nancy Mairs' *Carnal Acts* (1990), which Heifferon describes as an autobiographical account in which Mairs goes into "explicit detail" in her descriptions of how "multiple sclerosis has affected her body and sense of self" (Brueggemann, et al, 2001). Heiffron writes,

> I had expected emotional responses to Mairs's work, but was surprised... I saw clear gender splits. The young women in the class were clearly moved by Mairs's words and were sympathetic and empathetic, and young male students were outraged, not just "grossed out" by descriptions of bodily functions and other things that go awry in MS, but angry, furious, livid in the classroom. (p. 383)

Heiffron initially made sense of this gendered response to the book by speculating that male students were reacting out of the dissonance between their images of the ideal female body and Mairs' presentation of "a real woman, one who bleeds, one who drops things and struggles to cope on a day to day basis" (p. 385). In Heiffron's analysis of the students' written responses to the text, she found that some students found Mairs' writing an occasion to rethink their conceptions of idealized masculine and feminine bodies,

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"confront issues of author and power", and "increase their confidence and enable identification with persons different from themselves" (p. 387).

Taken together, these four studies suggest the complexity of reader response to representations of disability. Cypher and Martin (2008) raise questions about the relationship between the subject positions of readers and their willingness to consider scholarship which critiques a familiar disabled figure—Helen Keller. Ware's (2006) work suggests the need to consider the ways in which teachers are socialized to read from a medical-therapeutic perspective and the value of providing teachers with alternative models for understanding how disability is constructed in text. Ware's (2001) work in a school setting not only illustrates how middle school students might participate in critical reads of disability, but also reveals how teachers are also "readers" who bring personal and professional histories to texts. Finally, Heffron suggests the need to consider how different social identities (in this case gender and dis/ability) might be mobilized in reading and response,

The relationship between literary form and social meaning

One commonality that the scholarship focused on "Positive representation as social realism", "Reimagining dis/ability", and "Reader response" share is that all three traditions explore the intersection of literary form and social meaning. (See table 2.1.) In the first case, scholars distinguish between stereotypical representations and those which provide complex character with disabilities who appear in stories that reflect the day-to-day realities of living with disabilities. In contrast, scholarship which takes "Reimagining dis/ability" as its focus investigate the ways that difference is constructed in texts, as well as ways that texts might disrupt the assumption of difference. Reader response

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studies reveal the variability of how readers evaluate and understand representations of

disability as literary and social constructions.

Table 2.2   **Relationship between literary and social meaning**

Scholarship on children's literature	
Positive representation as social realism	Stereotypes are patterns of representation of disability in literature which simplify and misrepresent the complexity of the real experience of people with disabilities. They often locate the "problem" of disability in the individual's body or attitude, rather than the social contexts which limit full participation in society. Authentic or accurate representations of disability would reflect the complexity of individual people's experiences and the diversity of experience among people with disabilities. Literature should also be of "good quality" in regard to artistry and storyline. The purpose of reading books which include representations of disability is to educate readers without disabilities and to allow readers with disability to "see themselves" in text.
Reimagining dis/ability	Language and literary form create distinctions between ability and disability. The purpose of analyzing books which include representations of disability is to identify the ways in which dis/ability is constructed in text and seek out texts which disrupt dominant understandings of normalcy and difference.
Reader response	Meaning is constructed in the transaction among reader, text, and context. Literary/social meaning is constructed in different ways in this transaction. Reading is social in at least two ways; reading takes place in social contexts (the classroom, etc.) and reader, text, and context are all located in sociocultural contexts. The purpose of reader response scholarship is to investigate and, at times, problematize the ways in which readers construct the meaning of texts.

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Theoretical Frameworks: Reading through Disability Studies and Reader Response

Humanities-based Disability Studies

In this project I suggest that drawing on theoretical tools from the field of

Disability Studies, is a productive way to extend scholarship related to the intersection of

literary form and social meaning. Disability studies in an interdisciplinary field of study

which emerged as a challenge to exclusively biomedical models of disability (Longmore,

2003; Taylor, 2006). Linton (1998) defined the focus of the field:

> Disability studies takes for its subject matter not simply the variations that exist in
> human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive
> processing but, more crucially, *the meaning we make of those variations*
> (emphasis added, p. 2).

Scholarship in this field has led to exploration of the ways in which disability has been

understood as a biomedical reality (Zola, 1983), a moral/religious manifestation

(Goffman, 1963; Foucault, 1976; Sontag, 1990), a mismatch between one's needs and the

environment (Longmore, 2003; Oliver, 1990; Shapiro, 1993), a cultural identity (Gilson

& Depoy, 2000; Peters, 2000, Longmore, 2003), and a discursive system through which

bodies are regulated (Baynton, 2001; Foucault, 1976; Tremain, 2005). One commonality

across this scholarship is a general interest in questioning the ways in which dominant

constructions of disability privilege those identified as "able". Humanities-based

disability studies focuses on the particular ways in which representations of disability are

created and circulated.

In their overview of the field of humanities-based disability studies, Mitchell and

Snyder (2002) characterize five methods of analyzing representations of disability in

literature and film: negative imagery, social realism, biographical criticism, and

transgressive reappropriation. In response to those traditions, they offer an additional

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framework for understanding how social meaning is imbedded in literary form: narrative prosthesis. Although they do suggest limitations of some of these models, their goal is to "create a more diverse array of options for thinking about disability as an intellectual category of inquiry and as an experientially based phenomenon" (p. xiv).

The first category they suggest, "negative imagery" includes criticism which focuses on identifying negative representations and stereotypes of people with disabilities. (See table 2.3.) The goal of such analysis is to surface and address the limited and stereotypical ways in which disability has been represented, and thus understood, in society. Those who write from this perspective take up a project of documenting the ways in which prejudicial attitudes are reflected in the literary canon, as well as calling for new literature which represents people with disabilities in a more positive light. Mitchell and Snyder argue that the limitations of this type of analysis are that it treats disability as a psychological, rather than social, "problem" and fails to theorize or identify representations that would be considered "positive".

The second method of analysis that Mitchell and Synder suggest is "social realism". In contrast to "negative imagery", "social realism does not call for 'positive images' that would celebrate the lives of people with disabilities in a romanticized light" (p. 23). In fact, social realists reject the search for "positive representations" by arguing that they merely reflect the flip side of "negative representations". Instead, they call for more *realistic* representations that reflect the social contexts, nuances, and complexities of the experiences of people with disabilities.

Table 2.3   Traditions of Literary Analysis of Dis/ability in Adult Literature

Scholarship on adult literature (Mitchell & Snyder, 2002)	Investigates	Limitations
Negative imagery	Stereotype, history of ableist representations	Focuses on the individual, fails to theorize "positive representation"
Social realism	Accuracy and authenticity, attention to social contexts	Assumptions that meanings are stable over time. Ahistorical analysis
New historicism	Production of dis/ability in historical context, dis/ability as ideological	(None offered.)
Transgressive reappropriation	Potential of literature to reframe disability as positive and challenge normalcy	(None offered.)
Biographical criticism	Literature written by historical and contemporary authors with disabilities.	Essentialist perspective, requires "diagnosis" of authors from the present and past
Narrative prosthesis *Set of methods that might be applied across inquiries.*	Disability as literary trope	(None offered.)

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Most notably, these "acceptable portrayals entail the refusal to disavow or suppress the site of struggle and oppression that characterizes a contemporary experience of disability." (p. 24) A theme throughout this scholarship is the need for authors who write from their own experiences as people with disabilities. These representations would, by their very nature, be political in there contrast to ableist representations.

New historicism arose, in part, out of the criticism that social realism treated the representation of disability as a static, ahistorical reality. In contrast, new historicism focuses on the ways in which disability is "an ideological effect of certain periods" and "sought to perform an anthropological unearthing of images that could help reconstruct a period's point of view on human variation" (p. 25). *Disability* then becomes *dis/ability* in that the focus in new historicism is to make sense of the sets of social relations which produce "normal" and "disabled" in particular contexts. From this perspective,

> [D]isability portraits provide a window onto a more dynamic interchange between culture, author, text, and audience. Disability is a product of an interaction between all of these positions that create and re-create the dis-abled body as a potent product of disability investment. (p. 27)

Thinking about representations of disability as "literary investments" also opens up inquiry to search for examples of ways in which authors have mobilized "disability" in different contexts to destabilize binaries of "abnormal/normal, male/female, desired/undesired, by openly exploring marginalized identities in political, rather than stigmatizing terms" (p. 28). In contrast to "negative imagery" and "social realism", new historicism not only focuses not just on what meanings are produced, but also on how meaning is produced and to what ends.

The project of biographical criticism became the search for previously overlooked authors whose writing could be read as reflecting disabled subjectivity and for authors who have experienced "success" but whose identities and experiences as disabled have been previously overlooked as insignificant. One of the goals of this type of literary criticism is to explore the "influence of disability identity upon creative efforts" (p. 30). Mitchell and Synder argue that "this undertaking has resulted in serious corrections and complications to the literary historical record while also challenging the idea that disability images have been exclusively the product of able-ist authors" (p. 30). In doing so, they identify a "counter-tradition" (p. 34) of literature in which "disability" is thought of as a creative resource. Biographical criticism is critiqued in that it involves "diagnosing" authors from the past and is grounded in the idea of an essential disability experience.

The last category of criticism that Mitchell and Synder identify is transgressive reappropriation. This tradition seeks to challenge the dominant assumption that disability is inherently negative by resignifying dominant images and languages. (For example, by embracing the word "cripple".) Mitchell and Snyder explain,

> The power of transgression always originates at the moment when the derided object embraces its deviance as value. Perversely championing the terms of their own stigmatization, marginal peoples alarm the dominant culture with a canniness about their own subjugation. The embrace of denigrating terminology forces the dominant culture to face its own violence head-on because the authority of devaluation has been claimed openly and ironically... The effect shames the dominant culture into a recognition of its own dehumanizing precepts. (p. 35)

Unlike the "freak show", in which the audience becomes more secure in their identities as "able" or "normal" through distancing oneself from the disabled "Other", in transgressive reappropriation the author uses "fascination and repulsion" (p. 35) to creative ends which

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attempt to force readers to confront their discomfort and reassess their values and the social norms which divide bodies into normal and different.

Mitchell and Synder suggest the relationship between literary form and social meaning might be understood as "literary prosthesis". The describe the focus of their inquiry in the introduction to their book:

> In Narrative Prosthesis we address the meanings assigned to disability as a representational identity in narrative art...: as a character-making trope in the writer's and filmmaker's arsenal, as a social category of deviance, as a symbolic vehicle for meaning making and cultural critique, and as an option in the narrative negotiation of disabled subjectivity. (p. 1)

For example, they illustrate the ways in which disability is used metaphorically in characterization to symbolize difference, introduced as a "problem" which must be resolved in the plot (i.e. characters must be "cured or killed or reimagined"), and occasionally as counternarrative. Rather than identifying "narrative prosthesis" as a category of scholarship, they argue that it suggests a set of methods which might be used across various types of inquiries. The goal of their work is to recognize the "social violence that often issues from the repetition of a representational formula (or antiformula)" (p. 9) and reject the possibility of articulating a set of criteria to determine what might count as "positive" representation of disability. Instead, they call for scholarship which questions how and why disability continues to be "used" in service of something else. They challenge the very "undergirding authorization to interpret that disability invites" (p. 59).

Textual reader response theory

Reader response theory suggests a way of considering both how individual readers come to particular understandings of texts and how texts "invite" readers to those

interpretations. Theories of reading which are grouped under the umbrella of "reader response" reject the premise that meaning resides "in the book", waiting for a competent reader to decipher it. Rather, reader response theory begins with the premise that reading is a dynamic process, or "transaction", among reader, text, and context (Beach, 1993; Suleiman & Crosman, 1980; Tompkins, 1980). More recently, reader response theorists have begun to explore the ways in which the sociocultural contexts in which these transactions occur shape all aspects of the reader-text-context model (Lewis, 2000; Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007).

Figure 2.1   **Construction of meaning**
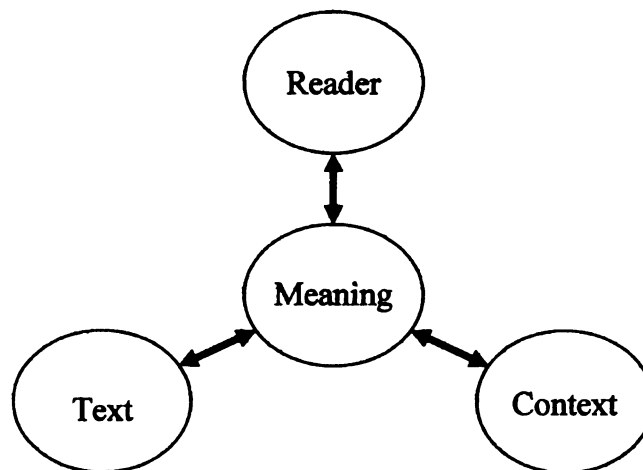
This reader-text-context configuration does not represent a fixed "total" experience of reading, but represents a shifting dynamic in which one or more of the elements may play a greater role given the particular moment in the reading experience (Freund, 1987). Likewise, the variation in theories that are grouped together under the umbrella of "reader response" differ, in part, based on the attention or primacy they grant to the reader, text, or context (Tompkins, 1980). Beach (1993) divides the use of reader response scholarship

in the field of education into five categories of inquiry, each of which focuses on either a particular element of response or a methodological approach to inquiry: textual theories of response, experiential theories of response, psychological theories of response, social theories of response, and cultural theories of response. In this project, I draw most directly on "textual" theories of response which emphasize the relationship between text and reader. These "textual" theories can be thought of as falling along a continuum which range from those which concentrate primarily on how texts shape meaning to those which emphasize the ways in which readers construct individualized meanings of any given text. In this project, I draw most heavily from two theorist's work which allow me to work "in the middle" of this text-reader continuum: Iser (1974; 1978) and Rosenblatt (1985; 2005). To account for context, I also draw from Fish's (1980) theory of interpretive community. This "middle ground" between text and reader offers a way of acknowledging both the "invitations" that are implied in texts and the creative and distinct ways that particular readers respond to those invitations in social settings (Sipe, 2008).

The relationship between text and reader

Iser's theory of the "implied reader" provides a framework through which to understand the relationship between text and reader in the transaction among reader-text-context. Iser (1974) suggests that reading is an interaction between text and reader, which he calls "literary work" (See figure 2.2). The text suggests a "horizon of meanings" both through the limits it imposes on the reader (what it says) and through what it does not say (the gaps in the text which readers must fill). The reader, in turn, represents the "potential

realizations" of the text that would be a product of his or her experiences, personality, etc. The "literary work" (reading) is only achieved when text and reader come together.

Figure 2.2   **Iser's model of interaction** (Iser, 1974, p. 274)

Text   →   **Literary Work**   ←   Reader

Limits, gaps, and   **Meaning(s)**   Potential realization of the
indeterminacies   text through imagination
suggest a horizon   and personal repertoire
of possible meanings
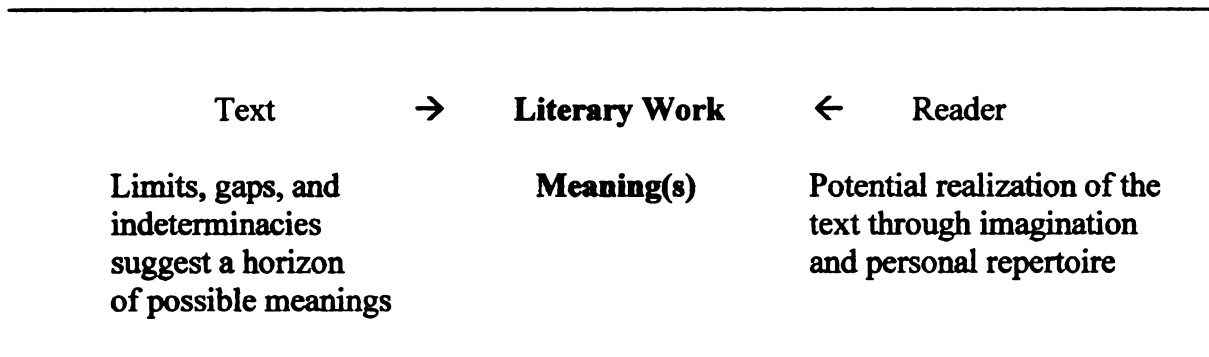
One of Iser's major contributions to reader response theory is the way in which his model allows one to consider the contributions and limits of both text and reader in this interaction. Iser suggests that texts offer particular "invitations" to readers, which actual readers may or may not take up. These invitations are, in part, a product of the way in which authors draw on social conventions in their writing. For any text one might imagine a hypothetical reader, the implied reader, who would possess the repertoire of knowledge and skills that would allow him or her to respond to take up the role that the text invites. This repertoire might consist of aesthetic preferences, knowledge of literary conventions, or any other personal or social knowledge which would allow that reader to engage the text most fully. The concept of "repertoire" is essential to his definition for several reasons. First, it recognizes the breadth of personal and social knowledge that a reader might mobilize in his or her reading. In Iser's model what the reader "brings" to the text is a necessary component of reading both because texts necessarily include "gaps" which readers must fill and because authors draw on conventions that they assume their readers will recognize. Second, it has become a way for teachers to theorize what it

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might mean to teach in a reader response setting in which teachers both encourage students to share and explore their responses to texts, while also supporting them in developing increasingly flexible repertoires of response strategies. Rabinowitz and Smith (1998), for example, build on Iser's concept of the implied reader when they advocate teaching students how to complete "authorial readings" of texts in which they attempt to understand the text "on its own terms" as a complement to discussions in which students share their personal connections to texts or evaluate whether they agree or disagree with the ideology of those texts. Depending on the particular text and particular students, this might include helping students recognize how an author is employing a literary convention, research the historical context in which a book was written, or become familiar with a reading strategy that might lend new meaning to the text.

Although Iser's theory might initially seem to imply that there is a "correct" reading of the text which an ideal reader would complete, this is not the case. What distinguishes Iser as a reader response theorists is his emphasis on the idea that the implied reader not only suggests the repertoire that a reader might bring to a text, but also constitutes a "role" that the reader can take up in a variety of ways. Nodelman and Reimer (2003) elaborate on Iser's concept of role by comparing the role of reader to that of an actor who takes up a role that is indicated in a script, but then interprets that role in a particular way that is valued for its particular expression. The actor, like the reader, is neither completely free to improvise, nor is he or she completely limited by the script. Returning to the reader, they write,

> The implied reader does represent a set of constraints upon readers' freedom to
> make a text mean anything and everything. On one hand, then, texts are not open
> to any and all ways of making them meaningful. A specific reader is implied. On
> the other hand, texts can't possess just one specific meaning. Readers must draw

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on their own experiences to fill the roles offered in their own way. In becoming the reader a text implies, then, readers are not in the process of losing themselves in the text. And, equally, they are not in the process of losing the text in themselves. (p. 18)

In this project I use the concept of implied reader to allow me to consider the "invitations" of the focal texts we read in the course, as well as how we, as readers, interpreted texts in a variety of ways that enhanced our collective understandings of the literature we read and discussed together. At the same time, positing an implied reader opens up the possibility that there were not only times when we took up the role of implied reader, but also times in which we either ignored or rejected particular textual invitations (Eco, 1979). As I will discuss in the following chapters, I struggled as a teacher, researcher, and writer not to equate my own reading of the text with that of the "ideal reader".

The classroom as interpretive community

While Iser's model of reading is helpful in considering the dynamic relationship between reader and text, it fails to account for the third point of our reader response triangle: context. In "Is there a text in this class?: The authority of interpretive communities", Fish (1980) argues that reading can be understood as produced in "interpretive communities" that structure how readers produce meaning as they read. Although Fish's theory suggests that context accounts for the total meaning produced in reading, it is still helpful in theorizing the role of context as part of the reader-text-context transaction.

Fish (1980) defines the "interpretive community" as "made up of those who share interpretive strategies" (p. 171) which they bring to reading. These strategies include a "structure of assumptions, of practices understood to be relevant in relation to purposes

and goals that are already in place" (p. 318). These strategies are learned (p. 172) and the "structure of norms" they imply are always social in that they are constantly negotiated (p. 318). Rather than considering context as one component of meaning, Fish argues that interpretive strategies determine how one reads.

> [T]he reader is identified not as a free agent, making literature any old way, but as a member of a community whose assumptions about literature determine the kind of attention he pays and thus the kind of literature "he" "makes"... Thus, the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it. (p. 11)

Fish suggests that the variability of interpretations of any text are because readers belong to different interpretive communities and therefore employ different interpretive strategies. Yet Fish suggests that it is productive when members of different interpretive communities (readers who have brought different assumptions to texts) engage in discussion.

> It also explains why there are disagreements and why they can be debated in a principled way: not because of a stability in texts, but because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities and therefore in the opposing positions they make possible... while the alignments are not permanent, they are always there, providing just enough stability for the interpretive battles to go on, and just enough shift and slippage to assume that they will never be settled... It is the fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities that allows us to talk to one another, but with no hope or fear of ever being able to stop. (pp. 171-172)

This stance is consistent with reader response theorists who emphasize the contributions of reader-text-context. For example, Rosenblatt (1985) writes,

> The same text may give rise to different works in transactions with different readers, or with the same reader at different times. This leads to rejection of the notion that there is a single "correct" reading of the text of a literary work of art... Yet, in any specific situation, given agreed-upon criteria, it is possible to decide that some readings are more defensible than others. (p. 36, italics in text)

Fish's concept of interpretive community thus provides both a way of conceptualizing the role of "context" in reader response and accounting for one of the ways in which readers come to different readings of particular texts.

The role of the teacher

In "Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature", Rabinowitz and Smith (1997) explore the role and need for teachers to incorporate instruction in interpretive strategies in reader response classrooms. The double-entendre implied in "authorizing" refers both to the need to recognize the legitimacy of individual reader's responses to literature, but also the sense that there is value in attempting to understand the author's intentions as expressed in the text. These "intentions" refer not to what the "real" author says about his or her work, but to the ways in which the text reflects the fact that authors draw on social and literary conventions as they address their implied audience. In order to participate in what Rabinowitz and Smith call the "authorial audience", a reader would not only respond from his or her idiosyncratic position as a particular reader, but also employ the types of literary and social knowledge that the text "needs" in order to be understood in the way the author intended. Since at least some of what authors do is based on conventions they expect their readers to recognize, part of "learning to read" includes learning to recognize those conventions.

Rabinowitz (1987) argues that there are a number of conventional writing strategies that authors employ to signal their intended meaning to readers. One of the ways that readers make sense of texts is by consciously or unconsciously drawing on these strategies, which Iser refers to as one's "literary repertoire", to guide their reading. Rabinowitz categorizes several conventional textual strategies as rules of notice, rules of

signification, and rules of configuration and coherence. Since readers are selective in what they draw on from the text as they build meaning, rules of notice include conventional ways that authors indicate which details the reader should pay attention to as they read. For example, the title and first and last sentences of a book are conventionally thought to be important. Likewise, if a pattern has been established in the text or the text seems to be a particular genre, any "rupture" to that pattern or generic expectation is typically read as significant. Rules of signification are those conventions that help the reader interpret the meaning of what is foregrounded in the text. Rules of signification refer both to (presumably) shared cultural references and to ways of reading such as the expectation that characters will act in a consistent manner or that one accepts magic when reading a fairy tale. Rules of configuration and coherence are grounded in the assumption that it is possible and preferable to make sense of a text as a whole. As a reader reads, this is equivalent to the process of "consistency building" that the reader engages in as she or he searches for patterns, parallels, "trajectories" of meaning, and themes in the text.

The danger, of course, is that this process will lead teachers to replicate the very assumptions of New Criticism that the turn to reader response sought to challenge: the idea that there is one, "correct" read of any particular text which is accessible to the teacher and which students strive to achieve. However Rabinowitz and Smith argue that attempting to understand the text in conventional ways is a necessary step in critical reader response. They write, "Critical reading involves questioning the values of the text you engage; but you can't begin to do so unless you first determine the authorial audience" (p. 13). For Rabinowitz and Smith, this "authorial" stance includes both a

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moments in which the reader steps back to analyze the construction of the text, as well as engagement in the "narrative audience" which is invited to enter into the storyworld of the text. They write, "To read fiction, we must not only join the authorial audience (which recognizes what it reads as an invented artifact and hence treats the characters as constructs... but also pretend to be members of the narrative audience (which takes what it reads as history and treats the characters as real)" (p. 22). They see this balancing act as necessary if readers are to be flexible in their responses, thus avoiding a number of what the authors see as sins, by virtue of their extremity: treating every reading as equally valid, losing oneself so completely in the narrative that one doesn't recognize that texts are constructed, or distancing oneself so completely from the text that one ignores "concrete images of pain as but stepping stones to a discussion of something more abstract and implicitly more important like 'narratablility'?" (p. 28). I would argue that there are certainly times when any one of those "extreme" stances is valid and it would be limiting to give up the pleasure of hearing interpretations I never would have imagined, losing myself in a book, or playing with webs that trace metaphors in *Al Capone*. At the same time, I believe that providing students with strategies to participate in both the authorial and narrative audiences of *Al Capone Does My Shirts* is one way in which to enable students to "enhance their ability to read diverse texts both as literary works and as bases for discussions of social issues" (course syllabus). For example, might have allowed them to explore the ways in which "literary" and "social" are often constructed as separate domains, rather than the intersections of the two.

Guiding questions

Despite increased interest in children's literature which includes representations of dis/ability, we are only beginning to explore the multiple ways in which this literature might be read. In this self-study, I drew on disability studies and textual reader response theories to respond to two questions:

- How did students in the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course mobilize textual invitations and personal repertoires to respond to representations of dis/ability in small group discussions of *Becoming Naomi Leon* and *Al Capone Does My Shirts*?

- What additional meanings are available in the texts when they are read through a Disability Studies framework?

In the following chapter, I describe tell the "story of my research" and describe the history of how I came to and explored these questions in the context of my teaching of the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course and reading of the field texts and focal literature from the course.

Chapter Three:

Rereading as a methodological approach in self-study

Introduction

Self study

Qualitative self-study is a form of practitioner research in which instructors, usually in university settings, systematically study the work they do with their students in the classroom. Typically the questions that are examined in this form of research are grounded in the dilemmas the instructor faces in teaching, but an equal emphasis is placed on the study's contribution to wider scholarship (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). In this chapter I describe the ways in which I fashioned a methodological approach to investigating some of the ways in which my students and I responded to literature which included representations of dis/ability. To do so, I treat methodology as a contextualized rationale for one's research choices (Burgess, 1994), rather than an adherence to an established set of procedures. The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to:

> ...present inquiry as a set of choices, inspired by purposes that are shaped by past experiences, undertaken through time, and will trace the consequences of those choices in the whole of an individual or community's lived experiences. (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 40)

I begin by describing my research as a process in which I asked what would it mean to enact textual reader response theory as a methodological framework in an investigation which combined an examination of field texts and literature. I then draw on scholarship from narrative inquiry to argue that a productive way to conceptualize this research is as a process of generating and reading texts for multiple meanings. I then describe the context of the course in which the "field texts" were produced. Next I describe the participants in the project, including myself as a particular "reader" of the students'

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conversations and focal texts. Finally, I describe the ways in which I worked with transcripts and focal literature to produce new "readings" of these texts which are valuable in the ways in which they suggest new ways of reading dis/ability in adolescent literature. As a practitioner of self-study, I had particular ethical responsibilities having to do with my dual roles as teacher and researcher (Mitchell, 2004). Rather than providing a separate section on the ethical implications of this research, I have included this discussion throughout the chapter.

