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Young Adult Readers Respond to
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VALUE AND AUTHENTICITY:
YOUNG ADULT READERS RESPOND TO
AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

RASHIDAH JAAMI' MUHAMMAD

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

VALUE AND AUTHENTICITY: YOUNG ADULT READERS RESPOND TO AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

Rashidah Jaami' Muhammad

The purpose of the study, "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature" (hereafter known as "Value"), was to discover how four middle school students take up some traditionally used classroom novels. In other words, "Value" wanted to find out what African American students, reading outside the classroom, would value, question, or believe about some novels written about "the Black Experience."¹ Therefore the intention of "Value" is to add student voices to the existing scholarship on The Slave Dancer (Fox), Words by Heart (Sebestyen), and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Taylor). If we accept Joel Taxel's contention that the textbooks, children's literature and indeed the social relations of the classroom are dominated by the perspectives of those in positions of social and economical authority;

¹ Generally, the references by authors, critics, teachers and students, used in this study to "The Black Experience" acknowledge the common experience slavery, as well as the traditions that came with and grew out of the enslavement of African American people.

then the

question of readership--of how children respond to, and make meaning of literary texts--is of fundamental importance given the belief that children are deleteriously influenced by racist and sexist images in literature ("Ideology" 255).

Thus, some initial questions that guided this study were:

- 1) Based on what personal experiences and/or what stories in the readings do students believe and perhaps value these texts?
- 2) Contextually how may these novels force students to culturally and/or racially identify against themselves?
- 3) If students are more willing to actively engage a novel outside the confines of the traditional classroom, then why?

Based on open-ended questions, "Value" individually invited the students to make written and oral evaluations of the novels. Among the multiple theoretical and pedagogical conclusions that can be drawn from "Value," perhaps the most important is that both the curricula and as well as individual teacher practices must allow space for students to make personal interrogations of the classroom novels.

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1995

With Love and Admiration "Value" is dedicated to
my mother, Rosa Lee Gilmore Crosby Reed.

For you Momma, and for all of our students
I tried to put it down easy...

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Diane, given our personalities if we had met on the playground as girls I dare say we would have got into a few scrapes. But we met in the classroom and the issue has been English education and I can truthfully say, scrapes and all I found a lifelong friend in my major professor.

PREFACE

I invite readers to share this study on at least two levels. One as a listener "ease-dropping"² on, sharing and empathizing with personal reflections. Then on another level, I would like you to imagine yourselves students who are learning to give voice to their own understandings. Because I too am responding out of my readings, in "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature," I employ diverse discourse patterns. Some arguments or discussions may be framed in African American Vernacular English while others may be in Standard Edited American English, still others may ring of the ancient Geechee Momma used when it came time to remind us of historical truths. Further, I believe that by mixing discourse patterns my study may be more accessible to diverse readers, as are the works of my some of my intellectual heroines bell hooks, June Jordan, Geneva Smitherman and Diane Brunner.

PREFACE NOTE

² In order to recall and utilize a tradition often used in my family, I have employed the phrase "ease-drop" in place of eavesdrop. When a story had profound consequences and Momma wanted us to learn a lesson, she would often say, "let me put this one down easy." In other words, she wanted us to pay close attention and carefully consider what she was telling us.

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INTRODUCTION

basic beginnings -- mine

color-ed people

White
Peculiar color White
It describes no one
It Defines EVERYONE

Black
Peculiar color Black
It describes no one
It Defines my people

It is not a question of
who we are or
what we are made of...

The Question is About Power!
WHO is making you?
WHO is making me?

CHECK the appropriate box:
☐ White of non-Hispanic Origin
☐ Black of non-Hispanic Origin

Appropriate
Peculiar word, Appropriate.
Are you appropriately White?
Can I be appropriately Black?

Appropriately Black in '63 meant stuffing down warm hot dogs and watered-down orange drinks in the back corner of the Five and Dime, under a huge neon sign proclaiming that this is the COLORED SNACK BAR.

Appropriately Black in '63 meant don't be sipping from the White-Only drinking fountain, even if it is next to the COLORED SNACK BAR.

In 1963, in Spartanburg, South Carolina, to be Appropriately Black meant you enjoyed the day spent uptown with Grandma. This old woman was so proud to be showing off her Northern grandchildren, how could I let her know I felt outtaplace?

I recall that during the sixties and seventies, we marched to protest the Vietnam War, carrying signs that read "Make Love Not War" and "No VietCong Ever Called Me Nigger." We marched to protest the fate of Black foot soldiers who were "given the point" -- ordered to lead patrols through the mine-rich rice fields of South Vietnam. My own brother was one of these "grunts" (Marine infantry). He flashbacks: "Wet, man I was always wet! And I was always scared, scared of either stepping on a land mine or being shot in the back by some racist red-neck."

Situated in the ideologies of the Black Power Movement and Civil Rights Movement along with the majority of the Black student population, I participated in a two-day campus sit-in to protest the dismissal of a Black dormitory cook. While We admonished the administration to implement fair-labor policies in the campus work-force, they summoned the National Guard to escort us from their building. Later, we marched not only to support African Americans working on campus, but also to proclaim the imperative need for more African American professors, and for additional courses in African American language, culture, and history. It can be said that my thoughts at that time resonated with Robert Blauner, who wrote: the Afro-American experience has produced a residue of collective memories: Africa, slavery, the South, Emancipation, northern migration, and above all, racism. Racism has consolidated rather than eliminated the

distinctive experiences of the past" (352). Were these actions and reactions just Gut Feelings? Perhaps, in a sense I came to be by coming to know something of my ancestors.

*My folks, African men, women, and children,
I never really got to know you.
What were your dreams?*

*Many of you were lost in a Nightmare
beat till yo blood ran like stormy waters,
pressed between blankets of human waste,
chained 24/7 till
till you just couldn't breathe no more.
Over 100,000,000 of you were lost
in the Middle Passage.
I pray your souls found peace.*

*Those of you who survived
faced the cruelest legislated servitude
known in the history of humankind.
I am truly grateful for your survival...*

Perhaps here I harmonize with Maya Angelou, who wrote

*Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise*

*Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise*

*I'm a [B]lack ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise*

*Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise*

*Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.*

I rise (155).

I have re-told these past events in order to share some of the early ideologies that have help shaped my thinking over the years. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests,

Telling ourselves our own stories has as much as any single factor been responsible for the survival of African Americans and their culture. The stories that we tell ourselves and our children function to order our world, serving to create both a foundation upon which each of us constructs our sense of reality and a filter through which we process each event that confronts us every day (cited in Mullane, 249).

This project, "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature," is in many ways a collection of such stories. Herein are stories four African American young adult readers created via their engagements with The Slave Dancer, Words By Heart, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

CHAPTER ONE

GUT FEELINGS: READERS PERFORMING WITH TEXTS

The purpose of this study, "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature," is to observe African American readers performing with African American literature. In other words, this study seeks to discover how four African American young adult readers take up some traditionally used classroom novels. My intention with this study is to add the voices of African American students to the existing scholarship on The Slave Dancer (Fox), Words By Heart (Sebestyen), and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Taylor). This existing scholarship, mostly White academics writing about "The Black Experience" not only excludes or discounts the voices of Black authors or critics, it pays practically no attention to the ways children respond to these kinds of books. Therefore, I wanted to find out just what do young adult readers think of these novels. Specifically, what do African American students value, question, or believe about some novels written about "the Black Experience?"

How do they read? Do African American young adult readers bring a "Black Cultural Reading" to the text that

may influence their reading? Are their readings based on their respective socio/economical class? Are their readings based solely on their teachers' interpretations such that these readers may feel outta place in terms of their own historical or sociological connections as opposed to those presented by the teacher? Do African American young adult readers allow themselves to challenge the validity of the PRINTED WORD? For whatever reason, the politics of schooling, the dynamics of the classroom, or even their own cultural background, do Black students feel free to say: "This is not authentic! I just don't believe that it happened like this in slavery time or any time?" Do the novels used in this study confirm or discredit what the African American student reader believes to be authentic about "The Black Experience?"

While African American literature for children generally refers to works about African Americans created by African Americans (Bishop, "Walk Tall" 557), however, for the purposes of this study African American literature refers to novels written about "The Black Experience," regardless of the race of the author. It should be noted that the race of the author has been a serious point of contention concerning two novels in this study, The Slave Dancer and Words By Heart. Rudine Sims advises

Controversies and arguments arise because, given the realities of life in these United States, fiction about Blacks created by White authors will almost necessarily be different

from fiction created from a Black perspective ("Question" 145).

This issue, the perspective of the author, will be addressed more fully in Chapter Three on The Slave Dancer, Chapter Four on Words By Heart, and Chapter Five Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

The "Black Experience"

Is it possible to describe the "Black Experience as a single identifying historical moment?" Without being bound to an essentialist point of view, I still acknowledge that a common tragedy, slavery, marks African American existence in the United States of America. Addressing this common factor, Julius Lester writes in the dedication of his collection of slave narratives, To Be A Slave: "The ancestry of any Black American can be traced to a bill of sale and no further. In many instances even that cannot be done." Arguably, this may be true in terms of physical lineage; however in terms of Black culture, studies have indicated that this is not the case. Molefi K. Asante labels the notion that Africans and African Americans only share skin color, nonsense. "There exists an emotional, cultural, psychological connection between this people that spans the oceans and the separate existence" (67). In other words there is a Black culture that grows out of Africa and African peoples throughout the Diaspora.¹ Discussing Black culture, Jawanza Kunjufu notes much of our culture can be

traced to our African roots. Kunjufu continues the discussion by detailing some features of Black culture: family values, the belief in the extended family, the importance of elders, the belief in "we-ness,"

Our allegiance to our culture was once described for us by one of our heroes, Marcus Garvey: "Here's to this flag of mine, the red, black and green." We have a Black National Anthem, written by James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." We have a unique language, not only based in Africa (such as the Swahili language) but also our creative Black dialect. We have our own traditions in literature, authored by Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin and many others. Our love for music, and our gifts of gospel, soul, and jazz are a part of Black culture which we have freely given the world (23-24).

Reflecting on the artistic aspect of Black culture Jawanza Kunjufu adds that the term "innerattainment" is a part of African culture. Innerattainment connects the performer to the audience: the drummer plays the people dance, the preacher preaches the people participate in a call response, thus there is no separation between the audience and the presenter (24). This is an interesting concept, no separation between the audience and the presenter. How does this concept play out in the reading process, if the text is the presenter and the reader is the audience? We will re-dress this issue in later chapters when we look at the students' responses to the texts used in this study. However, let's return to our discussion of African retentions in African American as well as American

culture.

Extensive scholarship has addressed the African carry-overs noted by Jawanza Kunjufu and Molefi Asante. Joseph E. Holloway's Africanisms in American Culture features a lengthy bibliography. In it he discussed Newbell Niles Puckett's 1926 Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro, an anthropological study of some 10,000 folk beliefs of southern Blacks. Puckett found African carry-overs in African American burial customs, folk beliefs as well as religious philosophy including belief in voodoo and conjuration (x). On the other hand in his early writings, Melville Herskovits agreed in principle with his rival E. Franklin Frazier. Speaking about African American activities in Harlem in relation to wider society, he wrote that the total cultural assimilation had already occurred: "Why, it's the same pattern, only a different shade" (x). E. Franklin Frazier, believing that slavery destroyed Africanisms in the African American, wrote, "...because of the manner in which the Negroes were captured in Africa and enslaved, they were practically stripped of their social heritage" (Holloway ix).² A year later, after reviewing Puckett's Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro, Herskovits decided that some African culture had survived in America but only things like Voodoo, which could be practiced in secrecy (cited in Whitten 25). After extensive research in many areas of the Diaspora, Herskovits wrote Myth of the

Negro Past which not only confirmed that African customs have survived the Middle Passage, but that there is a distinctive African American culture in this country (Holloway x).

Joseph Holloway's bibliography of works on Africanisms in American culture also includes Roger Abrahams and John Szwed's After Africa. What should be noted about this text in addition to detailing African connections to such modern-day activities as baton twirling, cheer leading, broken field running (the kind we look forward to seeing on football Sundays), food production (such as rice, yams, and sweet potatoes) is the section on linguistic retentions. Common everyday expressions such as OK, wow, uh-huh, unh-unh, daddy, and buddy have African roots (xii). Linguistic expressions have traditionally linked Black cultures throughout the Diaspora. The following is an example of the language traditions of the Diaspora: recently when I was dining on barbecue chicken at a friend's home, her daughter asked me if I liked the chicken. I said, "Gurl, yo momma really stepped on this chicken!" The little girl looked puzzled but her mother laughed and said: "You know, my mother from Jamaica, would say to the cook about food that is really well-prepared: "You put your foot in here."

Accordingly, Geneva Smitherman notes: "Language systems such as Jamaican Creole or Nigerian Pidgin English are still in active use today and provide a kind of linguistic mirror

image of Black American English in its early stages of development." Smitherman explains that the Black idiom used by most Black Americans, at least some of the time, has allowed Blacks to create a culture of survival in an alien land and as a by-product has served to enrich the language of all Americans (Talkin 2-5). Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask," describes the survival tactics mastered by African Americans to "git ovuh" (survive).

We wear the mask that grins and
 lies,
 It hides our cheeks and shades our
 eyes,--
 This debt we pay to human guile;
 With torn and bleeding hearts we
 smile,
 And mouth with myriad subtle-
 ties.

Why should the world be over-
 wise,
 In counting all our tears and
 sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ,
 our cries
 To thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh the clay is vile
 Beneath our feet, and long the
 mile;
 But let the world dream other-
 wise,
 We wear the mask! (71)

Confessions or assertions like: "How I got ovuh" or "How I have survived in this oppressive economic and political system," often meant and still often means that the African American person in order to "succeed" must smile in the face

of injustice. Geneva Smitherman adds this summation: Both in the old-time Black Gospel song and in Black street vernacular, "gittin ovuh" has to do with surviving. While the religious usage of the phrase speaks to spiritual survival in a sinister world of sin, its secular usage speaks to material survival in a white world of oppression (Talkin 73). Thus, the references by authors, critics, students and the teachers used in this study to "The Black Experience" acknowledge that common experience, enslavement, the subsequent oppression of African Americans, as well as the rich cultural traditions that came with it and those that grew out of the slave experience.

Does this mean that there was just one Black Experience--a core, an essence--that historically defines what it means to be an African American? While holistically it may be declared that enslavement defined African American existence in this country, individuals on various or sometimes even on the same plantations experienced the system's oppression differently. Additionally, it should be noted that researchers have concluded that, "Not all Blacks were slaves. Ten percent of the Africans in America have always been free although their freedom was precarious" (Jackson 3).

But let us suppose that an African American having traced her ancestry, discovered that her roots were not in the slave experience. Would her subsequent life in America

have been different? Perhaps a better way to phrase this hypothesis would be: Would a biological or physically identifiable African American, without roots in enslavement, have been socialized throughout the generations, differently in America? I mean regardless of my proclamation, "The slaves, they ain't my family," would my treatment (economically, politically or otherwise) be constructed on a par with White America or would racial relations for me be the same as other Black Americans with roots in enslavement?

Will the students of "Value" read from an essential Black cultural perspective (one grounded in the slave experience that acknowledges prior and resulting traditions) or a socially constructed view of race? Contemporary studies indicate that races exist not as biological distinctions but as groupings constructed by social and legal institutions (Ian F. Haney Lopez 1). Ian F. Haney Lopez indicates in this study on "The Social Construction of Race," that race manifests itself in our speech, dance, neighbors, and friends (3). Since race determines not only our social prospects but also our economic prospects, it may be to our advantage in this White male dominated culture to move away from identifiable features of African American culture. Haney Lopez's study is laden with painful examples of people "passing."³ Consider the following example:

"I seldom think of my girlfriend, Kathy, as Black. A lot of times I look at her and it's as if she is White; there's no real difference. But every now and then, it depends on what she is wearing

and what we're doing, she looks very ethnic and very Black. It bothers me. I don't like it. I prefer it when she's a regular, normal everyday kind of person."

--A White Detroit politician (cited in Haney Lopez 49).

I really feel for Kathy, in order to stay in this relationship, it looks like she will have to completely pass out of Black culture, deny its presence in her life. In order to be considered "normal," she must move, speak, and live as a "White" woman. Some readers, as did her politician boyfriend, may wonder "What's wrong with that?" Allow me to respond by way of an analogy. Recently a young man made me recall the scene from the movie Roots, in which Kunta Kinte is beaten within a inch of death before he finally abandons his family name and acknowledges the White slave massa's name for him, "toby." While the young man who compelled me to remember this brutal scene was condemning African American men and women with "blond" straight hair, blue-green contact lenses, and a "proper" English attitude, his analogy can also be used to describe people forced by choice, economics, politics, or history to live "out-side" of themselves. It may be possible for the Black woman dating the White politician to live as a "toby." But in the words of Keith Gilyard addressing Richard Rodriguez's (author of Hunger for Memory) cultural alienation from his family and community: "Rodriguez participated in such self-annihilation for as long as he did because he thought it benefitted him personally. It would be tragic, however, to

translate his own appraisal of pain into pedagogy" (160-161).

Students reading society or literature from a social constructive definition of race may deny the existence of racial distinctions, i.e. a distinctive Black culture. This was manifested at a recent campus symposium held at Michigan State University, to discuss the benefits or detriments of Black English. A well-articulated African American female student using identifiable features of Black discourse style totally dissed African American Vernacular English. "Black English is not legitimate, I mean it's only for us, they, the White power structure, are not going to accept it, so we shouldn't be using it. We are not the only people in this society. Black English should be banned! If my child came home from school one day and said something in Black English, I would CORRECT him" (speaker emphasis). Another young lady in the audience refuted the first woman's claims, "To get back to what you were saying about not wanting your children to speak Black English at all; to be Black and to not accept it (AAVE) at all means you don't go to a Black Church, you don't listen to Black music. It's (Black English) in our culture TOTALLY! How are you going to expose your children to Black life with out Black language?" Geneva Smitherman responding to the audience attending this Black English Symposium, stressed the importance of being multilingual: "teachers should teach the legitimacy and the

historical origins of African American English and at the same time teach the language of wider communication ("standard English")." Smitherman went on to cite several programs across the country that are currently successfully implementing curricula that validate, value and respect the language students bring to school, while at the same time saying, "Let me show you another way to say what you are saying...."

On the issue of language, Keith Gilyard contends that the eradication of one tongue is not prerequisite to the learning of a second (160). In other words, African American students do not have to commit linguistic suicide, in order to learn Standard American Edited English. June Jordan concurs that as children we depend on Black English to discover our world, then when we grow older we either hide our original word habits or we surrender our voice completely ("Nobody" 363). "Surrender," "Alienation," "Suicide," are these the conditions to order a life or a death? So sadly I question whether the linguistic choices of this young college student are any different from Kathy's cultural choices. Both seem to be deciding that since it is not profitable economically, socially, politically or even romantically to be Black, that she will just be "White"⁴

On the other hand a recent article appearing in The New York Times, "The Loneliness of Being White in the N.B.A.," illustrates the other side of this phenomenon that for some

White people it is perhaps advantageous to be socially constructed "Black." Bruce Schoenfeld queries whether or not the less than 20 percent White professional basketball players are socially constructed Black:

Over time I learned to group the N.B.A.'s Whites into two distinct camps: those who freely adopt elements of Black culture, like Geiger, and those who don't. Matt Geiger, 7-foot center for the Miami Heat believes that he has been profoundly changed by his immersion in Black culture-- in the way he talks, the clothes he wears, the music he listens to. Matt observes, "I have a good relationship with a lot of the Black players on my team because I think they realize I have understanding of what it means to be Black" (34).

Some of the White players do appear to be socially constructed "Black." But could this be an example of racial code switching? In other words sometimes the White players are "White" and at other times they are "Black" or this case based on social construction, we may be able to imagine a Third Race: "N.B.A." Okay, work with me here, I am not being sarcastic! Imagine Vinny Del Negro (White) and two of his team mates (Black) during a recent road trip out shopping. All three of them are dressed casually in t-shirts and sweats. They go into a men's clothing store. Vinny is waited on first, his team-mates are ignored. They are ignored until another customer recognizes them as National Basketball Association players. Now while the team-mates (Black) have more help than they need, Vinny (White) is ignored (34). No one thought that he (a White

guy) could be a basketball player too. So moving with and beyond race as an identifiable marker, we have #1) a White guy helped because he is White, #2) two Black guys not waited on because they are Black, #3) two Black guys waited on because they are "N.B.A." players, #4) a White guy not waited on because he is "black" in comparison to imagined wealth of the "N.B.A." Poor Vinny, once privileged because he is White, is now dissed because he is White. Of course, the clerks' assistance was based on anticipated commissions and tips.

Even though this whole scenario may have been economically underwritten, still based on wealth and the stereotypes associated with wealth, a new race was constructed. This scenario also demonstrates James Banks' contention that American racism is still largely based on skin color, no degree of cultural assimilation eliminates it (69). In other words, regardless how much wealth, or how deeply they had acquired the cultural traits of upper income Americans, the Black basketball players still experienced discrimination. Therefore, perhaps neither theory, an essential Black culture or social construction, can fully define what African American students may be bringing to or taking away from the readings. These arguments (social construction or essential Black Culture) become more crucial in later chapters of this study as we discuss cultural specifics and stereotypical mis-representations that may be

found in the African American literature selected for "Value." I am not suggesting that the proponents of social construction theories deny the existence of Black culture. I will contend however, that works given to a social construction theory of race may also be more likely to employ the negative racial stereotypes that are prevalent in society.

The Novels

From reading the novels used in this study, which are all historical novels, will African American students discover a Black culture? Of course this assumes that identifiable features of African American culture exists in these novels. On the other hand their readings could be shaped by the concept of Black culture that they each bring to the text? In Chapters Three, Four and Five, of this study using their words, we will hear the students performing with the texts. In addition to the students voices I will provide literature reviews which will include summaries and critical analysis of each text. However the main focus of these three chapters will be the voices of the student readers.

In Chapter Three, we will look at The Slave Dancer. In this novel, Paula Fox examines life for the Africans, for the crew, and for a kidnapped 13 year old male flute player, aboard a slave ship during The Middle Passage-the voyage

from Africa to America. Much of the controversy surrounding this text has to do with questions of perspective (White or Black), historical accuracy, and use of negative stereotypes. The following conversation is an example of the negative stereotypes used in The Slave Dancer to deny humanity to African people. This discussion took place between Jessie and one of the crew members just after the Africans were first brought aboard the Moonlight:

"Why was that man treated that way?" I [Jessie] asked.

"What man?"

"The one that was forced to drink the rum?"

"Man?"

"That Purvis was flinging about so..."

"You mean the nigger!"

"Him," I said (64-65).

Jessie is thus forced to acknowledge that he shares the crew member's belief that Africans are not considered to be human. Later the crew member affirms his earlier contention, "They ain't like us, and that's the truth" (65).

Chapter Four is devoted to multiple examinations of Ouida Sebestyen's Words By Heart. This novel set in 1910, concerns the fate of a Black family (Ben and Claudie Sills, their children Lena, Roy and Brother) who moves from an all-Black southern town to an all White southwestern town. Like

The Slave Dancer, this too is a controversial novel. Rudine Sims charges that like other prize winners (The Slave Dancer, Sounder, and The Cay), Words By Heart is honored because of excellent crafting by the author, yet the text is flawed because it presents an outsider's perspective on Black lives and fails to recognize the political, racial and social realities that shape the Black Experience in this country ("Black Perspective" 12). For example, re-live with me Lena's history lesson:

Elsie raised her hand. "Teacher, is that what is meant by the White Man's Burden?"

Mr. Doans cleared his throat. "Since the Spanish-American War, the United States has taken eight million less-advanced people under its jurisdiction. Yes Elsie, throughout our history the superior races have necessarily shouldered the burden of ruling the inferior ones."

Lena raised her hand, "What makes us a superior race?"

Mr. Doans looked at her for a long time. Somebody giggled. Then he said, "It is obvious from its achievements, Lena, that the Anglo-Saxon race is superior to any other."

"What's Anglo-Saxon?" Lena asked.

"Caucasian."

"What's that?" The giggles were growing.

"White," Mr. Doans said (97).

In "The Story Behind the Book, Words By Heart" Jean F. Mercier contends, White author Sebestyen makes the point that the effects of discrimination on people of both sexes, any age and all origins are the same (40). At the moment Mr. Doans announced "White" would any other boy or girl in that otherwise all-white classroom share the humiliation Lena felt as the only African American in the school? Perhaps readers identifying with Lena would feel her humiliation. Or perhaps readers identifying with Lena would feel shame and embarrassment that a Black twelve year-old girl not only would not know that she was being insulted by her White teacher and classmates, but would participate in her own humiliation.

Chapter Five concerns itself with a highly acclaimed young adult novel, Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. Joel Taxel writes the following about Taylor's novel,

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry about Cassie Logan, a young, African American girl's gradual awakening to the brutal reality of racism in Mississippi in the 1930's, has influenced my thinking about the possibilities afforded by literature to provide aesthetic pleasure and to raise issues of critical social and political importance ("Reflections" 301).

Issues of justice and what is "fair" are raised throughout Roll of Thunder. Following several incidents of mistreatment (tar and feathering of one man, the burning of

another) the Logans and several Black families decide to shop no longer at the local grocery store owned by one of the "night riders." On the return trip from the grocery in a neighboring town, David Logan and his "hired"⁵ hand are attacked. Cassie tries to understand the consequences of what happened:

It seemed to me that since the Wallaces had attacked Papa and Mr. Morrison, the simplest thing to do would be to tell the sheriff and have them put in jail, but Mama said things did not work that way. She explained that as long as the Wallaces, embarrassed by their injuries at the hands of Mr. Morrison, did not make an official complaint about the incident, then we must remain silent also. If we did not, Mr. Morrison could be charged with attacking white men, which could possibly end in his being sentenced to the chain gang, or worse (228).