Imagining what it would mean to "do" reader response theory

In chapter two I described my interest in Iser's textual reader response theory, which frames the reading process as a transaction between a text and reader. In this model the "literary work" of reading is enacted as a reader mobilizes elements of his or her personal repertoire to selectively attend to invitations in the text and creatively respond to the text's indeterminacies and "gaps". Rather than constituting a fixed meaning, the text is better understood as constituting a horizon of possible meanings that are only limited by the creativity of the reader and/or the limits of particular interpretive communities that establish what type of reading might be considered persuasive to its members. This theory of reading not only informed the teaching of the "Issues of Diversity in Children's Literature" course, but is also the basis for how I understand my work as a researcher; the students' readings of texts are the object of my analysis, my readings of texts become the subject of my writing, and the readers of this text, in turn, do the literary work of constructing their own meanings. (See Table 3.1) On each "level", I assume that multiple readings are both possible and desirable.

Table 3.1   **Reader response as a methodological framework**

Text	+	Reader(s)	→	Literary work (meaning)
Becoming Naomi Leon	+	Students	→	Readings which are shared in small group discussion
Transcripts of conversation, focal literature, etc.	+	Valerie	→	Readings which are shared in chapter 4
Chapter 4	+	Readers	→	Readings which are potentially *educative* and *persuasive*

Context of the course

The texts I analyze in this project were generated in course called "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature". Although the focus and form of my research evolved as I began to analyze field texts generated in the course, the design and philosophy of the course is important to understand as context for chapters four through six in which I draw on transcripts of small group discussion and literature we read in the course to open up new ways of reading representations of dis/ability in adolescent literature. One of the challenges of discussing "my" teaching of the course is that the course itself was collaboratively designed by Dr. Laura Apol and members of the "Children's Literature Instructor Group". In order to recognize the contributions of members of that group, I have provided a short history of the course in Appendix A.

"Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" is an elective course for preservice teachers that focuses on literature by and about traditionally marginalized groups in the United States. The students in the class had all participated in a prerequisite

course called "Reading and Responding to Children's Literature" as a requirement for their teacher certification. Our syllabus identified the primary goal of "Issues of Diversity" as providing opportunities to "enhance [students'] ability to read diverse texts both as literary works and as bases for discussions of social issues" (course syllabus) and the content of the course included reading texts from various "parallel" cultural groups in the United States (Harris, 1997), as well as more theoretical pieces on definitions of multiculturalism, the history of multicultural literature in the United States, and focused concepts such as "authenticity" in texts. When the course was being designed, the children's literature team deliberately organized content around several strands: "issues of diversity" which we defined as questions that were discussed in multicultural scholarship that students could bring to a variety of texts, sessions which focused on literature "by and about" particular cultural or social groups, and opportunities for students to pursue their own interests and questions. (See table 3.2 for a summary of the course.) As indicated in the table, students read two pieces of literature during the spring 2007 semester that included representations of disability: *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Ryan, 2004) and *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (Choldenko, 2004), as well as several articles on disability and children's literature (Tal, 2001; Williams, Inkster & Blaska, 2005; Smart, 2001). Throughout the semester I encouraged students to question what was gained and lost through this curricular design. (For example, students had a spirited debate about whether "People with Disabilities" should be considered as a cultural or social group.)

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Table 3.2   **"Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature"**

Session 1   Who are we? Why are we here? What type of classroom community do
we want to create?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on reader response and multicultural
literature;   Poetry which reflects social identities.

Session 2   What do we mean by "multicultural" literature? Why, how, and for whom
is it important? How does who we are shape how we read and write?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on multicultural literature, reading
"multiculturally", and social identity; Picture books which depict social
and cultural identities; Students' own autobiographical poetry.

Session 3   What language might we use to discuss diverse literature?: Generalization,
accuracy, authenticity.

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on stereotype, representations of
Native Americans in children's literature; Children's literature by and
about Native Americans.

Focal literature: *A Heart of a Chief* (Bruchac, 1998)

Session 4   Who has the right to tell and illustrate stories about specific cultures?
What does power have to do with discussions around representation?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles from "insider-outsider" debate;
Children's literature by and about Native Americans; Film: *In Whose
Honor?*

Session 5   How might be complicate our readings by considering audience,
purpose, and multiple identities?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on representations of Arab-Americans
and author's reflection on writing "from the outside"; Children's literature
by and about Middle Eastern Americans; Video: Dr. Waltzer's reading of
Habibi

Focal literature: *Habibi* (Nye, 1997)

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Table 3.2 (continued)

Session 6   What is unique about the history of African American publishing? How might learning about "Black modes of discourse" enhance our readings of children's literature which includes African American characters?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on cultural authenticity in African American children's literature

Focal literature: *The Beast* (Myers, 2005)

Session 7   Should there be specific awards for multicultural children's literature?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on awards debate; award websites; award-winning picture books.

Session 8   What do we mean by "voice" and "aesthetic heat" in writing? How and why might Spanish be included in children's literature?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on representation of Latino/as and Spanish language in picture books; picture books by and about Latino/as.

Focal literature: *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Ryan, 2004)

Session 9   How might one incorporate multicultural literature in the classroom?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on critical literacy and multicultural education; basal reading books; sample curricula.

Session 10   What is the history of representation of GLBTQ characters in children's literature? What patterns of representation do we find in picture books and adolescent literature? What do we mean by the "right to be represented"?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on representations of GLBTQ characters in children's literature; Guest speakers: Cart and Jenkins.

Focal literature: *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003)

Session 11   What do we mean by "disability"? What patterns of representation do we find in picture books? Who counts as an "insider" author?

In-class and assigned texts: Articles on children's literature about people with disabilities.

Focal literature: *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (Choldenko, 2004)

Our class met once a week for approximately three hours. Students prepared for class by reading scholarship and literature related to the topic of the session. On weeks where students were scheduled to have small group discussions, each student prepared for class by writing a "Questioning the Text" paper in which s/he proposed and developed a question to bring to his/her small group for discussion. Students are asked to complete three tasks within in the "Questioning the Text" papers: students were to pose an authentic question about the text, direct their small groups to the text to consider the question, and draw on course readings to enhance their analyses. I encouraged students to think about this writing as exploratory; their goal is to frame a discussion in which their group can "unpack" multiple interpretations of their text and consider the ethical implications of various readings of those texts.

During a typical class session, I would start class with a read aloud and short discussion and then introduce the agenda for the day. During this time students often made announcements, shared current events related to children's literature and asked questions about upcoming assignments. Although the schedule varied from week to week, I would then typically facilitated some sort of whole or small group activity in which students worked with sets of picture books to explore concepts from the assigned readings. In my mind the richest work we did in the course took place on days in which students met in small groups to share and discuss the questions they posed in their response papers. Depending on the focus of the session, we would often view or read an additional text to read with and against assigned readings. At the end of each day students would spend about ten minutes writing a "Post script" in which they would discuss one of

the books we had read in class, a question or concern, or something that they had learned from their classmates.

The context of the course provided an opportunity to consider the ways in which students drew on their personal repertoires to respond to literature which includes representations of disability. The course was grounded in reader response theory, offering students opportunities to reflect on their own reading processes, participate in regular discussions around texts, and consider the classroom and societal contexts in which they are making sense of those texts (Rosenblatt, 1995). Throughout the semester I encouraged students to consider how their own identities, aesthetic preferences, the constructions of texts, and different ideological assumptions shaped their particular understandings and evaluations of the literature we read in the course. Rosenblatt (2005) argues that readers develop and deepen their understandings of texts in conversation with others. Therefore, a reader response classroom is one which provides opportunities to reflect on one's initial response to a text, discuss the text with classmates, read what others have said about the text, and draw on others' interpretations and knowledge to question one's own "selective" attention to the text. The approach we use in "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course was designed to parallel that structure: students read a novel and accompanying articles; record their initial responses in a questioning the text paper; discuss, defend, and revise their understandings of the text in small and large group discussion; and write a "Post Script" in which they record how their questions or interpretations of the book have changed.

Participants in the study

Students in the course

On the first day of class I was surprised at how many students came into class and greeted each other by name. Most of the students were juniors and seniors and many had been in classes and school placements together earlier in the fall. As I introduced myself to the group I spoke about my hope that we would develop into a community that "enjoys literature and thinks about it in complex ways" and acknowledged that "everyone in this classroom comes with certain reading histories, personal experiences, knowledge, questions, ideas, etc. So part of the way that we want to run this class is to make sure that everyone ideas and what they bring to the class can be put out on the table so that everyone can benefit from it." Although the class experienced what I believe to be the typical ups and downs of any semester, the students in the class continued to be engaged with the material and on good terms with me and each other. With a few exceptions, students regularly challenged and considered each other's readings and evaluations of the literature we read. Given our emphasis on how "who were are" shapes "how we read", it isn't a surprise that students talked about their own identities in book discussions. Although this did not always work in practice, early in the course we had talked about the importance of "speaking from one's own experience", while not calling on others to speak on behalf of a particular group. The following descriptions of the class is meant to provide a "snapshot" of the diversity within the group and my overall sense, after reading transcripts from the whole semester, of how the group drew on them in discussion.

The class included twenty-one women and two men, all of whom were in their early to mid-twenties. Although gender wasn't broken out as a "topic" of the course, students discussed characters as gendered and sometimes discussed their own experiences as gendered. Most of these students identified as "white" or of European descent at

sometime in the course, with the exception of one student who identified as Chinese American, one student who identified as African American, and one student who identified as Indian American student. Two students identified as Jewish American and many identified as Catholic or Christian during literature discussions. Students identified as working, middle and upper-middle class and as coming from urban, suburban and rural backgrounds. In contrast to identities related to gender, age, and race/ethnicity, and religion, fewer people talked about their identities in relation to sexual orientation or dis/ability. In the former case I believe that I shut down conversation when I made a comment about the ways in which heterosexuals claim privilege by "coming out as straight". As I will discuss in chapters four, five and six, students seemed to mobilize their professional experiences and identities when responding to representations of disability, rather than identifying themselves as "able" or "disabled". All of the students in the class were juniors or seniors and involved in a teacher preparation program in some way: four students were Special Education/Learning Disabled majors, four were Special Education/Deaf Education majors; four were Child Development majors, and eight were Teacher Education (K-5) majors.

Of the twenty-five students enrolled in the course, twenty-three agreed to have their written work and recordings of large and small group discussion included in the study. One of the students who declined to participate was very vocal in class, which weighed heavily in my decision not to analyze whole group discussion and to exclude material from her small group from the project.

Positioning myself as a "reader" with a particular repertoire

Reader response theory suggests that the "literary work" of reading is never independent of the particular read who is in transaction with a text. I, like the students' in the course, bring a repertoire of reading experience, personal and professional history, and ways of understanding the world that shape what I notice in and make sense of the texts I read. In this section I would like to acknowledge some of the ways that I understand my own history as shaping this project and my readings of texts. In doing so I, first, hope to avoid the sense that my students came "with histories" and that I, as a researcher, I somehow offering "objective" or "correct" reads of literature and the events of the classroom. Second, I want to acknowledge that "the only way to write, comment, and analyze is from a position of partiality" (Murray, 2008, p. 18) This seems particularly important given that I have lived most of my life as an "able" person who is privileged in many ways; I intend to foreground my own response to literature, rather than attempting to describe or represent the experiences of people with disabilities (Cambell, 2008). Rather than trying to narrate all of the ways in which I understand my history to shape this research, I will share several stories that illustrate some of the ways in which I understand how I came to this project.

For most of my life I have lived as an "able" person in society. In fact, with the exception of a period in elementary school in which I attended remedial reading classes, I have few childhood memories of considering myself to be "differently abled" than my peers. It was only in college, when I took a course called "Sociology of Health and Illness", that I was introduced to the idea that ways of understanding the human body are social and embedded in language. Several memories of that course stand out in my mind. First, I was assigned a project in which I kept a journal and wrote a reflection paper on

the ways I felt, and felt about, my body each day (Zola, 1983). As a woman in my early

twenties, I remember being shocked when my professor encouraged me to consider why I

had indicated and how I had learned that menstruation was "abnormal". For me, it was

the first time in which scholarship had helped me understand my own physical

experience and identity. Second, we read Susan Sontag's *Illness as a Metaphor* (1990),

which introduced me to the idea that illness and disability are not just physical states, but

have social meanings that not only shape the ways in which we understand our bodies,

but also are used to understand the world. (A few years later I would read Anne

Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American

Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (1997) and be equally compelled by the idea

that the understanding of one's bodily state might be a cultural construction and that

Fadiman had made this "argument" through her storytelling, rather than traditional

scholarship.) Although I did not reengage with this type of scholarship until recently, the

memory of the impact that this course had on my as an undergraduate has shaped what I

believe to be possible in teaching courses with Disability Studies content.

The semester before I began this self-study, I rediscovered my interest in thinking

about dis/ability, literature, and social meaning. As I described in the introduction to

chapter 1, I had been concerned and intrigued by the session in which we had discussed

Al Capone Does My Shirts in the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent

Literature" course. Around that time, the children's literature team attended a series of

retreats, hosted by the Leaven Center, called "Doing Our Own Work: A Seminar for

Anti-Racist White People". During one of the activities I was talking about my half-

brother, Jim, who had had lived with, and eventually died from, Lou Gerig's disease

(ALS), a degenerative neurological condition. At some point in the story I referred to Jim as having been "wheelchair bound" and the facilitator of the group pointed out the ableist assumptions in my language. My initial response was defensive, but I later day I realized that her comment not only struck a nerve because she was talking about my brother, but also because I had not even begun to explore the idea that I might have "my own work" to do around ableism, in the same way that I knew I had work to do around racism. This personal insight, paired with my curiosity about how my students' had responded to *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, led me to commit to this dissertation project.

As an aside, on the day we discussed classroom norms, I told students in the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course about my experience feeling initially resentful and then grateful the day that the facilitator at the Leaven Center pointed out the implications of "wheelchair bound". My intent in telling the story was to acknowledge that I, as the instructor, was still learning and to invite students to think about the ways in which we might "challenge in ways that build". In addition to taking this conversation up, one of the students asked me if I had read Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson* (1997). I had read about half of the book, which is Albom's reflection on the wisdom and grace which "Morrie" displayed as he died of Lou Gerig's, and told the class that I had abandoned it because the romanticized portrayal of Morrie's death was such a jarring contrast to my memory of Jim's illness and death. Although I did not make this connection at the time, I had told students two stories; one about how my understanding of dis/ability (or wheelchair use) was limited by my experience and one in which I was very conscious of how my experience shaped my response to a text.

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Generating and selecting texts

As I taught the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature"
course, I collected and generated a rich set of texts to use to explore how different readers
(myself, included) made sense of representations of dis/ability in several pieces of
adolescent literature. Although I draw on examples from the semester as a whole to give
readers a sense of the context of the course, in this project I focus my "reading" most
directly on a number of small group discussions in which students raised generative
questions around the representations of disability: session eight in which one student
wrote about representations of disability in *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Ryan, 2004) and
brought the topic to her small group for consideration and session eleven in which
students in all of the small groups discussed representations of dis/ability in response to
Al Capone Does my Shirts (Choldenko, 2004). In this section I describe the process
through which texts were generated, my rationale for selecting specific texts for further
study, and how I "reread" these texts with and against each other and scholarship on
representations of disability in children's literature.

One obvious concern lies in the fact that, as an instructor, I was in a position to
grade students and grant them credit for the course and students may have felt compelled
to participate to please me. To decrease this potential, students were introduced to the
study by one of my colleagues and received consent letters that indicated that I would not
know whether they were participants in the study until after the course was completed
and I had submitted grades. Students were also informed of the steps that I would take to
maintain confidentiality, as well as the risk that others in the class may recognize them in
writing. Additionally, I was committed to designing my data generation in such a way

that it didn't interfere with my teaching. For example, although I jotted down notes as I taught, I relied heavily on stimulated recall to write my field notes. When I did experience a conflict between "business as usual" and my research needs, I attempted to minimize the disruption. For example, when I realized that it would be impossible for me to understand audio recordings if all of the groups met in one classroom, I asked several groups if they would mind meeting in the empty classroom next door. When they agreed, I made sure they had equal access to materials and my attention as I moved between the two rooms. Early in the semester I checked with each group to ask if the room set up was an imposition; students responded that they enjoyed being in a quieter setting so they could hear their classmates. Particularly since all of my students were preservice teachers who might go on to conduct action research themselves, I talked about my research processes, goals, and dilemmas throughout the semester and invited students to ask questions about the research process, opening up communication about both the benefits and potential risks in conducting research in the classroom.

Generating texts in "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature"

As I taught the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course I collected and generated a broad range of field texts which I believed might help me understand the ways in which students made sense of representations of disability in children's and adolescent literature. Along with the focal literature itself, these field texts became the basis of my readings of student response and my own rereadings of the focal literature. I use the term "field texts" deliberately to signal both the fact that they are constructed representations of events in the classroom, conversations, etc. and that any interpretation of these texts is one possible reading of those texts (Connelly & Clandinin,

1990). I began by collecting student writing and artifacts from the teaching of the course such as lesson plans and assignment guidelines and kept an instructor journal in which I recorded my evolving understandings of the events in the course. Since I was particularly interested in the ways in which meanings were negotiated in discussion, I also recorded large and small group discussions, which I later transcribed. Although my questions and understandings of the project shifted, I was able to use some of these texts as a resource in providing contextual information about the course. As I will describe below, the transcripts of small group discussion became the focal point of this dissertation.

The first set of data that I collected were documents that were produced in the typical teaching of the course: the syllabus, lessons plans, assignment guidelines and rubrics, power point presentations, and other materials we used during sessions. A second source of data was formal and informal student writing, along with my responses to that writing. Since I was initially interested in how students responded to literature through writing, I also kept copies of all student writing, with my comments, in both electronic and hard copy form. All documents were dated and filed according to the date which they were created and/or presented to students.

Based on my experience collecting data during my practicum, I established a weekly routine that allowed me to create rich fieldnotes to document events in the classroom, as well as my responses to those events. Each week I would prepare and print my lesson materials as I would in a typical semester. While I was teaching I would then jot down notes on conversations I had with students, what I was noticing about the atmosphere of the class, which students initiated particular conversations, snippets of conversation, thoughts that popped into my head, etc. My goal was to avoid what

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Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) refer to as "visual clichés" in favor of concrete and specific information. Immediately following class I returned to those notes to flesh them out while my memory was still fresh. At this time I also transferred my written notes to my electronic lesson plans, which became the outline of my fieldnotes. In order to distinguish between the plans, observations, and my later notes, I indented observations/comments and bracketed evaluative commentary. In doing so I developed a record of the lesson activities and what I was noticing in the session.

To supplement my fieldnotes and to document student discussion, I recorded all whole group discussion for the fourteen class sessions and small group literature discussions. At the beginning of each class session I would tell the class that I was turning on the digital recorder and reminded them that they were welcome to ask me to turn it off at any time. (None of the students did so in whole group discussion.) During weeks in which small groups met, I provided digital recorders to each of the groups, turning them on at the beginning of the discussion and turning them off as we moved to break. Several times during the semester, groups turned off their recorders, typically near the end of the discussion time. As I discussed earlier, in order to be able to hear small group discussion, I asked three of the groups to remain in our classroom and three groups to move next door to an empty classroom. After the class session was completed, I downloaded the audio files to my computer, as well as backing them up onto CD. As I will discuss in a moment, I listened to all audio recordings the day after teaching, but worked with them in different ways, based on the type of discussion and the particular session.

The morning after I taught each session, I listened to the audio recording of the whole group segments of the session and added to my fieldnotes from the previous day. As I listened, I created a very rough transcript of discussion which included time codes and the names of who was speaking. The purpose of this rough transcription was to provide me with enough detail that I could later return to the notes if I wanted to retranscribe segments in greater detail. I also used the audio recordings as a prompt to flesh out my fieldnotes engage in a process of "stimulated recall" (Lyle, 2003). I followed a similar procedure as I listened to small group discussions, with one modification. Since I was not present for most of those discussions (I circulated around the room), I treated my commentary on those rough transcripts in a slightly different way. As I transcribed, I stopped at moments that struck me as being particularly interesting and added notes or questions within brackets. Once I listened to the whole discussion, I then made three types of notes at the beginning of the document: teaching ideas/responses; methodological notes, and thematic notes. At the end of the semester, after I made the decision to narrow my focus to concentrate on the two sessions in which disability was explicitly discussed, I went back and transcribed these discussions more carefully. In this transcription I indicated turns, pauses, overlapping speech, and oral exclamations, laughter, etc. and bracketed any dialogue which I couldn't understand. (Table 3.3 lists the conventions I used.) Although I occasionally did "smooth" student discussion, I tried to do so only when it seemed necessary to avoid possible confusion on the part of the reader. (For example, one student apparently thought the author of *Al Capone Does My Shirts* was male, which made it appear that she was referring to Moose, rather than the

author, in certain exchanges. I decided to substitute her use of male pronouns for female pronouns for clarity.)

Table 3.3 **Transcription conventions**

032B	Line 32 from Blue Group discussion
...	Pause in discussion
[...]	Material excerpted
I liked	Individual word spoken with emphasis
:	Interrupted speech
?	Upturn in intonation
.	Downturn in intonation. Pause.
,	Shorter pause.
!	Phrase spoken with emphasis
Owen said	Text quoted from focal literature

By the end of the semester I had generated and collected a broad range of texts which I could then reread as part of my analysis of the ways in which students were invited to respond to literature and drew from their personal repertoires to do so.

Rereading as an approach to analysis

After the end of the course, I began my reading and rereading of the field texts and focal literature which I think of as including three cycles. In my first cycle of reading I concentrated on generating multiple readings of the complete set of field texts. To do

so, I used Strauss and Corbin's (1998) method of open coding to provide a structure for reading and documenting my evolving understandings of the ways in which students' responded to literature in the course. Although Strauss and Corbin's method is conventionally used to develop theory which is "grounded" in empirical reality, their methods have been successfully adapted to be used in interpretive projects (Grubs, 2006). Using a discourse analysis software program, Atlas.ti, I read through my entire collection of field texts to become refamiliarized with the texts and label moments that seemed related to dis/ability. Strauss and Corbin identify this strategy as "open coding" because the goal is to generate many different ways that the "data" could be read, without regard to how those observations might relate to each other. In order to generate as many ideas as possible, I commented on the texts paragraph by paragraph (or turn by turn) in an effort to focus on the richness and detail of the texts. Throughout this process I "came out" of the texts to write memos which documented my initial impressions, questions, and curiosities. To guide this writing, I drew on Richards' (2005) questions: "What's interesting? Why is it interesting? Why am I interested in that?" (p. 15).

I also wanted a way of foregrounding the ways in which we, as readers, paid selective attention to the focal literature as we mobilized it for particular purposes. To do so, I began with my own mark-up copies of *Becoming Naomi Leon* and *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. I then read students' response papers and the transcripts of discussions alongside the literature and used a different system of notation to mark the places in book which students either directly quoted the text and/or referred to a recognizable scenes from the story. I used a system of color coding and symbols to keep track of each quote, who mobilized the quote, and for what purposes. For example, I have indicated that two

students directly quoted the sentence, "Natalie lives in her own world." (Choldenko, 2004, p. 18), but one of them used the as evidence of stereotype in the text and the other used it as evidence of the ways in which Choldenko uses metaphor to describe autism. These "marked up books" became resources as I reread the focal literature with and against transcripts of discussion; they not only provided me with visual record of what readers had paid attention to but, perhaps more importantly, the sections of the text which students had not discussed.

My next step in analysis was to focus my reading on the texts which seemed to be the most potentially generative in responding to my research questions. My first decision was to limit myself to analyzing texts which were generated in the two sessions in which students discussed characters with disabilities directly: sessions 8 and 11. My second decision was to focus my analysis to the transcripts of small group discussion; the interactive nature of discussion had provided students with openings in which they had expanded on their interpretations of the focal texts and how they had come to those interpretations. (Although I considered including whole group discussion as well, when I began to work with the transcripts I found that, because one of the more vocal students in the class had not agreed to participate in the study, it was difficult to exclude her participation and still retain the sense of the dynamics of the whole group discussion.) This decision was also pragmatic in that I realized that, in order to do a close reading of transcripts and return to literature, I had to be selective.

At this stage in the research I had refined my research question to focus more directly on how reader response might provide a way of considering how readers respond to textual invitations to understand disability. My next step was to select segments from

the transcripts of small group discussion which struck me as potentially generative in responding to my research questions. I decided to work with the Green Group's discussion of *Becoming Naomi Leon* both because, paired with *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, it would allow me to discuss two different pieces of focal literature and because the students in the group had read Owen's character in several ways. I also decided to work with the segment of the Blue Group's discussion of metaphor in *Al Capone Does My Shirts* because it constituted a very different type of response to the text than the rest of the class had generated. Finally, I was interested in looking across groups to explore two themes that I seemed to notice again and again in my initial readings of the transcripts: the evaluation of Natalie as an accurate representation of autism and the evaluation of Mrs. Flanagan as a mother-figure. It is important to reiterate that I did not select these excerpts in an effort to characterize discussions as a whole, nor do I attempt to generate a theory which might predict or explain how students come to different readings of representations of disability. My focus is on how these particular conversations could be understood as responses to invitations within the focal texts and as opportunities to consider the range of resources students mobilized in their interpretations for the purposes of opening up new ways of thinking about representation of dis/ability. I then read the text with the following questions in mind:

- ◆ What commonalities and differences do I see in the ways in which students are responding to this text?

- ◆ What do I notice about the dynamics of discussion? How do students' respond to each others' readings of the texts?

- ◆ What resources do they mobilize in their discussions, either from the text or from their personal repertoires?

- ❖ How might the focal literature and/or the context of the course invited such responses?

As I worked with the field texts and focal literature, I wrote memos and created visual maps in order to record my emerging "readings" of the transcripts. As I did so, I returned to the texts to ask myself whether there were ways of complicating my readings by mobilizing other quotes or interpretations. In order to present this analysis in a more manageable form, in each chapter I present the results of this round of analysis in two sections: "Reading for themes" and "Reading for textual invitations and personal repertoire".