Selective Tradition

As I previously noted, the books that I selected for this study address various stages of "The Black Experience" (the middle passage and slavery, turn of the century share cropping/tenant farming in the southwest, and the Great Depression shaped southern African American life). The historical aspect may be one reason why each of these novels is a popular choice of middle school teachers. Another reason why these novels may be classroom favorites for teachers is that they are all award-winning books.

There are at least three logical reasons why award-winning texts will be chosen over others: one, it eliminates

the need for teachers to shop or research for the 'best' children's book; two, the official sanction that goes with an award-winning text makes it more likely to be bulk purchased even in a budget restraint crisis; and three, the more the novels are used the more they are talked about among teachers, the more additional teachers adopt the text. It may also be possible that the politics of the publishing firms influence schools' continued use of these award winning books by including a re-useable supply of user-friendly materials (work books, study guides, tests, etc,). Award-winning texts often become a part of pre-packaged standardized curricula and teaching strategies.

Michael W. Apple argues that the use of these pre-packaged curricula resulting in a separation of conception and teacher execution, is related to external control over teacher practice. Granted, Apple was referencing the research that indicates external forces (White male patriarchy) must control women's work, since 87 percent of elementary teachers and 67 percent of teachers overall are women (300). Certainly it is a question of gender and whose knowledge counts as knowledge. It reads like: "We can't have women completely in charge of developing our future leaders." Statistics like these lead me to wonder why so many women are currently opposed to affirmative action programs. Do they imagine that without such programs in place, their voices would still be heard? The issue,

however, that Apple's research brings to the forefront for this study is if teachers have less curricular and classroom autonomy, then will they have the where-with-all to help each student make "real" connections with the text?

Returning to the discussion of prize-winning texts children's book author, Sharon Bell Mathis notes "When a Newbery winner is cited, it is one of the first books school officials make sure children read" (148). Selected annually by the American Library Association, the Newbery Medal is "presented to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published the preceding year" (Woolman 5). Borrowing from the Newbery Award Committee manual, Joel Taxel lists the criteria in judging the nominees for the Medal:

Interpretation of the theme or concept

Presentation of information including
accuracy, clarity, and organization

Development of plot

Delineation of characters

Delineation of setting

Appropriateness of style

Taxel adds that committee members are admonished to remember that the Newbery is awarded for "excellence of presentation for a child audience, for literary quality and quality of presentation for children...not for didactic intent or for popularity" ("Controversies" 253). However, it seems to me,

both as a parent and as an educator, the fact that these books' presentations are for children should make for a closer more careful reading by the award-selection committees, not an avenue for excuse. Included among the excuses often offered by students in my classes for pre-service language arts teachers:

- 1) It is just a kid's book.
- 2) Is just a cute little duck story.
- 3) Children don't see race, unless we point it out to them.

Ironically one of the criteria for the International Reading Association Children's Book Award is explicit in addressing the issues of racism and sexism: "The awarded book will be non-racist and non-sexist, as far as the selection committee can determine" (Taxel, "Controversies" 253-54). If the winning book is to be non-racist, non-sexist, then it is possible that the committee members were not sensitive to or chose to ignore the apparent racism in Words By Heart that was noted by critics. If award winning selection committees are not aware of racist text, if teachers do not read these books with an eye opened for negative stereotypes, then will African American young adult readers know when they (members of their racial group) are being mis-represented in the books? Will these young readers then accept and identify with these MIS-representations?

Before adopting African American literature or any award-winning texts for classroom use, it is important to consider that piece of literature in light of recent research. This research indicates the perspectives of people of color, working class individuals, and women are often excluded, distorted or mis-represented (Taxel, "Reclaiming" 111). Violet Harris contends that even though African Americans have been depicted in general literature since the seventeenth century, these depictions are essentially stereotyped pejorative and unauthentic (167). Thus contrary to the criteria established in principle by award-selection-boards of governors, a "selective tradition" may in fact determine which book is designated the "Book of the Year," "Book of the Month," or "Honor Book." The concept "selective tradition" is attributed to Raymond Williams who defines it as a social order that selects literatures that reflect the cultural values of the society (52). Citing Raymond Williams, Joel Taxel adds that the designation of certain groups knowledge as the knowledge for all is central to the process of social and cultural definition, thus providing historical and well as cultural legitimacy for the social order (Taxel, "Reclaiming" 111).

How does the selective tradition play itself out in terms of African American literature for children and young adult readers? Violet Harris responds that texts written by African Americans rarely become designated classics, even

though many exhibit extraordinary literary merit, and provides a forum for voices silenced by mainstream literature. "The vast majority of students do not read African American classics such as Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry because the literary canons in schools have become a part of the selective tradition" (Harris 168). Adding numbers to our discussion Joel Taxel notes that in a three-year period from 1962-64 African American characters were present in only 349 of 5206 or 6.7% of the books published. While he acknowledges some improvement has occurred over the years, Joel Taxel concurs with Rudine Sims Bishop that this is "another lean period in the publication of books about African Americans" ("Reclaiming" 114-115). Bishop suggests that in addition to the need for more books about African American experiences, there is also a need for culturally authentic literature. Of 150 African American fiction books surveyed between 1965 and 1979, the majority were created by Euro-American writers. While several of these books have merit, Bishop adds that many have been charged with presenting a distorted and racist point of view ("Informed Choices" 41). The nature of the picture painted by children's literature is of paramount consideration. Violet Harris contends that because children's literature serves as a mediator between children, cultural knowledge and socialization by adults, it has both real and symbolic power. "However, when a tradition is selective or, worse,

when it sets up inaccurate and damaging stereotypes, the meanings and the knowledge shaped by it become significant because they shape individuals' perceptions of the world and their roles in it" (Harris 168). In other words what children and young adults read in the word may shape their reading of their past, present and future worlds.

The Participants

The research group that I have selected for "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature" is composed of four (3 females and 1 male) African American sixth/seventh graders. They are between the ages of 12 and 13. These students attend various public or parochial schools in a mid-western capital city. Two of the students attend the same church, but go to different schools. I will include case-study information on each student-participant in Chapter Two. Actually, during the course of this study, we never met as a group in its entirety. On occasions I met with them in groups of two or three to chat over dinner. Basically the students read on their own and corresponded with me by telephone or fax. Thus, for the students I was able to reproduce the comfortable atmosphere Mario and I enjoyed during our work on Children's Voices: Children Talk About Literacy (Hudson-Ross, ed.). In other words, just as with this earlier study, students of "Value" were afforded the

space to work through the material and articulate their views on the reading and writing process.

Of course before the study began I met with the students and their parents. Even though only the students would be reading the novels, I needed parental permission and I wanted parental support. Each student and each parent completed consent forms detailing the study as well as acknowledging their willingness to participate in the research project (See Appendices B, B-1 for sample permission forms). In these initial conversations, I basically detailed the logistics of the study: "Over the next several weeks, I would like each of you to read these three novels." (The books were displayed for both students and parents to look over.) Providing space and opportunity for their immediate reader responses, I asked the students to please take notes as they read. "You may use any format that is comfortable for you, for example you may write in the margins of the books, or in a notebook (I provided students with the novel, notebooks, pens and pencils) like a Dear Diary entry, or like a journal: Today I read in _____, about _____, and I think_____. Please just jot down two or three sentences perhaps a paragraph or two expressing your thoughts about each day's reading."

After they had finished each book I invited them to respond to a specific set of questions (4-5) per book (See Appendices C, D, E for the question forms). The questions

were designed to be open-ended without predictable answers. Students were free to respond in any manner--with drawings, poetry, short answers, or even long essays. Following the reading of all three texts, I individually spoke with each student based on their responses. These talks in general provided students a space in which to elaborate on the written responses. Specifically we just talked about their reading writing experience with these novels.

Even though these interview sessions were taped recorded (so that I was able to reproduce a more accurate account of their thought on the books), students had the option of deleting or restating anything that they believed did not accurately reflect their meanings. On the transcribed data and the written responses students were identified by numbers or code names. In the published study students will remain anonymous, identified by pseudonyms, unless as some students did choose to use their own first names.

Modeling the format I used for my work in Children's Voices: Children Talk About Literacy, each student participant in "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature" was free to speak for themselves. My role was that of petitioner, begging entrance into their worlds. Going into this study I wonder if only as an observer if I may have membership in the specially engineered worlds that were crafted out of their

individual reading of the novels? Or would they shape their responses for me as they would any teacher? Even though I stressed the importance of their voices, their thoughts, some students would give very tentative responses. This remained a limitation through out my study. For example when talking about Words By Heart, one student responded "Well, I mean its okay, I guess I liked the book." Other students welcomed this opportunity to freely write their opinions. In all capital letters one female student said this about The Slave Dancer: "I HATE THIS BOOK!"

Of course this study will supply numerous opportunities for reading-intervention on the part of language arts instructors. Thinking about the authority Mario gave to the text in our work for Children's Voices, "Its Mostly After I Read That I Write," I am concerned how often we as teachers don't ourselves question, and surely don't encourage our students to question the text. Actually all the while I read or listened to each students' responses, I was thinking of what can I do here to make this a positive learning experience for African American children who so often feel displaced by racist literature, and for all students who have not been taught to interrogate negative stereotypes in their textbooks and those novels traditionally chosen for classroom study. In Chapter Seven, we will look at some positive avenues for teacher intervention that do not erase but perhaps work with and therefore enhance students own

meaning making processes.

Project Details:

We began with Paula Fox's The Slave Dancer simply because in terms of "Black Experiences" this text by addressing the Middle Passage and slavery came first (set in 1840), among the books we read for "Value." Basically, I set aside three weeks to study this book. In terms of subject matter, chronologically, of the books I selected to study for Value, focusing on the post-reconstruction turn of the century share-cropping era, Ouida Sebestyen's Words by Heart (set in 1910) came next. For this book I again sought to implement the procedures we outlined for our study of The Slave Dancer.

The final text for this study is Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (set in 1933). Following the same process as with the other books, we divided Taylor's book into three parts, designating a one part per week study. After I had read all the students responses to all three texts, I met with each student individually to orally request further clarification, explanation, and/or elaboration. Thus based on the reading, writing, interviewing schedule I established for "Value" my original timetable looked like this:

Week	Reading	Notes	Questions	Interviews
One	<u>Slave</u>	X		
Two	<u>Slave</u>	X		
Three	<u>Slave</u>	X	X	
Four	<u>Words</u>	X		
Five	<u>Words</u>	X		
Six	<u>Words</u>	X	X	
Seven	<u>Roll</u>	X		
Eight	<u>Roll</u>	X		
Nine	<u>Roll</u>	X	X	
Ten	All			X

However, students reading rates outside the classroom perhaps even in-class reading rates can not be totally predicted. On any of the given novels, student reading rates ranged from one day to five weeks. The following table reflects students reported reading rates:

Novels (Reading Time)

Students	<u>The Slave Dancer</u>	<u>Words By Heart</u>	<u>Roll of Thunder</u>
1. A.J.	3 weeks	4 weeks	5 weeks
2. Constance	2 weeks	3 weeks	3 weeks
3. LeTasha	1 week	1 day	3 days
4. Maya	2 weeks	3 weeks	2 weeks

Data Collection and Analysis

For "Value" I am moving with and away from the in-depth interviewing model I employed with Mario in the Children's Voices' piece. I am moving with I. Earl Seidman because my methodology is still socio/cultural phenomemology and my primary data will still be students' voices. But in "Value" the interviews or talks with the students are the spaces for

them to elaborate on written responses. Seidman explains the model:

Although the interviewer comes to each interview with a basic question that establishes the purpose and the focus of the interview, it is in response to what the participant says that the interviewer follows up, asks for clarification, seeks concrete details, and requests stories (59).

In "Value" rather than all the data being transcriptions of students' interviews, I am moving away from Seidman's model a bit, in that I want to allow space for written responses. The interviews were conducted after I had gathered and read their notes and responses to the questions. The written responses were important additions to the data because generally in the classroom students are asked to respond in writing to a text. In "Value" for some students the written responses proved to be the preferred space of articulation.

What do I intend to do with this data? The truths that emerge from this study can only be translatable to the particular population from which it originates. I do not imagine that "Value" will provide a blueprint on how African American students read. This is a qualitatively designed project. Therefore I am more concerned with the context of their responses than how many responses. While it may be significant if all the participants were disturbed or elated by the same area of the text, I was more curious to know in each case why that area of the novel generated such a response. A more detailed analysis of their responses will

be discussed in Chapter Six, "Creatin Texts Outta Texts."

For this study analysis followed the "constant comparative" method discussed in Goetz and LeCompte(). In other words I will sort and sift data for patterns and/or idiosyncrasies among and across participants. Additionally, I will use a semiotic method of analysis, (reading relational responses in contexts to produce meanings based upon ideological codes); e.g., meanings related to racism based upon the ideological code or view of white supremacy.⁶ Though these data are not generalizable, "Value" does seek to develop "grounded theory" about what stories African American students bring to the text and how those stories influence readings and therefore shapes the stories these students take away from the text (Glaser 31-34). My approach was to allow "substantive concepts and hypotheses to emerge first, on their own," this enabled me to determine if any established theory may help generate more substantive theories. I have been more faithful to my data, therefore in using the method; i.e., I have not tried to make the data fit the existing theory (Glaser 34). For example, if I had asserted (in a previous study) that young Black Americans consider it exploitation to find their established street patterns of discourse in printed texts, then I would expect readers to be offended every time they read "nigger" in a book. This was the declaration of one of my students in that study: "shoot only my homies can call me

nigger." However, in that same study, rather than outrage, other students just attributed the use of the term to the speaker's (characters in the story) lack of education.

Children's Voices

The focus of "Value" is the voice of youth: How did these African American students take up literature in terms of their own social, cultural, and/or political values? This leads to another question: are students' social, cultural, and/or political values apparent in their responses? It is my hope that this study adds to the existing scholarship that has been written about The Slave Dancer, Words By Heart, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. Therefore for educators some questions this study may address are:

- 1) How do African American students feel that their own stories are validated by the use of these classroom novels?
- 2) Based on what experiences and what stories in the readings do students believe and perhaps value these novels?
- 3) Contextually how may the texts used in this study force students to culturally and/or racially identify against themselves?
- 4) Are students more willing to actively engage a novel outside the confines of a traditional

classroom setting?

- 5) If the reader brings a voice other than standard edited American English to the text, in terms of understanding will the text-door be opened?

Readers' Response

As I was working through a teaching/learning metaphor for readers' response I thought of a baseball game. In order to be in position to score the base runner must first have made a connection with the ball. But just as quickly as I was applauding my metaphor, I realized that in all situations it does not work. A player can indeed reach base and be in the position to score without ever touching the ball, if the pitcher is inept enough to throw four wide pitches. So what does this do to my baseball game metaphor for readers and books? For teaching and learning? If a player can be in position to score without hitting the ball, then is it possible for a reader to circle a book without making any real social, cultural or political connections with the text? And if a reader does not entertain such issues should that reading be discredited? Then the question may be what marks a substantial reading?

What's missing here? No thrill of a home run, no emotions, no passion, no real engagement with/or enjoyment of the game. John Willinsky would say what was missing here

is "any form of encouragement for students to experience the text in an aesthetic manner, which was, after all, what art was all about and which in the context of the classroom be profitably shared, refined, cultivated and still ultimately, examined (103). Sometimes we teachers forget that it was the love of the game that first brought us to the playing field.

Perhaps the larger question that looms outfield here is do we only value the artistic rendering of a text, while discrediting the political construction that may in fact have a powerful on impact the young adult reader? In a conversation on cultural representation of the text Diane Brunner reminded me that it is not just the way a teacher teaches but the way that the author moves a particular plot or a character artistically through the representation of a culture, that may shape a student's reading. In other words how do we distinguish between the aesthetic value of a text and what it does in terms of passing along oppressive images of the dominant culture?

When does it become important to negotiate an aesthetic reading with a political one? For me the way to begin the interrogation of the text is to return to those gut feelins and allow myself to experience the reading. By no means is this a linear activity in which the text acts on me, and I simply chart the meanings. Basically by reader's response I am referencing the process described by Louise Rosenblatt

in The Reader, the Text, the Poem:

The reader, we can say, interprets the text.
 (The reader acts on the text.) Or we can say,
 the text produces a response in the reader.
 (The text acts on the reader.) Each of these
 phrasings, because it implies a single line
 of action by one separate element on another
 separate element, distorts the actual reading
 process. The relation between reader and text
 is not linear. It is a situation, an event at
 a particular time and place in which each element
 conditions the other (16).

Echoing Rosenblatt, Robert E. Probst writes the reader performs with the text. The symbolic dance of words on paper awakens memories, arouses feelings, evokes thought, conjures images, but all those memories, feelings, thoughts, and images are the reader's as much as--even more than--they are the writer's or the text's (29). In other words, a reader-response approach would allow students to make connections with the ball, feel the thrill of the home run or even the anguish of a ground-out. These individual experiences with the text can be interrogated on an emotional as well as an intellectual level.

Here I am in the line-up with Taxel and others who insist that the text should not be evaluated aesthetically apart from the social, political, ideological and historical forces that shape it ("Reflections"). Granted my reader's response philosophy begins on an aesthetic level and in a certain sense remains on an aesthetic level. But just because I enjoy the game does not preclude me from critically examining my position from home plate. Paulo

Freire provides an excellent analogy that clarifies what I believe we should be encouraging in the reading process, "Reading is not walking on the words; its grasping the soul of them" (18-19). It is a matter of reading the world as we read the word. "Its engaging the words in a word-world" (Brunner). The premise of art for art's sake just does not work in evaluating historical fiction or novels that purport to represent cultures and or experiences that have and are shaping our lives and the lives of our students. Paulo continues declaring that

it is impossible to read texts without reading the context, without establishing the relationships between the discourse and the reality that shapes that discourse (18-19).

Where or when does this interrogation of relations of power that leads to recognizing racism or classism occur?

Can this happen? Politically how is the game played in our language arts classrooms? Do we allow space for students to interrogate the text, challenge the word, love it or hate it? Marjorie G. Roemer notes

Whether we (teachers) name ourselves traditionalists or members of the avant-garde, more often than not our classrooms communicate a set of dominate values and manners which the students transgress at their own peril; that is, they jeopardize their grades, or feel that they do if they deviate from the kinds of opinions and style of speech that we so clearly privilege (912).

Who holds the power or whose readings matter are

questions that often block the successful implementation of readers response in the classroom. During a book-talk on Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, a pre-service teacher in my English Teaching Methods course raved about the book. Using stories from the text she retold the school bus incident without mentioning racism, or the fact that only White children were allowed to ride the bus, and that the driver purposely splashed mud on the walking African American students. If this pre-service teacher was not able to use words like "racism" or "bigotry" with her peers, then imagine "how" she will teach Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry to seventh or eighth grade students. Rudine Sims Bishop says what readers experience with this book that explores the effects of racism and bigotry, may in the words of Louise Rosenblatt, "Liberate the student from anachronistic emotional attitudes and even perhaps nourish the impetus toward more fruitful modes of behavior" (Bishop, "Fifty Years" 6).

Thus, even though my use of reader's response draws on Rosenblatt, Holland, Beach, and others, I am also extending it through a Freiran notion of reading the word and the world, which encompasses both an aesthetic appreciation for literature as art, but does not excuse it because it is art. My theory of reader's response does not say art for art's sake. It subjects literature to the same sort of criticism about what its representations mean to children and young

adult readers as television, movies and other forms of popular culture that are not often considered high art. It is not enough to question the aesthetic value of a text, each volume must come to the plate and be challenged in terms of the social, political and cultural representations that it puts forth. If a text is racist, will students know what those racist representations are, those very representations that may be shaping their perceptions of themselves and the world? If we as educators do not encourage students to make critical interrogations of the world of the word what understandings will they take from the reading experience? Brunner adds that even when teachers are selecting African American books, given that these texts are often filled with the deliberate ways authors have set out to keep people in their place, it is important to not only look at the traditions in which African Americans will be seen, but how African American students will see themselves.⁷

Throughout this first chapter, I have suggested several questions concerning African American student readers, for example:

- 1) Will African American readers see this book, this situation, this individual as racist?
- 2) Will African American students believe this story?
- 3) What stories do African American readers bring to this text?

The intention here is not to suggest that African Americans share one reading. "If a student is Black, then THIS is how she reads and these are the stories that she will bring to the reading experience." Clearly this is a very limited if not racist presumption that no teacher should make concerning any child. However, it may be equally damaging to ignore the community of those "cultural specifics" that African American students may be reading with. Rudine Sims Bishop says the following are cultural specifics: language styles and patterns, religious beliefs and practices, family relationships, and values shared by that cultural group.

While Chapter Two, *Sharing Visions: Movin Beyond "White Folks, They Can't Write Bout Us"* briefly addresses those cultural specifics that may be shaping African American students' readings, this issue is discussed in greater detail in the concluding chapters of "Value." Chapter Two is primarily devoted to discussions of 1) what I learned from various pilot studies that led me to "Value," 2) design of "Value" and 3) case history profiles of the student participants. The middle section (Chapters: Three, Four, and Five) of "Value," following a brief summary and a review of the academic literature, will be primarily devoted to students' performances with each of the texts used in this study. Chapter Six, *"Creatin Texts Outta Texts,"* concerns itself with a discussion and analyses of students' responses to the books used in "Value." Chapter Seven

"Playin Like I'm 1 Down" concludes this look at what some African American students are bringing to and taking away from the reading process with some possible pedagogical visions. Here I entertain the question: What does this study, "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature," foresee in terms of theoretical and/or practical implications for language arts instruction?

CHAPTER TWO

Sharing Visions: Movin Beyond "White Folks, They Can't Write Bout Us!"

In the fall of 1989 as an undergraduate student teacher I enrolled in Diane DuBose Brunner's English course, Women and Minorities in Adolescent Literature. Brunner designed this course to force us to critique our own thinking on the use of multicultural literature in secondary English classrooms. Therefore we not only read and discussed the young adult novels but we also read and analyzed essays, book reviews and professional scholarship. While some of this scholarship focused on the merits or (dare I say de-merits) of classroom use for such novels as those assigned for this course, others addressing issues of race, class, and gender questioned how these novels reflected the sociology of schooling.

In keeping with the challenging nature of the course, some of the material we discussed reflected the disturbing views of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."⁸ Masters of linguistic gymnastics, these authors often relied on twisted language to retain the literary status quo. For example, Lee Burress wrote the following response to the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) initiative

to change the "all-white" world of children's book publishing: "To criticize racist and sexist elements in given literary works is a legitimate part of the intellectual life. But to focus attention exclusively on an evil is dangerous in this paradoxical world" (16).

Dangerous for whom or for what? Imagine with me the following scenario:

If we could, at this very moment, shrink the Earth's population to a village precisely 100, but all the existing human ratios remained the same, it would look like this:

57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 8 Africans

14 Western Hemisphere people

70 of the 100 would be non-white

70 of the 100 would be non-Christian

50% of the entire world's wealth would be in
the hands of only 6 people--and all 6
would be citizens of the USA

70 would be unable to read

50 would suffer malnutrition

80 would live in substandard housing

and only 1 would have a university education

(APhA Computer Network).

Since only one would have a university education, would she (he) automatically be president of our hypothetical

village? Whose culture would define this space? What political economy would govern our town? Again I ask dangerous for whom? Whose rights are being protected when we allow racist, sexist and classist educational materials to go unchallenged?

While it is true that Burress did not suggest that these works should go unchallenged, however his attaching warning signs like dangerous to the practice may prevent serious interrogation of literature for children. Even though he went on in this English Journal article to condemn the selective tactics of the CIBC as censorship, Burress cited research that indicated "Bad books can corrupt a mind much the same as a good book can impart knowledge..." If he was concerned about the developing perceptions of school children, then should he not have been supporting the efforts of the CIBC?

Indeed although working through the material that Brunner had selected for this course was not easy, it became even more difficult when I read White scholars recommending a demeaning racist text in the face of opposition by Black authors and critics, "Despite some problematic features, The Slave Dancer is an outstanding and important literary work" (Taxel, "Ideology" 218). In condemning the use of The Slave Dancer, Sharon Bell Mathis wrote that this book not only insults Black people, it perpetuates stereotypes about Africa and Black people in general (146). Agreeing with

Mathis, Binnie Tate wrote "no matter what the author's intent, this book presents grave problems for those of us concerned with eliminating racism in children's materials which help perpetuate racism" (149).

Here too I acknowledge that I was angry when I heard my White classmates in this literature course for teachers, hold this book out as a "must-read." Why did these teachers and soon-to-be teachers applaud the use of this award-winning yet racist text, when clearly The Slave Dancer perpetuates the racist myths, noted by Beryle Banfield, that were used to justify the plantation slavery?

- 1) The Black was by intellect and temperament naturally suitable to be the slave of the White;
- 2) Slavery was the natural lot of the African and so ordained by the Creator;
- 3) Rigid discipline and severe controls were necessary and beneficial to the African barbarian ("Same Old Story" 9).

What effects do the use of these racist myths in texts and literature have on young adult readers? In I Won't Learn From You, Herb Kohl notes what often happens to students when they refuse to learn racist materials:

Since the students have no way to legitimately criticize the schooling they are subjected to or to the people they are required to learn from,

resistance and rebellion is stigmatized. The system's problem becomes the victim's problem (29).

Kohl goes on to cite several of these "victims" like Jamila L. who spent four years in special ed. classes drinking orange juice, eating graham crackers and pretending she couldn't read. "The whole act was to keep from hitting several of her teachers who she knew were racist. In fact, she was an avid reader of romances and black history" (29).

Or the case of Paul Luciano who wrote:

Everything you learn is lies.

It's their education. Not mine.

It's their history. Not mine.

It's their language. Not mine.

A white teacher, he has not lived the life.

He cannot relate any of the things to me.

So I'm bored (30).

Or the case of Paul Luciano's friend Victor Hernandez Cruz who tells this story:

George Washington had slaves, man. You know one time he traded a black man for a pig?...We told the librarian we wanted a picture of Malcolm X. We said that we would supply our own picture and everything. But she said, "No." We wanted his picture up there with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson...the librarian said he preached hate...

We asked the librarian to get the Autobiography of Malcolm X. She said, "Some books you have to wait three years." It's still not there.

Today Jamila, Paul and Victor are success stories, working in various educational programs that are designed to empower students. Are they successful because of or in spite of the education they received? Victor supplies this answer in his volume of poetry,

Papo Got His Gun:

JHS (Junior High School) was boss
not because of what you taught me
but because of what I learned
which was not what you taught me.

Also in I Won't Learn From You Herb Kohl discusses his intention to teach Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. He not only concluded after re-reading the text that racism was not "just a secondary unfortunate aspect of an extraordinary piece of writing," but that he should not teach Heart of Darkness unless he was willing to deal with the racism and to condemn Conrad (19). Herb Kohl agreed with Chinua Achebe's contention:

That this simple truth (Conrad's racism) is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" ("Image" 8).

Could the teachers and teachers-to-be enrolled with me in Brunner's English course, be so racist against Africa and

even against African Americans that they just did not get it? And if they did not see The Slave Dancer as a racist text, then how would they teach it? Perhaps, the most important concern here is if The Slave Dancer and other books like it bothered me as an African American, then what would middle-school students (the recommended grade level for these novels) make of these types of teacher-selected and imposed bits of prose? The editors of the Interracial Books for Children Bulletin discuss some implications of racism:

For children of the dominated group, negative portrayals of their group and superior portrayals of the dominating group (along with the overall situation of oppression) lead toward the development of a negative self-image and self-identity (10).

Thus, armed with the purpose of finding out if these texts adversely affected African American children, in the fall of 1989, I decided to conduct my own "scientific-mini-study." So I gathered a group of neighborhood teens in a friend's basement. My initial question to the group was: "Are non-Black authors able to write a positive portrayal of the Black experience in America?" Even though I had requested (silent) written replies, the students made loud vocal responses:

"No! Because they are not able to relate to the past experiences of Black people in America."

"No, because Whites don't have a better act than Blacks."

I do feel that they can write positively about Black people. But I find it hard to believe that they can write knowingly about our trials and tribulations, as if they have experienced what we went through."

Following that discussion, I read aloud the portion of The Slave Dancer, concerning the very poor sanitary conditions that spread 'bloody flux' throughout the ship; a fever-ridden woman was thrown overboard; and Jessie, the fife-playing Creole boy expressed his hatred for the Africans not the captain or the crew members who responsible for this human misery:

I hated the foul stench that came from the holds no matter which way the wind blew, as if the ship was soaked with human excrement. I would have snatched the rope from Stark's hand and beaten them myself! Oh God! I wished them all dead! Not to hear them! Not to smell them! Not to know of their existence (Fox 79).

Without revealing if the author was Black or White, I asked for student comments:

"When I hear stuff like that, I just want to go out and hit somebody White."

"I don't like it because of all the racism and the cruelty to Blacks."

"You can tell that somebody White wrote that. I compare the language to Maya Angelou; she uses a dialect that is real to Black People."

"I don't think that they can get inside of us and tell how we really feel. Like Paula Fox, her people were not slaves, most likely, they were slave-holders, so she can't tell how the slaves musta felt bein treated like that."

Emotionally drained and reflective, an eighth grade student both named and concluded my basement study: "White Folks, They Can't Write Bout Us!" Still overall, I must admit that this early study was painfully flawed. Rather than address the issue of the effects of racism in young adult literature on African American youth, my questions forced the students to focus specifically on the question of authorship: "Can White people write about Black people." Later, Rudine Sims expanded my thinking on this issue:

In a democracy, authors can write about anything and -- in fiction -- anyone they choose. Controversies and arguments arise because, given the realities of life in these United States, fiction about Blacks created by White authors will almost necessarily be different from fiction about Blacks created from a Black perspective ("Perspective" 145).

Thus, the following summer (1990), utilizing a grant from the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program/ Summer Research Opportunity Program, I sought to re-dress the issue of White authorship of Black texts. The questions that motivated my research were: 1) Are White authors' portrayals of the Black Experience authentic or are they shaded by negative racial stereotypes? 2) How does the literature selected correspond with the reader's experiences? In this study I shared some select pieces of African American literature with middle school students enrolled in an enrichment program at a neighborhood youth center. My initial question to this class was: "Do you believe that someone from a different social, economical,

cultural and historical background can write about the African American experiences in this country?"

Although my questions were more theoretically based than they were in the earlier study, something I was doing still forced the students to focus exclusively on the race of the author. I admit that my assumptions going into this study were naive. I believed that by reading the context (story) and the content (language/dialect) the students would be able to identify an authentic text. Yet, the very surface nature of my research agenda was illustrated when students rejected Langston Hughes ("One Friday Morning"), labeling what they believed was his 'passive, our day will come' approach to social equity, as the writings of a White author. I then realized that students must be reading outside the text. It seemed that students of the late 1980's did not share the same values as writers of the 1940's. But let us suppose that in place of "One Friday Morning" from Langston's Laughing to Keep from Crying collection, I had shared a piece from Good Morning, REVOLUTION: Uncollected Social Protest Writings? Amiri Baraka notes with this work that Langston has moved "into a militant internationalism embracing the struggles of the majority of the world's peoples for liberation with a stirring and conscious anti-imperialism ("Class Struggle" 7). If I had invited students to "break-fast" with this selection of Langston Hughes poetry...

The boss got all he needs, certainly,
 Eats swell
 Owns a lotta houses,
 Goes vacationin',
 Breaks strikes,
 Runs politics, bribes police,
 Pays off congress,
 And struts all over the earth--

But me, I ain't never had enough to eat
 Me, I ain't never been warm in winter.
 Me, I ain't never known security--
 All my life, been livin' hand to mouth,
 Hand to mouth.

If I shared "Good Morning Revolution" with my students readers would they have been able to imagine a historical presence in contemporary African American struggles for equity?

The question I must ask myself is did I program their responses? Imagine the discussion that could have taken place had I not forced them to focus on the racial identity of the author? Given the fact that at the beginning of the study just a little more than half of the students believed that White people were unable to write positively about the Black Experience in this country. However, after an eight-week study of characterization, language usage, and story content, in which students participated in role-playing,

oral and silent reading and lengthy discussion sessions, more than 90% were able to ascertain which works were written by "outsiders." As Rudine Sims illustrated in Shadow & Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction, "there is a difference between being talked to and being talked about, being subject and being audience" (8). This difference often manifested in children's literature is picked up by the young adult readers. As one reader remarked: "Why do the White people have real names, and we always got to have a nickname--what they call us?"

I found the students' responses to The Slave Dancer disturbing. In spite of comments like those listed above, even acknowledging that the book was written from an outsider's perspective, the students still accepted this historically erroneous text as an authentic account of the slave experience. Their anger primarily resulted from the fact that they believed the Africans did nothing to defend themselves from the cruelties of slavery. This response is evident of their emotions: "Shoot, I would of killed them all! NO WAY, would I take any shit like that!" (eighth grade male student response to The Slave Dancer). By accepting The Slave Dancer as a true story, some of the students viewed their ancestors who were slaves negatively, rather than the imposed institution of slavery. Responses like the one above prompted me to label The Slave Dancer a dangerous

book for African American children.

"White Folks, They Can't Write 'Bout Us!"

Encouraged by my mentor to get conference experience as well as more feedback on my first organized research project, I presented my study, "White Folks, They Can't Write Bout Us!" at the L. Ramon Veal Seminar on Research in Language sponsored by the National Conference of Teachers of English, Conference on English Education, Indianapolis, Indiana, March, 1991. As a neophyte I received a very warm reception. So warm in fact it was almost like "if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." In other words, if I wanted to consider myself a serious researcher, then I should be willing to interrogate my conclusions. It was suggested that my labeling a book "dangerous" bordered on censorship. One professor attending the seminar, said that my use of the label dangerous made him "nervous. Did I intend to decide what books African American children could or should read?" Another professor questioned whether or not my set of assumptions had not impinged on the students' readings? I was also advised to conduct in-depth interviews based on the written responses or the classroom discussions, to follow-up on the question of authenticity, to allow the students to be co-investigators challenging the texts based on their own understandings and life experiences.

With a new resolve, needless to say I returned to the

academic enrichment program that very next summer (1991). However so many dynamics had changed within the program, under the new director my reading class took a back seat to recreation, to computers, to cyclotrons, to photo imaging, and of course the usual summer family vacations. One day I would have 36 students, then the very next day only 3. Although it was very difficult to keep sustained reading/writing/discussing sessions going, with the various groupings, we did manage to cover the three texts, I had selected for the project.

Since The Slave Dancer, Words By Heart , and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, have been examined by many scholars, I wanted to concentrate our studies that summer on these three texts, in order to understand where African American young adult readers stood in light of the various professional assessments.

However, the negative reactions The Slave Dancer received from the student-readers in the summer of 1990, did not change during the Summer Academic Enrichment Session of 1991. The following discussion between myself (RJM) and Sheila an eighth grade female student was prompted by her reading just a few pages of the book:

Sheila: Are we going to read something else?

RJM: Why?

Sheila: Cause this just ain't kicking!

RJM: What's the matter? What's wrong with the book?

Sheila: Look how they be saying nigger and stuff. Its okay to say nigger or Nigguh to your homeboys, yeah somebody you tight with. But not somebody White. Somebody White call me nigger they're dead.

I was not able to persuade Sheila to read more of The Slave Dancer. During a later conversation concerning my apparent teacher-intervention failure, Diane Brunner advised me to consider the reader, the text and their interactions. She also steered me to an early draft of her book,

Though I would argue that what readers bring to texts is by far more complex than anything which might be reductively determined, still I would argue that the way a reader reads against a text -- especially if an author represents the world in terms of binary oppositions -- is an important part of that reader's meaning making process (Inquiry 93).

Brunner also reminded me of Robert Scholes' charge to educators: "Our job is not to produce readings for our students but to give them the tools for producing their own" (cited in Brunner Inquiry 24). What I had failed to realize was that Sheila was making meaning outside the text, yet in some ways by way of the text. Still I was very concerned about Sheila's reading process. Supposed she was required to read The Slave Dancer in her language arts class, would she read it? I mean really read it! Or just skim for answers to her teacher's chapter ending questions? All the while hating the reading experience?

In this case a strict textual reading, without

allowing space for individual interrogation, may in fact open the door to continued racism. Suppose a book "is written from a perspective outside the cultural experience it purports to reflect, there will be those from inside the experience who will rightly or wrongly, question its authenticity" (Sims, "Black Perspective" 145). I am not suggesting that White people can't write authentically about Black people or vice-versa. I am suggesting that careful attention needs to be paid to those culturally specific details that members of that community may treasure, such as language usage, or religious practices. It takes a lot of research, reading about the history, talking to diverse members, and just being with members of that community in order to reproduce their story to some degree from their perspectives. On some level, individuals wishing to write about another community, must assume an acculturation process. For example, suppose a given community (Town A) is very successful (economically, socially, and politically). Town A's success depends on the efforts of a voiceless working underclass. This underclass is composed of members of a different racial community (B). A very successful author wants to write the history of Town A. Since this author is a member of Town A's elite class, then in order for him to write an authentic text he would have to identify against himself, by exposing the oppressive practices of his town. The question is what perspective would this author

articulate in his work, one that would applaud the town's success or one that would expose the evils of his town's ruling class?

This question of perspective was certainly a burning issue for my students, in that summer (1991), when we read The Slave Dancer. Early in the novel, on page 22 (1983 Laurel edition), Fox identifies Jessie Bollier as a Creole. When you say Creole to an African American this generally means you are talking about a person of color. So at the end of one of our sessions, I asked my students: What does Creole mean?" They had various answers all suggesting a person of color. My homework assignment for them that day was to ask their parents, grandparents, neighbors, friends, anyone and everyone they would run into during the course of a day: "If you are talking about race, what does Creole mean?" When they returned the next day, without exception these students all identified a Creole as a person of color. "In the Black community 'creole' generally implies some basis in blackness--for example, a Black person from a certain area of Louisiana with creole parentage and who speaks creole or any white-skinned Black" (Tate 150). In a recent discussion with a professor of African American history, I posed the same question: "In terms of racial identification what does Creole mean?" Her immediate response was: "Black, some combination of Native American, French, and African American."

If the readers identify Jessie as 'half Black' as my students did, then their reading may be governed by that interpretation. In other words, Jessie's expressions of hatred for the slaves represented to the students, the wailing of a half-Black sell-out. On the other hand, Joel Taxel contends that "The Slave Dancer is the story of a white boy. The point is that Fox has not attempted to tell a story from the black point of view" ("Controversies" 269). I would agree, The Slave Dancer is not told from a Black point of view. However, if Paula Fox's intention was to write a story from the White perspective, then I would like to know why did she choose to identify Jessie as Creole? It should be noted here, that all the readers of "Value" believed that Jessie was Black. But we will discuss Jessie's ethnicity more in Chapters Three and Six. Here lets examine reactions to the other texts used in "White Folks, They Can't Write Bout Us! Part III." Generally, in Roll of Thunder, the students were able to positively interact with the activist character, Cassie and her methodology for getting even with Miz Lillian Jean. Yet they also mourned for the con-artist TJ:

I had to cheat on a test before, when I was too tired to study. I don't know, man, he shouldn't have to die for those White guys crime
(eighth grade male student).

Contrastingly, they found the characters in Words By Heart

too passive to be believed:

Shoot, Man! I don't know why she didn't turn
in that dude that shot her father. Man I
would of...(seventh grade male student).

With Roll of Thunder, Words By Heart, and even The Slave Dancer students were making meanings by sharing their life experiences. So the question may not be what is the criteria for an authentic text, or who should author texts for African Americans. The questions may be what values do the readers bring to the learning experience, how do those values shape their reading, and how are those values validated by reading books like those selected for this study?

In spring 1992, I returned to the Veal Seminar to discuss the my findings from research the summer of 1991. While the reception was just as warm as the previous year, this time I was invited to sit at the "kitchen table." Invoking a language of possibility and change the Seminar participants dined well on my findings:

I feel that there is still much work to be done on the subject of incorporating students voices into the learning process. With a better appreciation for the values that students bring to the texts, perhaps educators would be able to provide the students with skills to decode and understand the graphic and text symbols. Students would be in a better position to challenge, question, analyze and yes resist the language and the images that have been historically used to mis-represent African Americans in literature (Muhammad "Questions").

Talkin bout a counter hegemonic approach to language

arts education! Imagine students having the where-with-all to challenge, resist and even alter the perceptions of what teachers put forth as 'must-read' texts. How will this happen? How will students develop such cognitive abilities? If in contemporary American classrooms students are not invited to entertain texts from their own individual social cultural perspectives? Diane Brunner advises:

it is not enough simply to offer a language of identification and resistance to our students, if we do not also provide them with specific opportunities to socially construct understandings--understandings that are based upon their personal experiences of lives not lived in isolation but within a network of social relations ("Dislocating" 18).

Brunner then encouraged the use of reflective writing pieces, an assignment she often uses in her own classroom. "In general reflective writings are responses to literature which lead students to question aspects of their own lived experiences" (19). Incidentally, for "Value," I provided space for students to do reflective writing. We will see if they were able to respond to the literature through their own experiences in Chapters Three, Four, and Five.

But to continue our discussion of literature and politics, if we accept Joel Taxel's contention that textbooks, children's literature, as well as the social relations of the classroom are dominated by the perspectives of those in positions of social and economical authority; then

the question of readership--of how children

respond to, and make meaning of literary texts-- is of fundamental importance given the belief that children are deleteriously influenced by by racist and sexist images found in literature ("Controversies" 254-255).

If this reads as contradiction, given Taxel's support of The Slave Dancer, then we could conclude that he just didn't get it. Joel Taxel does not see The Slave Dancer as a racist text. In his favor, Taxel acknowledges that his reading is that of an adult scholar and calls for further student examinations of these books:

There have been virtually no investigations of the way children respond to the kinds of books under discussion; to such critical questions of children's response to literature in the course of regular, day-to-day classroom interactions; or how gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity influence response to literature ("Controversies" 255).

Hence, the creation of "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature." As I have stated the purpose of this study is to do just what Joel calls for, discover how young adult readers take up some traditionally used classroom novels. I believe that the title: Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature, describes much of what I hope to see happen in this study. In an earthly sense, value, authenticity, and reader response all evolve in a circular happening. What we value what we find authentic in a text may depend on the space we allow ourselves or the space we allow our students to interact with the text. Elaborating on Louise Rosenblatt's

"transaction theory," Norman Holland adds

As readers, each of us will bring different kinds of external information to bear. Each will seek out the particular themes that concern him (her). Each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies ("Unity" 123).

It appears that Holland locates the majority of the meaning-making in the reader as opposed to a one to one continuous exchange between the reader and the text, I would argue that this is not always the case. Especially in young adult and children readers, we must acknowledge the power the written word possess. During my work with Mario for Children's Voices: Children Talk About Literacy, he confided: "I could write, but it's mostly after I read a book that I write" (99). If on the one hand we are willing to acknowledge that literature has the power to change the world, then we must also be willing to recognize the power of literature to maintain or reproduce the existing dominant social, cultural, economical and political structures (at least in the minds of the readers).

Therefore it is crucial, Taxel adds "given the potential impact of books on children's developing perceptions and values, critics are obligated to evidence concern for the cultural and historical accuracy and authenticity of these books" ("Controversies" 248). Since the "critics" in the name of the American Library Association and/or the Newbery-Caldecott Committee gave this book the label of excellence, then it becomes the

responsibility of adults who care about the eradication of racism to reject the purchase and use of The Slave Dancer (Tate 153). On many levels I applaud Tate's call to arms; however I believe given a critical pedagogy, this book and others like it could be excellent forums for social change. In other words a critical pedagogy often referred to as cultural politics not only challenges the existing values that support oppressive social structures, it affirms other human beings' sense of history and self (Kanpol 174-5). Therefore a reader response approach which includes a critical pedagogical approach to teaching literature would not only allocate the space, it would encourage individual students to interrogate their experiences with the text. Marjorie Roemer adds:

Reader-response theory is a gesture toward opening dialogue with students and problematizing questions of authority, but it can only be a significant gesture when appropriated by teachers who recognize the forces against which such freedom must contend (920).

Lets kick the ballistics (discuss the logistics)! When I invite teachers to establish a pedagogy based on reader response, I am not talking about textual orgies. "I like this book, it makes me feel good, it reminds of the good old days when..." Yes! these emotional connections are important but that is not all that I am referencing when I discuss reader response. I am talkin bout establishing a WORKING relationship with a text. Some attention needs to be paid to the socio/political context of the novel, as well

as classroom use of the novel. In other words, are teachers using a "language of critique" to engage historical fiction? (see Giroux and McCarthy). Once back in the day (some time ago) I coined the phrase "never stifle the storyteller." Stifling the story teller can happen in one or two ways: 1) we can silence the story teller, when we believe her responses do not match what we believe to be an authentic representation of the text, or 2) we do not provide the analytical tools for students to create political bridges with the text. Regardless of what theory or whose voice we may wish to privilege, we must allow students space to work through a text. Kathleen Weiler and Candace Mitchell add to this discussion on critical pedagogy and practice in What Schools Can Do. They note that a critical pedagogy links education with an analysis of politics and economics, and takes as central the belief that schools are the places where social analysis and the empowerment of students can take place (2).

This discussion on reader's response naturally leads to one on authenticity. When I think 'what is authentic', I also think of what is involved in physically saying the word: Authentic. It seems like the first thing I must do is gather breath from all around me, then once I have sucked down air, I gotta come up from my gut, then give it teeth, and only then am I able to push the word out: AUTHENTIC! Thus, what I am focusing on in "Value" in terms of authentic

is what do the students believe to be true based on all that they have learned in school, at home and in their communities, and once they have correlated all these beliefs, I want them to come from their guts, give it teeth and then tell me what do they feel is right. Will their readings come from a Black Cultural or a socially constructed perspective? While I recognize that many of their responses will be learned representations, what "Value" is concerned with is what do these young adult readers believe to be authentic. Will their concerns about differences in race, gender, or class have any bearing on their readings?

Perhaps the overriding principle that I learned from my three earlier studies on "White Folks, They Can't Write Bout Us!" and from my work with Mario in Children's Voices is to not only allow space for student interrogation of the text, but to also only pose questions that will further their own individual interrogations. I believe that this is an important consideration, because all too often (especially in my first two studies) I found my self leading students to make my conclusions. It was paramount that I make them see the negative stereotypes, that they read this book or that novel as a racist text. In essence I stifled the storyteller. If students read over a particular scene or re-told a passage without noting the racism, then I would quickly call their attention to the racist element. As an

African American, I believed that if those students did not see the negative racial images, then it was my duty to point out how these books was dissin my folks. However, if I do not create space for students readings then I am just doing what is traditional done in the academy: "This is the poem, and this is what it means."

The posture I have established for "Value" is not to make students share only what I value or what I find authentic in the literature, but to encourage them to make these discoveries on their own. Additionally, for "Value," I removed the race of the author as a point of contention. Without focusing on "White Folks, They Can't Write Bout Us!" the "Value" students were in a better position to go one on one with each novel under consideration in this study. How did they score? Following brief literature reviews, we will check out students' responses to The Slave Dancer in Chapter Three, Words by Heart in Chapter Four, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry in Chapter Five. Now lets meet the young adult readers of "Value." It should be noted that the names used to identify the students were selected by the students themselves. In several cases, students chose to be identified in this study by their own names.

A. J.

He is a 12 year-old seventh grader enrolled in an urban school. Because A.J.'s school is located

near a large university, it is populated by students from diverse cultures. It is also a professional development school, which means in addition to the classroom teacher, his classes may be taught by a student teacher and/or teacher interns. His class enrollments range from 22 students in his geography class to 33 students enrolled in his English class. "School is only okay some of the time, but mostly it is boring." Having learned to read before he went to school, currently A.J. spends his free time reading comics and sports books: "Anything bout kids and football, basketball, soccer, or karate. And I like Cage, he is one of my favorites because he is an African American superhero."

Constance

She is 13 year old seventh grader currently enrolled in a suburban school of a university town. Constance learned how to read before she went to school. In her early days, she would memorize her mother's words, so on the next reading she could read by herself. Although her first experiences with public schools were in California, Constance also attended school in Grand Rapids, Michigan, before moving to this

university town. "In California we went to school year-round. But I think that the schools are better here than in Grand Rapids. They are not rough. You feel safe. You don't have to feel like you are going to get beat up. Its just a better school district here. But we have a lot of homework. Right now we are working on a Walter Dean Myers' project about his book Scorpions and street gangs." Constance, still an avid reader, said, "I like reading books about my African American culture."

LeTasha

She is a 12 year old enrolled in an urban middle school. Even though she is involved in two demanding competitive sports, volleyball and swimming, LeTasha is a very good student: "School is good. I do good in school, I got all-A report cards so far, and I am hoping for an all-A report card this semester. My favorite subject is English. Right now we are reading a story by John London. It is a different story, for high school level readers. But my teacher wants us to read it now, so we can get an idea of what different reading is like. For fun reading, I like mysteries, scary stories and things you have to

solve."

Maya

Named for poet Maya Angelou, Maya is a 12 year old sixth grader. While her older brother attends a local public high school Maya is enrolled in a Christian school. "In my school we are allowed to pray and talk about God. There are a smaller number of people in my classes. There are not as many problems like drugs and stuff like that. Even though it is there, but it is a smaller percentage, because there is not the same amount of kids (as in a public school). To get into the high school you have to be "saved", you have to be a Christian. As you get older it gets more strict on how you get into the school. They don't want people coming in because they got kicked out of every other school in town. They want people who are Christians who worship God. (In public school) there are more people, more kinds of people, different religions everything would be different. In my school its like everyone is like one person or one kind of person. In a public school, there would be all different kinds of people, people who wouldn't care about you."

CHAPTER THREE

The Slave Dancer

By Paula Fox

John Newbery Medal Winner 1974

All the people of African descent -- the Latin,
the Jamaican, the Haitian, the Brazilian,
the Caribbean, and the African American --
all must realize that, although they were not
born in Africa, they still are African people and
all of us have been through the experience of slavery.

-- D'jimo Kouyate

The past is not past
and the dead are not dead.
-- Julius Lester

Some hundreds of years ago an African was brought to
the shores of North America. That African was my
ancestor, and will always be a part of my heritage.
He was worked and beaten, humiliated and subjected to
the will of people willing to exploit him. I claim
that work, those beatings that humiliation, the pain
of that exploitation. I claim the womenfolk, the
quilts they made, the articles they wrote, their fear
of having their children sold away, their art and
songs. I claim the darkest moments of my people and
celebrate their perseverance.

-- Walter Dean Myers

The Slave Dancer, a powerful painful novel, by Paula Fox addresses this horrifying period in human history. Jessie Bollier, 13 year old boy, pictured as White (on some book covers), identified as Creole, is kidnapped from the shores of New Orleans and forced to play his fife aboard a slave ship. "The scenes in which Jessie is forced to play his fife to dance the slaves for their morning exercises become a haunting, focusing image for the whole bizarre undertaking" (book cover notes of the Dell Laurel-Leaf edition). Haunting? Bizarre? This was no kid's game, no Halloween, no trick or treat. Yet Fox writes the slavers as business men, tradesmen, who do little more than offer rum, tobacco and ten bucks a head in exchange for a supply of sturdy workers. The following statement of justification is offered to Jessie by Smith, a member of the ship's crew:

For as everyone knows, our whole country is for the trade, in spite of the scoundrels who cry and fling themselves about at the fate of the *poor poor black fellows*. Poor indeed! Living in savagery and ignorance. Think on this--their own chiefs can't wait to throw them in our holds! (Fox 49)

Interestingly, Paula Fox thanks Willard Wallace, professor of history, for reading her manuscript of The Slave Dancer. However either Fox's historian did not do his research or she chose to re-write history. Rather than limiting the blame for this horrendous period in human history to African chiefs and warring African tribes, why didn't Paula Fox consider the extent of the European

involvement in the slave trade?