Finally, I "reread" *Becoming Naomi Leon* and *Al Capone Does My Shirts* as a way of considering how mobilizing theories from Disability Studies might lead to different readings of these texts. I began with the question or theme that I found in the students' discussion and began reading the focal text in search of passages that might complicate the ways in which the students' discussed the text. As I did so, I considered the ways in which my concurrent readings in Disability Studies were shaping what I was noticing in my reading. Finally, for each chapter I focused on reading my selecting a concept from Disability Studies that seemed to generate readings that complemented the students' readings: in chapter four I used Anderson and Merrill's (2001) concept of dis/ability to search for passages in which the character of Owen might be read as "dis/abled", in chapter five I drew on Mitchell and Snyder's (2002) trope of disability to read Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan as figures in the "family autism story", and in chapter six I drew on Murray's (2008) analysis of the ways in which autism is represented metaphorically to foreground some of the nuances in Choldenko's use of the "Natalie as prison(er)" metaphor. (These "rereadings" appear in the third section of each of chapters

four, five, and six.) The purpose of these "rereadings" was to suggest alternative ways that dis/ability could be read in the focal literature.

Writing as invitational

It would be ironic to write a dissertation which draws on reader response theory without addressing the choices I made in the writing process. As the author of this dissertation, I made a number of decisions which are intended to invite readers to understand my readings of focal literature and fieldtexts as one possible set of readings and invite readers of this dissertation to engage in their own readings of selected texts. In this section I discuss my rationale for a number of writing choices I made in this dissertation that reflect my desire for this text to be both recognizable and invitational.

One set of writing choices that I made have to do with the ways in which I foregrounded my "presence" as the author of this text. These choices have to do with *ethos,* or the textual invitation to understand the identity and credibility of the author (Ivanic, 1991). In many academic discourses, conventions such as using the passive voice, writing in third person, hedging, and avoiding the suggestion of emotional or personal investment in one's topic have been used to suggest neutrality on the part of the researcher. One of the tasks that writers must learn is that "the language of the text should create a distance between the writer and the text to give the appearance of objectivity" (Johns, 1997, p. 60). However in this project I wanted to acknowledge my participation in the course and the fact that I considered myself as a particular reader of the field texts and focal literature. Therefore, I have intentionally written in the first person, acknowledged some of my motivations and interests in the project, and foregrounded the ways in which I, like all readers, brought a particular repertoire to my readings of texts.

I am also concerned about the ways in which I represent students in the framing of questions and writing of the dissertation (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001). My first priority is to understand students' responses and the "logic" of how disability was being discursively produced in the class. In other words, rather than judging student response to literature as "the problem", I seek to understand how the resources that all of us brought to the course and our interactions shaped the meanings we found in the literature. Since one of the goals of the course is for students to develop the capacity to come to more complex readings of texts which acknowledge issues of power and privilege, I hope to contribute to professional literature which can complicate our theoretical understandings of reader response to disability in literary texts and inform future instructional choices.

In writing chapters 4-6 I decided to use a parallel structure in which I introduced themes in a small group discussion, analyzed the repertoires the students seemed to draw on in their discussion, and then offered a rereading of the focal literature through a Disability Studies framework. Although I decided that creating this parallel structure across chapters was necessary in order to organize and present my analysis in a way that was manageable for the reader, I believe there are two drawbacks to the structure. First, the structure might suggest that there are sharper divisions between the students' readings and my own than really existed in practice. This sense might be heightened by the fact that I was not a participant in small group discussion. Second, there is a risk that the reader might understand the students' initial readings as a problem and my rereadings as "corrective". My intent is to illustrate the value in pursuing multiple readings of the texts, not to offer my own reading as the only valid reading.

Finally, I would like to invite readers of this dissertation to consider my readings of texts with and against their own readings. In Appendices B and C I have included transcripts of the small group discussions discussed in chapters 4 and 6 that can be read in advance or alongside my own characterizations of those discussions. (Including the complete transcripts used in chapter 5 would have been prohibitive in length.) In doing so I don't want to imply that this offers the reader a somehow "neutral" way of understanding the small group discussions; I selected the which excerpts from the longer transcripts to share, laid them out in a particular way, and have offered them in the context of a chapter. Rather, I am interested in signaling the constructedness of all texts (including research texts) and offering the reader multiple ways to read the text.

In the following three chapters, I analyze the ways in which students in the course mobilized a variety of resources as they discussed and evaluated representations of disability in two pieces of adolescent literature and how my interest in exploring how reading from a Disability Studies perspective might open up new meanings in those texts.

Chapter 4:

Reading Owen as Dis/abled in *Becoming Naomi Leon*

Introduction

During the eighth week of the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course, the class read and discussed the adolescent novel *Becoming Naomi Leon* by Pam Munoz Ryan. This novel is told from the point of view of Naomi, a young girl who lives with her great-grandmother and younger brother, Owen. Naomi and Owen's mother, Skyla, abandoned them when they were young and the siblings are both hopeful and apprehensive when Skyla reenters their lives. Unfortunately, Skyla proves to be an unreliable and openly rejects Owen because of his physical differences. Gram, Naomi, and Owen's concerns grow when they realize that Skyla plans to have Naomi, but not Owen, come live with her. With some help from two trusted friends, Gram, Naomi, and Owen travel to Mexico in hopes of reconnecting with the children's father and asking him to support their appeal to the court to allow Grams to retain custody of both children. The trip allows Naomi to establish a stronger sense of her Mexican heritage and find the strength to stand up to her mother in court where she successfully prevents Skyla from separating her from Owen.

The whole class read this book in preparation for our eighth session which was labeled on the syllabus as "Literature by and about Latino/as: Issues of Voice and Language". The assigned readings for this session included one reading that discussed the representation of Latino/as in children's literature (Ada, 2003) and one which discussed the use of Spanish language in bilingual literature for children (Barrera & Quiroa, 2003). Our whole group activities focused on exploring questions of voice and

language in this literature. In order to prepare to discuss *Becoming Naomi Leon*, two or three students from each discussion group wrote "Questioning the Text" papers in which they developed questions that they wanted to discuss with their classmates.

Although the official topic of the session focused on Latino/a literature and language, one student, Karen, wrote me several days before class to ask if she could focus on disability in her "Questioning the Text" paper. I responded that she was welcome to take that focus and suggested that she read ahead in the course readings so that she could draw on scholarship particular to the topic in her paper (Williams, Inkster, & Blaska, 2005; Smart, 2001; Tal, 2001). Karen did so and brought her paper to the Green Group for consideration, resulting in a conversation which illustrates some of the ways in which members of the group drew both from textual and personal repertoires to construct Owen as an able or disabled character.

In this chapter I examine the ways in which Owen might be constructed in multiple ways, based on the particular aspects of the textual and personal repertoires that a reader mobilizes in those constructions. I begin by analyzing Karen, Lacey, Gina, Maria, and Shelley's discussion in order to consider the ways in which members of the group mobilized aspects of the text and knowledge and attitudes from their personal repertoires to construct Owen as a particular type of character and evaluate the possible consequences of that representation. In order to make this analysis more manageable, I break the conversation into two sections: "Owen as Optimistic and Strong" and "Owen as Disabled". Next I consider some of the ways that the students' responses might be understood as responding to invitations in the text and mobilizing personal repertoires of meaning. Finally, I draw on theory from disability studies, which might be considered as

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part of my literary repertoire, to present a rereading of the novel based on my reading of scenes from the text which the students did not mobilize in their discussion. The purpose of this rereading is not to suggest that the students' readings of the text were "wrong", but to illustrate the ways in which multiple readings of the text are possible.

Reading for themes in small group discussion

Characterizing Owen as optimistic and strong

In the first half of the group's discussion of *Becoming Naomi Leon* a strong theme emerged: the group found Owen to be admirable because of his optimism in the face of a number of rejections by his mother and peers. Although Owen's "optimism" was not disputed, the significance of this representation becomes a topic of conversation in the group. As group members discussed Owen they drew on a common strategy in reading literature; they treated Owen as a coherent character who could be understood both through patterns one could construct in the text (Rabinowitz, 1987) and by drawing on their understanding of the "real world" to imagine how Owen would act or feel beyond what was written in the text. As they stepped back from the text, they also evaluated Owen's character as a "representation of disability" that might be evaluated as positive or negative (Tal, 2001).

The Green Group had met three times by this point in the semester to discuss focal literature and seemed to be developing a positive rapport which included teasing, laughter, as well as gentle challenges when group members disagreed about the meaning or significance of a piece of literature. In previous discussions, Lacey, Gina, and Maria had been particularly outspoken, although in the discussion of *Becoming Naomi Leon*

Karen took a strong lead. The remaining student, Shelley, was more soft-spoken, but her contributions were thoughtful and seemed to be well-respected in the group.

Karen initiated her group's discussion of the book by describing her interest in Owen as a character and offering an initial evaluation of Owen's character. Shelley, Gina, and Maria then built on her characterization of Owen as "optimistic".

004G   Karen: So, um, I was really intrigued by Owen because I thought he was such a strong and like optimistic character. And like every time like something bad happens he always had a good side to it or like took it in the best light and I just thought that was a really, really strong quality to have.

Karen then directed her group to read and discuss two passages which illustrate the ways in which Owen's physical appearance is "misunderstood" by people, particularly his mother.

> *Owen started racing through his homework like a horse on a tear. People were usually fooled by his looks and thought he was low in school due to being born with his head tilted to one side and scrunched down next to his shoulder. It had straightened out a little after three surgeries at Children's Hospital, but he still talked with a permanent frog voice because of something inside being pinched. One of his legs was shorter than the other so he walked like a rocking horse, but other than that, he was just fine. Contrary to people's first opinions, he got the best grades in his class.* (Ryan, 2004, p. 4)

> *[After Owen beats Skyla at checkers, she comments to Naomi,] "All I'm saying... is that he doesn't look smart.... You know what I mean. Owen's not right physically, and he has weird habits."* (104)

After the group read the above two passages silently, Karen responded to the second quote:

020G   Karen: I was just like shocked that a mother would say that about her own son.

022G   Shelley: When she was reading that I was like about like about the whole checkers thing? I was just like why is Skyla saying?

024G   Gina: Yeah and she's just like, "Oh, it's ok, you don't have to defend your brother."

026G Karen: Yeah I like to be nice to people to people who are like... I was like...what?

028G Gina: But I think that it's that his mom hasn't been around and she showed back up so she really has no idea.

030G Maria: Gram even says that "You don't know... like what he's been through. You should try like coming to a doctor's appointment."

032G Karen: And then when she finally did. I was like surprised that she would say some of the things she did, especially to those doctors. Oh he's ... What did they say? FLK a funny looking kid. But that doesn't have anything to do with... he's fine medically.

Karen suggested a pattern of consistency in the text: "bad things happen" (007) to Owen yet "he always sees a good side" (008) of life. She also indicates that she is intrigued by this optimism and values this characteristic as "a really, really strong quality to have" (008). In response to this opening, Shelley, Gina, and Maria contribute additional examples of the ways in which Owen is a character who "faces challenges"; they refer to scenes in the text in which Sklya doubts Naomi's assertion that Owen is good at checkers (024), Skyla doesn't appreciate the challenge of his medical treatments (030) and asks Owen's doctors to "fix him" (032), and the doctors call Owen a "funny looking kid" (034). Although the group focuses primarily on the challenges that Owen faces, rather than his responses to those challenges, the consensus of the group seems to be that there is a pattern in the text which confirms Owen's "optimism".

Lacey then took up Karen's reading of Owen as "strong and optimistic", shifting the discussion to focus on why such a representation might be included in children's literature: to represent the challenges that real people with disabilities might face. This prompted Gina, Maria, and Karen to speculate on how Owen might have felt in these situations.

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036G Lacey: I think [the author] put it in though for the fact that like that's what people do think. And that's like that could even go on in front of the child. They could hear it... like could hear that even in their own home that they are funny looking and that they are stupider than they are.

041G Gina: I wonder how like that made Owen feel. Because he seemed like very optimistic the whole time even though is mom said that about him and other people made fun of him at school and stuff.

045G Maria: And how does he feel when his mom comes back and she's not really concerned about him, she's all focused on Naomi.

047G Karen: Buys Naomi's new clothes.

048G Maria: And how would you feel if people called you funny looking and your mom doesn't care about you.

Lacey opens this series of turns by suggesting that Ryan's intent was to describe the ways in which people with disabilities do encounter discrimination, even from their own family members. Lacey draws on both her understanding of how the world works ("that's what people do think" [036] and "they... could hear that even in their own homes" [039]) and her sense that an author might deliberately use such an example to illustrate the ways in which people like Owen ("they") might be told that they are "funny looking" and "stupid" (048). This prompts Gina to question how Owen might feel in these types of situations, a perspective that is only offered through Naomi's point of view in the text. Although their focus was initially phrased as how *Owen* would feel (041-047), in the final turn of this segment Maria shift her use of pronoun to ask "how would *you* feel if people called you funny looking and your mom doesn't care about you" (048). There are several possible ways to read this shift in the discussion. One would be that Gina, Maria, and Karen found Ryan's representation to be unrealistic. Another might be that they are acknowledging the fact that *Becoming Naomi Leon* is written as a first-person narrative from Naomi's perspective. Owen may have *"seemed... very optimistic"* (041), yet

perhaps it makes sense to consider this a function of the point of view of the story ("a realistic representation of Naomi's point of view"), rather than a reflection on how Owen, himself, might have felt. The students' shirt toward a more empathetic reading seemed to have opened up the possibility that Owen wasn't "really" optimistic.

Gina's next comment responds to this implication. Rather than considering the realism of the text, she comments on the pleasure she took in reading Owen as an "optimistic" character. This shift complicates the group's evaluation of Owen's character further.

050G Gina: That's why I really liked **liked** his character too, because he was so optimistic no matter what and:

052G Maria: I don't know. That would be hard.

053G ?: Uh huh

054G Karen: But do you think it would be... **we** would be so sympathetic as readers if he wasn't so optimistic? Like what if he was "I hate her"? Or, "I hate my life"?

056G Gina: I think I would think like, "I would too." Honestly I think I could relate to him, but not admire him as much as I do as a character right now because he is so optimistic.

059G Karen: That's what I thought too. Oh my gosh. He's so cute and strong. I always thought he was a really cool character. And oh I also, like on page 125. He says to his sister. Because explaining why his mom didn't want him as a baby. He says, "because I wasn't , you know, like everybody else." He realizes he's not the same and he realized that that's maybe why his mom like wouldn't want him. But that's sad if he thinks that's acceptable. "Oh,
065G   she probably doesn't want me because I'm not the same." Does everyone else? I mean, that's not ok.

067G Maria: Whatever. You know.

068G Shelley: Yeah, like the few times when it's like Owen looked sad it's like "Ohh..." It's a big deal.

070G Karen: Yeah, yeah. And then... And I just, in the why I think my question is

important, I just wrote that I think it is important that children to receive like accurate and positive examples of people with disabilities in literature. So that they have exposure to it and it's not something new to them. Especially because I'm in special education. That's like a big deal to me at least. Just cause I think we should have more stories with people or children with disabilities in it that are like strong characters and genuine. You know.

In this series of turns Gina shared that she enjoyed reading Owen as an optimistic character. She refers to her experience reading "I really liked **liked** his character" (050) and suggests that optimism is an admirable characteristic (057). Karen and Shelley also seem to have taken pleasure in moments when Owen is represented as "cute and strong" (059) or feeling sad (069). Yet while Gina enjoys when Owen is "optimistic, not matter what" (051), Maria responds with "that would be hard" (052), which is picked up by Karen when she asks Gina to consider whether "we" as readers would accept a less optimistic character. In doing so, she asks the group to imagine a different story than is presented in the text in which Owen "wasn't optimistic" (055). Gina's response foregrounds a tension she seems to feel between valuing representations that she "relates to" (those which seem realistic) and those which she enjoys or admires (056-058). Karen responds by both acknowledging that she enjoyed the "cute and strong" aspects of his character and also suggesting that optimism on Owen's part would be a product of internalizing an idea that he's different and less worthy of acceptance. Karen's last statement, that positive examples of characters with disabilities should be "strong characters and genuine" seems to smooth over the suggestion that there may be a conflict between valuing strong/optimistic characters and "genuine" characters which would presumably voice the types of complexity that the group acknowledged that they themselves would imagine feeling.

Characterizing Owen as disabled or able

During the first half of the conversation, group members focuses on characterizing Owen and considering some of the implications of those characterizations. Although Karen asked the group to consider a section of the text which described Owen's physical appearance, Owen's "differences" weren't discussed as consequential, apart from people's social reactions to them. However, in the second half of the discussion the group disagreed about whether and how to identify Owen as either able or disabled. The focus of this conversation was on the significance of Owen's habit of sticking tape to his clothes when he was upset. To do this work, group members drew on both their general perceptions of what might constitute "normal" behavior and medical-therapeutic language which seemed consistent with their special education backgrounds.

The group's discussion seemed to focus primarily on one of the first scenes in which Owen is presented as having tape stuck to his shirt. Gina directed her group to the following scene.

> *Owen went first and reached out to hug Skyla, but before he could, she said, "Oh look. You have something stuck to your shirt," and she reached down and started to pull off the long piece of tape pressed across his cheek.*
>
> *Owen clasped his hands over the tape.*
>
> *Gram and I yelled at the same time, "No!"*
>
> *"He... he likes it," I said.*
>
> *"It's just a little comfort thing he does," said Gram.*
>
> *Some kids had blankets or stuffed animals they dragged around. Others got contentment from twirling their hair or sucking their thumbs. Owen had to have tape stuck to his shirt—the clear kind people used to wrap presents. For some reason it brought him a particular satisfaction. (Ryan, 2004, p. 20)*

Gina describes the conflict that she felt in interpreting Owen's use of tape in that scene.

091G   Gina: But you know at the same time, when I was reading that I questioned...
[Ryan] made it seem like he wasn't disabled mentally, but then the whole
tape issue? That he always has tape on his clothing? And when his mom
came. The first time she came and tried to take it off and they were both
like "no". Was she like foreshadowing... or not foreshadowing but like
putting on the... maybe there was like something but maybe that there was
something... I mean, I wouldn't put tape on my shirt.

Gina begins by commenting that Ryan "made it seem like [Owen] wasn't disabled

mentally" (091), but that she wondered if Owen's use of tape was significant. Although

Gina doesn't expand on the first half of this statement, there are several places in the text

in which Naomi comments that "although people are fooled by his looks... other than

that, he was just fine" (p. 4). Gina seems to hesitate or struggle to articulate the tension

she feels between her reading of Owen's use of tape and this textual invitation to

understand Owen as "normal", but then characterizes "putting tape on one's shirt" as

something that she would not do. The implication seems to be that using tape is not

normal and that Gina reject's "Naomi's" textual invitation to consider Owen's use of tape

as similar to other children's use of stuffed animals, blankets, hair twirling, and thumb

sucking. Referring back to her leading statement, perhaps this means that Owen is

mentally disabled. In response, Karen and Maria share their interpretations of Owen's use

of tape.

098G   Karen: But I think that's more like an issue of feeling secure and that's like his
safety blanket. Tape for some reason. I mean for other people I mean
what kid didn't have a blanket or suck her thumb? What kid didn't have a
blanket or... I mean not everyone did, but when I was reading it I was
like, oh that's just his way of feeling comfortable. It is like awkward...

103G   Maria: It's different from a blanket. Or something that we're used to.

Both Karen and Maria take up the question of whether using tape is "normal". First,

Karen echos the textual invitation to equate Owen's tape usage to what "typical" kids do:

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have a comfort blanket or suck their thumbs. Maria, however, seems to agree with Gina, distinguishing between Karen's example of a blanket as a "normal" comfort object and the tape as "different". Like Gina, Maria's final comment positions "normal" as "something we're used to".

The group's ambiguity about whether Owen's use of tape is "normal" or "different" from how children's typical use of comfort objects opens up the possibility that Owen's use of tape might be a symptom that requires diagnosis. In the following turns, both Karen and Gina consider each other's positions and introduce a medical diagnosis into their interpretations:

104G   Karen: But at the same time I just thought that was his way of feeling safe. And it could... I don't necessarily think of a disability. Even though like you could look at it as something mental or cognitively impaired. But for me it I just thought it was something about feeling safe.

108G   Gina: Yeah, I never really looked at it like his security blanket. Right. His binkey, as they call it.

110G   Karen: I can see it from that perspective too. Kind of like OCD maybe?

111G   Gina: Right.

In responding to each other's readings of Owen, Karen and Gina both acknowledge the repertoire of meaning that the other seems to be drawing on to fill in the indeterminacy that Gina experienced in the text. Although Karen restates her understanding of tape as a comfort object, she also suggests that it might be possible to read Owen's use of tape as a symptom of a "mental or cognitive" disability or, more specifically, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) (110). On the other hand, in considering Karen's interpretation of Owen as "normal", Gina adds to the list of "normal" ways in which children soothe themselves: "security blankets" and "binkeys".

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This initiates a more general discussion in which the group takes into account the context of Owen and Naomi's life.

112G Maria: Well like if you look at the way they were treated when they were little, even though he doesn't remember it. I mean, Naomi didn't talk for a very long time. You know, so, for him it's a comfort thing. He could have high anxiety or whatever from not being treated correctly when he was a baby. For not being treated properly. He probably wasn't held enough. He probably... All those things.

118G Karen: Plus, she had alcohol problems. He's probably, you know, fetal alcohol syndrome so... You know, he could have... well, since he has good grades in school and stuff I don't know if there's a cognitive delay. But maybe another... maybe social.

122G Maria: An emotional thing.

123G Shelley: She keeps stressing that he's smart. Smart in school. Smart in school. And then, yeah, but what are grades? What he's going through emotionally...

126G Gina: What he's going through emotionally? Grades. His grades are good. He's smart and...

128G Karen: You generally don't get to look at that, what he was feeling. Yeah because it was told from her perspective, which is interesting...

130G Gina: Yeah.

Maria attributes Owen's behavior to his traumatic childhood, reminding the group that Naomi (who is presumably normal/able) also had difficulty after being abandoned by their parents. From this perspective, Owen's tape is an understandable "comfort thing" that he uses to deal with his "high anxiety" (112). Karen then considers an additional "diagnosis" for Owen: fetal alcohol syndrome, which she rejects because it is inconsistent with the evidence in the text that he gets good grades. Karen, Maria, Shelley and Gina then seem to play with the tension they feel between the pattern of "good grades" and their sense that he's gone though a lot "emotionally". Karen's final comment, that "you

generally don't get to look at... what he was feeling" (128) seems to suggest that the

reader is not positioned to know Owen's experience, the implication being that this

information would be necessary to evaluate his emotional state. This marked the end of

the group's discussion around Owen. After a slight pause, Gina volunteered to share her

question, which focused on they ways that Ryan may have drawn on her family history

and cultural identities to write the book.

Reading for textual invitations and mobilization of personal repertoire

As I described in chapter 2, reader response theory suggests that the "literary

work" of reading occurs when readers respond to the invitations, gaps, and

indeterminacies of a text. Readers in any particular community may share common

experiences or assumptions that they mobilize to create similar meanings, yet each

reader's repertoire is unique in that each reader brings somewhat different personal,

professional, and literary experiences to the work. This duality accounts for what readers

appear to have in common in their readings and the ways in which their readings vary. In

this section I consider the ways in which the students' responses might be understood as a

process through which they mobilized what was available in the text in a variety of ways.

The intersection of textual and personal repertoires

In the first half of the group's discussion centered on Owen's character, the group

approached the question whether and how Owen might be considered "optimistic and

strong" from a number of different angles. They began by drawing on examples from the

text to illustrate the ways in which Owen faced challenges related to how his mother and

others rejected or misunderstood him because of his disability. Lacey then suggested that

Ryan may have intentionally represented these "challenges" to illustrate prejudices that

people with disabilities face in the real world. This led to Gina, Maria, and Karen to speculate on how Owen would have "really" felt in this type of situation. Finally, the group grappled with an apparent tension between what they enjoyed in their reading ("Owen as optimistic") and the ways in which they valued authenticity and realism ("how Owen really or should have felt").

One of the assumptions in textual reader response theory is that the reader can never hold "all of the text" in mind; he or she selectively draws on examples from the text to create and recreate the story. Members of the Green Group mobilized examples from the text to understand Owen as "optimistic and strong": Owen is repeatedly faced with rejection from his mother and people outside his family (020-032), to which he "was optimistic, no matter what" (050). One of the ways to understand the construction of Owen as a character, as well as why this characterization might have resonated with members of the group, is that Owen can be read as a common representation of children with disabilities that can be traced back to the figure of the "innocent, afflicted child" which became common in Victorian literature (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, p. 42) and persists in representations today in telethons and sentimental family stories (Murray, 2008). This "Tiny Tim" figure is inspirational in they ways he faces and overcomes physical or social challenges through sheer determination and goodwill, making him palatable to readers who can then see themselves as caring in relation to the character. (Clare, 1999; Thomson, 1997). This type of positioning in relation to Owen is most evident when Karen says "Yeah, I like to be nice to people who are like [Owen]" (026) and when Shelley comments "the few times when... Owen looks sad, it's like 'ohh..' It's

a big deal" (068). A common critique of this figure, which Karen raises (054), is that this type of flat representation may be more enjoyable than realistic.

In the second half of the conversation, members of the group disagreed about whether to read Owen's behavior as that of a "typical" child or diagnose his behavior as a symptom of a cognitive or emotional disability. Among the members of the Green group, Owen's use of tape constituted an indeterminacy which required interpretation: Owen's use of tape drew Gina's attention (092), but the group members didn't seem to find information in the text which could satisfactorily direct them to consider Owen's use of tape as "normal" or "different". One way in which they did so was to drew on their personal repertoires to compare Owen's behavior to their images of what "most" children would do. For Gina, Maria and Shelley, this led them to consider Owen's behavior "different" from that of "normal" children. For Karen, this led her to consider Owen's use of tape, although "awkward" (102), to be similar to other comfort objects and therefore "normal". The focus of their discussion also reflects their common interest in evaluating Owen's character as able or disabled. For example, a completely different way of reading the uniqueness of Choldenko's choice of tape as a "comfort object" might be to consider the metaphoric implications of how Owen "holds himself together".

Once the question of normal/different was raised, the group shifted their focus to considering Owen's use of tape as a possible symptom of a particular disability: mental or cognitive impairment (103), obsessive compulsive disorder (110), fetal alcohol syndrome (118), or a social or emotional impairment (121). One way in which the text was "open" to this interpretation is that, although Owen is described as "different" in the text in many ways, his behaviors and even his physical differences are not labeled with

any particular medical diagnoses. This is true even in the scene in which Skyla meets

with Owen's doctors for the first time.

> *... Dr. Navarro turned to Skyla. "At this juncture, there is nothing more to do. He's had all the surgeries that his ages and size can accommodate. There's a surgery we would like to do when he reaches adolescence, when he's thirteen or fourteen, but for now, we've reviewed all of his tests and we've determined that he's in great shape. He's just going to be a FLK."*
>
> *"A what?" said Skyla.*
>
> *"A Funny Looking Kid," said Doctor Reed.*
>
> *"Is that some medical term, or are you trying to make a joke?"*
>
> *"No," said Dr. Navarro. "I'm most certainly not making fun of him. And sometimes it's a term we use unofficially. He's fine mentally. In fact, he has a rather high IQ and is quite bright. He just has a few physical problems that were the result of his birth defects..."* (pp. 113-114)

This indeterminacy in the text, in which Owen is represented in the context of having had

medical interventions, but not identified as having a particular disability seems to have

opened up a space in which Gina, Maria, and Shelley "filled in" their own medical

evaluations, while Karen and Lacey read Owen as a typically developing child.

Ware (2006) argues teachers may be positioned to diagnose characters because

teachers work in contexts in which medical-therapeutic knowledge is highly valued and

provides the framework through which they are asked to evaluate their students for

special education placements. Yet, as this group's conversation demonstrates, this type

of "diagnosis" is not inevitable. Karen's participation in this conversation seems

particularly interesting in this regard in that she draws on medical-therapeutic language

("medically or cognitively impaired" [106], "OCD" [110], "fetal alcohol syndrome"

[118]) as she acknowledges Gina's point of view, but reads Owen's use of tape as "just

his way of feeling comfortable" (102).

Invitations from the course

Another "invitation" to understanding Owen in terms of accuracy and authenticity may have been the students' previous work in the "Issues of Diversity in Children's Literature" course. As I described in chapter 3, students prepared for discussions by writing Questioning the Text papers in which they posed a question grounded in their personal response to the focal text, identified the aspects of the text which they understood to be related to their question, and connections between their question and scholarship. This reader response focus was reflected in the ways in which students referred to their own reading experiences (005, 020, 041), mobilized examples from the text (022, 030, 032), and stepped back from the story to consider the value of the story as a "representation of disability" (036, 072). The affordance of the small group discussion format was that it allowed students to also consider different responses to the text. The clearest example of this was when Gina comments that "I really liked liked his character" (050) and Karen asked her to consider whether "we could be so sympathetic as readers if he wasn't so optimistic" (054).

The course may have also invited students to consider whether Owen was a positive and realistic representation of disability. By this time in the semester, the students had quite a bit of experience considering the dangers of stereotype and affordances of accurate and authentic representations of members of traditionally marginalized cultural groups (for example, Cai, 2002; Cortes, 2001; Bishop, 1997). Although I assume that only Karen had read the articles related to disability before this session, the article she cited in her paper included a checklist for evaluating representations of disability in children's literature which emphasized the importance of

"promoting positive images of persons with disabilities" and "describing the disability or person with disabilities as realistic" (Blaska qtd. Tal, 2001, p. 75). However, unlike the clarity suggested by this "checklist", the students seemed to experience these types of evaluations as complex; what they enjoyed in the text, what constituted a "positive" representation, and what might count as a "realistic" response on Owen's part all seemed open to negotiation.

Rereading Owen as dis/abled

When, how, and if Owen is read as "disabled" is not an inevitable feature of reading *Becoming Naomi Leon*. In fact, although Karen was intrigued by Owen as a disabled figure, most students in the class wrote papers and held small group discussions without reference to Owen as a disabled character; they responded to the "invitation" in the course to consider representations of Latino/as in the text. Even Gina, who raised the question of whether Owen's use of tape might indicate that he was being represented as having a cognitive or emotional disability, wrote a Post Script after class in which she indicated that she didn't initially read the text with disability in mind.

> One of the major things that I thought about today was after looking more closely at the character of Owen I wondered if I would read the given information about him differently now b/c while reading I picked up on the difference in his looks but I never really thought critically about if the author was trying to make a statement about people w/disabilities through Owen's character. The fact that I really kinda overlooked this to focus more on the Latino aspect of the book almost kinda upset me because as a special education major I feel like I should pick that kind of stuff out first, however while discussing in my group it was interesting to touch on Owen's character b/c then it was like a light bulb went on and I was able to bring different aspects to the table.

Karen's question, in the context of a course on "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature", positioned the group to consider Owen as a representation of disability in ways that opened up conversations around Owen as an "optimistic and

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strong" disabled figure and grapple with whether Owen's use of tape was "normal" or whether it required diagnosis. In this section I attempt to read the text in different ways that open up new constructions of Owen as a character.

Just as Gina, Karen, Lacey, Maria, and Shelley mobilized examples from the text and aspects of their personal and professional repertoires to build a sense of Owen as a coherent character, my reading of his character is also shaped by the ways in which I mobilized text and drew on repertoires of knowledge and experience. Given my interest in exploring alternative readings of dis/ability in texts, I drew on scholarship from Disability Studies, part of my developing personal repertoire, to reread the book in search of invitations, indeterminacies, and gaps which might be used to produce a different construction of Owen as a character. My intent in rereading the book is not to suggest that the students' readings were wrong, but to suggest that the nature of texts and readers means that multiple readings of a text are always possible.

My sense that the members of the Green group were reading Owen as "disabled" led me to question whether it might be possible to read Owen as a "dis/abled" character. Anderson and Merrell (2001) propose using the term "dis/abled" as a construction that invites the reader to consider the relationship between disability and ability as fluid, shifting, and "kinky" (p. 267) according to context. Rather than a person (or character) being "disabled" or "able", the "/" is an act of inviting the reader to consider the relationship between the terms in a variety of ways: in addition to being able or disabled, one might be both able and disabled, or disabled in relation to a contextualized idea of ability. Since "disability" tends to be marked as difference in language, while "ability" tends to remain unmarked as privileged and "normal" (Tatum, 2000), finding examples of

Owen as "able" or "dis/abled" in context required me to read for passages in which Owen appeared without explicit reference to his physical, behavioral, or emotional ways of being and those passages in which a "difference" is marked, but in ways that may be unexpected or complicate the idea of "tidy" categories of ability and disability.

In my rereading of the text I found many scenes in which Owen is described without reference to a "difference". Keeping in mind that the story is told from the point of view of Naomi, Owen is a "typical" younger brother who rolls his eyes at his grandmother's sayings (p. 8); bothers Naomi as she works (p. 14); enjoys buying ice cream and watching cars go through the carwash (p. 82); and makes "construction paper turkeys and cornucopias" to decorate the trailer for Thanksgiving (p. 88). In addition to these more mundane "little brotherly" moments, Naomi and Owen also share a family history and respond to the events in the story in similar ways:

> *We had heard [the story of how they came to live with Grams], but only once in glorified detail because Gram was not one for rehashing events from the past. Owen and I had retold it to each other so many times that we might as well have been reciting it from a storybook. (p. 27)*

> *The next morning before breakfast, still lying in our beds, Owen and I whispered our plan for showing Skyla around Buena Vista.*
>
> *"Owen, after my conference you take Skyla to your class to meet your teacher."*
>
> *"Yeah, then I'll show her my papers that are on the bulletin board. The A papers and my science potato. It's growing real good," said Owen.*
>
> *"Then I'll meet you in the art room," I said. "Then we'll take her to the library and I'll show her my reading journals and she can meet Mr. Marble."*
>
> *We stayed in bed as long as possible. (p. 64)*

In both of these quotes, Naomi and Owen are depicted as participating in rehearsing their hopes for a positive relationship with their mother. Unlike scenes in which Owen might

be read as an "optimistic disabled" character (as if his optimism was related to or a result

of his physical differences or social identity), in these scenes Owen is positioned as an

optimistic brother/son, just as Naomi is an optimistic sister/daughter.

Even outside the family, Owen interacts with others in ways that don't reference

difference. For example, Owen is described as a good neighbor and well liked in the

neighborhood:

> *Mrs. Maloney tapped on her bedroom window, breaking my concentration. She waved at us, then pointed at Owen.*
>
> *"I almost forgot," said Gram, looking at Owen. "Mrs. Mahoney needs help moving her hummingbird feeder. She loves watching them through the window, with all their flitting and shimmering, but they've taken to diving and pecking at Tom Cat. I told her you'd come over after school."*
>
> *Owen nodded to Mrs. Mahoney and waved back to her. (p. 45)*

Again, Owen's social identity as "neighbor", rather than any reference to his dis/ability is

the focus of his characterization.

When the family travels to Mexico, virtually all mention of Owen as "different"

disappears from the text.

> *Ruben walked over to Owen...He pulled a small rubber ball out of his pocket and held it up. Owen nodded and they ran over to the side yard and began tossing the ball back and forth. Gram shook her head and said, "Give a boy a ball and that's all it takes to seal international relations. (147-148)*
>
> *Owen swung and got a good crack [at the piñata]. When everyone whooped for him, he bowed, and the people laughed, but not making fun, like in Lemon Tree. When the bigger boys took their turns and the piñata broke, Owen ran with the rest and came back to me with hands full of something that looked like short sticks of bamboo. (185)*

The second quote, which contrasts the way in which people laughed in Mexico in

contrast to the "making fun" that Owen experienced "in Lemon Tree", suggests that

Owen's dis/ability is constructed and received in different contexts. Paired with the

scenes which the students mobilized in their discussion, these examples of Owen as family member, neighbor, and friend contribute to a construction of Owen who is not "disabled" in a totalizing sense, but dis/abled in particular contexts and relationships.

A second question I asked as I read was whether different readings of Owen's "optimism" and/or readings of Owen as "worldly" might be suggested in the text. One pattern that I found that complicates the characterization of Owen as "optimistic" is that his hopeful demeanor is often paired with an action that suggests that Owen recognizes the potential negative outcomes of situations. To return to a scene which the students discussed, when Skyla first notices that Owen has tape stuck to his clothes, she exclaims "He wears it on purpose?" and tries to tear it off of his shirt.

> *Owen looked at Skyla as if she was a fairy princess, but still didn't take his hands off the tape. He gave her his biggest jack-o'-lantern smile (I swore his mouth was too big for his face) and said in a dreamy sort of way, "It's all right, you didn't know." (p. 21)*

Owen may have looked "at Skyla as if she was a fairy princess" with a "jack-o'lantern smile" and a "dreamy" response, but he "still didn't take his hands off the tape". Owen may be hopeful, but he's also recognizes that Skyla is capable of hurting him and guards himself against harm. As I looked for other scenes in which Owen might be read as "optimistic", I found a pattern in which Owen's hopefulness was typically paired with a more guarded response. When Skyla ends her visit to the children abruptly, Owen addresses his sister and Gram.

> *"Maybe she'll be right back," said Owen, his voice excited. "Maybe she just went out to pick up a pizza and ice cream so we can sit around together and talk about what we've been doing for all of these years."*
>
> *Gram and I looked at him. His never-ending good nature was grating on me.*
>
> *"Owen," said Gram. "I give you more credit than that." (p. 31)*

...

I looked at Owen. His eyes grew big and his mouth dropped open. He slid off the bench, opened the drawer, took out a roll of tape, and studied it. Then he stuffed the whole thing in his pocket. (p. 33)

Although Owen is initially optimistic that his mother might be "right back", his

grandmother's prompt that she gives him "more credit that that" leads him to prepare

himself for rough times by stuffing "the whole [roll of tape] in his pocket". By the middle

of the story, Owen comes to realize that his mother might not love him unconditionally.

"I think [Skyla] never wanted me because when I was a baby I wasn't... you know, like everyone else, and I think she doesn't want me now." (125)

Although Skyla rejects Owen specifically because he "wasn't... like everyone else",

Owen's loss of faith in his mother parallels Naomi's realization that Skyla is

undependable and will never match her vision of a "normal" mother. If he had previously

been optimistic, by the end of the book he might be described as "realistic".

Owen is described as optimistic through Naomi, through whose perspective the

story is focalized. If one considers her perspective to be limited, one might understand

her description of Owen as optimistic differently. One of the passages that struck me as a

contrast to those mobilized by the group in their construction of Owen as "optimistic"

occurs near the beginning of the book. Naomi and Owen arrive at school and Dustin, a

classmate who is known for teasing, approaches Owen. As Naomi stands by, Dustin

begins to tease Owen about his name and rips the tape off of his shirt.

"What's this, Outlaw Boy? Oh, you robbed the office store." He yanked the tape from Owen's chest, strip by strip. When the last piece was peeled off, Owen dropped to the group and started to shake and spit. A straggle of kids crowded around. Dustin panicked and frantically searched to see if a teacher was watching. He picked up the tossed about pieces of tape and pressed them

back on Owen's shirt. "Hey kid, I didn't mean it. Here's your tape, kid. Get up before the teachers sees you lying there. Get up, kid."

With the tape back in place, Owen opened his eyes, got up, brushed himself off, and walked away, his suit dirty from the playground...

"Retard!" yelled Dustin.

Everyone laughed.

I just stood there watching the whole thing like it was a movie. Why couldn't I speak up and defend Owen or myself?

Finally I ran to catch up with Owen, the flush of embarrassment still on my cheeks. Owen smiled so big that all of his cheeks showed, as if the joke was on everyone else. Didn't he even know the joke was on him?

He took one look at my strained face and said, "I fell down on purpose, Naomi."

"Why would you do that? It just made everything worse!"

"They didn't mean it. They were just teasing."

Why did he always have to look on the good side of everything? "Owen, don't you care what people think about you?" I said, "Kids will like you better if you don't... you know... do crazy things. Skyla would probably like you better, too, if you tried to please her."

I immediately wanted to take my words back. (pp. 68-69)

This scene complicates the "optimistic and strong" representation that Karen and her groupmates suggest. Although it begins with a "challenge" that Owen must face (the teasing), Owen's response to that challenge does more than "hope for the best"; Owen defends himself by anticipating the ways in which Dustin would be uncomfortable with "shaking and spitting" and conscious of how adults on the playground might react to the event. Although Owen might be optimistic or generous in his attitude toward the children who teased him, he was also pragmatic and used his understanding of their fears to protect himself. Owen's decision to fall down on the ground and shake and spit suggests

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a more active response which Mitchell and Snyder (2001) describe as "transgressive

reappropriation".

> The power of transgression always originates at the moment when the derided
> object embraces its deviance as value. Perversely championing the terms of their
> own stigmatization, marginal peoples alarm the dominant culture with a canniness
> about their own subjugation. The embrace of denigrating terminology forces the
> dominant culture to face its own violence head-on because the authority of
> devaluation has been claimed openly and ironically... The effect shames the
> dominant culture into a recognition of its own dehumanizing precepts. (p. 35)

Owen has used his knowledge of Dustin's ableist attitudes to protect himself. Owen is

pleased with himself; he "smiled so big all of his cheeks showed". One read of this scene

is that Owen's "optimism" ("They didn't mean it. They were just teasing") is an effort to

console Naomi, who is embarrassed and ashamed of her own inability to "speak up for

herself and Owen". Naomi is embarrassed by this response and seems to suggest that

Owen would do better to "act normal" than resist the teasing by making Dustin and the

other children uncomfortable.

Contrasting the readings

The contrasts among how different group members and I "read" Owen illustrates

the value of considering representations of disability as both "in the text" and in

particular readings of any one text. The first theme I found in the students' reading of

Becoming Naomi Leon was that group members characterized Owen as "optimistic and

strong". In addition to drawing on particular scenes in the text to construct Owen in this

way, group members also considered how their reading of Owen corresponded to their

understanding of the purposes of representing people with disabilities in children's

literature and their own senses of what rejection might feel like for a character like Owen.

This led members of the group to grapple with an apparent tension between what type of character they enjoyed in their reading and their desire for authentic representation.

The topic of the second half of the group's discussion focused on whether they understood Owen to be emotionally disabled, with Gina and Maria reading Owen's use of tape as a symptom that required diagnosis and Karen reading Owen's use of tape as a "normal" comfort object. In this analysis members of the group drew on their understandings of what typical children do to comfort themselves, as well as medical-therapeutic categories of disability.

My interest in exploring alternative ways of characterizing Owen led me to reread the text for moments in which Owen was "dis/abled", either because he was not marked as different or because his actions challenged normative expectations. This focus allowed me to read Owen as a more complex figure whose identity shifted according to context and whose behaviors and attitudes might be read as realistic, worldly, or transgressive. This alternative reading also suggests the potential of expanding students' repertories of reading strategies by incorporating disability studies theory into courses such as the "Issues of Diversity in Children's Literature" course.

In the following two chapters I analyze and draw on student responses to a second piece of adolescent literature, *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (Choldenko, 2004), to consider the multiple ways that students and I mobilize textual and personal and literary repertoires to respond to the representation of dis/ability in text.

Chapter 5:

Reading Natalie as (too) autistic and Mrs. Flannigan as (too) Caring
in *Al Capone Does My Shirts*

Introduction

The title of our eleventh class session was "Literature by and about People with Disabilities". During the first third of the class session the class worked to articulate a rationale for including why disability should be included in a course on diverse literature. Just as Kelly, Gina, Maria, Lacey, and Shelley did in their discussion of *Becoming Naomi Leon*, students proposed rationales ranging from the general need to represent "minorities" to disrupting "normal" to educating people "about disability" to celebrating different ways of being in the world. Students also raised the question of whether it makes sense to talk about "disability" as an umbrella category or whether we should be talking about commonalities in the Deaf experience, for example. It was a rich discussion, although in this first third of the class we had not brought the discussion back to specific pieces of literature; that work occurred after our break, when we reassembled for our small group literature discussion.

The whole class read and wrote Questioning the Text Papers for *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (Choldenko, 2004). The story takes place in the mid-1930s and is told from the perspective of Moose Flanagan, a twelve year old boy, who lives with his family on Alcatraz Island where his father works as a guard. Moose's sister, Natalie, is constructed as a character who, according to Choldenko's Author's Note, "would probably be diagnosed with autism" if she lived today (p. 224) and much of the plot is driven by the conflicts that the family experiences as they attempt to meet Natalie's and the other family members' needs within this historical context and setting. Mrs. Flanagan,

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Natalie's mother, plays a central role in the story as a parent committed to doing "whatever it takes" to provide Natalie with a "normal" future. Unlike other books we've read during the semester which have been told from the point of view of a character who is not commonly represented in children's literature, the story is focalized through Moose, an "able" character.

In this chapter I consider the contrasts between the ways in which students in the class evaluated the representation of Natalie, a character with autism, and Mrs. Flanagan, her mother. Since students in all four groups discussed each of these characters, I draw examples from several groups, rather than a focal group of students. Although this means that the sense of development of topics is somewhat lost in the presentation, I believe what is gained is the chance to consider the commonalities and variations between how students discussed the two characters. (In chapter six I also consider one group's discussion on the use of metaphor in the book.) I begin with an analysis of the ways in which students read and evaluated Natalie as a representation of autism and Mrs. Flanagan as a representation of a reasonable mother. I then consider how both the content of the course and invitations within the text may have positioned students to read the book in search of accurate and authentic representations of these characters. Finally, I reread *Al Capone Does My Shirts* to consider how Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan might be understood as figures within what Mitchell and Snyder (2001) call the "trope of disability" and Murray (2008) refers to the "family autism story".

Reading for themes in small group discussion

Evaluating Natalie as (too) autistic

In keeping with the historical context of the story, Natalie's "differences" are described, but not labeled, in the story. In the Author's Note, however, Choldenko writes, "The character Natalie Flanagan would probably be diagnosed with autism" (p. 224). Whether students "recognized" Natalie as autistic or responded to the invitation to understand her as such from the Author's Note, the students in the class never discussed whether Natalie should be read as autistic, they took it as a given that she was autistic and that the focus of their discussion should be on evaluating whether the representation of Natalie as autistic was accurate and/or stereotypical. To make these evaluations, students drew on their understanding of the purposes of diverse literature, autism as a diagnostic category and their own experiences working with children with autism.

Ashley, Jeff, Joyce, Kim, and Nadine's discussion was typical in that the students began with the assumption that Natalie was autistic and that the work of the group was to determine accuracy and possible impacts of this representation. Joyce introduced this topic by asking the group to think about the possible impacts of labeling or not labeling Natalie as autistic in the story.

005Y Joyce: My question for my paper was should her disability have been labeled. Should we have known what her disability was=

007Y Jeff: Autism.

008Y Joyce: =and in my argument I said you know, autism has such a wide spectrum. There are high functioning people with autism and there's people who have definite issues. Their learning and stuff with their autism. And my question was if it had been labeled in the book would readers have... you know if they weren't consciously thinking that everyone with autism had these characteristics, you know, was it a good thing that she left it unlabeled?

015Y Jeff: I thought that was a huge stereotype that numbers thing...that's a huge stereotype. Like in *Rainman* when they dropped the toothpicks?

Joyce began with the question of whether Natalie should have been labeled as autistic in the story. She then argued that, because autism is "such a wide spectrum" (008Y), labeling Natalie as autistic would have carried the risk of having readers assume that "everyone with autism had these characteristics" (013Y). Jeff then brought up a particular example of how Natalie is represented as having the ability to do large computations in her head, with the representation of Charlie in *Rainman* (016Y), the "prototypical" representation of autism in contemporary media (Murray, 2008). Ashley and Kim, however, are concerned with a different set of evaluative criteria related to accuracy.

017Y Ashley: But when that was written they didn't necessarily know what autism was like in the 30's.

019Y Kim: If you look in the back of the book it says that autism was a diagnosis or whatever like ten years after the book was set and this Natalie character was based on her sister. So if her sister counted…her sister counted, you know?

Ashley and Kim suggest that the historical context of the story, set in the 1930s meant that Choldenko didn't have the option of labeling Natalie as "autistic" because that diagnosis would not have been available. Kim's second response, that Choldenko based the character of Natalie on her sister, "so if her sister counted… her sister counted" (021Y) suggests an additional way of evaluating the character—if Natalie was based on a real person, then the representation can be counted as accurate. Jeff responded by reiterating that he found Natalie to be a stereotypical representation of autism.

023Y Jeff: I don't know…that's sort of a stereotype. Just cause it's true for one person doesn't mean it's true for everyone.

025Y Kim: I know but it was based on her sister. I mean all of the books we've read have stereotypes in them.

027Y Jeff: Yeah. I still think it stereotypes them if it stems from something that really happens to them.

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Jeff and Kim's exchange highlights the way in which each is using different criteria to evaluate the representation of Natalie: Jeff is concerned with whether readers will generalize what they know from a common representation of autism to "everyone" with autism, while Kim is interested in whether the story is representative of the author's own sister and, therefore, accurate. Jeff's final comment that "I still think it stereotypes them if it stems from something that really happened to them" (027Y), acknowledges this tension. (In fact, when Jeff shares his question later in the discussion, he asks the group to identify "accurate stereotypes" in the story.)

This idea that autism is best understood as a spectrum and that only a particular "type" of autism is represented in the media, was a common theme across groups. Here Kara, Jen and Erica are in close agreement.

129B   Kara: That was one thing that bothered me is that she's of course so good with numbers. They always do that with people with autism. It's just like *Rainman*. Which is true sometimes like if someone has Asperger's or something but there's different types. They always do that. That's like the media.

134B   Jen: I was wondering does she like... there's that whole spectrum of autism. Like how:

136B   Kara: :There's really high functioning autism where they are genius where it's like whatever but that's usually like just one form of it and there's autism that's associated with other disabilities where they're not so high functioning and stuff.

140B   Erica: Yeah, I don't know much about autism but I know:

141B   Kara: :There's so many categories of it.

Kara shared that she was bothered by the representation of Natalie as being "good with numbers" in the story. Kara then refers to *Rainman* (Levinson, 1988) as an example of how "they", who I read to be the media, "always do that with people with autism"

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(130B). This leads the students to also identify a dilemma related to the idea of

representing autism: if autism is understood to stand for "a spectrum", no one character

can represent the spectrum in its entirety.

Shelley and Lacey's exchange also illustrates the tension between finding the

representation of Natalie as an accurate representation of autism based on one's

understanding of the diagnostic criteria and a concern that only one "type" of autism is

represented in the media.

104G   Shelley: I think the author did a really good job of like describing autism though
           because a lot of the things were very true about their rigid life and
           behavior. And they:

107G   Lacey: :But also autism is such a wide spectrum it almost seems like.. too perfect
           I want to say. It gets to a point where like:

109G   Shelley: :I definitely have a handful of kids that I've met with autism with a
           severe case of autism that are exactly like that. And she didn't do it in
           such a negative way but she just kind of laid it out there like this is what it
           is and this is what happens. But you can't really reach them. She describes
           them as like, they look the same, but their her eyes are just somewhere
           else and that was very true because I've dealt with kids with autism and
           it's very like that... You're right there are high functioning too.

117G   Lacey: I just kind of thought it to be more stereotypical like how someone if you
           said a child with autism you would think that like... um... how they're
           really good with... kind of like *Rainman*. I wanna say how he can in the
           movie how the toothpick fell [=Gina: the toothpick fell] and he was able to
           immediately know. So I think that's kind of how people think but I
           student taught in the child development lab last semester and we had a
           little boy with autism who you would never be able to know, but he is
           more like his attention to detail that at three years old he's able to sit there
           and draw out every like almost every bone in the body. And you can be
           like what bone would be here? And he can tell you anything about space
           and at 3 years old he came in all excited to tell me that Pluto wasn't a
           planet anymore. So now there were only eight planets. So I think it built a
           kind of a stereotype about that maybe all children with autism would act in
           a certain way.

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Shelley begins by suggesting that Choldenko's depiction of Natalie was true to Shelley's understanding of people with autism having "rigid life and behavior" (104G). Lacey interjects that "autism is such a wide spectrum" that she sees the representation of Natalie as "too perfect" (107G), which she later clarified as belonging to a stereotypical representation of autism in the media. Both Shelley and Lacey compared Natalie to children with whom they have worked: Shelly described a "handful of kids with a severe case of autism" whose eyes, like Natalie's, are "just somewhere else" (114G), while Lacey described a boy who was autistic and paid "attention to detail" (124G) in a way that differed from Natalie. The difference between Shelley and Lacey's evaluation of the representation of Natalie as autistic is related to whether one focuses on whether Natalie is a plausible "case" of autism or whether one values representations that break out of the recognizable, *Rainman*, depiction.

Arwyn also questioned the representation of Natalie's mathematical skills, although for her the problem wasn't that the representation of Natalie was familiar, but that it seemed extreme.

105R Arwyn: I questioned the skill part. In my paper I did like question like Natalie's like gift for mathematics. I questioned if they took it to an extreme.

107R Sherri: You mean because it was in there so much?

108R Arwyn: Yeah because it was in there so much and like being able to just compute ridiculously large numbers. Like that's almost saying you're a genius, but only with mathematics you are a genius, but every other place you're not. And my... I spent a lot of time, I wrote about this kid Zachary that I spent a lot of time with and he's obviously younger than Natalie, but Zachary... knows computers really well. Like he gets computers like none other but he's, he's not a genius about them. I mean he's more advanced than I am but its not a genius status but struggles with math and reading and writing and things like that and I just thought that they took it kind of to a higher level than they maybe should have. That was my thought maybe.

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For Arwyn, the problem she has with the representation of Natalie's "gift for mathematics" (106R) is not that it might be stereotypical, per se, but that Choldenko "took it to an extreme" by characterizing Natalie as working with "ridiculously large numbers" (109R). For Arwyn, this seems significant in at least two ways. First she suggests that Natalie's gift for numbers might be read as a compensatory characteristic (Murray, 2008), implying that "you're a genius, but only in mathematics... every other place you are not"(110R). Second, she tells a story about Zachary (who she identifies as autistic in her paper), who "knows computers really well... [but] is not a genius about them" (114R) that seems to suggest that the representation of Natalie is inaccurate if compared to a real person with autism who would have a mix of abilities. Later in the discussion, Arwyn expands on why avoiding these "extreme" representations might be important in children's literature.