During that time (1619 to 1855) the terrible trade in human beings plunged west Africa into chaos. Europeans brought their guns into the ports of Africa and attacked small villages. They provided weapons for Africans who were willing--sometimes to avoid slavery themselves but often out of greed--to start wars against their neighbors in order to supply captives for the waiting ships. Local governments fell, unable to defend their people against European guns. Entire villages were forced to leave their traditional lands to avoid manufactured wars (Myers 10).

An earlier count indicated that references to sole African responsibility for the slave trade appears no less than five times in The Slave Dancer. For example: "The native chiefs are so greedy for our trade goods they sell their people cheaper than they ever did to tempt us to run the British blockade" (Fox 30). Another example of African responsibility for the slave trade which may negatively affect young adult readers: "The chiefs kidnap the children. The slavers give good trade goods for them because they fetch such high prices in the West Indies" (63).

Of this children's book that absolves Whites, Masha Kabakow Rudman writes: "There is no indictment of Whites' role in the institution of slavery. One could believe that, if African kings refused to supply their people for the slave trade, it would stop" (206). Historically, we know that was not the case. In To Be A Slave, Julius Lester writes that it is true that some White slave traders formed alliances with some Black African tribal chiefs; this was by

no means the only method of capture. Melville J. Herskovits describes other means of procuring Africans for slavery:

Falconbridge repeatedly stressed enslavement by kidnapping, and also describes the method called boating, whereby sailors would put off a small boat from their ship, load it with supplies, and sailing up the rivers, take on whatever natives came into their hands whether by sale or by capture (108).

Joel Taxel also addresses this issue: "the suggestion that the burden of guilt rests primarily on the Africans is misleading and unfortunate. The simple fact that the Africans would not have had any market for their "wares" without first the Europeans, and then the Americans speaks to this point" ("Controversies" 268). Thus, additional questions for this study may be:

- (1) How will young adult African American readers adjust to the "human commodity" factor in The Slave Dancer?
- (2) How will they take up the notion of ancestral betrayal?

Given that these youth generally are fiercely loyal to their families, and to their 'homeboys' (close friends) will they accept what is put forth in The Slave Dancer, that Africans were responsible for slavery?

In "Using Children's Literature to Teach Black American History," Nancy Anderson calls attention to this historical inaccuracy: "After reading the story, children should be

encouraged to discuss whether one man has the right to sell another into slavery" (88). I would suggest, however, before we encourage our students to get into a spirited pro/con debate, should we not address economical issues, political issues, cultural issues and maybe plain old fashion common sense? Given that even with the British anti-slavery patrols, cargo stealing pirates, and the 1808 U. S. Congressional ban on importation, American slavers still risked everything to bring Africans into this country, for oppressive inhuman servitude. Why? Could increase wealth mean so much to these early "business men" that they would sacrifice their existing finances? Yes! Accordingly, Edward M. Jackson describes their money hungry mind-set:

Human beings were defined in the European mind as commodities. They were brought as an investment and sold to make more money. It is not hyperbolic to suggest that the rise of the capitalistic system of the western world was based on the slave trade (1).

Another issue comes to my mind that we should explore before giving our students over to a discussion of "rights," that is language differences. Acknowledging that the European Americans did not share the language and the culture of the Africans, then how did the slavers communicate to the chiefs the purpose for trading people for goods? That the African chiefs really didn't know the depths of American inhumanity, is not inconceivable as it sounds. More that a hundred years later with sophisticated

cross-Atlantic communication systems, how many Jewish people did the world allow to be exterminated, because we just didn't believe human beings would do that to other human beings? If the African chiefs who were involved in the trade did not know about the American system of slavery, then should African American young adult readers be led to believe that their own ancestors were responsible for Africans being enslaved?

"Therein lies the problem of the book (The Slave Dancer)," says Masha K. Rudman:

White readers may be moved to feelings of guilt, sympathy, or indignation. Black readers may be moved to anger, empathy, or possibly shame. If the author chose to present this situation as the central theme of her book, she should have also recognized that its impact would be of mixed value. She fails to articulate any opinions or evidence to counteract the crew's distorted view of the slaves and the slave trade (207).

Children's book author, Binnie Tate writes, aside from the constantly repeated racist implications and negative illusions, there is a question of The Slave Dancer's historical accuracy. Condemning the book, Tate notes that certainly there is not enough evidence that African chiefs were primary force in the slave trade to allow for consistent projection of theme (153). Another historical inaccuracy in the novel noted by Tate is that there some question about the slaves being 'Ashantis captured in tribal wars with the Yoruba' (Fox 63). "I can find no evidence of

these being warring peoples" (153).

On the other hand Myra And David Sadker applaud the use of this book in American classrooms. They claim that the "power" of The Slave Dancer is its graphic descriptions of the intolerable conditions of the slaves on the ship. The Sadkers then imply since the book won the coveted Newbery Medal, it should not be open to attacks by critics. Is it possible that as educators, as parents, as readers we should not view this work through historical, cultural, and political lens, simply because a select committee deemed The Slave Dancer worthy of praise?

Adding to their discussion of the novel, the Sadkers noted that although these faults (The slaves are depicted as dirty, ignorant savages, scurrying about the ship like rats and all too willing to sell each other into bondage), do detract from the book, The Slave Dancer still provides a poignant insight into human degradation, both white and black, of the slave trade (145). Myra and David Sadker conclude that this story is "a moving account of an unhappy chapter of American history" (145). Despite its (The Slave Dancer) value as story from an innocent "White boy's perspective," Joel Taxel declares, "we clearly need a novel which will allow young people to bear witness to the ways that millions of African people themselves struggled to retain their dignity and humanity in the face of barbarities to which they were subjected" ("Controversies" 271).

I have listed these diverse readings of The Slave Dancer to do just that--illustrate diverse readings. As I mentioned earlier the works that I have selected for this study have been the subject of much scholarly debate. But practically no attention has been paid to how students are reading these books. After reading the novel will African American children reject or adopt The Slave Dancer as a historical truth? Will they feel inferior or bad about being Black? Will they hate White people? Will all this translate into how they feel about their opportunities in today's society? Therefore the balance of this chapter is devoted to how Maya, A.J., Constance, and Le Tasha, took up Paula Fox's The Slave Dancer. Generally, I let the individual students' enthusiasm for the novels guide me in ordering their narratives. Maya was especially taken with The Slave Dancer, so I began the student section of Chapter Three with Maya's story of Fox's novel.

The data for the students' section of this chapter comes from 1) the participant's reader response notes, 2) written responses to the open-ended questions, 3) tape-recorded interviews with each student, and 4) tape-recorded dinner conversations. Please see the Appendices C, E, and F, for complete listing of the questions used in "Value." Because I want to retain the sense of a whole narrative, even though the data comes from three or four sources, I am not going to display the sources individually, i.e. "This

response came from A. J.'s journal or this response came from a dinner conversation with Maya." What follows here are their own words. Citing Lev Vygotsky's work Thought and Language, I. Earl Seidman notes the importance of retaining the individual student's words: "Each word a participant speaks reflects his or her consciousness" (87). Earl Seidman adds that

The participant's thoughts become embodied in their words. To substitute the researchers' paraphrasing or summaries of what the participant say for their actual words is to substitute the researcher's consciousness for that of the participant (87).

In other words I would be undermining the intention of "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Response (emphasis mine) to African American Literature" if I did not use the actual words of A.J., Constance, LeTasha, and Maya .

Another issue of importance that may guide the students' readings is the book cover. Generally speaking we can agree that the cover is one of the first things that either engages or distances the reader from the text. Valid or not: We often judge a book by its cover. Thus, in addition to their responses to the questions, students were asked to comment on the two different book covers. Currently it is possible to purchase two editions of The Slave Dancer with the same text. However, the Laurel-Leaf edition first published by Dell in 1975 has smaller print (text size is 4 x 7) and a different cover (Please see the Appendix D for copies of the different covers. For the

purposes of identification, this 1975 edition will be cover #1). It should be noted that this is the edition currently being used in many local area schools. The Dell-Yearling edition first published in 1991 has a larger print (the text size is 5 x 8) and a different cover. (This edition will be known as Cover #2). We used Cover #2 for "Value." I did not expose the participants in "Value" to the different covers until the interview stage of the project. An important point of consideration is even though The Slave Dancer is available with both covers, the 1991 printing date of Cover #2 indicates that much of the early scholarship (Aitken 1988, Banfield 1980, Mathis 1974, Muhammad 1989, Sims-Bishop 1980, Tate 1974, Taxel 1986, 1988) was written with Cover #1 in mind.

Maya on The Slave Dancer

Wow! Shew! That is an excellent book! I think every African American and Caucasian American child alike should read this book. I am overwhelmed and just plain speechless. I like how the excitement builds up, then the book kind of gives you a cool down period. I can't believe how they treated the slaves. I almost started to cry when the storm hit and they just threw the slaves overboard. It touched my heart how Jessie cared about Ras. How he made sure he was okay. I could feel, see, smell and hear the environment of the hold when Stout threw Jessie's fife in and you could

imagine the stench of those bodies piled together with not a single inch of space to spare. I felt like I was there and a part of Jessie's life throughout the book.

I got a good description of the way it was in 1840 on a slave ship. On the way over to Africa before we picked up the slaves, I wouldn't like it all. The crew would despise me [be]cause I'm a child and they are big men. I'm just a little brat in their way and I had one reason to be there and that is to and dance slaves. And that's all I do with them and when I'm not doing that I'm doing work and be simply doing what they say. And the mate would beat me too [be]cause he didn't much like anybody, any of the crew members. The captain would probably try to avoid me and wouldn't want to talk to me or look at me because I'm a little child, and only have me on the ship because I have a special talent. I would probably get along with one or two of the members who had sympathy for me being a child on this ship.

Life aboard the Moonlight (the slave ship) would be smelly and stinky. The smell of all of the naked bodies was disgusting. The trip would be long and it would be like, I would never get back home. If I was Jessie I would feel sorry for the slaves and kind of hate my country, [be]cause to me it is unfair and mean. I would feel really guilty I mean I wouldn't want to be part of country that's taking people and putting them all together in holds of ships. And

it would be scary. I would try to be the friend or whatever or get along with the slaves. I would be totally sorry for them and try not, try to just do my job and avoid like talking to them or avoid contact with the slaves.

When you think of slavery you think of the people who, like the slaves who are on the plantations and they were not paid and they were beat if they didn't do what they were suppose to do. Otherwise you don't know. Because in history books they don't tell about that and slavery is a main part of African history. But its not told how we get over here and you know about the slavery. But how we got over is the main part of the, that's a big part because its sad. But you don't think of how they got here or how bad it was on the ship and this story explains it to you in detail. It doesn't cut corners or glorify it all. Anyone White, Black or anyone should read it because then you can see what Black and White, what they went through to get were they are today. Because I mean you don't read about that in the history books or I mean everything was so glorified and made to seem like it wasn't that bad. But it really was that bad so. So I think that this book is was really good in explaining how slavery was. I really didn't know (about slavery). I knew that we came over on ships, but I didn't know we were in shackles and naked and we had use in buckets and shackled for days until people like Jessie would come in and throw it overboard. (I didn't know) that it was dark,

that there were hundreds of naked bodies in this one small place and that is gross. This is overwhelming, I can't even imagine it!

Back in Africa their normal lives would be a lot of family meetings and tribal sermons and things like that. They were probably really happy and they would have course stayed in Africa. They were basically they just had birthdays and I guess marriages. I think there would be a lot of wars, a lot fighting and between the tribes. One tribe was kind of pushing the other tribe out and they had a war and so they kind of like threw the tribe out and ships would come by and so the ones the tribes do not want and that's how they got on the slave ships. [Be]Cause they were fighting and stuff like that. I wasn't too clear on how the slaves became slaves and were put on the ships. Getting out of their own country was hard. But I don't think it was better in America. I know they probably have great dislike or hate toward the White people or other people on the ship.

The Africans were a very strong people and I don't think we owe anything to anybody. We were taught everything by the White man. When we came here we had to learn new customs and everything like that. So whatever they taught us was what we knew to live here. We had no knowledge of living here. So we learned off them. So whatever we do was taught to us by them. I don't mean that we should get a way

when we do something wrong. But we don't owe anything to them because they took us out of our land so they're at fault. I mean it is their fault [be]cause they brought us out and they taught us everything we know now.

Because no matter what you do, how much education you have in this world its a White man's world. I mean it is their country because they founded it. There is no way we are ever going to be equal because we are not equals because our lives are not even. This one is White and this one is Black with the same qualifications, the White person will get favored because they're White. It is how America is.

I didn't get angry reading The Slave Dancer. I was more overwhelmed then anything else. I was just basically overwhelmed and amazed. I took pity I guess; I don't know if that's how I do it but I was really sad and I saw how bad it really was on the slave ships. It just overwhelmed me. For a White person reading this book they would be ashamed. Well, they probably would feel a little stupid because their culture is doing this. They'd have to deny it. You don't want to know what your ancestors did to people. I mean you know it but you don't want to know it, that your ancestors were slave masters, but you don't really want to admit to it. I'd rather be Black than White, because I'd rather have my ancestors have been slaves than my ancestors have been the people who were enslaving people. That's cruelty. If you read The Slave Dancer you see that it was not a joke.

It was real and it was harsh. It wasn't like a serving in a household where the person is treated half-way decent. No! On these ships, they were treated like things, like little animals. And that's not funny. I think if Caucasian kids read this book they could see that what their ancestors did to us was not funny and that we did not do anything to them to hurt them, that they did more to us than we did to them so.

I think that if people read this book, I'm sure there are other books like this, they would understand why people are angry. If you think about it we have a reason to be angry toward them and we don't owe them anything and they don't have no right to anything from us. We don't owe them a thing. Not a thing. Not a sprinkle of dust because, even adults could read this book and it could benefit them too. What it shows is that we had it hard, really hard. They may have it tell us that we had it hard, we had it rough. I mean if they could imagine people, how the naked, smelly, stinky, (human) waste all over. People can imagine that. Its hard for me to imagine that. I mean its bad. I mean there is no way that you cannot take pity on people and feel bad and ashamed of that. (It) is terrible!

If I had to sum up this book, it would sound like this: The Slave Dancer was about a young boy taken off the shores of Louisiana and put on a slave ship and used for his fife playing. He did not want to be there but he didn't have a

choice. He had to leave his family and his sister and his Mom back in Louisiana. He was on this ship and he didn't know exactly what he was getting into until they picked up the slaves. He really felt bad for the slaves once he met them and he knew that the captain and the crew didn't care about him or the slaves. And that they were just using him because he could play the fife. He did not want to dance the slaves but he probably get thrown overboard if he didn't so he did anyway. He could not wait to get back home. And he did not enjoy this experience and he did not think that it was okay at all because of their skin color. Toward the end of the book there was a storm and he met one of the slaves named Ras, who he became friends with.

Oh, I think that the Jessie learned a lot and he also learned to hate the people who did this. I think he grew a strong hate for that. The ending was good. But I wondered what happened to Ras, and the old man for that matter. I think that Jessie looked at Blacks different now and he got out of the South and moved to Rhode Island so he wouldn't have to put his children in that danger. If I went through that experience I would not want to be around slave markets and I think I would really fight for an end to slavery.

On the different book covers:

I like the other cover (#2) better cause it shows the little boy Ras, and it shows the Underground (Underground Railroad). I think that this one just looks better. (#1)

The slaves don't look real, they look like monkeys, so ugly. And the slaves just look like "Okay I'm just sitting here on the boat." No! I imagined them as being unhappy and miserable and just all over each other. This picture doesn't really match with what the book says. Jessie looks very content with what he is doing and he was not content with what he was doing. He was very sad and he did not want to do it. On cover #2 it shows that his face is not happy and he is just there because he has a job to do. He would have probably gotten thrown overboard if he didn't do it. The other one #2 shows the boy (Ras), I got the picture that they (the slaves) were naked. And here he has clothes on. I guess cause it was after they shipwrecked. It would change my reading a lot looking at this cover (#1) cause I always wanted to know what the boy Jessie looks like. I had imagined Jessie looking more mature than he does on here (#1 cover), cause he was 13 or 14. He looked very young and stupid here. And Jessie seemed more mature. He looks very White on here (#1) and he was Creole. These book covers look like two different boys, I mean Jessie (#2) is more mature looking and what he is wearing is not suspenders. That boy (#1) looks very calm, and Jessie (#2) was very solemn: "I don't want to be here, but I'm here anyway." And his clothes are more ragged and worn (#2). And here (#1) they are not, this doesn't look like an outfit the boys would wear. Here (#1) Jessie looks very neat and polished,

very proper.

White authors of Black texts

I think that it would be glorified, if a White person wrote about the Black Experience. And I don't think that any White person can really write a book about a situation that is true because they don't know and they haven't experienced it or had anyone who has experienced it in their ancestors. Even if they talked to some Black people before they wrote the book, they are going to still glorify it a tad bit. Because they don't want to seem as bad as it was, because it's guilt. You know you don't want to feel bad that your ancestors actually did that. You don't want to really, really show the true meaning of it because it is embarrassing. It is embarrassing to be writing a book about what your ancestors did to people and seeing how cruel and bad it was. I don't think that they would talk to Black people, before they wrote the book. I mean they might but I doubt it.

I still think that it would be a little glorified, even if they went to the library and did research. It wouldn't be as good as The Slave Dancer. I think that the White person who wrote The Slave Dancer did a really good job, and a whole bunch of research. They probably had to do a lot of research. They had to do a lot of talking to people and a lot of interviews and a lot of everything because you can't just do that raw. You know, you have to have some

prior knowledge of something and this person had to be really modest I think. They had to be a really, really good person to have written that kind of book, knowing that they were physically putting, down their ancestors and showing what they really, really did. They are saying that "I'm not proud of it." Because it really does hurt to know that your ancestors did that to people and then once you find that out you understand why people are the way they are today. And if people would do more reading and more listening and shut up and stop talking, and find out about what's going on, people would understand more why people are more the way they are. They would understand why Blacks and Whites are in the predicament they are in. Because you could think that we are just making a big deal out of nothing and that we're just jealous because we aren't qualified. Anyway you slice it, really, I don't think it's all our fault that we are the way we are today. A lot of it is because how we came up and how we were brought up in society. Before you can say we're bad people you have to know, do some research, read about it, read The Slave Dancer. Find out you know what happened and why it happened and you'll understand some things.

I can always tell other African American children and White children you know that they need to read it and I have, I have a lot of friends who I would have love to read the book who would never do it of course. But I would love

them to read because they need to read it. You know, and a lot of people think well the world is all equal. Well you know, we wish that's how it was but if they would read something like The Slave Dancer, they would really see, they would really say "Ah, now I see." And they would really, their eyes would really be opened and teachers would shove it in their face. I think that teachers really should shove The Slave Dancer in their face because they need to read that book. That book is so good and it says so much.

If I was a teacher teaching The Slave Dancer, what I would do is I would have them reading in groups of kids, like three kids or something like that. I would include questions with each chapter. There would be questions like: "What does it tell you about being Black? About being African American in this society, what does it tell you about that. What does it tell you about how they were treated back then." So kids could really open their eyes and see this is how it is you know, and this is why, and this is how it was back then and this is how it is that way now. I would really make them get into every part of the book. And it would probably take us like three months to read the book. I would make them do reports and projects on different incidents in the book and maybe make them do a simulation of the slave ship just to get it in their mind. "What is going on with these people, and the shackles and the smell and all that stuff?" I would tell them, "Ok

everyone scrunch up in one spot and everyone has to find a place to sit." They would be like, "We can't fit here." "Well that's too bad, find a way to get in it." I would make them get into the book and figure out how it felt. I'd probably give them all a free copy to take home to their parents.

A. J. on The Slave Dancer

If I was doing a presentation on this book to my class it would go like this:

Today I am presenting to you a very historic book that is mostly true about what happened to us African Americans it is called The Slave Dancer. It has passion, romance (well not that much romance) drama, action and suspense. You might want to call it a movie. So I suggest that you read this book. It is our African American duty to read this book!

There is a person named Jessie. He is 13 years old. He lives in a one-room apartment with his Mom and his sister, Betty. I felt just by reading three pages of the book called The Slave Dancer, it was going to be about poor people. I feel sorry for the boy [be]cause his Dad drowned in the Mississippi River. I like the way the author of the book expressed the way Jessie felt about his father dying.

I wish that they had welfare back then to help them get through their bad times. I wish that us African Americans did not have to go through what they went through, but if they had given us our 40 acres and a mule at the end of slavery, like they said...

I feel that it wasn't right the way they took Jessie on aboard the ship, without asking him, just making him leave his Mom, they just threw him the bag beat him down and took him on the ship. I think that The Slave Dancer was a very sad book. The way they captured them (the Africans) and took them on the boat, and the way they starved them too.

On the ship, first I would show them, prove to them that I could blow my whistle, in this book the flute (instrument is called a fife). When I would wake up and get bout a half a bowl of soup, that is not cooked very well. I probably would be doing a lot of work for my age. The part in the book about Jessie dumping the bathroom buckets really bothered me. But it showed what a young person, like my age would have to do, to show that he could handle his responsibility among a bunch of men. And I would not like not being around my peers, being around a lot of people older than me, instead I don't think I would feel right. I wouldn't have that much freedom on my own. They might just call me a slave too, you know, [be]cause I don't hardly get no freedom around. I don't get to talk to nobody. All I do is go sit in this crappy bed, they call a net. And all I

get is like soup for all of your food. So you see I think I would feel kind of sad and lonely I would be starved probably. [Be]Cause they think it is disrespectful to ask for little bit more food cause they think little kids can't eat that much food. Then I would starve to death [be]cause they hardly ever give you the right amount of food a day.

I would be sad. The Slave Dancer shows how it feels to get beaten for nothing that you did wrong only [be]cause of your color. I really hate the way Purvis is treating Jessie wrong by hitting on him and by trying to strangle him.

I wouldn't feel right to go out there and help them, the Caucasian do that, do that bad thing that they were doing. It would be like helping thieves steal. I think that I would feel sad right when I seen that girl get thrown off the boat into the water.

Most of The Slave Dancer was true. Maybe about 75% of it is true. I mean that they probably did say and do that stuff back in the old days, like they treated the kid and stuff. And they probably did have a kid come on board, use his flute to exercise them (the slaves). [Be]Cause if they didn't exercise they would be all stiff and they couldn't work. I think that it is true that the African Americans were beaten a lot. The Slave Dancer was about 25% false, like the kid coming aboard and having a lot of freedom. He was practically starved to death and still had the strength to fight the racism he saw in his eyes. I really don't

think that they would have got a kid, I think that they would have used a grownup that had that talent, [be]cause he would be stronger. The other thing I think is false is that the only way they became slaves (being sold or traded by their chiefs) most of them, I'll say about 65% were forced here by the Caucasians and their muskets.

The picture they gave me of Africans, was that they were having a terrible life anyways. But not the way all these movies show it. To me they had a good life. All they had to do was avoid other tribes and that would be cool.

In Africa I see them (the Africans) having fun, just chillin out, being themselves, enjoying their life. Before the English men came with the muskets and all and forced them on the ship, I thought that they had freedom. Living their lives the way they wanted to, in a free democracy. Well, I thought they were living perfect. Working in the fields. They didn't have to be forced to work to get money. They got paid for working and they had fun, you know. Have a little vacation time and stuff. Like our regular lives are, but a little harder.

Then I see them Caucasians and Englishmen coming with their muskets, forcing them to get on the ship, sometimes it was surprise attack and they captured the Africans. Sometimes the White people would say something like, "come on we have a party on this ship" or something like that. I see their (the Africans) smiles turn into frowns. They are

very mad and feel like killing them. But they couldn't think of a plan [be]cause most of them spoke different languages. That is what the Englishmen were smart at, cause they knew they couldn't come up with a plan by talking to each other. If we all had our same language we could have turned our backs and had a good plan and we could have whipped their butts.

I think it was still worse on the slave ship than in Africa. Because on the ship they couldn't move anywhere. They were stacked up on each other in bunks. One person on the top needs a bathroom or to go to the toilet, it would get on the other person. They couldn't get clean clothes. The crew would take them out every other day so they could get exercise.

I felt that the words that were used in The Slave Dancer seemed like what they would be saying back in the old days. I think it was kind of written towards young kids so that we would have an easier time reading. Black folk language, old Caucasian language -- old English is probably hard to understand or pronounce. [Be]Cause sometimes they will leave off letters or something like that and ends like an. You understand it you would take it as a different way. So I think it was kind of a strange way. The way that they put it in to the book sounds like a great idea so that the people at our age will understand it. But our parents would have to come in and we have to ask them what this word is

and that word. The language in this book like if I was really on the ship, like Englishmen talking old-English, Africans talking their language like Swahili.

I think us African Americans have fought hard in the past to be where we are at today. Even back in the old days women got more money than that, which they were not very much respected. I think that the way us African American are treated today is very much different than the way we was treated in the past. That shows if we put a lot of heart in what we want we can get it, like freedom. Racism has decreased. It is not over, no, never, it probably will never be. [Be]Cause say Mr. _____ was racist, it would probably run through the family, like if he is racist, his son will be racist and his daughter would be racist, it would keep going and going. But we can teach the people, show them the light of day, show them the right way. Racism has decreased but back in the old old days, lets say 15 million Caucasians, and even some Black people were racist to themselves. Now since we have some Caucasians and some Blacks [be]cause of the heart we put in to get racism out of our blood, and out of our face, push it to the side. Now, they see we work hard and should deserve freedom and no racism. Like Martin Luther King, he was a great man and he fought for the same things us African Americans have heart for. I respect my ancestors who were slaves very much, [be]cause if they didn't stay alive I wouldn't be here

today. If they didn't come here and make the world the way it is now, like putting in the seeds we wouldn't be here. No African American would be here if our ancestors did not plant that seed for us.