142R   Arwyn: There was a quote in the Williams article that talked about reading books about characters with disabilities and chronic diseases opens the door for children to ask questions and it would facilitate discussions about the types of likenesses and differences and I just thought that... like I talked a little bit about how a book really needs to be accurate to... um... the disability in order for kids to read it with the purpose of learning something about the disability because you don't want kids to get false stereotypes or especially if a child hasn't been around an autistic child or someone else with a disability, you don't want them to have the wrong idea of what it is so if they do come in contact with that disability like... you don't want them to... react in a way that is totally to an extreme. That was kind of one of my thoughts.

Arwyn drew on an idea from a course reading to provide a rationale for why avoiding inaccurate representations is important in children's literature: children may learn "about disability" from those books and develop stereotypes or preconceptions about people with disabilities, particularly if "a child hasn't been around an autistic child or someone

else with a disability" (150R). The danger of "extreme" (106R) representations is that they might lead children to "extreme" reactions (152R).

The impossibility of representing autism "accurately" came up again later in the discussion during an exchange in which Maria, Shelley, Karen and Lacey discussed whether they believed that Natalie would allow Onion, a prisoner with whom Natalie develops a friendship, to hold her hand.

278G   Shelley: Yeah, [Choldenko] talked about that in the book that [Natalie] almost doesn't like to be touched but that she looked like she enjoyed it.

280G   Lacey: That was kind of another stereotype too that children with autism don't...

281G   Karen: It's a sensory thing. Sensory issues.

282G   Lacey: But it's not like... I just have learned about it because of my child with autism last semester. It's because they need... They go on sensory overload basically so if you're talking to them and touching them. But only for this particular child touching him actually calmed him. Like you could put him in your lap and massage his hands and you wouldn't really talk to him you would be more quiet so it gives him one sensory thing to focus on. He would get upset if there were too many things going on at once. Like if there was something for him to listen to, something for him to look at, and for him to be touched...

291G   Shelley: I think it's important that autism is nothing like or the same as any other like... Down's has like... This is what Down's has... but autism is individual for each and every person so like we're still researching it and we don't know a whole lot about it.

295G   Maria: Yeah there are kids who can't stand to be touched because it's painful and there are kids that constantly need to be touched so that their nerves work better. You know?

298G   Shelley: Yeah.

299G   Maria: So you can't say that some kids like to have their hands held and then...you know?

Shelley began by pointing out a possible contradiction in the text: Natalie doesn't like to be touched, but seems to enjoy holding hands with Onion (278G). Lacey responded by

identifying the idea that children with autism don't like to be touched as another stereotype. She then drew on a professional story to illustrate that although she understood that *children* with autism "go on sensory overload" (283G), she had worked with a *particular child* who enjoyed being touched. Lacey then agreed that "autism is individual for each and every person" (293G) and that "we're still researching it and we don't know a whole lot about it" (293G). Maria also agreed that different children with autism have different needs and then ends the exchange with an ambiguous statement in which she trails off after stating that "you can't say that some kids like to have their hands held" (299G). I read the implication of this statement to be that you can't then critique a representation of autism as being inaccurate. Not only is it impossible for one character to represent the whole spectrum of autism, but it is impossible to have an understanding of autism that can be applied to all people or characters with autism.

Students in all of the groups told stories of people with autism who reminded them of Natalie. Although this was often in the context of evaluating whether Natalie's savant-like behaviors were stereotypical, they also seemed to take pleasure in sharing these stories.

155G   Shelley: Yeah cause I mean my dad's friend's child is like 20 something now and he's going to a university but I mean he's been diagnosed with autism. He went through themes where he became obsessed. Plumbing. When he was really little, 2-3 years old. My dad would take him in the basement and show him all around. He's obsessed with doors. Like opening and closing. And with numbers. I feel like if she was obsessed with numbers that would be stereotypical but I think she avoided it by using buttons. You know, I thought that was good.

163G   Maria: She did have I guess different things like the index thing. I thought that was kind of...

165G   Shelley: So I think that=

166G Maria: =they said that they never knew how she knew.

167G Lacey: But she did do numbers too though because...

168G Gina: The one part where she was like 11. Was it 11 or 13?

169G Lacey: Well he would try to a number and she would know that's wrong and she would be able to catch... it was when they were waiting before they sent her off on the one thing [school] which almost made me cry.

172G Gina: Yeah she says like I count 229 birds.

173G Lacey: Oh yeah.

174G Gina: Nine birds, nine.

Shelley began by illustrating the variability of people with autism through a story about a family friend who is "going to university" (156G), but went through times in which he focused on "themes" (157G) like plumbing, doors, and numbers. She then suggested that Choldenko's use of "buttons" as a theme was positive because it avoided the more stereotypical "numbers" motif. Maria then added that Natalie as "different things" like her interest in reading and memorizing indexes, which Lacey adds the example of how Natalie also "did numbers" (167G). Gina and Lacey then discussed a scene in which Moose uses numbers to entice Natalie to get on the ferry to go to the Esther P. Marinoff School. The fact that Lacey comments that the scene "almost made me cry" (171G) and Gina was able to perform Natalie's part seems to indicate that it captured their attention.

Although Sarah, Kara, Luke and Jen previously critiqued Choldenko's representation of Natalie as being good with numbers, the group members also seemed to enjoy sharing stories about people they had known. This storytelling happened in all of the groups, typically near the end of conversations when the students seemed to be done discussing the book. This particular conversation occurred after a side conversation

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having to do with the following week's assignment and was never explicitly connected to the text.

291B   Sarah: My sister's boyfriend's mom is a special needs instructor and works with autistic people. Well, a specific one. And he doesn't know my sister's name and can only recognize her by her birthday. So when she walks up he's like [date]...

295B   Kara: So weird. I love it.

296B   Luke: I went to school with a kid like that who remembers every kid's birthday because he's good with numbers but he wouldn't say your name. He'd wouldn't say your name for nothing, but he would go "April 23rd". He'd meet you one time but that's how he'll know you. He'd ask you your birthday not your name. He'd come up and say, "What's your birthday."

301B   Kara: That's strange how peoples' minds are different.

302B   Sarah: So he can't even complete full sentences, but he knows your birthday.

303B   Luke: Yeah.

304B   Sarah   I think it's so interesting that:

305B   Kara: Yeah that's part of autism is that they have a focus. So birthdays were his thing. I knew a kid that all he wanted to talk about were dolphins.

306B   Jen: Yeah.

307B   Kara: He had a dolphin stuffed animal that he took everywhere with him.

308B   Erica: I wonder why that is.

309B   Sarah: There was a kid at the Child Development Center. The green shed, or the red shed was his focus. Then they painted it. It totally threw him off.

310B   Kara: That's so sad.

311B   Sarah: We didn't even know it was his focus.

312B   Kara: Paint that thing red again! That's not nice.

The theme of this discussion was sharing and appreciating stories about the unusual abilities or interests of people with autism: Sarah and Luke both knew of people with

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autism who could remember or compute dates, Kara told about a boy who was "focused" on dolphins (305B), and Sarah supplied another example of a boy who had a focus on the "red shed" (309B). While these students critiqued the representation of Natalie's abilities as stereotypic, they also seemed to find a certain pleasure or camaraderie in telling stories of other novel abilities or interests.

In this section, I analyzed the ways in which students discussed Natalie as a representation of autism. Students compared Natalie against medical-therapeutic definitions of autism ("autism is a spectrum") and against the behaviors of people they knew with autism to evaluate the accuracy of this representation. Although many of the students were concerned that this representation might add to a stereotypical understanding that all people with autism are "like Rainman", they also seemed to take pleasure in sharing "savant stories" that could arguably be part of the same pattern of representation.

Evaluating Mrs. Flanagan as (too) caring

In the first paragraphs of *Al Capone Does My Shirts,* the reader learns that the reason that the family has moved to Alcatraz Island is "all so [Natalie] can go to the Esther P. Marinoff School" (p. 3), a residential school which offers hope for the "mentally deficient" . Although Moose is initially ambivalent about the prospect, their mother, Mrs. Flanagan, devotes her full attention to working towards this goal. When Natalie is initially rejected from the school, Mrs. Flanagan first becomes depressed, and then redoubles her efforts to prepare Natalie for a second interview: Mrs. Flanagan finds a tutor to prepare Natalie (p. 81), struggles to maintain the illusion that Natalie six years younger than she is so she will qualify for the school (p. 68), and insists that Moose "treat

Natalie like a regular sister" (p. 90) as part of her therapy to learn to communicate with others. Students in all four groups raised questions about Mrs. Flanagan's motivation for sending Natalie to the Esther P. Marinoff School, as well as her single-mindedness in her pursuit of this goal. Woven through these discussions, students brought up the fact that *Al Capone Does My Shirts* was set in 1935. These discussions become moments in which students appeal to idea of what a reasonable parent might do in this historical setting.

One question that several students raised in their discussions was how to interpret Mrs. Flanagan's motivations. Sarah initiates this conversation in her group by asking them to consider Mrs. Flanagan's single-mindedness in preparing Natalie to go to the Esther P. Marinoff School.

045B   Sarah: I said if Mrs. Flanagan really wanted Natalie to go to school because it was best for her or if she wanted it because it would make her life look so much more normal to not have the child. You know, her autistic daughter and all the time that it was obvious that her family wasn't...

049B   Kara: Normal?

050B   Sarah: Picture perfect, normal family. Yeah. Like most other people

051B   Kara: That kind of bothered me too. That it was all about getting into an institution, but then I kind of put it in the time. The era. Because it was 1935 so people didn't really understand autism like we do today. Whereas nowadays you would obviously be in a regular school and with your non-disabled peers. I read it the same way. That's a hard one. Because why... What was the purpose?

057B   Sarah: Right. And was it because they didn't know? I looked at it both ways.

Sarah suggests two possible motivations for Mrs. Flanagan's behavior: "it was best [for Natalie]" or "it would make [Mrs. Flanagan's] life look so much more normal not to have the child" (p. 45). Kara then attributes Mrs. Flanagan's behavior as a reflection "of the

time", implying both that the representation of Mrs. Flanagan could be read as historically accurate and that a contemporary mother would not make a similar choice.

Ashley raises a similar dilemma related to the theme of "cure or acceptance" when she questions the intent and impact of Mrs. Flanagan's behavior in the story. Like the conversation between Sarah and Kara, this group doesn't resolve their dilemma, but makes sense of it by considering what a parent might reasonably do for her child.

096Y   Ashley: My question is about Natalie's mom and how she is like single minded about Natalie and her disability and I asked does that hurt her chances of having the normal life she wants for her? I tried to think of like both sides. On one side like it's kind of hard to have a normal life when you're constantly being dragged from this place to this place for all these new treatments and things. But then also on the other side she's the only one who's really fighting for Natalie and for her to.... I mean the dad is too but she's like crazy.

104Y   Nadine: She went to like a voodoo person or something from like the West Indies or something didn't she?

105Y   Ashley: Yeah that was pretty intense. But then towards the end [Natalie] did start to learn a lot more because her mom was working through all these things so I don't know. It's hard to think about both ways.

106Y   Nadine: I think it was interesting to see that perspective of the disability. I mean what parent wouldn't try to do everything for their kids, you know? That's interesting.

Ashley began by asking whether Mrs. Flanagan's "single-mindedness" (096Y) and extent to which Natalie is "dragged from this place to this place for all these new treatments" (100Y) will "hurt her chances of having a normal life" (097Y). Although Ashley questioned the impact of Mrs. Flanagan's behavior, she seemed to consider Mrs. Flanagan's motives to be legitimate: she wants a "normal life for Natalie" (098Y) and she's "the only one who's really fighting for Natalie" (101Y). When Nadine brings up one of the more extreme treatments that Mrs. Flanagan tried, going "to a voodoo person"

(104Y), Ashley agrees that "was pretty intense", but then acknowledged that "towards the end Natalie did start to learn a lot more" (105Y). Nadine's final statement, "what parent wouldn't try to do everything for their kids, you know?" (107Y), returns the evaluation back to the question of the authenticity of the representation of Mrs. Flanagan as a parent.

The group then returned to the idea that authentic representations of parenting an autistic child need to be understood in a historical context.

111Y   Ashley: Part of the problem was the lack of knowledge they had of autism at the
time though. Like it could be realistic of the parents…you know what I
mean though?

114Y   Nadine: I baby-sit for a family that the oldest son was diagnosed with a high
functioning level of autism. He was two years old and he was hardly
speaking so that's why they were concerned but the mom said that year
from two to three they went to all these conferences…went to all these
specialists and they wanted to get as much information as they could on
autism and where their child stood on the spectrum and they brought him
back to the child specialist that they originally started with and they were
like this is like a totally different kid. He goes, this kid had been brought
in now after they had been working with him for a year I wouldn't have
though anything different. But he's like we know that he was at such a
high level function of autism because of last year so like you still see little
things in him like straight lines. He loves straight lines like when making
train tracks, he doesn't need it to curve around. Just straight lines is
content for him and little ways we have to like discipline him is different.
We have to talk to him differently than like his brothers would have to
deal with. But it was just neat to hear how much they invested into their
kid for that one year and then you know…it worked and then… Back up
to level. like they though he was going to be in a special education
classroom for the rest of his life.

Ashley's statement that "part of the problem was the lack of knowledge they had of autism at the time" (111Y) offers an explanation for why Mrs. Flanagan's behavior might have been "realistic", given the historical context of the story. In response, Nadine tells a contemporary story of a mother who successfully "cures" her son through intense work and dedication (114Y). The juxtaposition of Mrs. Flanagan's "extreme" measures and the

contemporary mother's success seem to suggest that what might have been an unreasonable expectation in the past, might be reasonable in the present.

Students were most sympathetic to Mrs. Flanigan when they read her behavior as leading to Natalie's improvement. In this exchange Erica refers to the fact that Mrs. Flanagan maintains the pretence that Natalie is ten years old throughout much of the book and insists that Natalie not have access to her button box.

156B Erica: Yeah. The whole being ten thing bothered me too. I was like that is so weird. Come on!

158B Jen: I'm not going to let her grow up.

159B Erica: Yeah I was like come on. I didn't like the mom. The mom bothered me in the book. The dad was like the hero and this nice guy and the mom was like horrible.

162B Luke: Took her buttons away.

163B ?: I was so upset!

164B Erica: But at the same time that's how she was getting better. Because she was like improving, you know? I feel so bad, it's so sad.

Although Erica initially began the exchange by suggesting that Mrs. Flanagan is not a reasonable mother ("Come on!", 157B) when she pretended that Natalie was ten, she concludes, "But at the same time, that's how she was getting better" (164B).

However, these students were less sympathetic to Mrs. Flanagan when they considered the impact that her choices had on Moose.

097B Kara: I didn't like the mom.

098B Erica: I didn't either because like...

099B Sarah: She neglected Moose.

100B Kara: That's what I kind of said for the negative.

101B Erica: She like…When the dad was like, "Moose needs you too." Hardly…

102B Kara: Just because he's 12 years old. [Lots of overlap here.]

103B Erica: Yeah, he does. He doesn't need you as much to do day to day things, but your still his mom.

105B Kara: He's only 12 years old.

106B Erica: He's not a grown-ass man.

Here Kara, Erica, and Sarah suggested that Mrs. Flanagan has neglected Moose, presumably because she was focused on Natalie. An authentic mother would have presumably balanced her commitments to the two children.

Gina questioned whether Mr. and Mrs. Flanagan treated Natalie as a burden in the story and linked the problem with this type of representation to one she noticed in a parent of a student with whom she worked. Lacey's response picked up on Gina's reading of her experience, rather than that of the book.

068G Gina: That's what I wrote my paper about was the parents. How when they came in contact with Natalie they were you know like loving. They said like kind of nice things but I felt like they were really… like they Natalie was a burden and like you know. Like she couldn't accomplish anything because they were lying to get her into the school. To me it was like they were just trying to like push her away and put her on someone else. Like Moose always took care of her. [Shelley: Yeah.] They were like stay with your sister while I go do this. They both worked all the time and I know it was to support the family too but I also felt that it was a way to get away. At least that's just how I kind of looked at it just because and I put it really personally because I work at a school with kids with disabilities and I see those parents all the time so it was like I was just reading about my kids' parents. Which is horrible, like I have a kid in a wheel chair that his mom never comes and picks him up. We always have to call her and say school ended at 4:30. School ended an hour ago. You need to come get your kid.

084G Shelley: That's hard though to make those judgments when you don't really know the family life…

086G Gina: No. I know but I do know the family like that kind of thing. It's clear and it's not based on… because I'm always really careful to do that.

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Gina begins by identifying a tension between her reading of Mr. and Mrs. Flanagan as "loving" (069G) and her sense that they "felt her as a burden" (071G), as evidenced by the fact that they intended to send her to the Esther P. Marinoff School and gave Moose a great deal of responsibility in Natalie's care. Gina recognized Mr. and Mrs. Flanagan as a type of parent ("I see those parents all the time", 079G) and brought that image to her reading of the book ("It was like what I was just reading about my kids' parents", 079G). For Gina, treating one's child "as a burden" is clearly a problem that she recognizes in both the text and in her work. Shelley challenged Gina's reading of Gina's own experience, rather than the reading of the Flannigans, saying "It's hard to make those judgments when you don't know the family life" (084G) which suggests that judging parents might also be a problem.

In this section, I analyzed the ways in which students discussed Mrs. Flanagan as a representation of a mother faced with dilemmas associated with "curing or accepting" an autistic child. In contrast to Natalie, who the students treated as a flat representation, the students discussed the authenticity of Mrs. Flanagan through their understanding of the choices she made in a particular historical context and against the outcome of her actions.

Reading for textual invitations and mobilization of personal repertoire

Personal repertoires: Professional knowledge and experience

Students drew on personal and textual repertoires to "read" Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan in different ways. In this section I consider the ways in which students drew directly on their knowledge of autism and families in their conversation and may have responded to invitations in the novel and the course readings for the week. Not only did

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the students' responses complicate simplistic definitions of accuracy and authenticity, but the textual invitations in the novel and course readings seemed to suggest varied ways of thinking about such evaluation.

Students in the class evaluated Natalie as a representation of autism which could be evaluated for accuracy and the degree to which it conformed to stereotypical representations of autism in the media. In order to evaluate Natalie as an accurate representation of autism, students drew on their knowledge of autism as a diagnostic category, as well as their experience working with children who they knew as autistic. For example, students frequently drew on terms that one might consider to be part of a medical-therapeutic discourse to discuss Natalie in relation autism: "spectrum" (008Y, 107G, 134B), "high functioning" (009Y, 115G), "diagnosis" (019Y, 156G), "Aspergers" (131B), "rigid life and behavior" (105G), "severe case" (110G), "sensory issues" (281G), and "theme" or "focus" (157G, 305B). A second way the students evaluated Natalie as an accurate representation of autism was by comparing her to children with autism who they knew personally and against the knowledge that Choldenko's sister was autistic. For example, Shelley shared that she knows "a handful of kids that I've met with autism... that are exactly like that" (109G) and had a family friend who went through "themes" which reminded her of Natalie's use of buttons (162G), Lacey worked with a child who went on "sensory overload" in ways similar to Natalie (284G), Kara, Jen and Sarah know kids who have a "focus" (305B-321B), and Luke "went to school with a kid who remembered every kid's birthday" (296B), just like Natalie. In their evaluations of Natalie as an accurate representation of Natalie, the students moved back and forth between evaluating her against a diagnostic category and comparing her to "examples"

from their own lives. The students treated the diagnosis of autism as historically located, but the condition of being autistic as ahistorical; Natalie could be evaluated as "autistic", even if one understood that the diagnosis was not available at that time.

This assessment of whether Natalie seemed to fit the students' understanding of autism as a diagnostic category was tempered, however, with a concern that Natalie seemed too similar to the prototypical representation of autism: the character of Charlie in *Rainman*. Jeff (015Y), Kara (129B), and Lacey (119G) all compare Natalie's facility with numbers directly with that of Charlie, while Arwyn discusses the "extreme" stereotype more generally (109R). To make this assessment, the students made an intertextual connection between Natalie and Charlie. The dilemma this raised in two groups was whether it was acceptable to have an accurate, although stereotypical, representation of autism (023Y-028Y; 104G-117G).

In contrast, students discussed Mrs. Flanagan as a believable or unbelievable character, but not as a "representation" of motherhood or ability that might be read against other texts as stereotypical. While none of the students discussed whether they liked or disliked Natalie or even considered her an actor in the storyline, the students read Mrs. Flanagan as a complex character who they liked or disliked and found reasonable or unreasonable. For example, Sarah questioned whether Mrs. Flanagan wanted what was best for Natalie (045B), Ashley questioned whether Mrs. Flanagan's choices were justified (096Y), Sarah questions her behavior toward Moose (099B), and Gina questions whether Mrs. Flanagan sees Natalie as a burden (068G). In each discussion the students, at some point, discussed whether Mrs. Flanagan's actions made sense in a historical context in which medical knowledge wasn't as "advanced" as in contemporary times. To

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do these readings, students drew on their understanding of historical and contemporary knowledge of autism, as well as knowledge of contemporary parents who successfully or unsuccessfully made choices about their children.

Invitations from the text

There are a number of ways in which the text invite the reader to read the characters in the story as "accurate and authentic" representations of a person with autism and her family. The parallels between Choldenko's Dedication and Author's Note and the story itself invite the reader to consider the representations in the text as accurate and authentic. The Dedication and Author's Note are significant in that they constitute the "paratext" of the story, the physical part of the text which is not part of the story itself, but serves to guide the interpretation of the story (Gennette, 1997). Author's Notes, particularly in historical fiction, are one of the ways in which authors establish the credibility of their text (Galda & Cullinan, 2006). In the Author's Note for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, Choldenko includes information about Alcatraz Island and autism. In the first seven pages, Choldenko describes the research she conducted to write the story and delineates which aspects of the story were grounded in historical accounts and which she created from her imagination. The second section, titled "About Natalie", is about a page long and includes several definitions of autism, historical context related to the diagnosis, and a statement about whether Natalie "represents" autism. Choldenko writes in first person, signaling that we are hearing "from the author", and includes thirty-seven footnotes and references as documentation of her research.

Rather than offering a clear "invitation" to understand the relationship between autism and Natalie in a particular way, the Author's Notes includes the same tensions that

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the students seemed to experience as they evaluated the representation of Natalie "as autistic". The first heading in the Author's Note identifies the section as about "*Alcatraz Island... where truth is stranger than fiction*" (p. 216, italics and ellipses in original) and reflects the primary focus of the section as delineating between the elements in the book which were and were not grounded in a historical record of life on the island. In contrast, the relationship between second section heading, "*About Natalie*" (p. 224), and the content of that section is less direct. Choldenko begins this section with the sentence "The character of Natalie Flanagan would probably be diagnosed with autism" (p. 224) and then goes on to define autism as:

> *A disease that affects the way your brain and sensory system work. It usually becomes evident in the first three years of a child's life. While there is a whole range of behaviors of people with autism, typically a child with autism has an extremely difficult time making eye contact, playing with other kids and sometimes even speaking. Children with autism are often prone to tantrums, repetitive behaviors and intense physical sensitivities and desensitivities...* (p. 224)

Choldenko then explains that autism was not "identified" until 1943 and suggests that "intense early intervention with applied behavioral analysis" (p. 225) represents an encouraging new treatment for autism. The opening sentence invites the reader to understand Natalie as autistic: "Natalie Flanagan would probably be diagnosed with autism" and then goes on to describe the "typical child with autism". This description, of course, mirrors Natalie's characterization, particularly in the beginning of the book, before Natalie is "cured"; Natalie has trouble making eye contact (p. 23, 182), playing with other kids (previous to coming to the island, p. 33), speaking (p. 4, 118, 168), has tantrums (p. 9, 68, 167), engages in repetitive behaviors (p. 4, 26, 81), and has intense physical sensitivities and desensitivities (p. 93). (Interestingly, the characteristic that

students were most critical of—the representation of savant abilities—is not included in this list of the "typical" autistic child, although students found the "invitation" to understand Natalie in stereotypical ways in the text.) The historical context of when autism was created as a diagnostic category explains why Natalie was not named as autistic in the text and the new treatments that are suggested also explain the progress that Natalie made as she worked with Mrs. Kelley. Learning "About Natalie", as the section title suggests, is the same as learning "about autism". However, the dedication of the book and the final paragraph of the Author's note add another level of complexity to the way in which the paratext might constitute an invitation to understand the representations in the text as accurate or authentic.

The Dedication of the book and the last paragraph of the Author's Note both refer to another way in which Choldenko might be considered an "informed" author: Choldenko refers to her experience as a sister of a woman with autism, Gina Johnson. First, the first dedication reads:

> *To my sister,*
> **Gina Johnson**
> *and to all of us who loved her—*
> *however imperfectly.* (np)

Although this reference doesn't provide any information which might suggest that Gina Johnson might be an inspiration for the character of Natalie, Choldenko makes this connection in the final section of the author's note, *"About Natalie."* In the final paragraph of this note (and of the book, as a whole) she writes:

> *Natalie is a wholly fictional character. She is not meant to symbolize or represent autism in any way. She was inspired by my own sister, Gina Johnson, who had a severe form of autism.* (p. 225)

The Dedication, which refers both to Choldenko's sister, and "all of us who loved her" introduces both the idea that book is not only "for" (and presumably about) a person with autism, but also her family or "all of us who loved her". The addition of "however imperfectly" characterizes that love or relationship in a way that resonates with how Moose comes to understand his mother's love for Natalie. In this scene Moose it contemplating contacting Al Capone to try and persuade him to use his influence to secure a place for Natalie in the Esther P. Marinoff School.

> *I know I have to do something. Have to. I have no idea what. I wonder if this is how my mother feels. How she has always felt.*
>
> *Now I understand. When you love someone, you have to try things even if they don't make sense to anyone else.* (p. 201)

Moose, like Mrs. Flanagan, might question his care of Natalie, but he is motivated by love. The parallels between the Dedication, Author's Note, and storyline invite the reader to receive this text as an accurate and authentic representation of not only autism, but also the dynamics of a family with an autistic member.

The complexity of these "bookends" to *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, read against the diagnostic information earlier in the Author's Note, suggest that the "invitations" that the text provides to "understand Natalie" are multifaceted, and maybe even contradictory: the book is dedicated both to Gina Johnson and "to all of us who loved her", Natalie is both "wholly fictional" yet "inspired by [Choldenko's] sister, and Natalie is "not meant to symbolize or represent autism" yet she fits the supplied diagnostic criteria and was inspired by someone "who had a severe form of autism". The only bid for authenticity that Choldenko can't make, is that she is autistic herself. However, the idea of an

"insider" author which is debated so frequently in scholarship on multicultural children's literature, doesn't seem to get raised when discussing representations of disability.