On the Book Covers

Creole is like Italian and Black or something? I know that it doesn't mean all White. Jessie looks like he is Italian or French with African American blood. He looks like African American by his hair. He wasn't treated like a slave cause he mostly had White blood. And it didn't show up as if he was a Black person. But still they didn't treat him with as much respect as the other crew members.

[Be]Cause they also knew that he had a little bit of Black in him. On cover #1, he looks like he is an Caucasian. This one shows a lot more of what is in the book. The slaves look like gorillas. This is what I HATE about this picture: They make it seem like we are animals, when really we are mammals, people who have come from a far away and we are strong.

Le Tasha on The Slave Dancer

At first it was hard to read The Slave Dancer because it was such a different book. They said a lot of different things that I didn't understand. The language was different and that is the part that was hard when I first started the

book. The language in The Slave Dancer was different but at the same time I think you would have to be on a little higher level of vocabulary to understand word for word what they were saying. Because they had different words for the words we use now. The different language went throughout the book. So they would repeat it sometimes. And after they repeat it a couple of times, you figure out what those words stand for. But this made the book kinda hard to read. But once you get used to the type of writing it was easier. But I still understood the majority of the book. I read basically everyday and then maybe toward the end I might have skipped a couple of days.

The Slave Dancer was a good book. It had a lot of bad things that went on that bothered me. Aboard the Moonlight was terrible. The horror and disgust fills me every time I read about the awful things they did do to the slaves. When Jessie was on the boat and they had brought slaves aboard. They put all the slaves together. They were really mean to Jessie, and called him names, beat him up and just did anything they felt like doing to him. I felt really bad for the slaves, the circumstances that they were in. How they had to live! Doesn't seem like they could live in those circumstances. It was bad. The whole journey I kept thinking that if I was there I'd jump overboard.

I thought that Jessie was really brave to go through all those things without like jumping over board, or just

lashing out or doing something mean to them. He had to be brave to just sit there and let all that go by, and being kidnapped, being away from his family, and then having to go through all that and he was only a kid. I thought that was (what is the word I'm looking for? I guess brave) Jessie was really brave. If someone asked me about this book I would probably tell them about how Jessie's life was, about how he got kidnapped and what happened while he was on the ship. Having to go all through that and he was only a kid. I thought that was a big thing. That is what affected me the most.

The ship's captain didn't bother me a lot, he was just there and in control of all the slaves and everything. But there was one crew member that just bothered me. He was always in on something, doing something to a slave or to Jessie or something to somebody. And he was a really close friend to the captain. He just irked me cause he never stopped. I don't think that he even had a conscious [be]cause he was just so cruel and so mean to everybody.

We've discussed the slaves and the slave trade in school. But I really didn't know what was false about The Slave Dancer. I just read the book and I thought it was basically true. It was based on a true story. I believe that the majority of the book is true. I can't pick out what is false in the book because I don't know enough about slavery to know what is true and false.

I didn't like that part when they slaves were being sold either or traded. I thought that part was really bad. I thought it was bad when some of the slaves got sick or they got too many slaves or something, they would throw them overboard. And I thought that was like one of the meanest things they ever did to them to throw them overboard. At least while they were put together they were still alive. They just lost their lives like that.

The Slave Dancer tells me that the conditions were harsher to deal with than they are now for Black people. I am blessed that I'm able to live at a time where the majority of the population respects me and that the trading of slaves is banned.

On the Book Covers:

I don't know that I really stopped to think about Jessie being Creole. I think Creole means Black or bi-racial. Jessie doesn't look Black and he doesn't look like White. He just looks like a mixture or something. On this other cover (#1) he just looks White. If you were reading this book, you wouldn't think that he is having a hard time because he looks White. You would think that he is just part of the crew. But in the book (#2) that I read, he is darker than the crew. The other people (crew members) were White. You could tell that they treated him a lot differently. This (#1) does not look like the same boy, (on this cover #1) the entertaining part just comes out. There's a guy

(captain or crew member) in the background watching him. He is just sitting there merrily blowing his whistle. It does not occur to me that something is wrong. And that he was taken away from his Mom.

The slaves aren't that happy. The slaves weren't happy. But they look happier (on cover #1) than the way they were in the book. They are not even there (on cover #2). But even though they are not there when you read in the book the slaves are not happy people at all. And they look, they just look happier and peaceful (on cover # 1) than the other book.

Book Cover #2: Jessie looks very down, he looks sad. I looked at that cover and I thought what is he thinking and I just thought if I was him I would probably be thinking of my mother and wishing I were home and off this ship. I didn't know anybody. I didn't know what they were going to do to me. What they wanted with me...

Reading this book he (Jessie) is darker than them and the other people were White and you would think that they would treat him a lot differently than the other boy (the "White" Jessie). The story I read matches this cover (#2).

On the race of the author:

If a White person writes something about a Black person, I just have to say that I would think they should do some research on it. I mean it doesn't bother me that much just as long as they know what they are talking about. It

wouldn't surprise me to find out that The Slave Dancer was written by a White person. Because of the pirates not pirates, but the men in the (slave) trading and stuff. I will be surprised if it was a Black person who wrote this book. But either one (White or Black) could write The Slave Dancer.

Constance on The Slave Dancer

This was an easy book to read I didn't have any problems with the language. It took me about 2 weeks to read it. I didn't read everyday, [be]cause I had a lot of homework. Usually I read on the weekends when I don't have that much homework.

I didn't like this book. It really made me mad! It tells what White people did in taking us over to their land and how they treated us taking us over. And what it was like when we were captured. I wouldn't recommend reading The Slave Dancer because its very sad. It was really sad that Jessie and his family lost their Dad by the Mississippi River. Jessie's Aunt Agatha, I think is very picky about things and doesn't seem to care about people's feelings.

The White people wanted somebody to serve for them, so they came over to Africa. And I think that they tricked the Africans, [be]cause I guess they (Africans) wanted to trade with them because they had sugar and stuff. I guess that

they were going to trade, but I think they tricked them into coming on board. The White people had guns, even though the Africans made their weapons bows they (the Africans) couldn't really hurt them. They were forced to be slaves.

I didn't like the part when the slaves came aboard the Moonlight Ship, because the crew members just treated them so badly. I get really mad every time I think about what they done to us back then, and we were so helpless and couldn't do nothing. I am really mad and upset about how the White people treated us back then. And they think just because we're Black we should be treated like we're dumb. I HATE IT! What really makes me mad is that back then we were treated like animals and talked about very badly and (we) couldn't do nothing about it. I don't like the cussing in it either.

I believe that the White people came over to Africa and got the slaves and put them on a ship where they had to sit together, naked as submarine sandwiches. I also believe that some of the slaves would try or even jump overboard because it was so bad. I really didn't like this book! This book made me really mad, because of what the White people did to us back during slavery. They treated us like animals. It made me really mad because I mean we were all down there and we could hardly breathe or anything, we were all squeshed together. I mean, Oh Man! It was just really Mean! There was this little girl that first arrived on the

Moonlight, she was her parents were with all the blood {bleeding}. Then one of the crew members took her by the hair (now this is a little girl) and picked her up and threw her with the other slaves. A man bought on the ship had covered himself with his arms, and legs (since he was naked) and one of the crew members, Purvis, came over there and called for Jessie to bring him some rum. And when he brought it to him, Purvis forced the man with his hands opened the man's mouth and put the rum in, and the mouth of the man bled. And that's what "I REALLY HATE"!!!!!! Just how they treated us back then, just made me real mad. I wish I was back there, so I could beat them up. I remember in the book how they threw a sick woman overboard. And also threw a child overboard. It is just so sad to know that our own kind got tossed over into the sea and nobody cared. All they worried about was the money, not people's feelings and that just makes me mad!

In social studies (in the fifth grade) we did research on what slavery was like. I saw a picture in the social studies book, where it showed, like the picture I drew, the Black people were underneath and they were starving (See figure 1). Really, I was really mad because what the White people did to us like they treated us like animals and they were really making me mad. Because they were all down there and they could hardly breathe or anything. They couldn't... they didn't... really get... Oh man... It was just really

mean how they treated us back then. They showed (in the social studies book) a Black man jumped off the ship. That was a sad picture. It was terrible when they jumped over board, trying to escape, by swimming home, because they mostly got eaten by sharks. I do believe that back then it was very cruel on those ships and stuff. So the slaves tried to jump off to swim away across the Atlantic back (to Africa) because I know it was really terrible.

On the Book Covers:

Jessie was treated better than the slaves. I disbelieve that the captain and the crew knowing that Jessie was Black treated him better than the slaves. Just because he could play his fife, doesn't mean he could live in a hammock, eat better stuff like that. Just because he became friends with one of the crew members. Well, he looks Black on the cover (Cover #2). It says in the book that he is a creole. That's like mixed or something. But he was still Black. He's like still Black but he's basically still Black. On this cover #2 he is feeling fair. He wants to get off the ship [be]cause he wants to go back to his hometown to see his mom. (On Cover #1) He looks White. I thought he was Black. Here (cover #1) he is just playing for the Black people to get them calmed down. They're all just looking sad. They just want to have freedom. They don't want to be captured like animals cause they want to go back to their homelands. Just because it is the same words, it is not

really the same, the book covers make the stories different.

On White Writers of Black Books:

Well, its kind of like they (White writers) don't have all the principles of what we went through back then. Because they can just make up some stuff. But sometimes they don't know all the real story behind it because they weren't there back then and that's not their heritage. So they don't really know what really happened. Its okay with me if White person writes a book about Black people. No, not all the time, they can't get it right, cause they don't know how it was. They can't say that because they were treated fairly. So they won't know how it felt because they were White. If they can get information from a Black person then yeah its okay for them to write the book. I think they pretty much got the history right in The Slave Dancer. But wouldn't they have to talk to somebody who really experienced that?

In Chapter Six, "Creatin Texts Outta Texts," I will discuss what Maya, A.J., Le Tasha, and Constance's responses may mean in light of the questions posed for "Value." In the meantime I invite you to enjoy Chapter Four, which is devoted to a discussion of Words By Heart, and Chapter Five, which discusses Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

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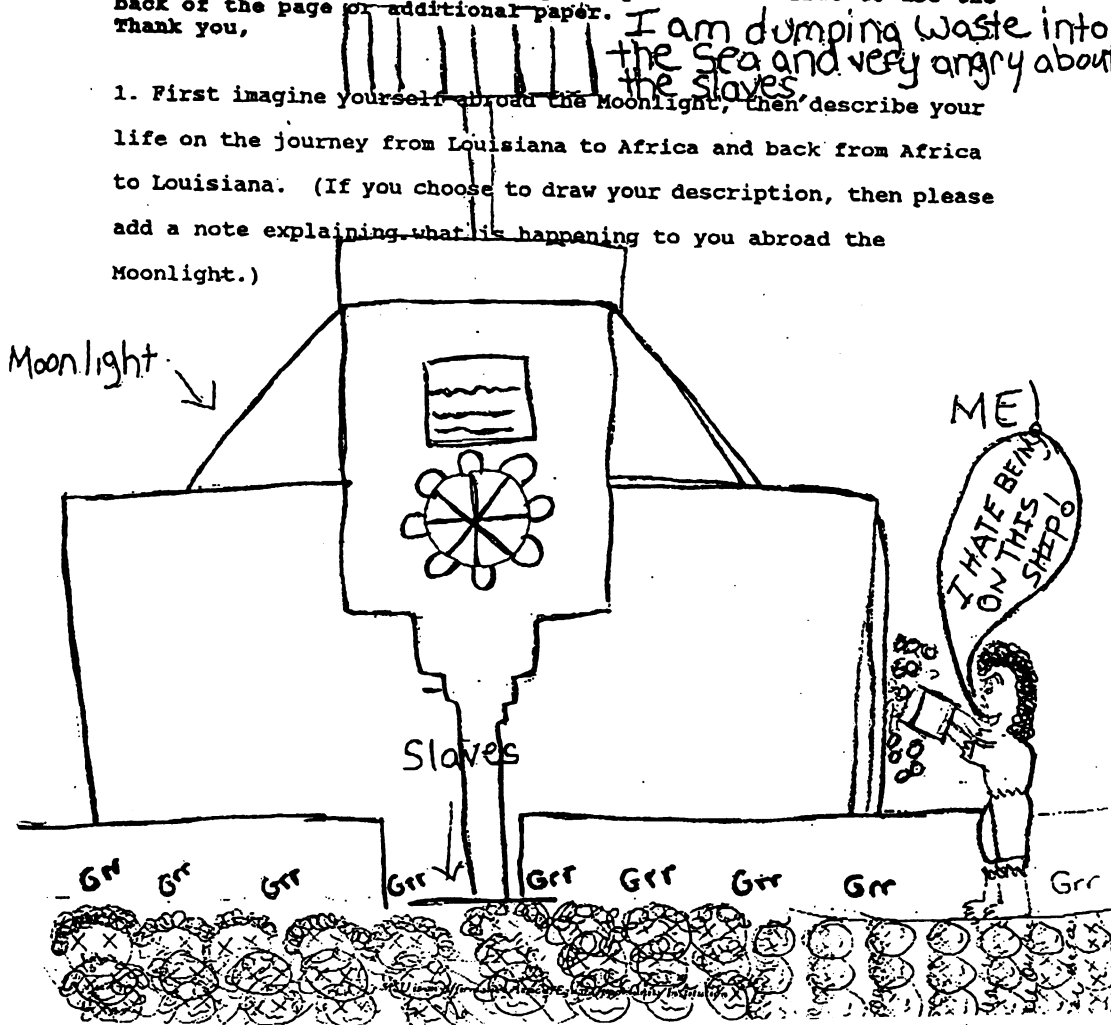
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Name ConstanceDate 2/3/95The Slave Dancer

Note: Any time you need more space, please feel free to use the back of the page or additional paper.
Thank you,

1. First imagine yourself abroad the Moonlight, then describe your life on the journey from Louisiana to Africa and back from Africa to Louisiana. (If you choose to draw your description, then please add a note explaining what is happening to you abroad the Moonlight.)



CHAPTER FOUR

WORDS BY HEART

by Ouida Sebestyen

1979 American Library Association Best Book
1980 International Reading Association Award

"The words that had been so beautiful to say,
so easy turned to stone."

Here is a Brief Plot Summary of Words By Heart.

In 1910 Ben Sills and his family, who are Black have moved from Scattercreek, a southern all Black town to Bethel Springs, an all-White southwestern town. Sills' 12 year-old daughter, Lena, wins a school contest (Bible recitation) and otherwise displays quickness of mind that is disquieting to local residents. While Sills is mending the landowner's fences, he is fatally shot by a poor white sharecropper's son, Tater. Tater is thrown from his horse, and Lena finds her dying father trying to keep the boy alive. Sills extracts a promise from Lena to help Tater and not identify him as her father's murderer, saying "let God handle it" (Sims, "Black Perspective" 13).

In addition to being awarded the American Library Association Best Book for 1979, Words By Heart won the 1980 International Reading Association Award for a Children's Book. This award is annually given to a writer whose first or second published book shows unusual literary promise.

Several journals and children's book reviewers gave high praise to this novel.

"Sebestyen plays no holds barred the first chapter and doesn't let up ... audiences must meet this story head-on ... the book is a finely honed heart-wrencher."

--School Library Journal

"Words By Heart by Ouida Sebestyen is a poignant and superbly written tale ... The characters are richly portrayed, the action is gripping, and the message of nonviolence and redemption is moving."

--Learning Magazine

"...poignancy without sentimentality, tragedy without melodrama. --Horn Book Magazine

"This is an impressive first novel about race relations and non-violence, written in an easy, vigorous style and candid in its depiction of discrimination ... A most moving story about a black family strong in their love and pride."

--Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

"Everything is present here to make this book not only to be read once, but to be re-read, studied and shared." --Catholic Library World

"Re-read, study and share." I agree with the reviewers at Catholic Library World, that a piece of literature is truly outstanding if it can prompt readers to engage it many times on multiple levels. However, when I re-read Words By Heart, especially the following passage, my agreement with the Catholic Library World, ENDS. I contend that any agreement to praise this novel must be tempered by a close examination of its social and political implications.

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"I got to get you home, Papa. Into the wagon."

"Tater first."

"Papa! He tried to kill you. I can't touch him. Papa I can't. We'll send somebody for him."

"Good Lord already sent somebody"

(Sebestyen 120).

Every time I re-read this part of the book when Ben Sills forces his daughter to save his assailant, I get a pain in my gut that just cuts straight through like the most horrendous form of injustice. For God's sake did he think he was Jesus? If he did believe himself to be Christ, then pray tell whose sins was he dying for? For his own family's sake, I just cannot believe that this proud Black man, husband/father/provider would not do all he could to save himself! The message that comes from Words By Heart is that there is honor in Black sacrifice. Rudine Sims notes that in works like The Cay and Words By Heart the "noble" Black man is a "very expendable literary creation" ("Black Perspective" 12). Is this what the author would have language arts teachers share with their students? But that is the end of the novel let us begin with the beginning of Words By Heart.

When I first read this book in 1989, I was mistakenly told that it was written by a Black author. My feeling then was, "Well, if girlfriend got it, she sure didn't write it!"

... the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul -- the tom-tom of revolt against weariness

in a white world, a world of work, work, work;
the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain
swallowed in a smile (Hughes, "Racial Mountain"
179).

In this novel, Ouida Sebestyen did not share those "gut feelings," the pain of slavery, that very real chain associated with being different, therefore not quite acceptable by White standards but very acceptable by Black love. At that time (1989), my student readers concluded that Words By Heart was written from a "lets get-along-with-whites perspective. And this book is not a positive portrayal of African Americans." Mildred Taylor addressed this issue of the African American portrayal in literature in her Newbery Award Acceptance Speech:

Books about Black families by White writers left me feeling empty, not because a White person had attempted to write about a Black family, but because the writer had not, in my opinion, captured the warmth or love of the Black world and had failed to understand the principles upon which Black parents brought up their children and taught them survival (405).

A few years earlier in his essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Richard Wright defined perspective as "that part of a poem, novel, or play which the writer never puts directly upon paper. It is that fixed point (emphasis mine) in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people" (341). When I first read this section of Wright's essay I was disturbed. Although I wasn't quite sure what was the nature of my uneasy feelings, I knew it had something to do with

his use of the term "fixed point." Did he mean that there was only one way to see the African American experience? In other words if I could not see the Black Experience from this certain (his) vantage point, then I can not see it, then it also follows I should not be writing about it. However Richard Wright's position is not as stationary as I was led to believe by his "fixed point" statement. Later in this essay he notes, "At its best, perspective is a pre-conscious assumption, something a writer takes for granted, something he wins through his living" (342). "Something he wins through his living," I like this reflection because it imagines a space without defined parameters a space not conceived out of a single focus a space defined by each individual's living experiences.

Yet in the case of Words By Heart, how do I reconcile author autonomy (the writer's right to imagine his or characters) with our quest for authentic representations in children's literature? Wright provides some guidelines for writers that may help us solve our dilemma,

there are times when he may stand too close
(to view his peoples hopes, struggles and
sufferings) and the result is blurred vision.
Or he may stand too far away and the result is
a neglect of important things (341).

Then is it possible for a White author on one level to objectively view the "Black Experience" then very subjectively realistically write about it? Several scholars argued that this could not be done, at least it was not done

in Words By Heart. Kristin Hunter in her review of Words By Heart labeled the novel a "Blurred view of Black childhood." Echoing Kristin's concerns the Harlem Writers Guild declares that

Ben Sills could exist only in White fiction. By creating such a creature the author perpetuates the myth of the 'docile Negro' who turns the other cheek, leaves vengeance to the Lord, etc. This does a disservice to young readers--Black and White alike. It is a danger to young White readers who may grow up believing such mythical creatures exist. And it is insulting to Black children who know instinctively how they would have dealt with the realities of the situations (cited in Sims, "Black Perspective" 14).

Later in this chapter we will see how the young adult readers of "Value" dealt with the reality of the situation in Words By Heart. Rudine Sims notes what is "at issue is not simply 'racial background,' but cultural affinity, sensitivity, and sensibility (Shadow 13).

Of course we must acknowledge that Ouida Sebestyen said, that Words By Heart is her family's story. In a conversation with Jean Mercier of Publishers Weekly, Sebestyen said, "Their (my parents and grandparents) struggles in a tiny Texas community [quite like Bethel Springs in the story] helped shaped the book. My widowed grandmother took every job possible to support seven children. My aunt, her eldest daughter joined in supporting the family at 13" (40). During her keynote address at the ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents) breakfast (held annually at the National Council of Teachers of

English Fall Conference), Sebestyen reported, that the model for Lena was this aunt, who began supporting her family at an early age. It is interesting to note that in 1994 at this conference attended primarily by language arts instructors, no one made any political statements (that in and of itself is a political statement). The mood was at such a height of comradely and celebration, that I dare not pose a question of perspective. Yet the question remains "Why did Ouida Sebestyen put her family in 'black face,' to tell their story?

Did she believe that it would make the story more exciting? Perhaps. However, as it is written the majority of my students found Words By Heart boring. Does she believe that on some level poverty merges cultural values? Robert Blauner asserts that poverty is only one source of Black culture. He further adds that "even the lower class traits and institutions in Negro life have been modified by strictly ethnic values" (352). Thus growing up poor, does not render Sebestyen an authority on Black culture. But the fact remains what we have here in Words By Heart is a story about "The Black Experience" told from a White perspective. Tom Feelings echoes many scholars concern with this novel,

Why didn't author write that (her) story?
 That sense of her specific life in White
 rural America would have allowed the reader
 to find out more about poor Whites, their
 class differences, their struggles. I believe
 by forcing the story into a Black context the
 writer substantially weakened the value of her
 work, there had to be distortions and omissions

when the book dealt with a Black life style
because the author had not lived it
(cited in Sims, "Black Perspective" 14).

The problems with Words By Heart begin with the cover description: "Hoping to make her adored Papa proud of her and to make her white classmates notice her "Magic Mind," not her black skin, Lena vows to win the Bible-quoting contest." Must Lena demonstrate that she is intelligent despite being Black? How will African America readers respond to Lena? Will they say: "Are you saying Black people can not be smart?" Will they ask: "Do you want me to see you as smart girl but not as a Black girl?" Addressing this issue Rudine Sims writes one of the problems with the book's perspective is "the tendency to associate things black with negative. There is the minor incident when Ben takes one look at a new kitten and names him Old Nick because he is 'a little black devil'" ("Black Perspective" 13). In keeping with the religious theme of the novel, the non-black kittens are named Faith, Hope, and Charity (Sebestyen 30).

Sims also points out the historical inaccuracies in Words By Heart. For instance: Black people did not only begin to read and write after the Civil War. Not only Black freed people, but many enslaved African Americans learned to read and write even when it was illegal. Sims also condemns the suggestion that African Americans were passive recipients of post-war gains:

And to say about the Civil War, "All those people fighting for our rights" (Words, 24) as Sills does, is to minimize the role Black people played in fighting for their own freedom ("Black Perspective" 13).

Did Sebestyen forget to consider the efforts of the countless African American freedom fighters, the Nat Turners, the David Walkers, the Sojourner Truths, the Harriet Tubmans and all the others whose stories are only recorded in the soul of Black America? When writing historical fiction for children, writers are more obligated to do extensive research, because in many cases what children and young adults and adults read even under the label of fiction is what they believe to be true.

Concerning African American participation in the Civil War, the official record of the Union Army indicates that by war's end 178,985 Black men had enlisted; Black regiments had participated in 449 engagements and 39 major battles (Barksdale 247). The fact that at least 37,300 Black soldiers died fighting the Civil War, should have been included in Ben Sill's declaration, "All those people fighting for our rights." The most heart-warming gem of my brief research on the Civil War is when Richmond finally fell in April 1865, the first Union troops to enter the city were troops of the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry (Black), followed by the troops of the XXVth Army Corps, comprised of thirty-two Black regiments (Barksdale 247). I am not exaggerating when I say that my whole body was just consumed

with pride when I read this passage. I didn't know the extent of the African American involvement in the Civil War. I wonder just how we can let African American children believe that their ancestors did nothing to help themselves out of slavery? How can we let any student believe that helplessness and passivity define the African American nature?

A small statement by Lena at the bottom of page 105 further demonstrates Sebestyen use of historical inaccuracies:

The pumpkin head stared into the sky for them. A seam of light escaped around the lid. Had people's lives poured out like that when they were scalped, she wondered. Back in Indian times? (Sebestyen 105-106).

Again I must reference historical responsibility in writing fiction for children, we cannot just leave them thinking that Native Americans invented and were the sole perpetrators of this vile act. Research indicates that scalping dates back to ancient Greek and Persian days: "Mentions of scalping can be found in the fourth book of Herodotus" (Miller 211). Richard Burton declared that "It is generally, but falsely, supposed that only Americans scalp; but the practice is Asiatic, European, and African" (87). Also Webster's encyclopedia discusses the practice:

Scalping: the removal of an enemy's scalp with hair attached. In North America, the practice originally limited to the East, spread among Indians and frontiersmen largely as a result of rewards offered by colonial governments (808).

In Chapter Seven, "Playin like I'm 1 down," we will discuss some implications this study has for teacher practices. Right now, lets return to our discussion of Words By Heart.

Clearly, Ben Sills' mentality has not moved beyond that of enforced servitude, the chains have been taken off his legs (even though Sills was born after emancipation) only to be locked on his mind. Clinical Psychologist, Na'im Akbar describes this psychosis:

The slavery that captures the mind and incarcerates the motivation, perception, aspiration, and identity in a web of anti-self images, generating a personal and collective self-destruction is more cruel than the shackles on wrist and ankles. The slavery that feeds on the psychology, invading the soul of man, destroying his loyalties to himself and establishing allegiance to forces which destroy him, is an even worse form of capture. The influences that permit an illusion of freedom, liberation, and self-determination while holding one's mind in subjugation, is the folly of only the sadistic (2).