Invitations from the session readings

In chapter 4, I described what I found to be general invitations in the course to respond to texts through a reader response framework and understand "diversity" in relation to accuracy and authenticity. Rather than reexplore that terrain, I would like to consider how the particular readings assigned for session 11 may have invited students to consider representations of disability, in particular, through evaluations of accuracy and authenticity . The students had read three articles in preparation for the class. The first, "Experiencing Prejudice and Discrimination" (Smart, 2001), introduced the idea that people with disabilities are often subject to the stereotypical beliefs of people without disabilities. In this article stereotype is defined as "an exaggerated belief about a category [of people]" which is then taken to be the "sole determinate of the individual's attitudes and behaviors" (185). Smart goes on to describe the ways in which twelve different stereotypes of disability create limiting "disability roles" (187) which work as discriminatory social barriers: role entrapment, lowered expectations, lack of privacy, hypervisibility and overobservation, solo status, token status, infantilization and paternalism, objectification, viewing people with disabilities as animals, unnecessary dependence, marginality, lack of equal social status relationships, and second-class citizenship.

The second article that students read for the class session was Williams, Inkster, and Blaska (2005) "The Joan K. Blaska Collection of Children's Literature Featuring Characters with Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses". In this article, the authors present a

rationale for reading books which include characters with disabilities to children. However they caution, "Due to their limited understandings, young children are typically susceptible to believing stereotypes. It is, therefore, imperative that young children receive accurate and positive information to help limit bias in their thinking" (p. 71). The resource they offer readers to evaluate literature is Blaska's "Images and Encounter's Profile" which consists of a ten point checklist for evaluating the storyline, language, and illustrations for bias.

Finally, the third article that the students read was Tal's (2001) "Swimming in the Mainstream: A Discussion of Criteria for Evaluating Children's Literature about Disabilities". In this article summarizes trends in the representation of characters with disabilities, noting common stereotypes and symbolic uses of disability (i.e. the disabled villain). Tal suggests that literature should be evaluated in the following way:

> How can stereotypes be avoided? Information about the disability needs to be accurate and up-to-date, and the language describing the disability chosen with sensitivity and an awareness of current usage. In many books, the disability is the focus of the entire story rather than an integral part of a character exploring universal solutions understood by every reader. Characters with disabilities must be more than a vehicle for the growth of the main character. Parents and other adults should be neither omniscient problem solvers nor tossed in as unmotivated plot obstacles. (p. 31)

Tal seems to be advocating for books which include more fully developed characters who are not "used" in stories which focus exclusively on the "problem" of disability and the last sentence of the quote included the representation of adults under the umbrella of what one might evaluate. However, her conclusion seems to collapse the idea of authentic or accurate representation with the "overcoming story": "Rather than allowing the reader a glimpse into the world of individuals struggling to lead a full life despite their disabilities, the disability itself becomes the focus of the story (p. 32)." I read the implication of this

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conclusion to be that the authentic and non-stereotypic story which includes a character with a disability would, in fact, focus on the "struggle to lead a full life", rather than on other possible characterizations and storylines.

As I reread the articles that students were assigned to read for the session against the ways in which students discussed Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan, I'm struck that, in some ways, students did respond to *Al Capone Does My Shirts* in ways that were consistent with the invitations to evaluate the texts based on the degree to which they avoided stereotypes and were "accurate and authentic". However, they very rarely drew on the articles directly in their conversation and, as my previous analysis suggests, the evidence their drew on in their evaluations came from their professional knowledge and personal experience and was specific to autism and the role of mothers of autistic children, not disability. Arwyn was the only student to talk about representations of "disability" more broadly when she referred to a quote from the Williams article to argue that accuracy in representation is important because children can be misled by stereotypical representations. However, even Arwyn incorporates autism as a more specific term when she explains "you don't want [children] to get false stereotypes, especially if a child hasn't been around an autistic child of someone else with a disability" (149R).

Rereading Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan through the trope of disability

Students in the class evaluated the representations of Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan against their understandings of what would constitute an accurate or authentic representation of a person with autism or a mother of a child with autism. As I read these responses, I was struck by the ways in which their focus on accuracy and authenticity seemed to lead them treat Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan as if they were "real" people, rather

than as characters constructed by an author in the development of a story. This made me wonder how reading Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan as literary figures might shift the focus of one's response to those characters. In this section I reread *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by focusing on how the characters in the story were constructed as figures in a recognizable literary trope used in the representation of disability, in general, and autism, in particular.

Mitchell and Snyder (2000) argue that characters with disabilities are often included in literature as recognizable literary forms in which disability drives both characterization and plot (p. 4). This "use" of disability is reflected both in the ways that disability tends to define characters and function as the "problem" to be resolved in the story. Specifically, once a disability is introduced into a story, this "deviance" must be resolved in order to reach a satisfying resolution to the story: a return to a normative state. Mitchell and Snyder describe the pattern that such narratives take as "the trope of disability": the character with a disability is introduced to "attract… the reader's interest" (p. 53), the significance of the disability is explored, the disability becomes the problem around which the story is organized, and the disability is "resolved" through death, cure, or a "reevaluation" of its significance. This pattern is so common in literature that, with the exception of what Mitchell and Snyder identify as "disability counter-narratives", stories which include characters with disabilities often seem "incomplete" unless the disability is "resolved" for the ableist audience. In *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, and Fascination*, Murray (2008) suggests that the dominant representation of autism in narrative has taken on an even more specific form of the trope of disability; "a particular form of the 'overcoming narrative', usually that of families, in which autism is

seen as a potential destroyer of the family unit, but emerges as an affliction that can be fought through perseverance and love "(15).

In my rereading of *Al Capone Does My Shirts* I found that Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan's characters work as complementary components of the trope of disability. First, both characters are introduced in the early chapters of the books as "different" and as defined by their relationship with each other in the family. The reader learns that Natalie typically goes to schools in "where kids have macaroni salad in their hair and wear their clothes insider out and there isn't a chalkboard or a book in sight" (pp. 3-4), she is fascinated with buttons and Moose explains that "if I hide one behind my back, she can take one look at her box and name the exact button I have" (p. 4), she speaks in a distinctive fashion in which she refers to herself in the third person, has "tantrums" which go on "for days and days" (p. 5). Murray argues that one of the most pervasive ways that characters with autism are characterized is through the display of "savant" abilities. The first time that the children on the island meet Natalie, Moose tries to prove that Natalie isn't "retarded":

> *"When's your birthday, Piper?" I ask.*
>
> *"November sixteenth."*
>
> *"1922?"*
>
> *"Yep."*
> *"Natalie, what day of the week was Piper born?"*
>
> *"Thursday," Nat says without looking up.*
>
> *"That right?" I ask Piper.*
>
> *Piper doesn't answer, but her eyes open wider. She chews at her bottom lip.*
> *"What else can she do?" she asks.*

"She's not a trick monkey."

"She'd never make it as a trick monkey. She only has one trick," Piper says.

"487 times 6,421 is 3, 127,027," Nat says.

Although the surface ideology of the text suggests that it isn't right to treat Natalie "like a trick monkey", these opening chapters display Natalie as a character who is "different" and therefore, of potential interest to the reader.

As a figure of "the mother", Mrs. Flanagan is defined by her role in the "family narrative" in the ways in which she displays an "excess of love and care" for Natalie (199). Mrs. Flanagan is represented as such a mother in the first chapters of the book as well. This scene, in which Moose remembers the previous day's train ride, introduces the idea that Natalie's behavior is a problem and that Mrs. Flanagan will have the primary responsibility for her management.

> *Nat was kicking and screaming. She pulled a curtain off the rod and sent her button box flying down the aisle. My mom had her arms around Nat, trying to keep her from hurting anyone. The conductor and the motorman were yelling. People were staring. One lady was taking pictures.*
>
> *My mother finally got her calmed down by sitting on her right in the middle of the train aisle. I don't know which was more embarrassing. Natalie's behavior or my mother's. (p. 9)*

Although Mrs. Flanagan's response in this scene might be read as a reasonable response, she also suffers from the "excess" that is predicted in the family story. In one of the next scenes one of the children on the island asks Moose how old Natalie is:

> *Natalie's age is always ten. Every year my mom has a party for her and she turns ten again. My mom started counting Nat's age this screwy way a long time ago. It was just easier to have her younger than me. Then my mom could be happy for each new thing I did, without it being another thing Natalie couldn't do. (12)*

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Given that Natalie's "real" age is fifteen at this point in the story, Mrs. Flanagan's insistence that Natalie "stay ten" is a clear signal to the reader that Mrs. Flanagan is a particular type of mother who cares so much that she is difficult to understand from the perspective of a "reasonable" reader.

As the story develops, the reader learner more about the ways in which the whole family is impacted by the problem of Natalie as autistic and by the problem of Mrs. Flanagan as a mother who *must* "care too much" in order to cure her child. This dynamic in which an aspect of Natalie poses a problem, which leads Mrs. Flanagan to seek a solution which in itself becomes a problem, works as the narrative structure of the story. For example, in the beginning of the story Natalie's "problem" is that she is that she does not communicate in typical ways, has "tantrums" which are unpredictable and violent, and is treated as a "spectacle". One of Mrs. Flanagan's responses is to subject her to dehumanizing treatments ranging from invasive testing at UCLA to the use of voodoo dolls. Not only is the failure of these treatments a problem in the sense that they do not cure Natalie, but Mrs. Flanagan's cycle of desperation, hope and disappointment become a central problem in the family. Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan are constructed against each other to create tension and resolution in the plot. From Moose's perspective as the focalized voice in the story, his mother's reactions are as much of a problem as Natalie's "difference".

As the story develops, the problems related to Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan are redefined. Mrs. Flanagan employs Ms. Kelly to provide Natalie with therapies which cause problems both because of the demands they place on family members (for example, Moose must give up a weekly baseball game) and because Natalie initially resists having

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her button box taken away and familiar routines disrupted. Once the therapies begin to work, however, the problem shifts again; Natalie must resist her own body in order to make further progress. As I will discuss in chapter 6, the metaphor which is employed at the point is that Natalie must escape her body: "Natalie screams louder. I look into those trapped eyes. Wherever she is, she can't get out, which only makes her scream louder" (168). Natalie does become more and more in control of her body, which, in turn, leads to a new problem in the mother-daughter relationship.

> *"Natalie is getting better. Do you know what she said yesterday? She said, 'You make me sad.' Do you think I like making her sad? I don't. But she's never said anything like that before. 'What is 55,031 times 59,032.' 'Does May 16 fall on a Wednesday in 1914?' This she's said. But never you—not* Mommy—you, *a pronoun. I've been trying to get Natalie to use pronouns her whole life. And feelings...she said something she felt. Natalie is communicating with us. (157)*

What is significant about the above quote is that it typifies the ways in which the resolution of autism in the story is both caused by Mrs. Flanagan's perseverance and at her own expense.

The resolution of the family story always redeems the mother in that her "excess" does lead to her child's cure and the family's reconstitution; by the end of the story Natalie takes her place in the community and emerges with a "voice", Moose and Mrs. Flanagan find common ground and mend their relationships when they recognize their common love for Natalie and the part that each has played in her "progress", and the family receives the news that Natalie has finally been admitted to the Esther P. Marinoff School. The problem of autism wouldn't work as a driving force in the story if Natalie was allowed to continue on with life without therapeutic intervention or if the therapies that she received had initially worked or if she had maintained her resistance to intervention. In order for there to be tension around these issues, for the trope of

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disability to work, both Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan have to be constructed in particular

ways. Natalie has to be a resistant body, as well as emerging as a an agent who resists her

body and her mother. Mrs. Flanagan has to "do whatever it takes": sacrifice, struggle,

love fiercely and exhibit a level of determination that could overcome obstacles. The

narrative arc in which "autism is seen as a potential destroyer of the family unit, but

emerges as an affliction that can be fought through perseverance and love" (15) can only

be achieved if both Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan are characterized according to the trope.

Contrasting the Readings

The contrasts between how students and I "read" the characters of Natalie and

Mrs. Flanagn provides another example of how different concerns, knowledge or reading

strategies from one's repertoire shifts how one might evaluate a text. When discussing

Natalie, I found that students evaluated her as an accurate, although possibly stereotypic,

representation of autism. In these discussions student drew on medical-therapeutic

knowledge, their experience working with children with autism, their familiarity with

Rainman as a prototypic representation of autism, and their understanding of autism as a

"spectrum" to complicate each other's evaluations of text. When students discussed Mrs.

Flanagan, however, they focused on whether they found her behaviors to be a reasonable

desire and attempt to "cure" Natalie and evaluated the impacts of therapies on Natalie and

the rest of the family. In my rereading of the story, I considered the ways in which

Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan worked as figures in a recognizable literary trope: the family

autism story. This reading suggests both why Natalie's characterization and role in the

story are overdetermined by her autism and why Mrs. Flanagan can only work as a

mother-figure if she is characterized as dedicated to curing Natalie and faced with barriers and dilemmas to that cure.

In the next chapter I analyze an excerpt from the Blue Group's discussion in when Jen posed a question which did not focus on accuracy and authenticity, but on the use of metaphor in *Al Capone Does My Shirts*.

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Chapter 6:

Reading Natalie as Prison(er) in *Al Capone Does My Shirts*

Introduction

One of the most distinctive features of *Al Capone Does My Shirts* is that the story takes place in the 1930s on Alcatraz Island. This setting is emphasized in the opening pages of the book. The title alludes to the setting in its reference to Al Capone and the cover features an aerial photo of the island. Before the story begins the reader finds a double-spread aerial photo of the island with "Alcatraz Island (1935)" in the lower right hand corner and labels pointing to areas designated for prisoners and those designated for the families of the prison guards. The pages which divide the sections of the book feature gray and white "prison stripes" or bars as background. The opening paragraph the first chapter, "Devil's Island", sets the tone.

> *Today I moved to a twelve-acre rock covered with cement, topped with bird turd and surrounded by water. Alcatraz sits smack in the middle of the bay—so close to the city of San Francisco, I can hear them call the score on a baseball game on Marina Green. Okay, not that close, but still. (p. 3)*

At least in the beginning chapters of this story, Alcatraz Island is distinctive both because it houses a prison and is a place you wouldn't want to be. It is barren and isolated and just out of contact with the mainland. The protagonist of the story, Moose, resents the fact that his family was forced to move to Alcatraz Island so the family could afford to send Natalie to the Esther P. Marinoff School, which his mother believes will provide Natalie with a chance at a "normal" life.

While in the last chapter I explored the ways in which students understood the representation of Natalie as stereotypical or realistic, in this chapter I elaborate a question that one of the students, Jen, raised about the relationship between the setting of the story

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and the representation of Natalie: Did Choldenko "set the book at Alcatraz to have

readers be able to relate to Natalie?" On one level, exploring this question is of interest

because Jen and her group took up a topic which was very different than how others in

the class made sense of *Al Capone Does My Shirts* and that I, as an instructor had not

anticipated. It is also interesting because it suggests the potential benefits of inquiries

which take into account both literary form and social meaning. As in previous chapters,

my intent is to open up new meanings in the text and explore a way of reading that we

had not previously practiced in class.

In this chapter I consider the ways in which different readings of a central

metaphor in *Al Capone Does My Shirts* led to different "ways of understanding Natalie,"

Moose, and autism. I begin with a close reading of a segment of the Blue Group's (Erica,

Jen, Kara, Luke, and Sarah's) discussion that suggest a series of interrelated metaphoric

associations in the text, which I characterize as "Natalie as prison(er)," and how the

group did and did not take up Jen's analysis. Given the relative lack of uptake from the

group, my analysis of the ways in which group members drew on textual and personal

repertoires in the discussion is both about what Jen drew on in her reading of the text and

a speculation that the "naturalness" of considering autism as a prison made it difficult for

students to know what to do with Jen's question. Finally, I return to the text to reread *Al

Capone Does My Shirts* in search of different meanings associated with the "Natalie as

prison(er)" metaphor which complicate how one might understand that metaphor.

Reading for themes in small group discussion

Constructing the "Natalie as prison(er)" metaphor

In the first five minutes of the group's discussion of *Al Capone Does My Shirts* Jen asks her group to consider whether the setting of the story on Alcatraz Island may have been a deliberate attempt by the author to help readers "understand Natalie". To support this analysis, Jen and several group members engage in "consistency building" to suggest a meaningful, parallel structure in the text (Rabinowitz, 1987). Although the group does not take up the question, Sarah implies that extending the metaphor might be one way of imagining Natalie's future.

Erica, Jen, Kara, Luke, and Sarah gathered around a rectangular table in our main classroom. After checking in to see how each other's school placements are going and introducing themselves by name (a practice that I've asked students to do to help me in recognizing voices so that I can transcribe) Jen opened the small group discussion:

001B   Jen: I don't care, I'll go. I don't have my exact question, but I'll go. Do you think [the author] set the book at Alcatraz to have readers be able to relate to Natalie? Like being trapped in her body and trapped in a prison.

004B   Sarah: Ahhh...

005B   Kara: Oh wow. Interesting.

006B   Erica: That's really like...

007B   Luke: That's deep. It really is.

008B   Erika: Yeah.

009B   Jen: But I don't know. I didn't support it at all very well.

010B   Kara: That's still a fancy question. [Laughter from group.] Very fancy. I couldn't have come up with something like that.

In this opening exchange, Jen introduced the topic of her Questioning the Text paper: whether Choldenko deliberately created a parallel between the setting of the story and Natalie's experience. She framed the significance of the metaphor as something the

author may have done to help the reader "relate to Natalie" as being "trapped in her body" (002). Rather than immediately taking up the content of Jen's question, Jen's group members responded to the topic she has offered for discussion with evaluative comments: Kara found the question "interesting" (005), Luke said the idea is "deep" (007), and Sarah and Erica generally affirmed Jen's idea (004, 006, 008). Kara's second evaluative comment, that Jen posed a "fancy question," might be read in several ways. In the context of the discussion, "fancy" might simply be one more positive evaluation of Jen's idea. However, the laughter from the group, followed with Kara's statement "I couldn't have come up with something like that" (007-008) might suggest another set of connotations that implied that Jen's question is different than previous topics of conversation: "fancy" can imply novelty, imagination, superiority, or complexity (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd edition). In response to the group's evaluative comments, Jen seemed to downplay her own work, "But I don't know. I didn't support it very well" (006). In these first eight turns of the discussion, the group seemed to have indicated their support for the question, without entering into a discussion of the content of the question. In Jen's next turn she continued to develop her argument that the setting of the story is related to Natalie's treatment.

012B   Jen: I just said because the convicts weren't allowed to talk and she has trouble talking. She had her hair shaved off when she went to UCLA and was like tested like an animal. The point of the Esther P. Marinoff school was to turn out kids who could function in the world and that's the point of prison. And then, umm...

In this turn Jen began to describe a set of interrelated metaphors that she has found in the book. Not only might Natalie's body be like a prison (003), but also Natalie is like a prisoner since both are unable to talk (112), have their heads shaved (p. 113), and are

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subject to institutions whose goal is to help them "function in the world" (115). Jen's

examples imply another layer of association in which hospitals, schools, and prisons are

equivalent in the ways in which they silence, dehumanize, and rehabilitate. In doing so,

Jen has not only continued to build a case that Choldenko has constructed an extended

metaphor, but also has elaborated on the possible meanings implied by those metaphors.

017B   Kara: Wow. That's a really interesting question. I like that.

018B   Luke: That's good.

019B   Kara: That's taking it to a different level. Wondering why did she... why
             Alcatraz?

Kara and Luke initially continue the pattern of evaluative commentary, with Kara

commenting that this analysis is somehow at a "different level" than previous discussion

(019). She then began to engage in the substance of Jen's question as she also asked why

the author may have set the story at Alcatraz (019).

021B   Jen: Yeah, so I thought it might be more than just a coincidence so...

022B   Sarah: Even just being like:

023B   Kara: :That's what I was thinking when I was reading. What a creative thing to
             come up with!

025B   Luke: Yeah.

026B   Kara: The whole thing was very creative. Great question.

027B   Luke: Really good question.

028B   Jen: So that was my question.

Jen's statement that the setting "might be more than just a coincidence" (021) suggests

that the author may have be deliberately constructed to communicate an idea to her

audience. This idea is consistent with both how Jen initially framed her question "do you

think the author set the book in Alcatraz so readers would..." (002) and how Kara framed her follow up question "why did she... why Alcatraz?" (019). Sarah attempted to enter the conversation (022), but was cut off by Kara who remarked that she also noticed the metaphor while reading (023) and thus seemed to agree with Jen that the setting is intentional, although it isn't clear whether the author's use of metaphor is "creative" or whether she was characterizing Jen's question as "creative" (023, 026). Again, the group did not expand on the question of whether the author intentionally used a metaphor which seems to lead Jen to signal the close of the conversation (028).

Sarah then asked a question which shifted the tone and focus of the discussion from identifying a pattern in the text to imagining the implications of such a pattern.

029B Sarah: Do you think she'll ever be let out of her body?

[Soft, uncomfortable laughter from group, followed by 6 second pause.]

031B Jen: Who knows? [3 second pause]

Unlike Jen's previous work in which she built a case that she found a series of metaphors in the text (001, 112), Sarah extended the metaphor to bring together several strands of the "Natalie as prison(er)" metaphor. If Natalie is like a prisoner and her body is like a prison (003), then the question of whether "she'll ever be let out of her body" is one possible elaboration of the metaphor suggested by the author. One interpretation of the question is that Sarah was asking the group to imagine what might happen to Natalie beyond the end of the written book. In this case, "let out of her body" might stand for "will Natalie ever be able to communicate with others" or "will Natalie be fully included in society" or, more euphemistically, "will Natalie die". The phrasing of Sarah's question, in the passive voice, is also interesting in that it does not name who or what

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might "let Natalie out". Rather than taking up her question, the group seemed to be uncomfortable and the light tone and quick rhythm the previous conversation is disrupted when the group laughs and then lapses into silence. Jen's response "who knows" (031) acknowledged Sarah's question, but seems to imply that the question is one that can not or should not be pursued. Jen then continues:

032B   Jen: I got it from the back of the book, I'm not going to lie. Well,
                not from the back of the book but they… it says, "Autism is extreme
                aloneness from the beginnings of life". So that's where I came up with it.

035B   Kara: It makes sense because that's how they describe a lot of times that she
                didn't have control over a lot of the things… that's a good parallel to
                make.

038B   Sarah: The connection between the island itself and:

039B   Jen: :Right. I said specifically Alcatraz. It's not only a prison, but she's on…
                isolated from everything else.

In this series of turns the group returned to the work of exploring the construction of the metaphor. Jen explained that reading the author's note prompted her question (032) and elaborated on her understanding of Alcatraz as a particular prison that is "isolated from everything else" (040), which Sarah has noted is an island (038). Both the passage she quotes, "Autism is extreme aloneness from the beginnings of life" (p. 224) and Sarah's comment about Alcatraz as an island further expand the network of metaphors to include Autism and islands. Kara's comment that Natalie doesn't have control (036) appears to refer to the parallel between Natalie and prisoners (012) or perhaps Natalie as trapped in her body (003) or anticipates Sarah's reference to Natalie as isolated on the island (038). After Sarah's attempt to extend the metaphor beyond the structure of the text, this series of turns seem to return to establishing the variations of the metaphor within the text. The remaining four turns bring an end to this discussion:

041B   Sarah: That's helpful. Makes my question look pretty...

042B   Luke: Yeah, I don't...

043B   Kara: It was good.

044B   Sarah: All right, I'll go next. No where near as deep.

The discussion of metaphor drew to a close as Sarah, Luke and Kara compliment Jen on her question. Sarah signaled that Jen's "turn" is over and introduces a new topic of conversation, prefaced with the statement that it is "no where as deep" (044). In the remaining twenty-five minutes of discussion, the group did not return to the topic.

Praise and distance

One of the most striking features of this segment of discussion was the extent to which group members evaluated Jen's question, a pattern which I believe communicated support to Jen, but did not engage in the content of the question that Jen brought to the group. Roughly half of the turns in this excerpt consisted of praise for Jen's question: Jen's question was "interesting" (005), "deep" (007), "fancy" (010), "good" (018), at a "different level" (019), and "creative" (023). On one level, this positive evaluation might indicate support within the group for her question. Yet, these comments also seem to distance the group members from the question; as Kara states, it is "fancy" (010) and "I couldn't have come up with something like that" (010). Although there are moments when members of the group build on Jen's question (019, 029, 035, 036), most of the group interaction is evaluative without specifying what, in particular, is helpful about her idea or interesting about the question. In these turns, rather than engaging in the question, perhaps challenging it, complicating it, or building on it, the group evaluates it. In response, Jen's language was tentative and tends to downplays her own work, saying

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"But I don't know. I didn't support it very well" (009), "I just said because.." (012), "so I thought it might be..." (021), and "I got it from the back of the book. I'm not going to lie" (032). Yet, as I read through the transcript of the remaining discussion and other small group discussions from the semester, I found that the group did typically take up each others questions, expand upon them, circle back to topics as they made connections among the questions that individuals brought to the group. This exchange seemed "different", leading me to think that it was the question itself, not the dynamics of the group, which led to the emphasis on evaluation, rather than engagement.

Reading for textual invitations and mobilization of personal repertoire

From a reader response perspective, this conversation is interesting to think about both in terms of what students did with the focal literature as well as where they seemed to be willing, but perhaps not know how, to extend Jen's question as an opportunity for further inquiry. In this section I begin by considering the reading strategies Jen seemed to be employing in her framing and discussion of her question and then extending her analysis as a way of considering the textual invitations to which she seems to be responding. I then consider how her group's minimal uptake of Jen's question might be understood as a reflection of the "obviousness" of the metaphor that Jen proposes to the group and speculate that they might have had more success engaging in Jen's question if they had had access to other texts or ways of reading which had denaturalized the metaphor.

Invitations from the course

One of the reasons I was interested in Jen's question is that she posed a question which reflects one of the goals of the course: "To enhance students' abilities to read

diverse texts both as literary works and as bases for discussions of social issues" (Course syllabus). Yet, the focus of the course was almost exclusively on disciplinary debates and reading experiences that explored issues of accuracy and authenticity. In the scholarship we read in the course and in my teaching, the idea of "literary quality" and "social meaning" were treated like separate evaluations; one might find a book of high literary quality which included stereotypical representations of a social group or a book of low literary quality that was accurate or a book which fit both or neither criteria for excellence. One of the common statements I made in the course was that, ideally, we wanted to find books which were both "good stories" and helped us think in more complex ways about our world. Even our work with Martin's "Black Modes of Discourse in Contemporary African-American Picture Books" (2004) was focused on the idea that certain literary forms were authentic (and pleasurable) parts of a tradition of African American language and storytelling. In other words, I don't think that the course "invited" Jen to pose a question related to the ways in which literary form and social meaning might intersect or be inseparable. Jen's question constituted a new type of inquiry for which we didn't share a common repertoire of response that was grounded in the content of the course.