What I am suggesting here by including this long description from Na'im Akbar is that Words By Heart is not only a racist novel, it seeks to continue the mental enslavement of Black America.

Ben Sills believed that he lived to serve others, but all those others outside his family are all White. Sills chastises Lena, "What is wrong with working for people? That's what we are here for to serve each other. The greatest people that ever lived served other people"

(Sebestyen 70). Recall that rather than save himself after being wounded, Sills not only sacrifices himself, but he forces his daughter to promise to save the boy who shot him:

"I got to get you home, Papa. Into the wagon."

"Tater first."

"Papa! He tried to kill you. I can't touch him. Papa--I can't. We'll send somebody for him."

"Good Lord already sent somebody." Papa leaned his head against the tree trunk, resting, finding strength for words, the smile. "Heard him yelling, way off. Got to him, finally, but the horse kept spooking. Pulled him loose. That was yesterday, I think. I was ready to start home."

"Papa, why didn't you just get into the wagon and leave!"

He looked surprised. It had never occurred to him. He said, "I tried to drag him on the slicker, but I kept passing out. Haven't been much help to him. Just keeping the blowflies off" (120).

Still, I question whether African American students will read this text as racist or will they simply say "That's the way it was?" or "That's the way that it is." Would they believe that a man in this case a Black man would risk his own life to save the life of the very one who hurt him?

Many of the student readers I have talked to over the years, characteristically change the ending to Words By Heart. It seems that they are more interested in justice than the author of this novel.

Along with Sims' examination of Words By Heart from a Black Perspective, the Council on Interracial Books for Children also published a review from a White perspective. From this vantage point Kathy Baxter takes issue with Words for the damage it does to White readers. Citing its "muzzling effect" Baxter charges books like Words By Heart perpetuate racism:

Racism nurtures a spirit of violence through its suppression of people, ideas, behavior, speech. White people are just as surely victimized by the violence of racism as Black people, for we have paid a high price for maintaining a racist society. We have been censored and repressed so that we would not disturb the system, our thought and behavior molded by numerous influences, our education distorted. . . .(18).

Very likely since religious teachings play an important role in Words By Heart the Council on Interracial Books for Children also invited theologians Glyger Beach and Faye Wilson-Beach to examine the text from a religious Perspective. They surmise that Words "extols the virtue of forgiveness but not that of justice, the author calls for Passivity in the face of injustice. The quest for justice is ignored, as is an authentic use of scriptures" (16). Agreeing with Beach and Wilson-Beach, Emily V. Gibbes,

executive director of the National Council of Churches, expresses dismay that Words By Heart received such high honor:

It seems strange that a book filled with racial stereotypes, with ignorant, evil, prejudiced white people and their racist treatment of their Black neighbors, should be chosen for special honors by the literary establishment. The book is plastered with verses from the Bible--and that is all right! But all the 'love thy neighbor' and 'they that wait upon the Lord' verses are in the mouths of the Black people in the story; the white people continue to break the law and prosper. We know that this does happen, but this is hardly the story we want to honor in the 1980's (quoted in Sims, "Black Perspective" 14).

Piggybacking off the Council of Churches' contention that situations like those in Words by Heart, do exist, then will African American students reading this book accept it as authentic representation of the way it was or the way it is?

Unlike his praise for The Slave Dancer Joel Taxel has few words of celebration for Words By Heart:

The greatest problem with Words lies in the fact that Ben Sills is simply not a believable character. There is a glaring contradiction in the actions of this man who speaks repeatedly of his willingness to "wait on the Lord"--and thus remains passive in the face of the racist hatred and violence directed at himself and his family--and the man who has taken his family way across the country because he was not proud to live in an all-Black community ("Controversies" 267).

Sills transformation is just not real! Here is a man once given to forthright action, now in the face of White challengers is reduced to a passive recipient of whatever

they deal him. Yet, I wonder will African American students believe Sills? Will they look for some truth of their own roots in the Sills story? What story will they take from Words By Heart? The balance of this chapter is devoted to how the readers of "Value" take up Ouida Sebestyen's novel about "the Black Experience" in an all-White Southwest cotton farming community in 1910.

Concluding his remarks on this novel Joel Taxel writes:

Words By Heart contains some excellent writing. The account of the Bible recitation contest where Lena and Winslow Starnes engage in a verbal sparring match is especially noteworthy. Otherwise the novel is seriously flawed, and its inadequacies are most apparent when it is compared to Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (266).

Chapter Five is devoted to a discussion of Mildred Taylor's award-winning novel of Black family life set in Mississippi in 1933. Right now beginning with LeTasha lets see how the student readers of "Value" read Words By Heart.

As with The Slave Dancer, the student responses here come from three or four sources: 1) student's notes 2) written responses to questions designed for this text (Please See Appendix E for a complete listing of the Questions) 3) oral elaborations gathered from individual interviews with each participant, and 4) dinner Conversations. Again as with their responses to The Slave Dancer, rather than single out the source of any response, I have grouped them, allowing space for a freer flowing narrative.

LeTasha on Words By Heart

I liked Words By Heart, that was my book! This wasn't a hard book to read, it wasn't easy, it was just like an average book. I read it all on one Saturday. At first I read about half of it, then I stopped for a couple of hours, then I went back and finished. But I made myself read it, [be]cause I didn't have anything else to do.

I believe that more, about 95 percent, is true in Words By Heart than in The Slave Dancer. Because I can understand why things happened in the story a little better than in The Slave Dancer. I could understand it (Words By Heart) better, because The Slave Dancer such a different book I never read anything like it before. I could understand why things happened in Words By Heart better than The Slave Dancer probably because of the cruelty. I just thought that they could have stopped at one point, but they had to keep on going, keep on doing more things. And in Words By Heart there was something that did happen that were really bad, and sad. But it wasn't as tragic as the things that happened in The Slave Dancer. In that book there was just too many terrible things that happened.

If I were in a Bible verse contest, I think close to the same thing would happen. The only difference would probably be that there would be more racial issues being thrown out verbally because of my color. If I was Lena it would have been hard for me to be kind to the man. In the

book the prize is a bow-tie, it was supposed to go to a boy instead of a girl. And to me that's like saying that boys, the man was saying boys are suppose to win it or they're better than girls because they can memorize something. To me that's like saying boys are better than girls at memorizing something. I don't like it when things like that happen it just irks me. So I might have done something, I don't know what I would have done, but it would have bothered me. I couldn't just go home and let it go on by like she did. I wouldn't get over that. That's the difference I wouldn't get over it. I really wanted to win that contest.

I liked Lena. It just seemed like I could relate to Lena in a lot of ways. She kind has some of my personality. And we are about the same age. But I probably would have handled things differently about my Dad.

I have a little bit of a bad temper and if I were her (when Lena found her father bleeding to death), I would end up doing something I wished I hadn't done. What probably would have happened is: I think that the guy who shot him was near him or close to him and I probably would have yelled at him or just done something to him. I don't know what but I would have done something. I couldn't just let him sit there and my dad die and not do something because I would have been too mad to stop. I don't know if I would have hit that boy or maybe yelled at him. I don't know I

would have to be put in that situation. But I just have the feeling that I would do something. I have kind of a bad temper and I'd probably do something.

I probably would have stayed in Bethel Springs even though they had all those problems. I would have stayed anyway because it would just be giving up and I couldn't give up that easily. I would have to keep fighting and trying to work hard to be a success. And if they didn't accept me then I guess they just didn't. But it wouldn't stop me. I would be like too determined to live in a White town and to succeed. What they wanted is for you to go back home to Scattercreek where all the Black people were, and I couldn't do that.

If I were to present this book to my class, the main thing I would probably tell them would be about the Bible drill in the first part of the book. Well, I felt that all the White people in the audience would look disgusted [be]cause I was the only Black person in the contest. Then I just kind of put them out of it and based it on beating him and I was happy. I was very happy that I won. Oh, I would probably tell them about Miss Chism. She was different. I kind of liked her. She was kind of rude, but, in a way she was like her own person. And she didn't show it, but I could tell that she kind of liked Lean and her family, even though they were Black and she was White. Because there was just some things in there that I didn't

think any ordinary White person would let happen. She tried to play it off and acting like she couldn't stand those people. But it didn't work. I saw through her.

Words By Heart told me that it was constantly a struggle to prove your worthiness or value when you were Black. Also even though Lena wanted to fight back she learned that it wasn't the only solution. And I know a lot of people should think about that. This book made me feel and remember that Whites or other races can put us down but that God doesn't look at colors and if he didn't want me to survive and live in the same area as other races He would not have put me on this earth in the first place.

I think that this society has too many racial problems and people try to settle them. I think that people should just try to get along to help it (society). Because during the 1950's (1960's) people went on all these protests and marches to try to help the Black people and the White people and all races get along. And then when people turn around and start fights or beating up on people because of their race, it just starts the whole thing over again.

If a White person writes something about a Black person, I just have to say that I would think they should do some research on it. I mean it doesn't bother me that much just as long as they know what they are talking about. And that they don't write from their opinion or point of view or what they feel is what happens. Because what happened, and

they shouldn't try to cover it or try to put any of their opinions in it. I think it shouldn't be that cruel. I think most Black people would know enough or they would go and do research on it to write a good book on a Black person. They wouldn't want to write a bad thing and its about their own race. But it doesn't bother me that much. At least now White people may be interested in the Black race, interested enough to write a book about it. But I don't know if I know that much about it to determine whether a Black person or a White person wrote the book. Unless something was obvious I'd probably figure it out. If they put any of their opinions in it. I usually pick out peoples opinion from actual facts because I write my opinions on a lot of things and I know when things, when I write things are true and when they're my own opinions. So I think that probably would be easy for me to pick up.

I was surprised to find out a White person wrote this book. I think Words By Heart was very good! But not to say White people can't write good books on Black people. I'm not trying say that. I'm not racist or anything towards that.

A. J. on Words By Heart

Oh well Lena is doing perfect [in the Bible verse Contest], she is like on a streak, she is hot, she is on fire, she is saying all the perfect phrases, perfect time,

puts them in order! The guy is kinda on fire too; he is flying in there, but he is not going all the way and then he messes up. And she caught him. And then she says another good one to counter that. The sad part came when they did kind of a sexist thing by giving her a boy prize. That was very sexist the way they treated that girl. They never expected her to win. [Be]Cause they thought a woman couldn't do it. [Be]Cause back then women were known for being dumb and like not knowing anything. The didn't expect a woman to be a thinker. [Be]Cause women are known for like to listen and hear but not speak unless they are spoken to. All women do is stay home and take care of the kids, clean the house, do the chores and all that. If I was her I would throw that tie at the kid. No, not at the kid but at the person who brought it. [Be]Cause I don't think that they should have done that, estimated who would win.

I could understand if it was a case of "overdog" and "underdog," like mostly the overdog wins, but sometimes the underdog comes back which in this case happened. Like in the Houston Rockets' game [1995 National Basketball Association (NBA) playoff game] they came back on them, they were down three (games) to one in the series, then they came back and won it 4 to 3. Now see that's smart playing. She [Lena] didn't let that get to her. She went on did what her heart told her to do. And not what the other people kept telling her to do. Like if they said: "Oh you are

going to lose, you might as well give up now." She was like, "my heart tells to keep going and going and going and going." She let her heart and her senses tell her what to do. But the people didn't know what she was doing.

If I was in a contest like the one in the book, I'll say something good and then the Judge would say that it is the other person turn to say something. He would say something stupid and I would win. I believe the Bible verse contest to be a true event. In the Bible contest you say something from the Bible, that is why they call this book Words By Heart, [be]cause the words were from her heart.

I feel sorry for Lena at the school. But she had strength, she had power to go in there, after knowing how Caucasians felt about her. Even though she didn't know that much about it [the history lesson] she went in there anyway and learned stuff that they knew, to show that all African Americans are not dumb. Now practically 98% of us African Americans are probably you know literate, not illiterate like the Caucasians, well not the Caucasians of today, but of the old days, thought of us.

Well to me, Mrs Chism shows racism to show no trust in us African Americans, but then later on in the book she finds trust in Lena to lend her books, even though she wasn't never using them. Then Lena has the power to look through them and learn from them. Some people just look at books and let it go in one ear and out the other. To me

Lena was strong, she might not be physically by looking at her, she might not be a muscle bound woman, but still she is very powerful in her mind. This book tells that it is hard being Black and some people still wish that there was slavery.

I feel sorry for the poor girl seeing her father die in her own eyes. If my father died, basically I would go after the person who killed him, if I knew he would die before I got him to the hospital. So I would cover his face, do what a person should do to show respect, say a prayer, close his eyes. Then I might be going to jail for this but I would probably go after the person who shot him, even if it was a Caucasian person. Back in the old days we would have got hung for that. But to me I think I would do the right thing take his flesh for my dad's flesh. I would do what my dad said and save him [the boy who shot my dad] but I would still kick the jerk out of him. I think he deserves a beating, in fact I think he deserves a burning, but I would help him if my dad asked me to.

She did the wrong thing not telling. If I was the person, I would say "Tater did it." Cause he deserves to be in jail, but they probably would not have done anything. [Be]Cause back in those days they probably got paid for shooting an African American, like "Oh you shot a nigger, you get 15 dollars." I think that she should have told the sheriff but if she knew they would get away with it then I

would not have told. But I still would have kicked his butt though. That's the part I believe to be false about Words By Heart when her dad said to help the person who shot him and leave him [the dad] there to die, and she did it.

After her dad's death they are going to be pretty sad, and pretty happy. First they are going to be pretty sad, [be]cause her dad wouldn't be there to see her how she is now, all mind-build. If I was her dad I would be very proud of her. The sadness is he wasn't there to see it. And the happy part is that she was strong, very strong-hearted. She didn't let the people get to her, distract her like they say: "Oh you're a nigger, you ain't gonna do nothing, you as sorry as a piece of crap." So she let that go in one ear and out one ear. That is what she did smart, she didn't listen to the Caucasians say negative things about her. She didn't let herself find negative things inside. She just kept going, and going and going.

I think that they will make it. It is going to be harder because of they don't have an older person who is used to using the farm equipment. Her mom is probably used to working in the kitchen, she is not used to working in the field. That means Lena will have to teach her young brothers, young siblings to learn from her and to prosper. [Be]Cause say that they see her doing good, "Maybe I should be like her." Then they see people doing drugs, dumb stuff, negative stuff like beer getting high. Then they say: "They

are dropping out of school, they have no jobs." Now Lena on the other hand, strong minded probably will get a job in the future if they let African Americans have work. Then they think maybe I should be like her, then they push the bad ones to the side and let her come into their mind, and not one ear and out the other.

I think that it is a tie between this book (Words By Heart) and The Slave Dancer. Because this (Words By Heart) is like a woman-thing. It shows that women have to be strong, that women have come from a long ways. And this book (The Slave Dancer) shows about both races and that we have come a long way. I am happy about African Americans in sports. African Americans see Caucasians getting billions and billions of dollars, they said "Maybe I should be like that." Take Reggie Miller [professional basketball player, NBA--Indiana Pacers] for example, he is strong willed, [be]cause he sees that his team is not doing very good, then he does better for them. Even though he is not the full part he is supposed to, or Michael Jordan, M.J. [NBA--Chicago Bulls], he stays with his team, he knows now that he shouldn't have left them. But when he came back, he came back with power, but not as much as when he left. This shows that you have to keep going. This shows that us African Americans have come a long long way.

Constance on Words By Heart

I wouldn't recommend Words By Heart, it wasn't fair at all and it wasn't really written well. I liked the Bible verse contest at the beginning though. I liked how she HAD the contest and was winning, but I really dislike when she won the contest. They thought, they were all sure that the boy was going to win, but actually she won and it was a boy prize, a bow-tie. She was hurt by that. I would have been hurt and very sad and I think that was a shame.

I liked Lena and her Dad. Her Dad was understanding. He was wise, he knew what to do. If I was Lena and I found my Dad shot and bleeding, I would be very sad, and mad at who ever did it. Also I would be scared. I wouldn't help that boy who shot him because I would be mad at him. I would just leave him there. Maybe tell his folks to come get him. All the times when they're mean to us we end up helping them and then... They don't pay back or anything. Its not fair.

If I was presenting this book to my class, I would say that it is a good book to read, it teaches that even though somebody beats you or things like that you should treat them right. Treat them right and respect yourself and you are rewarded by God. I think Lena learned this lesson, but she was bitter about it [be]cause it was her father who died. She may understand this when she gets older. Maybe some of the people will treat them better, help them out since their dad died. She did save that one boy's life, that should

matter. But I think the family will have to move, too much has happened to them there. They will just have to move. I believe that White people hated us very much. Words By Heart tells me that our Black people had to go through a lot back then.

It's okay with me if a White person wrote a book about a Black person. They can't get it right all the time [be]cause they don't know how it was. They can't say that because they were treated fairly. So they won't know what it felt like. If they can get the information from a Black person then its okay with me if a White person wrote about Black people. But wouldn't they have to talk to somebody who experienced it! It wouldn't surprise me to find out Words By Heart was written by a White person, because the father ends up dying, but he ends up saving the White person. She [the author] kind of knows the history [of African American people] except that last part of the book.

In our school they teach a little Black history. Like for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday... You know other schools get the day off. I don't understand why we can't get out on that day. Anyway they will probably show the movie when King did the March on Washington, DC. We saw it in our homeroom class and our teacher Ms. C., she is White and the majority of the kids in my homeroom are White too. There are two Black students in the class and we were really focusing trying to see the movie, what happened. But the

other kids were looking around, they didn't really care. I don't know why, but every time we saw the movie, Ms. C would look back at us [the two Black students] and just keep looking back like something was wrong. . . .

Maya on Words By Heart

I have just finished reading Words By Heart. I don't believe the story or the characters. I did not enjoy it as much as the first book (The Slave Dancer). It was not as detailed as it should have been, for instance the fact that Mrs. Chism was a Caucasian was never mentioned. I really didn't understand why Lena had to skip school to work for Mrs. Chism. I didn't understand why Mrs. Chism wouldn't let Lena borrow her books other than she wanted her to be another ignorant Black person. To me that wasn't fair. She didn't understand why a Black girl should be reading and increasing her knowledge. She was not mean, but she was just not in favor of Black people. She was kind of like, "I don't really like people," so why should I like them.

Mrs. Chism is important to the story because she is the reason Lean's father got murdered. Mrs. Chism hired Ben Sills [Lena's father] over the White man and that man's son got angry and killed Lena's father. I think in the end she kind of, maybe she liked them a little bit more than she did in the beginning.

I would be very nervous being in the contest. Being

the only Black person would also be really weird. I would step up to the mic and I would recite my first verse being sure to speak my words clearly and slowly so they could be understood. I would always be reciting verses in my head and I would feel [sorry] for those who were out. Hoping that the next one wouldn't be me. At first I was amazed about the prize Lena received. This really shows that they favored the Caucasian boy over any other person in the competition. I didn't agree with Lena throwing the tie in his face. I would probably take the tie, throw it on the ground and step on it. Well, I thought I had to be drastic, I mean she deserved a prize. But its not my place to. . . .she's a child. . .I'll just take it and throw it away when I get home, but I'm not going to throw it in his face. That would be tacky.

The people didn't expect the girl to win. I also think that people have a stereotype of Black people that they are going to get to me. Just take me smiling and you know to be happy with it would have been more because they would have been like, she's suppose to get mad because that's the stereotype. Now days if she would have taken it, it would have been more effective. If she'd taken the tie and smiled and been happy with it or acted like she was happy with it, now that would have, WOW, been something drastic! I would have taken it home and then thrown it away or given it to my little brother when I got home.

It would have been hard for me to go and find my Dad by myself. She had a lot of courage. If I was Lena it would have been hard to help Tater out. I would be crying. I would leave Tater out there in the field and quickly got my father back to safety. At the end I found it sad that her Dad was killed. And I would have been telling everyone who killed my Dad. But it was good of Lena not to. I thought her Dad was very strong. I think he had the right idea about not retaliating and he letting it go. Because it was not his place to judge that person. He told his oldest daughter to go and I feel the same way. She would help him because she should. I know it's hard, he killed her father and that's hard to go out and help him so he won't die. But that's not for her to take care of that. I think I would have been the same way, would have been really hard to love Tater and also not to tell people that Tater killed her father. I mean, I would have been like, "He did it and I can show you the proof right over here." But it was hard. Really, really hard for her to sit there and smile and not tell. But they can make up all kinds of stories. There are lots of ways to get around what Tater did, they would say he was drunk or whatever they would say and you know there are all kinds of reason the guy would retaliate. So he had a reason to do it or they can go all with the past. But when it comes down to it, Tater was wrong and her father really forced to help Tater and go on. He wanted her to do better

than he did.

The father was a very strong person and he was a pushy person obviously and when he died it was really hard to love or hate him. I think a lot of fathers may have not been as good as he was. People were just cruel to him. They tried to just crucify him. He was very strong to retaliate . . .

and who was just a boy not even a note [about] who was saying rude things to him and calling him a nigger and he took that. I mean he was, I think it would have been pretty hard for a father today to just let that go. No, I mean in some ways he had to let things go because the city was all White and so whatever he done he would not have gotten support from anyone else because he's Black. And no one else is going to support except him, his family and in society that's not enough because people aren't going to be there for him. So his best support was that he didn't retaliate, that was strong on his part.

In the future, I think she's going to be a very strong person. Because ever since her father died she has to survive basically on her own. I think that she will be very strong as a woman and she will probably go places and be successful and be known. She'll probably move out of that city and go to a city where there are more Black people.

Words By Heart tells me that it is hard sometimes to be fair. We don't owe Whites anything. It was hard back then to be strong, Black and not berated. People had biases like

about who was going to win the competition. Black people worked for White people to get money. White people often hurt Blacks because they a had job and they didn't. I think that the book is very interesting. I don't think it was that good. It did not explain that time period very well, and we didn't get a very good picture of the environment. Overall on a scale from 1 to 5, I would give this book a 3.

CHAPTER FIVE

ROLL OF THUNDER, HEAR MY CRY by Mildred Taylor

ALA Notable Children's Book
Boston Globe/Horn Book Honor Book
Coretta Scott King Honor Book
Nominated for the National Book Award
John Newbery Medal Winner 1977
New York Times Book Review Best of
Children's Books, 1970-1980
Winner of the Pacific Northwest Young
Readers Award

And for every thing they took away, we came up
with something new We sang some new songs,
and danced us some new dances See you can
put a hurting on a body, but you can't touch the
soul. -- Al Young

"Roll of thunder, hear my cry over the water bye
and bye ole man comin' down the line whip in hand
to beat me down but I ain't gonna let him turn me
'round."

Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry
features nine-year old Cassie Logan. Cassie tells
the story of a confused and disoriented year as
she is awakened to the cruelties and callousness
imposed by racism in her Mississippi Community.
But it is also the story of a family's strength
and sibling loyalty as she outgrows her tomboy
role, understands why men sometimes must bend
in order to stand tall, and experiences the
sweet satisfaction that comes when patience
and timing reap deserved retaliation
(Mitchell 96).

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is a highly honored and

respected book in most academic and family circles. However this book is not without its controversy. Almost yesterday in 1993, would you believe that Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry was removed from the ninth grade reading list of Arcadia, Louisiana High School. The authorities charged the book with racial bias (Doyle). According to this published report neither The Slave Dancer or Words By Heart were dismissed from an American school during the 1993-94 school year. Ironically if we consult the Council on Interracial Books for Children's "10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism" (reprinted in Rethinking Our Classrooms edited by Bigelow et.al.), we will find more examples of those stereotypes listed by the Council in The Slave Dancer and in Words By Heart than in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. For example, the Council advised readers, teachers, librarians to question the text's use of illustrations: "Do all minority faces look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features?" (Bigelow 14). The cover of the Dell Laurel-Leaf edition of The Slave Dancer published in 1973 pictures all the Africans the same. They all look alike, they have no distinguishing features. They appear to be passive recipients of their current situation. Contrary to that picture Edward M. Jackson provides the following history lesson:

The Africans were loaded, as many as possible, into the holds of the ships. Chained together,

there was little room for movement. The Africans wallowed in their own blood, sweat, filth, and disease. Slave ships were death ships for many. One of the myths is that the Africans did not resist the European aggression. Some fought before they were put on the ships. Some fought on the ships. Others committed suicide. It is estimated that thirty million Africans were transported from Africa. Nearly half of them died in midpassage (2).

Also writing about the slave trade, John W. Blassingame noted that Africans rebelled so often that a number of ship owners took out insurance to cover losses from mutinies (8). Therefore in reality we know that regardless of how Paula Fox and/or the publishers chose to have them pictured on her book cover or what she wrote in her text, The Slave Dancer, Africans were not passive recipients of slavery.

Interestingly Paula Fox thanks professor of history, Willard Wallace, for reading her manuscript. This leads me to wonder that if her book was read in-process by a historian, then were the historical inaccuracies in The Slave Dancer deliberate attempts to mis-lead American school children about the institution of slavery?

Words By Heart also employs many of the stereotypes listed by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. For example in terms of standards for success the Council advises that we should watch for situations in which "making it in the dominant white society is projected as the only ideal" (14). This is the very reason the Sills family moved from all-Black Scattercreek to the otherwise (till the

Sills family got there) all-White Bethel Springs. In the following conversation Ben Sills explains the move to his daughter, Lena:

"It was easier there" (Scattercreek), Papa said, "but I wasn't proud of myself. So we gathered up our courage and moved on, out west here. That was our hoping time, our little Exodus. The promised land, where people would look at us and see us, not our color" (Sebestyen 25).

I could call Ben Sills a visionary, a man way ahead of his time to imagine a society in which people would be "judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King 649). However I believe that Ben Sills is mis-representation of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s premise. King never advocated that African American people should be ashamed of being Black. King fought for recognition of, not a denial of Black America. During his 1963 March on Washington Speech King declared:

Now is the time to make real the promises of Democracy. ...for this nation to live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." We have come to (Washington D.C.) to cash this check--a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice" (647-49).