Personal repertoire: Reading strategies and knowledge of metaphor

Jen and her groupmates did not mobilize personal experience or refer to their reading experiences when discussing the idea that Choldenko might have used metaphor to "help the reader understand Natalie". Jen, in particular, seemed to be mobilizing two understandings of how form and meaning intersect. Rabinowitz (1998) argues that there are conventional "rules" that authors employ with the expectation that readers will share

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the understanding of their significance. Jen seemed to be drawing on knowledge of the

conventional ways that literary parallels work in texts:

> Take, for instance, the way we are expected to respond to the conventional use of
> literary parallels. It involves a rule of notice (it is appropriate to pay attention to
> textual elements that parallel one another), but it is also a rule of signification
> (parallel forms suggest parallel meanings), a rule of configuration (given an
> element A, there is a good chance that there will be an Element A' parallel to it),
> and a rule of coherence (given elements A and B, their mutual presence can be
> explained to the extent that we are able to interpret them as parallel to one
> another). (1998, p. 46)

Recognizing patterns such as these is equivalent to what Iser discussed as "consistency

building" in the reading act: the reader mobilizes text to fit with and adapt a coherent

sense of the components of the text. Jen and her groupmates seem to be mobilizing this

strategy when they establish relationships between Natalie and prisoners and Natalie and

prisons. Table 6.1 summarizes the parallels that Jen and her groupmates made during the

discussion, which I will refer to as the "Natalie as Prison(er)" metaphor.

Table 6.1   **Natalie as Prison(er)**

Comparison	Occurs	Context/Support
Body ~ Prison	003	Trapped
	029	Do you think she'll ever be let out of her body?
Natalie ~ Prisoner	012	Can't/won't talk
	035	Doesn't have control over things
UCLA ~ Prison	013	Hair shaved; tested like animal
School ~ Prison	014	Turn out kids who function in the world
Autism = "aloneness"	032	Defined in author's note
	039	Isolated from everything else

A second layer of Jen's question focused on the potential of this pattern to suggest meaning; she recognized the pattern as metaphoric. Rather than treating the significance of the metaphor as of artistic or aesthetic significance, she focused on the ways in which the metaphor communicated meaning. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) write that the "essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5) and that metaphors do not need to be "consistent" in the images they produce, as long as they are "coherent" in the ways they foreground how a concept is structured (p. 45). So, although the image of Natalie "as an prison" and Natalie "on Alcatraz Island" may be inconsistent in the image they produce, they are coherent if they

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are both read as evoking a system in which people might be defined by social labels, the nature of rehabilitative institutions, and the ways in which we dichotomize mind and body. Jen has pointed to a rich set of associations in the text which could be used to "relate to Natalie".

Sarah extended this web of associations when she asked, "Do you think [Natalie will] ever be let out of her body?" (029) As I commented above, the uncomfortable laughter and silence, followed by Jen's comment "Who knows?" (030-031) were a distinct break in the rhythm of the group's interaction. In the context of the book, the phrase "let out of her body" could be interpreted in several ways: it might suggest a cure, a move towards "normal" communication, or even death. Additionally, Sarah's use of the passive voice "she will be *let out*" might raise the question of who or what would release her. If she is a prisoner, who is her jailer? Her guard? Her advocates? Who would "let her out" and under what terms? The phrasing of the question doesn't suggest "escape", but might Natalie let herself out in a similar way to Weasel, the jailhouse lawyer who is negotiating his own "legitimate" release/escape (p. 73)? One possibility that Sarah's question and the group's response opens up is that exploring the metaphor might be more than establishing its presence in the text, but could involve moving to an uncomfortable, and potentially revealing, space in which the metaphor is explored more deeply. The group's reluctance to pursue Sarah's question is significant because it constitutes a moment in the discussion which could connect to the ethical implications of the question. Rather than just asking whether there is a metaphor, Sarah asks the group to imagine the implications of the metaphor. What associations do we have with the component parts of the metaphor? What other relationships and meanings might this

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metaphor suggest? If it "helps us relate", how so? If it helps us understand, what does it help us understand? What are the ethical implications of such understanding?

Although one way to understand their lack of uptake is that they didn't have access to the types of reading strategies which they could mobilize to extend this inquiry, another is that the metaphor itself seemed so "natural" that there didn't seem to be much to talk about beyond recognizing the associations in the text. In *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, and Fascination*, Murray (2008) writes that the representation of the autistic individual as someone who looks out from "somewhere behind [the eyes]" and is "locked in" his or her body is "a virtual orthodoxy in narrative depiction of autism" (p. 34). Murray argues that this way of understanding autism is so entrenched in contemporary U.S. and British society, that it ceases to be recognized as a metaphor—it has become a "natural", and therefore, unremarkable, way of understanding autism.

Invitations from the text

As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, both the setting of the story and the "problem" of Natalie's place in the family and world are evident from the cover of the book to the Author's Note which features information about Alcatraz Island, as well as autism. Although both Jen's reading of the parallel treatments of those components have already provided an introduction to the metaphor, I do want to touch on one additional feature of the text which I believe naturalizes and legitimizes the metaphor: it is used by, or in the characterization of, all of the reliable characters in the story, including Natalie herself.

During the scene in which the children on the island meet Natalie for the first time, Theresa, who is depicted as being the most open-minded of the children, tries to

explain Natalie's "difference" to Piper by relating the explanation that Moose and

Natalie's mother gave her.

> *Natalie lives in her own world. That's what Mrs. Flanigan said... Sometimes it's*
> *a good world and sometimes it's a bad world. And sometimes she can get out and*
> *sometimes she can't.* (18)

This explanation, which locates Natalie "in her own world", suggests that Natalie moves

back and forth between an interior world and the outside world of her family and

community. Despite the fact that the quote also suggests that Natalie's interior world is

"sometimes good" and "sometimes bad" and is a space which "sometimes she can get out

and sometimes she can't", Mrs. Flanigan is adamant that Natalie be provided with every

chance to participate in therapies which would allow Natalie to be "more present".

Likewise, as Moose, Natalie, and the rest of the family prepare for an interview with the

director of the Esther P. Marrinoff School, Natalie struggles not to "retreat" into her

interior world: "Then the forces inside her seem to collide. I can almost see the battle in

her eyes. All at once, the storm seems to win. Her eyes are leaving" (183). When Moose

suggests that the family leave Alcatraz Island, his mother responds, "Nothing on this

island is half as dangerous as having [Natalie] locked in her own world. Not one half, not

one fourth, not one tenth as dangerous as that" (157). Unlike the previous quote, this

characterization draws more directly on the prison metaphor: Natalie is "locked" in a

dangerous, interior world.

Moose interprets his own interactions with Natalie in terms of "comings and

goings" as well. Moments of connection between Moose and Natalie are described as

Natalie joining Moose: "Natalie turns all the way around and looks me straight in the eye

in that weird way she has of suddenly being present after weeks of being somewhere

else" (23). Moments of disconnection are described as Natalie leaving her brother. When Moose and Theresa accidentally knock over a structure that Natalie has been intent on building, Moose narrates that "Natalie has gone away somewhere deep inside. Only her body is left, rolled up tight and completely still" (118). This quote implies several of the "Natalie as prison(er)" elements: Natalie has "gone away", she is "deep inside" her body, which is distinct from her subjectivity. Yet, this description also suggests that Natalie has retreated into herself, rather than being forced to leave.

Although there is some ambiguity in the first two-thirds of the book about whether Natalie's interior world is good or bad, by the end of the book Natalie fights to remain in the "outside" world. In these scenes Natalie's body again acts as a prison, with her eyes described in a similar way to the "barred windows" (p. 35) which Moose considers to be the prisoners' access to the outside world. When Moose prevents Natalie from leaving the apartment and playing with her buttons, Moose interprets her frustration in the following way: "Natalie screams louder. I look into those trapped eyes. Wherever she is, she can't get out, which only makes her scream louder" (168). Natalie's body becomes a prison: she is "trapped", not present, and unable to get out from behind her eyes. Later in the scene Natalie does overcome the pull of her interior world, which allows her a degree of agency she hasn't had earlier in the story.

> *"Eye outside," she says loud, like I'm deaf.*
>
> *I say nothing. I don't know what she wants.*
>
> *Her face seems to close in with effort. "Eye want to go outside," she says finally.*
>
> We're working on pronouns. *My mom said this. Pronouns. Natalie, who never called herself anything but Natalie her whole life, just called herself "I".*
>
> *"Oh," I say. "I want to go outside?" My voice breaks.*

" I want to go outside, " she says, the look of relief on her face as big as thirty states.

I open the door then. I do. How could I not? (170)

Moose first misunderstands Natalie as saying "eye outside", echoing his previous interpretation of Natalie's eyes as being the boundary between her interior and exterior. Then he understands Natalie to be using "I", which is significant because it is the first time he has heard her use the first person pronoun to refer to herself. The request that she has made, to be allowed to leave the apartment, is a request to control whether she can "go outside", which echoes her previous struggles to "control" her movement between her interior world and presence with the family. Moose gives her this freedom (he had barred the door with his body) when he understands her to be using the "I" pronoun, a marker of "normal" communication.

Although I did find other metaphors through which to understand Natalie, they are either less developed or set up in order to be discredited as legitimate ways of "understanding Natalie". Moose and his father use a metaphor which I will call "life is a game" throughout the story as Mr. Flannigan gives Moose advice on how to be a brother to Natalie. The metaphor is consistent with Moose and his father's love of baseball and takes on added significance when Natalie successfully procures a coveted "prisoner baseball" for Moose at the end of the story. The first instance of this metaphor occurs when Moose wonders whether Natalie is intentionally dragging her feet so that they will miss the ferry to the mainland: "I like to think that all of these years have been part of her plan too. And one day Nat will tell me it's all a crazy game she made up to see if we really loved her" (p. 25). Although he rejects the idea that Natalie has consciously been

testing or manipulating his family, the metaphor introduces the idea that life might be a game to be played and that Natalie might be a player in that game. Later, when Moose reflects on a memory of getting angry at Natalie for ruining a school project, Moose remembers the advice that his father gave him.

> *My father told me having Natalie as a sister is like playing ball when you're 100 times better than your opponent. You'll always win, but it will make you feel like a louse.* (p. 31)

In this quote, the "life is a game" metaphor is extended in a way that suggests that Moose shouldn't expect Natalie to succeed according to the same standards he applies for himself. This might indicate a failure on Natalie's part because she "can't compete", but it might also indicate that the rules of the game are rigged to favor some, but not others. Finally, Moose's father draws on the metaphor at the beginning and end of the story to make the point that, despite the fact that life is unpredictable, one should engage in life to the fullest extend possible.

> *Nobody knows how things will turn out, that's why you go ahead and play the game, Moose. You give it your all and sometimes amazing things happen, but it's hardly ever what you expect.* (p. 34)

> *Didn't you learn anything? Just be there. Just be close and it will happen. Nobody knows until they go ahead and play the game…. Life is amazing, isn't it? You can't ever tell what will happen. Nobody knows until they go ahead and play the game.* (p. 214)

Although in the second quote Mr. Flanigan is responding to the news that Natalie has been accepted into the Esther P. Marinoff School, this theme of engagement and "getting oneself out there" might also be applied to Natalie's contact and friendship with Onion; she only succeeds in developing a friendship with a young man outside of her family because she found a time and space in which she was not constantly monitored. Although the "life is a game" metaphor is not as directly applied to "understanding Natalie" and is

not as dominant in the text as the "Natalie as prison(er)" metaphor, it does invite the reader to make sense of life and the text through metaphor.

The text also includes a number of direct and implied metaphors which are introduced and then dismissed as those through which one might "*misunderstand Natalie*". Moose also rejects more subtle forms of metaphoric understandings of Natalie's "condition" when he describes the lengths to which his mother has gone in her attempts to cure Natalie.

> *Once [my mother] sent away for voodoo dolls and carefully followed the instructions of some witch doctor in the West Indies who wrote about how to relive Natalie's condition. Another time she Natalie to a church where everybody stood up and waved their arms. She read the Bible to her for two hours every day.* (p. 67)

The implication in this quote, which Moose rejects, is that autism might be understood as either possession or a curse from God. I found two other instances of metaphor related to understanding Natalie in the text: Moose states, "I hate being the brother of a stone" (p. 22) and "In some ways Natalie's very predictable, more like a clock than a human being" (p. 145). In the first case Moose regrets this characterization of Natalie and, in the second case, the comment later turns out to be ironic because it precedes Moose's discovery of Natalie's involvement with Onion. In fact, Moose has *not* being able to read Natalie "like a clock".

At times, Moose uses a metaphor to describe what Natalie is *not,* even as his actions suggest such an association. For example, when the other children on the island meet Moose and Natalie for the first time, Moose tries to convince Piper that Natalie's "not retarded" by asking Natalie on what day of the week Piper was born. When Natalie answers correctly, Piper asks, "What else can she do?" to which Moose replies,

"Natalie's not a trick monkey" (18). This creates a tension in the text between how

Moose *has* asked Natalie to "perform a trick" in order to impress the children, and his

desire not to have the children see it as such. Likewise, during a scene in which Moose

speaks on behalf of Natalie, he explains, "Usually I don't like when people talk to Natalie

through me. I'm not a ventriloquist and Natalie isn't my dummy" (152). Although Moose

rejects the trick monkey, ventriloquist, and possession metaphors, the text still seems to

imply that metaphor is a powerful way to "understand Natalie". The problem that Moose

finds is not that metaphors are used to understand his sister, but that using the wrong

metaphors leads to negative outcomes for Natalie. In rejecting particular metaphors,

Moose is acknowledging the power of those metaphors to shape responses to Natalie and,

in doing so, invites the reader to do the same. However, the dominant metaphor of the

text, "Natalie as prison(er)" remains unchallenged.

Rereading the prison(er) metaphor for transgressive meaning

Murray (2008) argues that the "autism as prison" metaphor has become such a

natural way of understanding autism that it is hard to suggest that one might not want to

"escape" or "be released" from one's "autistic body". Murray writes that "There is a

vocal autistic community that sees the cure campaigns[, represented through prison

metaphors,] as narratives that amount to a kind of genocide, a desire to eradicate

cognitive difference" (p. 209). Yet, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors both

suggest and constrain meaning, depending on how the component parts of a metaphor are

developed and put in relation to one another. As I suggest in previous chapters, one of my

goals in this project is to explore alternative ways of reading texts which open up

different possible meanings in our focal literature. As I worked with Jen's reading of the

metaphoric relationships in the text, I began to think of her reading as one in which she identified parallels in the text which then became a meaningful way of understanding Natalie's experience as similar to that of a prisoner. As part of my work to better understand Jen's reading of the text, I began to identify passages in which the component parts of the metaphors Jen found in the text were described. The process of assembling these quotes and reading them in the order they appeared in the story led me to question whether there were other possible readings of the "Natalie as prison(er)" metaphor which would produce different associations and potentially transgressive meanings. Rather than comparing elements to each other, I looked back on the development of the component parts of the metaphors to identify the ways in which Moose's descriptions of each of those components shifted as the story progressed. While Jen's reading emphasized the parallels between the experience of Natalie and prisoners, this new reading foregrounds the way that Moose, as a privileged member of society (able/free), recognized the limited ways in which he had imagined who Natalie and the prisoners might be.

At the beginning of the story Moose wants to be on Alcatraz Island like he "wants poison oak on [his] private parts" (p. 3). He understands prisoners as either nameless or notorious "murders, rapists, hit men, con men, stickup men, embezzlers, connivers, burglars, kidnappers" (p. 3) who "can fashion weapons out of nothing" (p. 40), are sexual threats to the women of the island (p. 38), and do not belong in his domestic space (p. 5). The warden explains that, "these are men who have been tried and convicted of the most heinous crimes imaginable—terrible men with nothing but time on their hands." (p. 37). Communication with prisoners is forbidden both by the Warden who tells Moose "Rule number one: There's no contact with convicts" (p. 38) and among prisoners who are

required to remain silent in their cells and as they move about the prison (p. 35). Even if Moose did want to communicate with a prisoner, this would be virtually impossible given the structural divisions between the prison and the rest of the island (pp. 5, 8, 34, 38, 39).

> I see a huge chain-link fence that blocks our path. The fence maybe twelve or fourteen feet high with three strands of barbed wire run across the top. It goes up the hill, where it connects to the rec yard wall, and down the hill as far as I can see. Maybe even to the water, though I can't tell from here… High up in the corner of the rec yard there's a guard with a Browning automatic training his sights on the convicts, watching to make sure they don't pull any funny business. (p. 95)

At least in the opening chapters of the book, Alcatraz Islands is an undesirable, divided space in which communication with and among prisoners is dangerous, unwanted, and impossible. Only guards can cross boundaries between the prison spaces and those in which Moose and his family and friends live. Alcatraz is a place which provides no hope for the future and is a place where no one would want to be (p. 83).

In parallel fashion, Moose initially has little hope for Natalie. He imagines the Esther P. Marinoff School, to which the family hopes that Natalie will be admitted, as a place where "kids have macaroni salad in their hair and wear their clothes inside out and there isn't a chalkboard or book in sight" (p. 4). Moose loves his sister and is able to communicate with Natalie through the routine he and Natalie have developed, but he is also embarrassed and discouraged and reflects that "Nat's tantrums go on and on for days and nothing makes them stop. It's impossible to know what will set her off" (p. 9). He's equally pessimistic that Natalie will be accepted by the other children on the island and remarks, "New people don't understand about her. They just don't" (10). Like the prisoners, "Natalie lives in her own world… sometimes it's a good world and sometimes it's a bad world. And sometimes she can get out and sometimes she can't" (19).

However, as Moose begins to settle into life on the island, many of his first impressions of the island, prisoners, and Natalie are upset. First, Piper, the warden's daughter coerces Moose into participating in a scheme in which she and the other children from the island sell mainland children the opportunity to have their laundry done by prisoners on the island. To encourage sales, Moose and Piper tell sensationalistic stories which Moose realizes are grounded in the myth, but not reality of Alcatraz (12, 38, 45, 46, 48, 74, 127). Not only do they successfully shuttle laundry to and from the mainland, but also in and out of the prison. When the warden catches them, he says "Apparently I can't trust you children any more than I can trust the hardened criminals... I'll handle this like I would uprising in the cell house. All of you will be punished without exception" (114). Not only has Moose learned that "what gets said" about Alcatraz Island may be false, but also that physical boundaries and identities may be blurrier than he previously imagined.

If Moose is forced to think of himself as "like a criminal", he also begins to learn more about prisoners as "regular" people. Moose's passion is playing baseball and he's surprised to learn that baseball is the main recreational pastime within the prison (p. 56). One of his classmates even teases him by saying, "Piper said they play ball on Alcatraz. The prisoners, I mean. Maybe you could play with them... Oh well, wouldn't want to play with them anyway. Probably steal all the bases" (p. 88). Moose also learns that finding a baseball that has been "hit over the wall" is considered to be valuable to both children on the island and on the mainland. The lure of finding one of these baseballs eventually leads Moose to finding a "gap in the fence" which allows him to cross into the

prison area (p. 153). When Moose reflects on his first six months living on Alcatraz he

realizes that the events and people on Alcatraz Island have become normal to him.

> *Another funny thing is how used to living on an island with a bunch of criminals I*
> *am. It would seem strange to live with regular people after this. Even when I saw*
> *the convicts unload the laundry from the boats, it was boring.* (p. 127)

Even Al Capone, the most notorious criminal on the island, becomes a "guy with a mom"

(p. 210) after the children arrange to be on the ferry and meet Al Capone's mother.

Rather than imagining his crimes, Moose imagines Al Capone as a boy whose mother

"held his hand when they crossed the street, packing his lunch for school and sewed his

name in his jacket" (p. 134).

As Moose learns to accept life on Alcatraz as "normal", Moose and the other

children on the island also come to accept Natalie as a member of the community with

whom communication may be challenging, but not impossible. As part of the "therapy"

that Natalie's tutor suggests, Natalie spends time with Moose and the other children after

school and Natalie even takes a part in the laundry scheme by counting and dividing up

the profits. As Natalie's birthday approaches, the children expect and are eventually

invited to the celebration. Moose takes Natalie with him in his search for the coveted

"prison baseball" and he reflects:

> *We're getting along, Nat and I. It's peaceful to spend time with her out here.*
> *Sometimes I even tell her stuff that's bothering me. I don't know if she*
> *understands, but she's quiet like she hears.* (p. 143)

However, although Moose and the children become more and more successful in

recognizing Natalie as a worthwhile member of their community, Moose experiences a

crisis when he realizes that Natalie has had on-going communication with one of the

prisoners.

The climax in Moose's understanding of both the humanity of a prisoner and

Natalie's comes when Moose returns from one of his baseball-hunting expeditions to find

Natalie holding hands with Onion, "prisoner 125". Moose struggles to reconcile his

immediate assumption that Onion has taken advantage of Natalie with the evidence that

Natalie is pleased with the relationship.

> *Natalie is holding hands with a man convicted of some awful crime. It's so*
> *strange, so awful and so... normal. Natalie doesn't look weird. She's my older*
> *sister. A sixteen-year-old girl holding hands with a man not much older than she*
> *is. This is terrible. This is good.* (p. 185)

To come to this point Moose has to question his assumptions that all prisoners are bad, as

well as recognizes Natalie as a young woman who would "naturally" be interested in

holding hands with a young man and is capable of communication with a young adult

outside of the family.

Although Moose understands that communication with prisoners like Al Capone

is almost impossible (letters are only allowed between family members [p. 128] and are

heavily censored [pp. 207, 222]), he succeeds in contacting Al Capone to ask him to use

his influence to intervene on Natalie's behalf and secure her acceptance into the Esther P.

Marinoff School, which Moose now imagines to be an opportunity for Natalie to learn

communication skills. In contrast to his initial impressions of the island, Moose now is

able to see the beauty of the island and can, albeit faintly, hear the voices of the prisoners.

> *It's beautiful out. The blue-black night all around, the black, black water. San*
> *Francisco like a bright box of lights. This is the most beautiful place I've ever*
> *been. Then I look at the cell house, sad and silent. The lights are dim. I don't hear*
> *anything except from deep inside the sound of one metal cup clanking the length*
> *of the bars and one lone voice calling for help... They do that now and then.*
> *Usually it's a bunch of them, that way it's hard to tell who's doing it.* (p. 191)

Moose reflects on the island as a community which "Natalie has been more a part of things here on the island than ever before. She's had a life here, for the first time. Maybe just a little bit of a life. But a life just the same" (p. 199).

If Jen's reading of the metaphors in the text foregrounds the powerlessness and injustice that prisoners, people with disabilities, and children experience in institutional settings in which those groups are subject to the will of those in power, reading the text with an emphasis on how these relationships may be reimagined might suggests more hopeful message. By reading the story as one of shifting understandings, the reader is positioned to identify with Moose as he develops more complicated understandings of those places and identities and relationships; life on Alcatraz Island becomes "normal", prisoners become individuals, institutions become more complex, and he learns to respect and pay attention to how Natalie communicates her own needs and desires. The overall message of the story can be read as acknowledging both the challenges and benefits of communicating across categories of difference for the purposes of disrupting those categories and recognizing common humanity. However, despite this new reading of the metaphor, the end goal is still the same: Natalie, although not "cured", achieves recognition as she becomes more "normal" in her ways of being and communicating.

Contrasting the readings

One of the affordances of a reader response approach to interpretation is that it allows for multiple readings of the same text. The contrasts among the readings of metaphor in *Al Capone Does My Shirts* that I've explored in this chapter illustrates this potential, as well as foregrounding the potential benefit of expanding readers' repertoires so that they can engage in a broader range of types of inquiries. Jen presents her group

with examples from the text which suggest a metaphoric relationship between the representations of Alcatraz Island, prisoners, institutions and Natalie's experience as autistic. In doing so Jen uses several conventional reading strategies, what Rabinowitz (1998) calls "rules of notice", to mobilize and configure examples from the text which work metaphorically to foreground the ways in which prisoners, people with disabilities, and children are subject to dehumanizing treatment in social institutions. One of the ways I made sense of the group's response to Jen's question is that the textual and cultural invitations to understand "Natalie as prison(er)" were so strong that, absent reading strategies which would prompted them to question this metaphor, the group had no where to go with the inquiry.

In my rereading of *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, I considered the ways in which the shifts in Moose's understandings of Alcatraz Island, prisoners, and Natalie can be read as an invitation to readers, particularly those with privileged identities, to reconsider dominant and stereotypical attitudes toward people with disabilities and encourage communication and community. To do so I mobilize an additional reading strategy in which I searched for evidence that the meanings of the component elements of the metaphors shifted from the point of view of the protagonist of the story. However, I still find that even this rereading still relies on the assumptions that the autistic body is confinement that is best to escape.

One of the reasons that I was able to pursue multiple readings of the same text was that I have a reading history and access to scholarship which provides me with a (somewhat) flexible repertoire of reading strategies and models of literary understanding. My sense that Erika, Jen, Kara, Sarah, and Luke may have been interested in pursuing the

topic of metaphor beyond their short conversation, but may not have had shared

repertoires of literary or reading strategies to do so, anticipates one of the conclusions I

reach in the next, and final, chapter of this dissertation: the potential of pursing teaching

and scholarship which explores the ways in which readers develop more flexible

repertories with which to pursue inquiries related to dis/ability in children's literature in a

variety of ways.

Chapter 7:

Complicating what it means to Read Dis/ability

In the introduction to Chapter 1, I shared a teaching anecdote in which I described

my surprise when students responded to *Al Capone Does My Shirts* based on what I

understood to be an unquestioned faith in contemporary medical knowledge of autism.

Since I had not anticipated this type of response, I began to question whether and how the

literature and course had invited such responses, what resources students were bringing to

their readings, and what assumptions I was bringing to my reading and teaching with this

literature. When I turned to scholarship on representations of disability in children's

literature, I found that most resources written for educators focused on documenting

patterns and trends in representation and was grounded in the assumption that "positive

representation" of disability in children's literature was that which avoided stereotype in

favor of accurate and authentic representations of people with disabilities (e.g. Landrum,

2001). A second body of literature, which I refer to as concerned with "re-imagining

disability," provides an alternative way of reading which focuses on how "dis/ability" is

constructed as a system of difference in particular social and historical contexts (e.g.

Quick, 2008). While each body of scholarship offers a critical approach to responding to

and evaluating representations of dis/ability in children's literature, neither bodies of

literature consider how particular readers draw on their personal and social repertoires of

knowledge to respond to textual invitations to understand dis/ability.

The context of the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature"

course provided an opportunity to consider how preservice teachers and I responded to

textual invitations to understand dis/ability as we mobilized resources that ranged from

personal experience to scholarship on multicultural literature to metaphoric language that seemed so natural that it almost went unquestioned (Murray, 2008). In this self-study, I drew on textual reader response and disability studies theories to investigate the ways in which we "read dis/ability" and responded to two questions:

- ◆ How did students in the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course mobilize textual invitations and personal repertoires to respond to representations of dis/ability in small group discussions of *Becoming Naomi Leon* and *Al Capone Does My Shirts*?

- ◆ What additional meanings are available in the texts when they are read through a Disability Studies framework?

In order to explore these questions, I positioned myself as a "reader" of the students' discussions, the context of the course, and the focal literature with the intent to generate readings of those texts which would be educative to the extent they complicated and broadened how we might imagine ways in which to read dis/ability in children's literature. As is typical of self-studies, I found that paying close attention to the ways in which students made sense of texts not only led me to a greater appreciation of their intellectual work and pushed me to reconsider the assumptions I brought to my reading of the focal texts, but also contributed to scholarship on disability in children's literature.

In this chapter I read across the findings from chapters four through six to make two related arguments: 1) the variability and nuance of students' responses to *Becoming Naomi Leon* and *Al Capone Does My Shirts* complicates the common assumption in scholarship that texts can (or should) be clearly identified as accurate or authentic outside of the context of a reader's active evaluation of a text and 2) the Blue Group's attention to metaphor in *Al Capone Does My Shirts* and my rereadings of the focal literature through a Disability Studies framework foreground the ways in which literary form and

social meaning intersect. Next, I consider the implications of these findings for scholars interested in representations of disability in children's literature and teacher educators. Finally, I consider the limitations of this study and suggest new directions for future study.

The "literary work" of evaluating accuracy and authenticity

Until recently, scholarship on representations of disability in children's literature has focused on creating and using evaluative frameworks that assess the degree to which representations of disability are stereotypical, accurate, or authentic. The overall thrust of this scholarship has been to seek out texts which reflect the "real life" experiences of people with disabilities with the understanding that sharing these stories with children is a first step in increasing acceptance and building inclusive communities (Baskin & Harris, 1984; Quicke, 1985; Landrum, 2001). Implicit in these studies is the sense that the meanings of literature are stable and rest "in the text" and that evaluating the degree to which a representation is accurate or authentic is relatively straightforward once one learns to recognize common stereotypes associated with disability (which are to be avoided) and search for evidence of more complex and "positive" representations. As Mitchell and Snyder (2000) note in their overview of scholarship on representations of disability in adult literature, articulating what might count as a negative representation seems to be much more straightforward than theorizing what counts as positive representation. Paying attention to the "literary work" (Iser, 1974) that students did as they drew on the focal texts and various repertories suggests that, while students found notions of accuracy, authenticity, and positive representation to be meaningful, determining how to evaluate representations based on those criteria was complex.

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The reader response approach used in this study illustrates the ways in which students did draw on language related to accuracy and authenticity as they evaluated texts, but did so through a process in which the meanings of those terms was constantly being negotiated and redefined as they were put into relation to other criteria. For example, as students in the Green Group evaluated Owen as a representation of a "positive and optimistic" character whose use of tape may or may not indicate a recognizable disability (chapter 4), the students drew on resources ranging from what they enjoyed in their reading (a positive character as "likeable"), what they found personally valuable in characters with disabilities (optimism as admirable), what they understood to be professionally persuasive (medical-therapeutic knowledge as a basis for accuracy), what they understood to be educational purposes of representation (accuracy and authenticity as remediation for stereotype), and how Owen compared to their own experience with "normal" children. As students drew on these multiple resources to evaluate Owen, they found it necessary to reconsider or rearticulate their understandings of what constituted "positive representation." However, rather than coming to any definitive definitions, small group discussions acted as sites in which students questioned the their own and each others evaluations of texts: What does it mean if we find the characters we enjoy to be unrealistic? How does one know when it is appropriate to diagnose a character? If the purpose of this literature is to educate, what should children be learning? To provide another example, as students in the class discussed the representations of Natalie and Mrs. Flanagan in *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (chapter 5), they engaged in similar negotiations in which they discussed the tensions between valuing historical accuracy, medical-therapeutic accuracy, and non-stereotype

representations of autism. Both the variability of readings within each group and the ways in which readers mobilized personal knowledge in their readings suggest that accuracy and authenticity are not only "in the book" (Landrum, 2001), but might be better understood as "literary work" which not only involves responding to textual invitations, but also mobilizing one's values, understanding of the world and scholarly resources to construct evaluations that are persuasive based on negotiated and shifting priorities.

These findings complicate and extend the work of Ware (2001; 2006) who suggested that teachers are overly focused on "diagnosing" characters and benefit from courses which incorporate Disability Studies theories into their curriculum. While Ware discusses teachers' readings in monolithic terms, this study illustrates the ways in which preservice teachers' can be supported in readings are more complex. For example, while students in the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course did mobilize medical-therapeutic knowledge to "diagnose" characters, they did so because they believed that this type of accuracy was an important part of avoiding stereotype or understanding characters. In chapter 4, we saw an example of how students negotiated the "diagnosis" of Owen in ways that recognized the relationship between "normal" and "disabled". In chapter 5, we not only saw an example of how students treated Natalie as an example of autism, but also how students disagreed about the significance of the way in which her characterization reminded them of *Rainman*. In chapter 6, the Blue Group's discussion of metaphor provides an example of a very different way of responding to Natalie that was not about medical diagnosis, but literary form. Although I agree that incorporating theories from Disability Studies into the curriculum may have helped us further question the idea of "diagnosis", this study suggests that the students were able to

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draw on a variety of resources from within and outside the course to play with multiple definitions of accuracy and authenticity.

Recognizing the intersection of literary form and social meaning

More recently, scholarship which draws on theories from Disability Studies has focused on the ways in which dis/ability itself is constructed in texts and reflects contextualized understandings of what (or who) is considered normal or different. Although the focus varies among projects, this scholarship focuses on questions related to the ways in which historical understandings of disability are reflected in texts (Dowker, 2004; Foertsch, 2009; Keith, 2001), how texts position the reader to understand the significance of "normal" and "different" (Christensen, 2001; Haberl, 2001), and how texts might include transgressive messages that ask the reader to "revalue" that which has previously been marginalized (Quick, 2008; Mills, 2002). This scholarship begins with the premise that texts are constructions that reflect and have the power to reshape assumptions about dis/ability. This study extends this scholarship by illustrating the ways in which theory from Disability Studies can be used to generate alternative readings of dis/ability in children's literature that are not grounded in negotiations related to accuracy and authenticity, but raise questions about the relationship between literary form and social meaning. In chapter 4, I drew on Anderson and Merrill's (2001) concept of dis/ability to focus my reading on the ways in which Owen could be read as dis/abled in context and transgressive in the ways in which he resisted teasing by classmates. In chapter 5, I drew on Mitchell and Snyder's (2002) "trope of disability" and Murray's (2008) "family autism narrative" to illustrate the ways in which characters in *Al Capone Does My Shirts* might be read as figures in a culturally recognizable story in which the

character with autism represents a threat to the family which the mother struggles to overcome through love and perseverance. Finally, in chapter 6, Jen's reading of the "Natalie as prison(er)" metaphor and my rereading of that metaphor for alternative meanings illustrated the ways in which literary form conveys social meaning. These "rereadings" of *Becoming Naomi Leon* and *Al Capone Does My Shirts* not only suggest options for reading them in different ways, but also illustrate some of the ways in which new tools of literary analysis might be brought to children's literature which includes representations of disability.

Implications for Children's Literature

Scholarship around representations of disability in children's literature tends to be divided into bodies of work which are concerned with selecting and evaluating representations of disability for the purposes of education and bodies of work which are concerned with the ways in which dis/ability is constructed in text. Neither tradition has taken advantage of the ways in which methods of reader response might generate new dilemmas, questions, and ways of reading. This study suggests the value of employing methods of self-study, qualitative research design, and literary analysis in the study of children's literature. First, it provides an example of the intellectual work that can be accomplished by attempting to understand and extend students' readings of focal texts. By positioning myself as a "reader" and analysis as "reading", I was able to take up explore the tensions and questions that students raised in their readings in ways that led to a more complex understanding of the ways that texts are open to particular readings and the individual and shared resources that readers draw on to animate those texts.

Implications for Teacher Education

This study illustrates the ways in which providing preservice teachers with opportunities to read, question, and discuss literature which includes representations of disability can lead to more nuanced and complicated understandings of how dis/ability "works" both in those texts and as a socially and historically located category. The context of the course, which invited students both to reflect on their own processes of meaning-making and how scholars interested in issues of diversity discuss concepts such as "authenticity", provided students with opportunities to share their interpretations, consider the ethical implications of such readings, and consider the ways in which alternative readings might suggest new understandings of both literature and the world. Given Ware's critiques of the ways in which teachers are socialized into "reading" characters and their students as objects of diagnosis, courses such as "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" provide opportunities to consider how dis/ability might be considered as a social identity and construction in ways which are both similar and different than other forms of social identity.

Limitations of the study

While this study does complicate discussions around the ways in which readers evaluate representations of accuracy and authenticity in adolescent literature which includes representations of dis/ability and offers alternative ways of reading representations of disability in this literature, it was limited in its scope and focus. The particular context of the course, with its strong emphasis on reader response and questioning the nature of accuracy and authenticity across different forms of diverse literature, inevitably shaped the questions students asked related to representation of disability in our two focal texts. One of the assumptions of this study is that different

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pieces of adolescent literature will include different invitations, gaps, and indeterminacies with which a reader might create meaning and the students' questions and concerns would inevitably have been different had we read different focal literature. Additionally, as I discussed in chapter 3, I consider my analysis to be one possible reading of the field texts and focal literature which may or may not resonate with how the students would describe their own readings of the texts. So, although this work is educative in the ways in which it complicates assumptions around disability in adolescent literature, my intent has not been to make broader claims about how dis/ability is represented in adolescent literature, represent my own reading as the students' perspectives on the process, or make generalizations about how preservice teachers read these texts as a group. To do so would require asking different types of questions and employing different types of methodologies.

Implications for future research

This project suggests a number of directions for future research which might include textual analyses of representations of dis/ability in children's, adolescent, and young adult literature; reader response studies; and inquiries exploring pedagogical options for teachers who are interested in expanding their own and their students' repertories of understanding how dis/ability works in text.

One area for future inquiry would be to expand the types of questions that scholars bring to children's, adolescent, and young adult literature. Questions which might be brought to these inquiries might include:

- What does it mean to be "disabled" or "different" in these texts? What does it mean to be "able" or "normal" in these texts? In what ways does the text suggest that these categories or identities are stable, fluid, or valued?

- What narrative figures or tropes can be identified in children's, adolescent, and young adult literature? How might these patterns be understood as similar or different than those found in adult literature?

- How is dis/ability constructed in particular types of literature? For example, how do genre conventions shape representations? How does the story change when it is focalized through the perspective of an able, disabled, or dis/abled narrator? In what ways does the particular disability represented shape what seems possible in the story? How is dis/ability represented visually in picture books?

- How are different social identities constructed with and alongside representations of dis/ability? For example, what do these texts imply about the relationship between gender, race, sexual orientation and dis/ability?

- In what ways might considering children's literature, as a genre written for dual audiences of children and adults (Nodelman, 2009), yield different readings of representations of dis/ability in texts?

The focus of these inquiries might be on rereading literature which had previously been evaluated for accuracy and authenticity, as well as bringing these types of questions to literature which had not previously been read with a focus on issues of dis/ability. Given that dis/ability in children's literature is undertheorized as a field, these new readings might provide a basis for developing models that articulate the variety of ways that texts might offer invitations to understand dis/ability.

A second focus for future inquiry would be to continue to investigate how different readers make sense of dis/ability in different texts and in different contexts. Questions which might be brought to these inquiries might include:

- What do preservice teachers say about what they find to be interesting, valuable, or provocative in their reading of texts which include dis/ability? How do these evaluate shift in different contexts and for different purposes?

- What role does identity and experience play in how readers respond to texts? In what ways might these resources be mobilized to produce varied readings? How do these identities change in response to reading?

- How do readers respond to different texts and types of texts? What commonalities might be found across responses? What differences? What types of knowledge do readers draw on as they read books from different genres or with characters with different disabilities or which are focalized from different perspectives?

- In what ways are K-12 teachers using texts which include representations of dis/ability with their students? For what purposes? How do they select these texts? In what ways do children respond to these texts?

Such inquiries would have the potential to foreground the ways in which these readers shared common cultural and more local resources (for example, from participating in a particular teacher preparation program), as well as the diversity of resources that readers mobilize in their readings. This work might suggest ideological assumptions that readers take for granted, as well as the ways in which readers resist or complicate dominant ways of reading texts. Projects which included interviews or other types of reader participation might also provide insight into how readers understood and valued particular types of texts for different purposes.

Given my conclusions that the content of the course played a role in inviting students to evaluate representations of disability in particular ways, this work also raises questions about how particular pedagogical strategies and contexts for reading shape reader response. Questions which might be brought to these inquiries include:

- How do different pedagogical approaches and communities shape the meanings that readers find in texts?

- What strategies might allow instructors to broaden their own and students' repertoires of reading strategies that they might bring to texts?

- What is gained and lost in structuring curriculum around the topic of "dis/ability"? Or positioning dis/ability as a form of multicultural literature? What other options might be available?

- How do readers learn to recognize and question dominant and trangressive ways of representing dis/ability in children's literature?

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❖ What types of inquiries might readers undertake within communities to explore their own questions and generate new ways of reading?

Pursuing these types of questions might lead to developing more flexible repertoires of teaching strategies, as well as reading practices. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1991) suggest that this type of inquiry involves a commitment to "forming and re-forming frameworks for understanding practice" (p. 290) with the understanding that teaching practice should be adapted to new contexts, the interests of the students, and emerging values and political commitments.

This study has provided an opportunity to consider the ways in which reader response and disability studies theories complicate scholarship which, in the past, has focused primarily on questions of accuracy and positive representation of disability in children's literature. However, more work is needed to consider the ways in which readers make sense of dis/ability in different texts and contexts. Our scholarship, reading, and teaching of literature which includes representations of dis/ability can only be enhanced by continued efforts to explore the complexity of ways in which texts invite readers to meaning, readers respond creatively to those textual invitations, and students and teachers expand their literary repertoires to incorporate new ways of reading dis/ability.

Appendix A

History of the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" Course

The following is an excerpt from an instructional framework that I wrote as a course paper during the spring 2007 to introduce new instructors to the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course.

History of the Course

The "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" course was conceived when Laura Apol, Suzy Knezek, and Jackie LaRose approached the Teachers for a New Era committee to propose designing and piloting a new children's literature course. Although they brought several ideas to the meeting, the committee was most enthusiastic about the idea for a course which would focus specifically on exploring and examining diverse children's literature. The idea of such a course made sense on several levels. First, although multicultural literature was included and discussed in the introductory children's literature course, "Reading and Responding to Children's Literature", the topic warranted deeper consideration than which was possible in that context. Second, the course filled what the committee considered to be a programmatic "gap" in course offerings. A course exploring "issues of diversity" would be consistent with the College of Education's commitment to prepare teachers who would be committed to teaching all students. With the support of the committee, the children's literature team, under the direction of Laura Apol, began to design the course.

Early on in the process, the children's literature team recognized that we needed additional education ourselves in order to construct and teach the course. Therefore, in the spring of 2005 the team wrote a series of grants to schedule professional development and purchase technology, scholarly resources, and trade books. Additionally, the team

received a university grant for "creating a diverse and connected community", which was used for similar purposes. Our goals were multifold: to become more familiar with diverse children's and adolescent literature, to deepen our understandings of the key concepts and debates in the field, and to explore how our own social identities and histories might impact our understanding of the literature and teaching of the course.

The last goal proved to be one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of our preparation and on-going development as instructors. During the fall of 2005, the team participated in a series of two retreats entitled "Doing our own work", which were facilitated by Melanie Morrison, the co-founder and co-director of the Leaven Center. Broadly stated, our work with Melanie focused on examining our racial identities and conceptions of race and racism. The scope of this experience is difficult to summarize succinctly, but our activities included: reflecting on our own understandings of our identities as members of historically dominant and marginalized groups, developing a vocabulary and framework to discuss racism and other forms of oppression, and developing authentic relationships and just institutional practices. An added benefit of this retreat is that we had the opportunity to work with an experienced facilitator. Melanie's thoughtful lesson design, attention to group process, and willingness to "challenge in a way that builds" impacted our own instructional design and practice. We left the retreat both convinced of the need for courses like the "Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature" and humbled by the sense that the retreat was just the beginning of our learning.

During the fall 2005 semester, Suzy Knezek drew on her experiences in a masters level course on diverse literature, taught by KaaVonia Hinton-Johnson, to design and

teach the pilot "Issues of Diversity" course. Concurrently, Laura Apol taught a doctoral seminar titled "Exploring Issues of Diversity in Children's and Adolescent Literature". The doctoral course was unique in that the pilot of the undergraduate course became part of the content of the doctoral seminar; Suzy allowed seminar members to observe her class, brought samples of her students' work for us to analyze, and invited undergraduate students to give us their perspective on the course. Members of the doctoral seminar included all of the members of the children's literature team, other interested doctoral students, and Mary Hennessey, a librarian at the East Lansing Library who has remained a colleague and resource.

In the spring of 2006, the Children's Literature team was honored with the "All University Excellence in Diversity Award" by Michigan State University in the category of "Emerging Progress Toward Excellence in Diversity". The members of the team included: Laura Apol, Claire Batt-Vandenburg, Tom Crisp, Suzy Knezek, Jackie LaRose, Valerie Struthers Walker, and Kurnia Yahya.

As of Spring 2007, Claire Batt-Vandenburg, Tom Crisp, Suzy Knezek, Jackie LaRose, and I (Valerie Struthers Walker) have taught the course, with other members of the team collaborating on course development and helping us analyze our work during our bi-weekly instructor meetings. Although in my research I focus on my own teaching of the course, the course represents a collaborative effort to provide students with opportunities to become familiar with a broader range of literature, develop a more flexible repertoire of ways of responding to that literature, and participate in the on-going debates around issues of diversity in children's literature.

Green Group Discussion of *Becoming Naomi Leon*
Gina, Karen, Maria, Lacey, Shelley

001G Karen: Um, I focused on Owen and my question was: How do the characters in *Becoming Naomi Leon* confront the issue of diversity in relation to disability. Also, how does the author's portrayal meet and or defy stereotypes of people with disabilities. So, um, I was really intrigued by 005G Owen because I thought he was such a strong and like optimistic character. And like every time like something bad happens he always had a good side to it or like took it in the best light and I just thought that was a really, really strong quality to have. And then... just like, in the book... I don't know if we can go... this is what I put as an example... what we 010G read a little bit ago I put it like on page 4 where she talks about having his head tilted to one side and speaking with a frog voice and um you know one of his legs was shorter than the other and I just um concentrated on that quote and just basically said basically what I said in the other class that um I think the author put that in there because she wanted to show 015G people that even though he did you know look different he still had the best grades in the class and you know was very smart and then... I also had the other example that she had but mine is from page 104 where his mom said "All I'm saying is that he doesn't look smart and that could work in Clive's favor. Owen's not right, right physically and he has weird 020G habits." And I was just like shocked that a mother would say that about her own son.

022G Shelley: When she was reading that I was like about like about the whole checkers thing? I was just like why is Skyla saying?

024G Gina: Yeah and she's just like, "Oh, it's ok, you don't have to defend your brother"

026G Karen: Yeah I like to be nice to people to people who are like... I was like...what?

028G Gina: But I think that its that his mom hasn't been around and she showed back up so she really has no idea.

030G Maria: Gram even says that "You don't know... like what he's been through. You should try like coming to a doctor's appointment."

032G Karen: And then when she finally did. I was like surprised that she would say some the things she did, especially to those doctors. Oh he's ... What did they say? FLK a funny looking kid. But that doesn't have anything to do with... he's fine medically.

036G Lacey: I think she put it in though for the fact that like that's what people do think. And that's like that could even go on in front of the child. The child could hear it like could hear that even in their own home that they are funny looking and they look stupider than they are.

040G Gina: I was wondering too It doesn't say how Owen felt though, cause because it is told from like Naomi's perspective. I wonder how like that made Owen feel. Because he seemed like very optimistic the whole time even though is mom said that about him and other people made fun of him at school and stuff.

045G Maria: And how does he feel when his mom comes back and she's not really concerned about him, she's all focused on Naomi.

047G Karen: Buys Naomi's new clothes.

048G Maria: And how would you feel if people called you funny looking and your mom doesn't care about you.

050G Gina: That's why I really liked **liked** his character too, because he was so optimistic no matter what and:

052G Maria: :I don't know. That would be hard.

0523G ?: Uh huh

054G Karen: But do you think it would be... **we** would be so sympathetic as readers if he wasn't so optimistic? Like what if he was "I hate her"? Or, "I hate my life"?

056G Gina: I think I would think like, "I would too." Honestly I think I could relate to him, but not admire him as much as I do as a character right now because he is so optimistic.

059G Karen: That's what I thought too. Oh my gosh. He's so cute and strong. I always thought he was a really cool character. And oh I also, like on page 125. He says to his sister. Because explaining why his mom didn't want him as a baby. He says, "because I wasn't , you know, like everybody else." He realizes he's not the same and he realized that that's maybe why his mom like wouldn't want him. But that's sad if he thinks that's acceptable. "Oh, she probably doesn't want me because I'm not the same." Does everyone else? I mean, that's not ok.

067G Maria: Whatever. You know.

068G   Shelley: Yeah, like the few times when it's like Owen looked sad it's like "Ohh..." It's a big deal.

070G   Karen: Yeah, yeah. And then... And I just, in the why I think my question is important, I just wrote that I think it is important that children to receive like accurate and positive examples of people with disabilities in literature. So that they have exposure to it and it's not something new to them. Especially because I'm in special education. That's like a big deal to me at
075G   least. Just cause I think we should have more stories with people or children with disabilities in it that are like strong characters and genuine. You know.

078G   Maria: Yeah.

079G   Shelley: I'm also in special ed. And feeling very... make these story poems (?). that I was like we could actually see that it wasn't like he did something crazy or changed the world. So I think it is important for kids to see that. They can be normal things and still successful. Not successful as if they did something once in a while. We only read about people with disabilities who are famous. Like in deaf ed there's Marlene Matlin who is an actress.
085G   And, you know, that's like. Ok. Wow. I think kids see that that's just one girl. Instead of seeing that all humans. Just regular deaf adults who are just making it. I thought that story portrayed them. Somebody who is just successful for being. Not like trying writing a book or do something crazy. That's where I think there has to be more of for children. Ordinary, successful.. in addition to successful people, in addition to famous.

091G   Gina: But you know at the same time, when I was reading that I questioned... she made it seem like he wasn't disabled mentally, but then the whole tape issue? That he always has tape on his clothing? And when his mom came The first time she came and tried to take it off and they were both like
095G   "no". Was she like foreshadowing... or not foreshadowing but like putting on the... maybe there was like something but maybe that there was something... I mean, I wouldn't put tape on my shirt.

098G   Karen: But I think that's more like an issue of feeling secure and that's like his safety blanket. Tape for some reason. I mean for other people I mean what kid didn't have a blanket or such her thumb? What kid didn't have a blanket or... I mean not everyone did, but when I was reading it I was like, oh that's just his way of feeling comfortable. It is like awkward.

103G   Maria: It's different from a blanket. Or something that we're used to.

104G   Karen: But at the same time I just thought that was his way of feeling safe. And it

could… I don't necessarily think of a disability. Even though like you could look at it as something mental or cognitively impaired. But for me it I just thought it was something about feeling safe.

108G Gina: Yeah, I never really looked at it like his security blanket. Right. His binkey, as they call it.

110G Karen: I can see it from that perspective too. Kind of like OCD maybe?

111G Gina: Right.

112G Maria: Well like if you look at the way they were treated when they were little,
even though he doesn't remember it. I mean, Naomi didn't talk for a very
long time. You know, so, for him it's a comfort thing. He could have high
115G anxiety or whatever from not being treated correctly when he was a baby.
For not being treated properly. He probably wasn't held enough. He
probably… All those things.

118G Karen: Plus, she had alcohol problems. He's probably, you know, fetal alcohol
syndrome so… You know, he could have… well, since he has good grades
in school and stuff I don't know if there's a cognitive delay. But maybe
another maybe social.

122G Maria: An emotional thing.

123G Shelley: She keeps stressing that he's smart. Smart in school. Smart in school.
And then, yeah, but what are grades? What he's going through
emotionally…

126G Gina: What he's going through emotionally? Grades. His grades are
good. He's smart and…

128G Karen: You generally don't get to look at that, what he was feeling. Yeah because
it was told from her perspective, which is interesting…

130G Gina: Yeah.

131G Maria: Like when he got his bike. Got to get blocks. Like a block for one side of
it because his leg was shorter. Yeah. Like in the book they're like, "Oh
yeah, I'll put some wood blocks yon there. " Blah, blah, blah. Yeah. Like
it's no big deal? But, for him, he's probably sad. "I want to ride it right
now!" He was really excited about it. He wanted to ride the bike. But he
just couldn't get it.

137G Gina: My question was about how it felt like the author.
[Discussion continues]

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Appendix C—

001B   Jen: I don't care, I'll go. I don't have my exact question, but I'll go. Do you think [the author] set the book at Alcatraz to have readers be able to relate to Natalie? Like being trapped in her body and trapped in a prison.

004B   Sarah: Ahhh...

005B   Kara: Oh wow. Interesting.

006B   Erica: That's really like...

007B   Luke: That's deep. It really is.

008B   Erika: Yeah.

009B   Jen: But I don't know. I didn't support it at all very well.

010B   Kara: That's still a fancy question. [Laughter from group.] Very fancy. I couldn't have come up with something like that.

012B   Jen: I just said because the convicts weren't allowed to talk and she has trouble talking. She had her hair shaved off when she went to UCLA and was like tested like an animal. The point of the Esther P. Marinoff school was to turn out kids who could function in the world and that's the point of prison. And then, umm...

017B   Kara: Wow. That's a really interesting question. I like that.

018B   Luke: That's good.

019B   Kara: That's taking it to a different level. Wondering why did she... why Alcatraz?

021B   Jen: Yeah, so I thought it might be more than just a coincidence so...

022B   Sarah: Even just being like:

023B   Kara: :That's what I was thinking when I was reading. What a creative thing to come up with!

025B   Luke: Yeah.

026B   Kara: The whole thing was very creative. Great question.

027B   Luke: Really good question.

028B   Jen: So that was my question.

029B   Sarah: Do you think she'll ever be let out of her body?

[Soft, uncomfortable laughter from group, followed by 6 second pause.]

031B   Jen: Who knows? [3 second pause]

032B   Jen: I got it from the back of the book, I'm not going to lie. Well, not from the back of the book but they… it says, "Autism is extreme aloneness from the beginnings of life". So that's where I came up with it.

035B   Kara: It makes sense because that's how they describe a lot of times that she didn't have control over a lot of the things… that's a good parallel to make.

038B   Sarah: The connection between the island itself and:

039B   Jen: :Right. I said specifically Alcatraz. It's not only a prison, but she's on… isolated from everything else.

041B   Sarah: That's helpful. Makes my question look pretty…

042B   Luke: Yeah, I don't…

043B   Kara: It was good.

044B   Sarah: All right, I'll go next. No where near as deep.

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