I just want to add one more point about Words By Heart, before we resume our discussion of Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry that concerns the name of the towns. Just think about the names the author chose for the towns, who wouldn't want to live in Bethel Springs as opposed to Scattercreek? "In portraying Scattercreek in a negative way, by giving it a

negative name, the author obscures the positive strengths of these Black communities" (Beach 16).

The question that begs to be asked here is why was Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, removed from the ninth grade reading list of Arcadia High school, when perhaps more racist books were allowed to remain on the library shelves? Maybe I can shed some light on this school district leaders motivations by way of the following example: Recently, during Black History Month celebration I led a group of eighth grade students in a reader's theater performance of Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. We read the scene in which Cassie charges the store owner with unfair customer practices by waiting on every White customer who came into the store before completing the Black children's order. Once out on the street, after being dismissed from the store, Cassie bumps into a White girl, who makes a big-to-do about the whole thing. A crowd gathers along with the White girl's father and the matter of offering a simple common courtesy "I'm sorry" becomes one of a person begging from an inferior position (having been pushed into the dirt road) for forgiveness, "I'm sorry...M-Miz...Lillian Jean" (116). Following the reading I invited this eighth grade English class to share their reactions to this re-enactment from Roll of Thunder. Before any student had an opportunity to collect their thoughts and offer an opinion. The classroom teacher announced: "We don't treat Black people like that

anymore, do we." Whether it was because of their teacher's unsolicited opinion or some other reason, the class simply shut down, they were not willing to discuss this scene from Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

What prompted the classroom teacher's response? Was she motivated by a need to maintain control? Control, not in the sense that the class was unruly or out of order. But control in the sense she must decide what passes for knowledge and/or the proper interpretation of literature. After all she didn't say anything "real" wrong, she just told the end before we finished the book--concluded our discussion before we had a chance to begin it. However, I would propose that her use of the pronoun "we" suggests a hegemonic ordering, in which she the classroom teacher is the locally in-charge member of the dominant society. In other words, Jane Goldner, a children's librarian, explains

The dominant society has controlled every aspect of life so that it can mold the images needed to keep it cohesive. When its control is threatened, especially politically and socially, society denies the validity of the challenge and then suppresses it. This phenomenon operates in the microcosm of books (cited in Tate 47).

Thus, books like Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry are banned, suppressed or otherwise censored, not because they are racially biased but because they point out this society's inequalities. Perhaps we should also consider Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the role of schools in determining what knowledge merits substantial

investments. Bourdieu came upon the notion of cultural capital in the course of research. He said the theoretical hypothesis offered a way to explain

the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions (243).

This seemingly economic theory suggests that beyond natural abilities and even beyond although associated with the unequal portions of wealth poured into school districts, there is another variable that may undermine the academic achievements of some students. Accordingly, John Gillroy adds that schools regulate the means of literary production and consumption. He further maintains that schools distribute cultural capital unequally (ix-6).

This is why educators should value a novel like Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry because it is an 'in-yo-face-this-is-how-it-was-this-is-how-it-is-now-what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it-book. And unlike the other two novels used in this study The Slave Dancer and Words By Heart, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry hollers Black! This young adult novel represents African American cultural experiences. In the words of one student reader "I know that a Black person wrote this book, [be]cause it just feels Black!" In a separate interview another student declared: "I wouldn't be

surprised if you told me a White person wrote Words By Heart, but I would be real surprised if you told me a White person wrote Roll of Thunder, it has too many Black things in it." What were these students referencing? Perhaps while reading Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry they heard his/her stories that had been previously recorded only in the soul of Black America. About her novels, Mildred writes, "It is my hope that to the children who read my books, the Logans will provide those heroes missing from the schoolbooks of my childhood, Black men, women, and children of whom they can be proud" (Penguin USA Children's Books 21).

According to Rudine Sims, Black authors tend to focus on the following:

- 1) African American heritage and history
 - 2) Pride in one's Blackness
 - 3) A strong sense of community
 - 4) warm human relationships, especially within the family
 - 5) a sense of continuity
 - 6) and the will and the strength to survive oppression and other hardship.
- Within these themes the authors tend to emphasize or include authentic Black language in terms of syntax, vocabulary and communication style ("Strong Black" 27).

In Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry there are multiple representations African American culture, history, language, arts, and community spirit. Simply put girlfriend got it goin' on in this book. She tells the tale! Masterfully Mildred Taylor describes racism there in Mississippi in

1933, lets you feel it but she don't be beating you over the head with it. "Ease-drop" on this conversation between David and his son Stacey concerning a Christmas gift from a Jeremy (a White boy),

"Actually, he's much easier to get along with than T.J.," Stacey went on. "And I s'pose if I let him, he could be a better friend than T.J."

"Far as I'm concerned, friendship between black and white don't mean much 'cause it usually ain't on a equal basis. Right now you and Jeremy might get along fine, but in a few years he'll think of himself as a man but you'll probably still be a boy to him. And if he feels that way, he'll turn on you in a minute."

"But Papa, I don't think Jeremy'd be that way."

"...Maybe one day whites and blacks can be real friends, but right now the country ain't built that way. Now you could be right 'bout Jeremy making a much finer friend than T.J. ever will be. The trouble is, down here in Mississippi, it costs too much to find out. . . . So I think you'd better not try" (157-158).

All the features that Sims mentioned were characteristic of African American writing are in this passage. When David tells his son that the cost of trying to maintain a friendship between Black and White is just too high, many readers may feel a genuine loss. We might question what if it wasn't 1933, what if it wasn't Mississippi, what if Stacey wasn't Black, what if Jeremy wasn't White. . . . if.... if.... But this is just the point of Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry; dare we re-write either boy's life?

Should we as readers, as writers, as mothers, as fathers, as educators re-cast this novel as a melting-pot book one that highlights universalities and ignores differences?

Yet, what I celebrate most about Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is its fighting spirit. Amiri Baraka terms it the "revolutionary tradition in Afro-American literature."

Afro-American literature rises as a reflection of the self-consciousness and self-expression of the Afro-American people, but to be an Afro-American literature, truly, it must reflect in the main the ideological and sociocultural portrait of that people! The celebration of servitude is not the ideological reflection of the Afro-American masses, but of their tormentors" ("Tradition" 244).

By echoing slave narratives, and employing the revolutionary tradition, Mildred Taylor has created a novel that celebrates Black America. Adding that her books "are explicitly concerned with resistance and those who resist," Joel Taxel notes that

In treating themes related to the intersection of race, class, and gender, Mildred Taylor touches on matters that until recently have been either marginalized within or excluded from not only the discourse within and about literature, but education as well ("Reclaiming" 117).

Also addressing the issue of resistance, Diane DuBose Brunner writes

Roll of Thunder offers a positive view of a woman, an African American woman, engaged in resistance to hegemonic forces--both to the members of the school board and to the tradition selectively being perpetuated in the social studies text (Inquiry 145).

Since Mary Logan was fired for not teaching slavery as it

was represented in the school board selected text, Brunner suggests that we should question the "ultimate effect of resistance" (Inquiry 163). The result of Mama's resistance would be the appointment of a new teacher who would likely, in order to keep her job, teach the text exactly as the text is written. In order to pass the class students will once again recite the lessons of the dominant culture as dictated to them by their "voiceless" instructor. And the cost was not too high! What those children saw, a Black woman standing up to a White man and saying this is wrong, will be replayed time and again in their imaginations, until they are in the position to challenge the system. For, indeed, as Brunner states explicitly: ". . .the price we pay personally, morally, and ethically when we don't resist powerful arrangements that enact the unconscionable" is too high! So whether resistance is personal or political may be less the question than whether we do not resist at all. To question the ultimate results of our resistance is to invoke in the words of Cornel West, "[that] as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive" (23).

Having already briefly mentioned this portion of the novel, here I would like to look at this pivotal point of Roll of Thunder in detail. Second only to the school-book incident which we just discussed this is perhaps my proudest moment in this novel. Cassie, in a stance of self-

determination and fair-play, declares to the White store owner: "I ain't nobody's little nigger! And you ought not be waiting on everybody 'fore you wait on us" (111). As if being ordered out of the mercantile wasn't mistreatment enough, what happened to Cassie once outside the store was totally humiliating:

It was then that I bumped into Lillian Jean Simms.

"Why don't you watch where you are going?
Well apologize," she ordered.

"What?"

"You bumped into me. Now you apologize"
(Taylor, Roll 113).

At this moment, Cassie handles Lillian Jean one on one, eye to eye, like any two adolescent school girls involved in a disagreement.

I did not feel like messing with Lillian Jean. I had other things on mind. "Okay, I said, starting past,
"I'm sorry."

Lillian Jean sidestepped in front of me. "That ain't enough. Get down in the road."

I looked up at her. "You crazy?"

"You can't watch where you going, get in the road. Maybe that way you won't be bumping into decent white folks with you nasty little self."

"I ain't nasty, and if you're so afraid of getting bumped, walk down there yourself" (Taylor, Roll 113-114).

However, with White and Might (a growing crowd of aggressive Whites) on her side Lillian Jean was able to give Cassie a troubling history lesson. After being knocked into the dirt road by Lillian Jean's father, Cassie tries to run for their

wagon:

"Stop, Cassie!" Big Ma (Cassie's grandmother) said.
 "Stop, it's me. We're going home now."

"Not 'fore she 'pologizes to my gal, y'all
 ain't," said Mr. Simms.

Big Ma gazed down at me, fear in her eyes, then back
 at the growing crowd. "She jus' a child--"

"Tell her, Aunty--"

Big Ma looked at me again, her voice cracking as
 she spoke. "Go on, child...apologize."

"But, Big Ma--" [said Cassie]

Her voice hardened. "Do like I say."

I swallowed hard.

"Go on!"

"I'm sorry, Miz Lillian Jean," demanded Mr. Simms.

"Big Ma!" I balked.

"Say it, child."

A painful tear slid down my cheek and my lips
 trembled. "I'm sorry ...M-Miz...Lillian Jean"
 (Taylor, Roll 113-116).

As much as I would like to jump into the story and
 compel my students to see that such racist acts must not be
 tolerated, instead I must ask student participants to
 entertain two questions:

- 1) Tell me what you see happening here?
- 2) Why do you think Big Ma made Cassie apologize
 to Lillian Jean?

If I don't allow them this space to interrogate the

situation, then I am assuming the hegemonic position of the one in authority therefore in possession of the right answer. Then I would not be providing the opportunity for students to "read their own way into the world" (Willinsky 94). Once home Cassie's family rallies round, helping her understand what happened and why things went down the way they did. Cassie gets advice from her brother, Stacy: "Cassie, don't go blaming Big Ma for what she done. Maybe she couldn't help it, maybe she had to do it" (Taylor, Roll 118). In a Black cultural tradition Mary Logan both comforts and advises her daughter with a history lesson:

So now, even though seventy years have passed since slavery, most white people still think of us as they did then--that we're not as good as they are--and people like Mr. Simms hold on to that belief harder than some folks because they have little else to hold on to. For him to believe that he is better than we are makes him think that he's important simply because he's white. ...you just have to accept the fact that in the world outside this house, things are not always as we would have them be" (Taylor, Roll 126-129).

Suppose it doesn't happen like this for my students? As pointed out by Johan Lyall Aitken borrowing from Jacques Derrida, the sense of the story is under erasure, that is, it is present in its very absence (206). Suppose my students do not have strong supportive families or friends that will help them feel included when the outside world excludes them? How will the stories they bring to the text influence their readings of Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry?

Aitken continues, "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is a novel full of values, self-respect, ownership of land... If literature is supposed to reflect our own economic as well as political and social selves, a conception I seriously dispute, then many children regardless of race are bound to feel inadequate or inferior when they read Roll of Thunder" (207). Entertaining Aitken's notion on an economic level I could gather that the reading enjoined by the young man sharing a small apartment with a large family depending on public assistance to eat, to live, would differ from that of the young lady with both winter and summer homes and throws away more food than many people can afford to buy. Yet what will my student readers expect from this book? Will they become one with the text, a part of the Logan family as they read? As Emily R. Moore tells us,

Throughout the book the reader is moved to tears by Ms. Taylor's vibrant, exquisite and simple style. After reading Cassie's last lines--"And I cried for those things which had happened in the night and would not pass. I cried for T.J. For T.J. and the land"--you want to turn back and start all over again (7).

Rudine Sims Bishop numbers Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry among 'culturally-specific' children's books. These, she adds, "illuminate the experience of growing up a member of a particular, non-White cultural group ("Multicultural Literature" 44). We will take a more analytical look at "cultural specifics" in terms of the texts selected for this study and the values students bring to the reading process,

in Chapter Six, "Creatin Texts Outta Texts." However, contrary to readings like that of Johan Aitken, Rudine Sims Bishop notes that these cultural specifics--these "details do not preclude other readers from understanding, appreciating, and enjoying the book..." (44). Readers may find that the Logans way of dealing with things may be the answer for others in similar situations.

Joel Taxel considers Roll of Thunder to be a benchmark, a literary work against which all other work for young people is measured and compared.

(It) is a success both in terms of literary values and in its historical, cultural perspective on the events it describes. ...Taylor's theme that racism be confronted with the cautious, yet insistent demand that the right of all to dignity and freedom be respected is developed without pedantic moralizing but instead emerges through the skillful development of events and characters ("Controversies" 260).

On the other hand, Aitken charges that Taxel is wrong in his assessment of Taylor's novel. Aitken notes that Roll of Thunder "is no less pedantic than the other two works (The Slave Dancer, and Words By Heart) Taxel examined (206).

From my reading of Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, however, I would hardly mark it a text with an ostentatious concern for formal rules when the Black teacher covers up the word 'niggar' in the White-supplied text books and chooses to teach African history, the reality of slavery, and the works of W.E.B. DuBois instead of the mandated curriculum, right in th face of th White school board members.

Reading with Joel Taxel, I agree that "Mildred Taylor has shown with Roll of Thunder, that it is possible to articulate a progressive politics and historical vision in a form that sacrifices neither historical accuracy nor aesthetic value" ("Reflections" 310). That this book is well-written, that it tells a good story, that it is historically accurate are only parts of what I cherish about Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. I applaud Mildred Taylor for burying the myth of the passive submissive Black with Mr. Tatum who accuses Mr. Jim Lee Barnett (the Mercantile manager) of charging him for things he never ordered or received (75); with Cassie who questioned the integrity of shop owner who waited on White customers before Black patrons (111); with the Logans who organized the Black community to shop elsewhere other than the store owned and operated by the "night-riders" who had burned three male members of a local Black family (161); with Mary Logan who in the faces of school board members refuses to change her history lesson to the board approved one (183). In Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Mildred Taylor has drawn on history, family stories, and compassion to describe African American struggles and survivals during the 30's in the South. What lessons did the students of "Value" learn from this novel? Let us begin our examination of their responses with Le Tasha who unlike the other students of "Value" chose Mary Logan to be her favorite character in Roll of Thunder.

LeTasha on Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

It took me about three days to read Roll of Thunder. The chapters are pretty long, so I only read maybe five or six a day or night. I started it on a weekend, then I read at school and at home when I had free time. Most of the time I read the back of the book to know what it is about. I read that first, but then sometimes I read about the author first. Generally I read about the authors after I finish the book. Roll of Thunder was a good book. It was kind of hard for me to get into at first. It was easier for me to get into Words By Heart because she went through the Bible drill at the beginning. But in Roll of Thunder not that much happened in the beginning, so I got bored with it. So I put it down for awhile, then I got to it. When you start to really get into it towards the middle and towards the end, it was really good.

When I read books I just keep my feelings about what happened to myself. I just read it, I don't stop to write things down. If I was writing a paper on a book, then I would take a lot of notes. I would write down important facts or key information, and I do that a lot. Sometimes I'll take a certain chapter of a book and I read it through then I write down good information like a rough draft.

My favorite character in this book would have to be the Mom. I liked the mother, the character of the mom a lot,

because she seemed to always have situations under control even when her husband went away. She knew how to run the house without a man or someone else there. That is why I like her a lot. She also knows how to raise a good family.

She had a good head, she knew what to do to help out the other families, and she was a good mother to her family. She is an intelligent Black woman, and a school teacher.

But I would not care to go to school in 1933. This is because of the harsh treatment that I would receive and the unnecessary put-downs from the Whites. Like the school-bus [While the White students were able to ride to school, the Black students were forced to walk along the same narrow muddy road, consequently the Black students often arrived at school covered in the bus-splashed mud. In retaliation the Logan children increased the size of one of the mud holes in the road. When the bus hit this hole, it broke the axle forcing the White children to walk to and from school until new parts could be ordered and the bus be repaired.] It was funny I liked that part. It was really mean but I still liked it. It was a way to get even. It was a way to get back at them without fighting or causing harm to anybody. Nobody got killed or hurt or anything. Delayed, but, not killed or hurt. I liked it. I had just hoped that nothing would happen so that no one would suspect them. But I probably be giggling all night long, like those kids were because I thought it was funny.

I would also have a problem with some of the teachers and would probably lose my cool. Like that textbook incident [The "new" books in the Black school were actually old worn discarded books from the White school. The inside cover of each book was stamped with a chart indicating that when the book was new, in good, in average, and even in poor condition it was used by the White students. However, when it was in very poor condition the book was marked for use by the "nigra" students. Little Man refused to use the book, threw it on the floor and stomped on it.] I liked that part even though it was wrong to stomp on the book. I would still would have pointed it out to the person. And if I didn't feel that it was right that I should be reading that I would have told them. And I guess that I would have got spanked for it too, [be]cause I'm too stubborn.

But the mother got fired for pasting over that chart in the book. I just thought that is another thing they did to her. And it was T.J.'s fault, he told the school board people. He bugs me. I didn't like him. I felt pity on him in the story. If I imagined myself to be T. J., I would see that I am a lost and misguided child. I need prayers, church, and a good loving, responsible family. That way I can get myself back on the right road and take an exit off the wrong one. His parents they just seem like not to care and when they did try to, he was just young growing up. Its like I guess he just tuned his parents out and they really

didn't do that much. They tried but they just gave up. If that was my son, I would keep trying and trying cause I would not want to see him hung or see something really bad happen to him. Or cause him to bring trouble to the family. I mean that's your son. You don't just give up on your own child. You should keep pushing him and keep trying to get through to him. But he caused problems [be]cause it seemed like he tuned his parents out. He didn't listen to anybody. I think that he probably served some time in jail for his part in Mr. Barnett's death. I don't think that they hung him. Eventually if he doesn't quit doing the things he is doing he will get hung. He needs somebody, some advice because he's really making some bad choices.

One thing about this book bothered me when Big Ma made Cassie apologize for bumping into Lillian Jean. I think that was the right thing to do because she didn't want her to endanger herself or get in anymore trouble or cause a threat of burnings. Someone could come burn their land. But what would have bothered me a lot was, see if I was alive back then I would be very nice to White people. Maybe suck up to them, I don't know. Anything to keep them from having a problem with me. I would hate to suck up to people like that because when you do act nice to them, they put more on you. So I didn't care for that part of the book. But I think Cassie went overboard, and I think that it was good that her grandmother was there to help her get out of it so

she didn't get into anymore trouble. I would have said a couple of things, but not that much. When Lillian Jean's dad came up, I would just have said, "Sorry" and left before something happened. Cassie wasn't unusual that was just the way she was. But I think she will probably grow up to be like her Mom. Because her Mom helped her kids a lot with their education. She helps the kids know what to do and when to do it and she helped her family so they wouldn't get into trouble. Cassie will probably learn from what she did when she was younger and be level headed like her Mom.

It was funny in a way when Cassie got back at Lillian Jean. But I could not just sit there and beat up somebody. I guess I'm too nice. I'm just not that mean. Maybe Lillian Jean deserved it, but I felt that was a little cruel. I mean that would make me mad to have to apologize in front of everybody. But I couldn't have gone and just hit, punched her, just to do all those things to her. I mean I might say something to her. But she would have to physically hurt me before I would turn around and do something like that to her. I think that she would still tell her dad, even if Cassie told all of her secrets. I think that it is unbelievable how she didn't say one word and Cassie got away with the whole thing.

While I think that 95% of this book is true, another thing I don't believe is that the father could stay alive when he got hit in the head by a bullet. I don't believe

that he could stay alive without medical attention.

Roll of Thunder, constantly describes the hardships faced with for being Black, especially owning something of value. It shows the struggle to hold on to this value, so it won't fall into the rival's hand.

It wouldn't bother me that much if a White person wrote books about Black people, just as long as they know what they are talking about. I think that they should do some research. And don't just write from their opinion or point of view, or what they feel happened. I don't think that they should try to cover it up. If a Black person writes a book about Black people, then they, most of them, would know enough to go do research and write a good book on Black people. They wouldn't want to write a bad book about their own race. But it wouldn't bother me that much, at least now White people are interested enough in Black people to write a book about them. It wouldn't surprise me to know that a White person wrote The Slave Dancer or Words By Heart. And I think Words By Heart was a very good book. But I'm not saying that a White person can't write good books on Black people. I'm not racist or anything towards that. But Roll of Thunder, there is just something about it, it had so many Black things in it and it was so deep that a White person could not have written it.

This project was fun! It got me to read three books I would never have picked on my own. I never read any books

on Black people or books like The Slave Dancer or Roll of Thunder. If I had to rate the books, for me it would be Words By Heart, Roll of Thunder, and then The Slave Dancer. I'm not saying that I liked it the least. That is just how I would rate it. I never really read any books like that. Because I just didn't think that they would be very good. I just went for the scary books and mysteries. I like these three books better than some of the mysteries that I bought. And these books (project books) were exciting, and they help me to know what these kinds of books are like. So if I find similar books, I will probably want to read them.

Constance on Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

This is my favorite book out of the three we read for this project. I read it before, when I was in 4th grade, so I already knew some of the stuff that was in here. I just liked the book [be]cause it tells a lot of stuff. Its not really sad. But its like you got to treat it right or better.

My favorite character is Cassie, because I think she is a good example on how she feels about things that happened back then. Like when she had to say sorry to that girl for bumping into her. She had to apologize. I don't think that it was really nice. [Be]Cause Lillian Jean's father came and made Cassie bow down to her feet. Cassie had to say to call that one girl "Miss." That really would have made me

mad if I had to do that. The grandmother had to make her do that? Because they (the White people) are a higher authority, and if she didn't apologize it would be a real big fight. The father would call and tell and somebody would go to jail or something like that. Black people didn't have the right to say, "No." They had to say, "Yes sir" It was like White people could say anything. Black people couldn't say that back. So there was nothing she could do but apologize. Because we didn't have a choice. Things like that make me angry.

I also think it wasn't fair because the Black people got the really, really poor school books. They would stamp the torn up books "nigger." And that made Christopher really mad. He threw his books down and he had to get whacked by the teacher. She told him to pick it up and he didn't, I don't think she really cared about her students. She told him she would hit him with the ruler. I think she knew why he put it down there in the first place. But she really didn't care. She told him to pick it and he didn't pick it up. It wasn't fair. Because it was the same as when Big Ma made Cassie apologize. Maybe she didn't have a choice. She probably did care, but she knew they didn't have no choice. They had to use those books [be]cause they just had to. So when he disobeyed she just had to hit him. Discipline him. So, no I would not want to go to school in those days because it wasn't fair how they treated us. They

didn't care about the Black students only the Whites. We had VERY POOR books, we didn't have good materials and we could not ride the "good" school bus, we had to walk to school.

Our teachers just taught what they knew. They didn't have a diploma or something like the White teacher would get. They didn't have higher education. Cassie's mom was educated but she wasn't as highly educated as White people. As the White teachers were. I thought she was educated because of the way she taught school and had things in order. She was very spiritual and she was also wise and she would tell her husband to stay out of trouble. She tried to keep the family together. I think that she was very mad and angry when she got fired from the school. But she kept a really good spirit about it.

Now, T.J.'s the one that always hangs out with the White guys. I think he acts like he's big and bad and stuff like that [be]cause he hangs around with them and he thinks he's more favored. At the end when the guy had died when they were trying to rob that store. And they arrested T.J. for it. But he didn't actually kill it was the White guys who killed the store owner. But I think that they will kill T.J. for it. [Be]Cause he is Black.

If I presented this book to my class, I would say its a real book and tells about family and how they went through the treatment of the Whites, and what schools were like back

then and what happened to you and how they [the Logans] survived. What it was just like back then. Roll of Thunder gives you a positive image of what it was to be there. Because first of all even if it had a lot of problems, they still treated each other right. They still stood together. They believed in what they believed in. They really did stick together. Roll of Thunder tells me a lot of what our people had to go through for us to be equal. I would recommend Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. Its a very exciting book and really tells how we were treated back then and the different systems that we had to go through about the schools and the buses back then. I would recommend this book. This was a good book.

Yeah, it is okay with me if White people write about Black people. Well, it's kind of like they don't have all the principals of what we went through back then. Because they can just make up some stuff. But they have the history. But sometimes they don't know all the real story behind it because they weren't there back then and that's not their heritage. So they don't really know what really happened. All the time, they can't get it right [be]cause they don't know how it was. They can't say that because they were treated fairly. So they won't know how it felt because they were White. If they can get information and stuff from a Black person then yeah it's okay for White people to write about Black people.

A. J. on Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

They had a lot of land. Back then Africans Americans were not known for having land. In some ways they were rich, cause they had land. But they really weren't rich, [be]cause the father had to go off to work.

Cassie was strong, she had younger brothers to look up to her like Lena in Words By Heart. Cassie is my favorite in this book [be]cause she had guts. When Stacey, T.J. and Cassie go to the store for T.J.'s mom, they hand Mr. Barnett a list to fill. But when the White, Caucasian woman comes up, and she gives him a twice as long list; he fills her order first and a lot of other Caucasian people first before getting back to their order. When Cassie finds out she goes and complains to Mr. Barnett that he should finish serving them, before going to take care of White customers. She had the guts to go up there and "front-on" him, she said "You were serving us first, why didn't you finish serving us before you started with them?" He said, "Go away you little nigger." If I was her I would have just pulled out a gun and shot him. But see she didn't have one on her. Then the guy says, "Who owns this little nigger?" And she says, "nobody owns me." Right there that shows me she got guts to stand up to Mr. Barnett. She believed in standing up for their rights. I believe this store incident to be true [be]cause we were really dis-respected in the old days and

we are still kinda disrespected now from some people but not from all Whites. To me this is showing that they treated White people better than African Americans because of the color of their skin.

I wouldn't like to go to school in Mississippi back then, because they gave the African American kids the worse books, like say the books' quality went from "A to D," they would give the Negroes the "D" book, and give all the Caucasians the "A" book. The "D" is like bad condition, torn, "A" would be like all perfect. The Caucasians would get the "B" and "C" books too. This was probably true but I don't like that word "nigger" that they stamped inside the "D" books, [be]cause that is not what we are. That is probably true they did treat us worse than they did the Caucasians. The Black kids had to walk to school and the Caucasian kids had a bus. The Black kids didn't have a bus because they were treated disrespectfully. They thought that we didn't deserve a bus [be]cause of the color of our skin so instead of a bus coming down the street to pick us up, we had to walk like five miles to school. They did that just because of the color of our skin. They felt if you had just a touch of Black in you they would treat you disrespectfully. I hate this, I am glad it is over today, I couldn't live through those times. If we didn't do what we did back then, you know fight it, we wouldn't be like having Caucasians living right next door to us, today.

This book tells me that Africans Americans have struggled the past four hundred years. We have fought long and hard but we have shown the Caucasians that we are a team. Back during slavery we couldn't be a team [be]cause we all had different languages, that's when the Caucasians were smart by putting us in different tribes. After being with the Caucasians a lot, the Caucasians became a team to keep us tame. But we learned how to communicate with each other in maybe less than fifty years.

T.J. got into a lot of fights, he tried to hang around with the Caucasians till he found out ... [Be]Cause he thought that they were just regular people like us and then he found out how some of them felt about us. [Be]Cause T.J. and the two Simms boys tried to steal that pearl-handled pistol and the money from Mr. Barnett's cash box at the store. Then Barnett's came down [be]cause they heard a noise in the store, and they flashed the light on T.J. and then both of the Simms boys. Mr. Barnett came running after them, one of them hit him in the back of his head and made him fall. And he was knocked out. Then his wife came running after them and they just tore her up. They thought that he might be dead, but they said, "let's go!" T.J. said, "Lets go now!" The Simms said, "No! we got a few more things to do first." T.J. said, "No, lets go now or I'm telling." Then the Simms started whopping T.J.'s butt [be]cause he wanted to go home, he wanted to hurry up and

get home. They were like kicking him and punching him, his face, his stomach. He ended up having broken ribs and a broken jaw, [be]cause they beat him up so badly. Then they threw him in the back of the wagon, while they went to the pool hall. Then T.J. snuck out and went over to Stacey's house.

I think that T.J. became a part of the chain gang. Nothing happened to the Simms boys, them punks! Nothing would happen to them in the future, unless they re-opened the case, which they probably wouldn't do [be]cause they were Caucasians. The Simms' boys did all the bad stuff killing Mr. Barnett and beating his wife-knocking her out. T.J. didn't do that much but take that gun. They took the money and a whole bunch of other stuff. They did the whole thing almost. T.J. got the blame for it [be]cause he was Black. But even if T.J. said who did it they wouldn't believe the words from an African American's mouth. Even if he said R.W. and Melvin Simms did it they wouldn't believe him, [be]cause they are White. They think all the Whites are like good angels, perfect people. Mrs. Barnett didn't really see them [be]cause they had put them black masks over their faces so they would look Black. So she thought it was three Black people robbing them instead of one Black and two Whites. So the Simms boys got away scot-free.

If I was to present this book to my class I would say "If you want to find out more about how us African American

have fought and become a team, you should read Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. It is about the Logans and their land and trying to hold their family and the Black people together like a bond. Cassie believed in team work. You also have to read the part about how they treated us African Americans in the past. This a tragic, sad book because of the way the White people-the "night raiders" treated the Berrys, burning them. But this book is "memorabilia," because it shows how us Black people have fought as a team together. We should stick with our family the family should be one and best friends should be there forever for you. If you are an African American and you want to find out about your past you should read this book. If you are a White person, it will show how y'all have changed from jerks to regular people, good people, most of y'all. Thank you"

It wouldn't bother me if White people wrote a book about Black people, as long as it was true. [Be]Cause if they said something fishy, it would show that they didn't do no research about it, they didn't look up anything. They just wrote up lies saying: "African Americans came from England," or something like that. But we came from Africa instead of England, that would show that they didn't do no research. The books that we read for this project, a lot of it was true in them books. Like Words By Heart shows a daughter doing what her dad tells her to do, "Help him, not me, cause I'm about to die anyway." I think that Words By

heart was a White person's book [be]cause they wrote more truthfully about White people.

In Slave Dancer the part was probably true that he had to blow his flute to make the slaves dance to get exercise, so they wouldn't be all stiff when they got to America. I think that The Slave Dancer was written by a White person, [be]cause they wrote a lot more about White people, Caucasians, than did us African Americans. But they did write a lot about us African Americans too that showed that they did some research.

In Roll of Thunder they also showed the truth about how they treated us African Americans. I would be getting mad if they had written lies about how they treated us, like they were all extra nice, giving us money. But that would be lying, and I wouldn't like that, it wouldn't deserve to even be out on the rack (in book stores). I think that Roll of Thunder was written by an African American. It shows the language the dialect of a southern African American. This book shows that she wrote about her own self, her ancestors. Of these three books Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry was my favorite.

I like this project, talking about the books, [be]cause we get to show what we feel about these books. You could read by yourself, but there is nobody there to share it with. It has to come from your heart, you have to have strength to go through it, like when you were reading The

Slave Dancer, you can't burst out crying when you see that little girl get thrown off the boat. You got to have heart and keep on reading the book, [be]cause normally, I would just have thrown the book somewhere. But I had heart and I kept on going.

Maya on Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

It took me about two weeks to read this book. It was easy to read. My favorite character was Cassie. She was very wise, she was always listening and using what she heard to help her understand what was best for her, and she also picked up the ways of the world. What I mean by that was that she was listening to her father and her mother and Big Ma. and she used those things to understand why people acted the way they did and why they were like that and how it got that way. Although she did not accept how the South operated, she still understood why Whites and Blacks did the things they did. She also knew right from wrong.

I like her personality. She has very bold, brave and courageous characteristics. She stood up for what she believed in and didn't let anyone convince her to back down from her beliefs. She held strong when others (even her siblings) gave in. And unlike T.J. she knew that giving in and "kissing up" to the Caucasians was not going to give/get her anything but unfortunate consequences.

I think she got this aggressive spirit from her Dad.

As she grows older she will learn, like her Dad when to use these aspects of her personality and when not to. Cassie believed it was wrong to bow down and apologize to Lillian Jean just for accidentally bumping into her. I think Big Ma made Cassie apologize because she didn't want, to cause any trouble. She probably figured that it was safer to just have her apologize than to continue upsetting Lillian's dad, than risking the "night riders" attacking them, hanging them or burning them out.

It happened with one family before. They burned their house, fields and them. And so, and I think Big Ma just figured "Well we better just keep everything quiet because it just happened before." And since this was a Caucasian man at that, he could take it back to his people and everything would start building up. This may or may not be the situation to put it over the edge, but you never know. You just never know. And by Cassie putting down his daughter well that wouldn't make him too happy.

I would not like to go to school in the 1930's. The teachers stuck to the books and didn't teach about what really happened. The White teachers were probably prejudiced against Blacks. The students were segregated and probably grew hostile towards the opposite race. They were taught that Whites were better than Blacks and that Blacks were just like animals. The schools were segregated White and Black. The Black teachers were probably women who were

afraid to speak up for their rights and thought it was better to just keep quiet and not lose their jobs.

The books were used until they were so worn that the pages fell apart. They were not sufficient in content information. They only told what Whites said and did. They never mentioned slavery or anything that minorities went through, invented, accomplished or contributed to the success of this country. So the Black children/schools got the old books after the White children/schools were done using them and couldn't use them anymore. The first incident with the book, there's one of those charts that has on it the race of the child who used the book. And it goes with the name of the book and what condition it was in. For Whites they had it from the time it was new, to it was good, it was fair, and it was poor. When the books got to Blacks and it was like very poor, they didn't get them until they were really bad.

Christopher (Cassie's little brother) didn't understand why things were the way they were, and he didn't like it at all. He was like, "I'm not using this book if it's going to be like this." So his mother went and covered the chart in the book that called Black people niggers.

The White school had a bus and the Black school didn't. The school bus was very rickety anyway, but it was a way to show that the Whites supposedly were better than the Blacks.

As T.J. I am very scared and insecure. I will do

anything to stay in good with the Caucasians. Even though I know how mean and inconsiderate I have been to the Logans, it is more important not to be hung. After I was taken to jail and had been through that cruel incident, I would have realized that I was the stupid one, not the Logans. I am sorry I ever started hanging out with Melvin, and R.W. I was never happy with my color. I felt that I was cheated and often asked God "Why me?" I did a lot of things I did because I thought the Caucasian boys would like me more and it would push away the Black kids. This way I wouldn't be seen with them and the White kids would hang out with me.

And it just goes to show you that he was one person's example of what happens to people who are just chummy chummy with everyone. And they put down their own race to get into with the other race and it just goes to show you that doesn't do anything but hurt you because those two White boys didn't care about T.J. at all. I mean not at all! See when the White towns people found T.J. and they found that stolen gun in his house, the two White boys sat back right there and watched it and did it with them, drove T.J.'s parents and his sisters and his brothers out of their house. They (Melvin and R.W) didn't help T.J.'s family at all. Not once. It goes to show you that you think you're getting in good with them but when it comes down to it, they're going to leave you right there in the dust, hanging right there in the dust. They're not going to take care of

you at all. So it didn't do T.J. any good at all. I mean he learned his lesson, and I guess he had to learn it the hard way, the real hard way. Because it's not like he could get out of it. Now he realizes what he did was wrong and he's a little, just a little too late; he's going to the chain gang, if they don't hang him.

But I think he learned his lesson and I think he, I don't think he deserved that cruel a punishment. But he was kind of cheated because they didn't catch the two White boys who helped T.J. rob the store and they were the ones who killed Mr. Barnett.

The dad in Roll of Thunder was, he was a little more secure in his blackness than the dad in Words By Heart. He knew a little bit more, and he is more assertive. But he was assertive to the extent that he did not offend anyone or give anyone a reason to dislike him. But he kept himself high. He was not rude about it. He did not put himself in the position to be criticized or hung or anything like that. But he still, you know, did it in a way that he would accomplish something and he would do it for himself and get by. So they were kinda on the same line of thinking, same way of thinking, but the dad in Roll of Thunder was a little smarter; he had more knowledge and he wasn't as passive. He wasn't playing stupid sometimes, you know; I mean like in the last part in the Words by Heart. To me that was not smart, you know.

And this father in Roll of Thunder would have done the Christian thing in a better way. He would save himself and, you know, but I thought he was very, aggressive and assertive and he got things done; he did what he wanted for himself. He did not worry about what other people thought about Caucasians even though by the way he did things he was not putting himself in a bad position. But the way he did it (organize the boycott of the Wallace store), it wasn't. I mean it was the way he did it, he did it kind of like everyone was doing it so it wasn't like they could pin point him even if they knew that he was the one who started it. The other Black families were doing it and he had been shopping up there anyway; he was shopping this way before. He never really did shop at the Wallace's store.

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry says that it was not easy in that time period for Blacks. It says that even after the oppression of slavery was over, we were still oppressed. It says that we owe nothing; it's not our fault we were treated the way we were. I believe that it was at that time that way in the south. I think the town Vicksburg, Mississippi exists. I believe that they had night riders that jacked people out of their homes in the middle of the night. I believe they hung Blacks or put them in the chain-gang. I believe vsb40911et Black children in schools got the old books after the White children in schools were done using them and couldn't use them anymore. I believe the White schools had

buses and that the Black schools didn't. I believed the Blacks slaved off the White's land. I believe they sold cotton to make money to pay taxes and mortgages. I believe that most whites in the south thought they were better than blacks. I think that things such as T.J.'s stealing and Casey's apologizing actually happened to people. I believe that Blacks were blamed for the bad things that Whites did sometimes. But I think the whole story is fiction, I don't think any of the characters are real people. But the setting, the situations, all that stuff, I think it all existed somewhere, and it was all true but didn't happen exactly how they say in the story.

I liked Slave Dancer obviously the best and then Roll of Thunder and then Words by Heart. I liked The Slave Dancer the best because it was very descriptive and it did not glorify anything. Roll of Thunder secondly because it was, it was very good and explained how the south was in that time period. It really did explain it very thoroughly. I liked that a lot. Words by Heart was okay just because it was just one incident, it didn't really explain the whole big part of that time period. It just explained what happened in one family at one time in one city. The fact that Roll of Thunder mentioned the night riders and it really graphically explained what happened that night when they came to T.J.'s house, I was almost crying. I was like that's cruel. It was really hard for me to really just to

accept that, and it really showed in that one event how it would be like a lot of the times that happened.

But I enjoyed reading the books for this project. And I'm glad I did it because otherwise I would never have read any of these books. I would never have come across them probably. So I would have been just as raw as I was going in, and so now I'm a lot more aware of what happened.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSING STUDENTS' RESPONSES

"Creatin Texts Outta Texts"

The purpose of "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature," was to discover how four African American students would take up selected works of literature that represent various periods of "the Black Experience" in America. My intention here was to add students' voices to the existing scholarship on three traditionally used classroom novels. This chapter then is concerned with an analysis and discussion of the stories the students of "Value" created outta the young adult novels: The Slave Dancer, Words By Heart, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. Based on my early impressions I have decided to divide this chapter into three possible sections: 1) my overall impressions of "Value," 2) African American culture, and 3) representations of Power. In these three sections I will discuss patterns within and across the students' responses and I will entertain the questions I have posed throughout this study. I am, however, in this chapter creatin texts outta texts, therefore my format may

change as I reflect more on the texts the students of "Value" created.

Since the intention of "Value" is to add four students' voices to the existing scholarship, I have resisted the use of charts and graphs that would reduce their multiple voices to a single representation of the African American young adult reader. It is time we stop looking for that lone representative voice of Black America. One spokesperson who is in the position to describe and perhaps prescribe how African Americans read, write, think, eat, drink and sleep. The designated leader encouraged by the media that best represents the selective tradition of Black America for White America. Fortunately, these designated leaders have generally imagined themselves working for political, economical, and social betterment of the African American community, thus they soon do or say something to lose favor with the White Political Power structures. For example when Martin OULutheKing, Jr. spoke out against the Vietnam War, "because my conscience leaves me no other choice," he moved into a new area. While to most observers, an anti-war stance seemed like a natural focus of the civil rights movement, it was viewed as a shift that troubled then U.S. President Lyndon Johnson, and prompted the FBI to bug King's phones looking for ways to openly discredit him (Mullane 631-2).

In many segments of the Black community, when Dr. King

evoked the old proverb: "I've been to the mountain top and I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land," it meant I've been to the "Big House," and I have seen what is promised to you and what is denied to you but you will have to continue this struggle without me. The following day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot, he died a few hours later.

I have included these thoughts on the life and death of Martin Luther King, Jr. to not only illustrate how the "selective tradition" is a vital force in the selection and the maintenance of a public spokesperson, but to document how Ouida Sebestyen in Words By Heart distorted King's principles of non-violence. In the words of Faye Wilson-Beach and Glyger G. Beach

The author wrote a book about love, a passive love, that in no way resembles the love that civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. got from his forebears. King preached a non-violent love that would propel men and women to agitate and confront an unjust society. The author advocates and portrays a love so distorted by her own perspective that it is inactive and unresponsive, narrow and restricted (17).

The students of "Value" read with Fay Wilson Beach and Glyger Beach:

All the times when they are mean to us, we end up helping them and then they don't pay back or anything. Its not fair (Constance).

I would go after the person who shot him, even if it was a Caucasian person. Back in the old days we would get hung for that. But to me I think I

would do the right thing take his flesh for my dad's flesh (A. J.).

I don't know what I would have done, but I would have done something. I couldn't just sit there and let my dad die and not do something. I don't know if I would have hit that boy or just yelled at him (LeTasha).

I have just finished reading Words By Heart. I don't believe the story or the characters. I would leave Tater out in the field and quickly try to get my father back to safety (Maya).

The students, of course, had a lot more to say about Words By Heart and how they would react to the situation of finding their father on death's doorstep using every ounce of life left in him to save his assailant. And we will examine more of their responses later in this chapter. I wanted, however, to show here that these African American students did possess the capability to be resisting readers, especially when the story did not match what they believed to historically or culturally authentic.

One of the early questions I posed for "Value" was: Do African American young adult readers allow themselves to challenge the validity of the PRINTED WORD? Concerning Words By Heart, students had no problems being "resisting" rather than "assenting readers" (Fetterley xxii). If a novel seeks to discredit what they believe to be authentic representations of African American history and/or culture then the students are likely to challenge the source of that mis-representation. By assuming positions as critical readers the students were able to challenge Ouida

Sebestyen's assumptions about how African American society worked,

She (the author) kind of knows the history (of Black people) except that last part of the book (Constance).

Overall Impressions

Before we get into more discussions of the students' stories, I would like to share some of my overall impressions on how the design of "Value" played out for the students. Basically this study was designed to be an independent project, for each of the students involved in "Value." Students were to read on their own, keep a journal/diary/comment notebook as they read, respond to a specific set of questions following the completion of each novel, and participate in a one-time interview about all three books. Perhaps it was the independent nature of the project that proved too burdensome, knowing that they had to read on their own made it impossible for some students to fit "outside" reading into busy school/sports/music schedules. Even though I stretched my original schedule, by several weeks to the point I was horribly behind, because of their own reading rates, homework, school activities, extra curricula activities, two students just could not stay with the study. I am grateful for their efforts. They demonstrated that one reading program may not work for all

students, even if those students are from very similar backgrounds.

Initially I did propose 7-10 pages/day reading and perhaps one or two written paragraphs responding to each day's reading. My proposal would have afforded students the opportunity to finish each novel in a three-week time period, completing the entire project in ten weeks. These suggestions were intended to be viewed as just one way to move through the novels. They were not meant to be structures to guide their readings. At first, I believe that the students did try to follow my suggestions, soon however they established their own reading/writing patterns. Some students would jot down notes as something struck them in the readings, others read major portions of a book before writing, and one student just said "I don't like my reading broken up by writing, but if I had to write a paper for school I would have taken lots of detailed notes as I was reading." In many ways this was not only a difficult project for busy middle-school students, it was also a new way of reading, writing and responding to literature for these 12-13 year old young adults. Therefore I am especially grateful that A.J., Constance, LeTasha, and Maya were able to complete the study.

I already mentioned that "Value" was basically designed as an independent project. Whatever conclusions the students came to were based on the understandings that they

made of the books in the study. While the students did not indicate to me that they had solicited advice from parents or friends, they did say that they had shared their readings of the books, with family and friends. The students were not aware of my feelings about the books I selected for "Value." Constance asked me during our pre-project talk, how I felt about the books. I responded, "I do not want your readings to be influenced by my readings so you will feel free to like or dislike the books." In this chapter I seek to critically discuss those themes that emerged from the narratives created by the students of "Value."

Additionally it should be noted that even though we did discuss the book covers in the interviews, no mention was ever made of the golden award-winning emblems embossed on the books covers. Therefore I can not state emphatically that just because these books are award winners, the students of "Value" judged them favorably. However I do feel safe saying that the students generally felt free to honestly reflect on their experiences reading these novels.

In many cases their reflections resembled a process called "innerattainment." We briefly discussed this African American cultural custom labeled "innerattainment" by Jawanza Kunjufu (24), in Chapter One. This process is also known as call-response. Geneva Smitherman explains

The African-derived communication process of call-response may be briefly defined as follows: spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between the speaker and the listener in which all

of the speaker's statements ("calls") are punctuated by expressions ("responses") from the listener (Talkin 104).

I rather like this concept, a sorta drawing-in, coming-in to an inner circle and whatever goals achieved there are attained collectively. Thus, if we imagine each text in this study as the "caller," then were the students able to respond in such a way drawing on the Black cultural tradition of call-response? This concept is not unlike the transactional theory described by Louise Rosenblatt, the relation between the reader and the text is not linear. It is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other (16). I saw this happen time and again, whether it was in their re-telling of a story, or their journal notes, students' thoughts moved the text along, while the text moved the students thoughts. A.J.'s early thoughts on The Slave Dancer are an example of "innerattainment."

I feel sorry for the boy [be]cause his Dad drowned in the Mississippi River. I like the way the author of the book expressed the way Jessie felt about his father dying. I wish they had welfare back then to help them get through their bad times.

Le Tasha's thoughts on Mrs. Chism in Words By Heart also reflect this live transaction with the text.

I kind of like her. She was kind of rude, but in a way she was her own person. And she didn't show it but I could tell that she kind of liked Lena and her family, even though they were Black she was White. Because there were some things in there I didn't think any ordinary White person

would let happen. She tried to play it off, acting like she couldn't stand those people. But it didn't work. I saw through her.

African American Culture

In the Introduction of this study, I talked about some of the early experiences of racial discrimination that shaped my thinking as a young adult. Surely, a lot has changed in the intervening twenty to thirty years. On some levels the blatant racism and discrimination that we as African Americans faced daily in the 60's, 70's, and 80's no longer exists. But just as the students of "Value" confirmed racism is not over, we are served with painful reminders of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" that still govern American social, political and economical structures. For example an African American motorist is videotaped being kicked and beaten senseless, yet the jury acquits the White police officers who perpetuated this vicious act. Just this summer (June, 1995) voters in a mid-western capitol city decided to remove the name of Cesar Chavez from a street that runs through a Mexican American community. Recently (1995) the governor of one the largest states in the union rescinded affirmative action policies in the areas of education and hiring. Mind you in His state the median household networth for Anglos in 1991 was \$31,904 and for non-Anglos \$1,353 (Mullane 747).

But as I observed earlier some changes have occurred. In South Carolina of course my relatives are no longer

compelled to dine at the COLORED SNACK BAR. Actually several of my folks have served in various positions of civic leadership from city council members to high school principals. But have things changed on college campuses for African American students? Are there more African American professors? According to the Autumn 1993 edition of The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, statistics indicate that there has been little progress in 20 years, since almost half of all Black faculty (which is only 4.5 percent of ALL full-time faculty) teach at historically Black colleges and universities, the odds of a student at a predominately White institution seeing a Black face in front of the classroom are about 50 to 1 (025).

While my adolescent and young adult feelings on what it means to be Black in America or on African American culture may not be shared by the student readers of "Value," my feelings may have been shared by their parents. Thus, via family values, students might read from an essential Black cultural perspective, a socially constructed vision of Black culture, or a combination of the two. The students' use of various pronouns may be an indicator of the reading that they are bringing to the text. Often students would change the use of pronouns from an objective she/he, him/her, them, to a more subjective I, me, we, us, within the same sentence, response or thought. Roger Brown and Albert Gilman described this "informal verbiage of the nuclear

family extended to humanity" as "pronoun solidarity" (273). In fact many times within the same narrative students moved from an outside perspective to a moment in time as if, for example, the physical enslavement of African American people existed today not well over a hundred years ago.

I was really mad because what the White people did to us, like they treated us like animals and they were really making me mad. Because they were all down there and they could hardly breathe or anything. They couldn't... they didn't ... really get... Oh man! It was really mean how they treated us back then (Constance). I wish that us African Americans did not have to go through what they went through, but if they had given us our 40 acres and a mule at the end of slavery, like they said. . . .(A.J.).

Echoing D'Jimo Kouyate the students of "Value" seem to identify themselves as an African people and that the slave experiences of our African American ancestors are our experiences (179-191). In other words as Brown and Gilman suggest the students' pronoun usage indicated that they had expanded their nuclear family to include slave ancestors.

In Chapter One, "Gut Feelings: Readers Performing with Texts," we established that African American culture is a live organism growing out of the traditions of Africa, enslavement of African Americans, and the African American sojourn in America. Also growing out of our discussion in Chapter One, let us here define essentialism as the common ancestral ties which create cultural experiences. Then social construction is realized not only as a one-dimensional artificial man-made creation but one grounded in

various historical and economical applications. In other words are the ways in which American society has treated African American people, even economically not a part of social construction? It seems that to understand social constructionism not in terms of its historical impact is to ignore part of how it works. For all its HORRORS slavery was still an economical/social institution. Borrowing the words of Amiri Baraka,

The Black people of this country were brought here in slavery chains on the fast clipper ships of rising European capitalism. It is impossible to separate the rise of capitalism, the industrial revolution, the emergence of England and later America as world powers from the trade in Africans (244).

Entertaining this argument then lets run with it a bit, if we suggest that social construction (which includes politics, economics and history) has shaped African American existence in this country, then are we saying that Black people have historically been treated a certain way because they are Black? Then as quiet as it is kept, in some ways that is ESSENTIALISM. Essentially I am treated in a certain manner because I am Black. Just as Malcolm El-Malik Shabazz hypothesized years ago, "What do they call a Black man with a Ph.D.?" Malcolm supplied the answer to his question, "nigger."⁹

Regardless of the wealth in my bank account or the letters behind my name, I am first approached as a Black person. Does this mean that I am not afforded respect as a

creative contributing member of society with a rich cultural heritage? Does it mean that "someone" in power socially determined who I am and how I should be treated economically etc.? That I am Black should not mean what it does (imagine here the list of stereotypical negatives that often accompanies narratives about African American people) but because it means what it does (at least in the minds of some of those given to social construction and we are talking "short narrow building" here) makes the issue not just a question of skin color but one of Power. Therefore, for example, would it have mattered if the "racist red-neck" trailing my brother through the rice fields of South East Asia, knew that it was only social construction that made the White soldier believe that he represented the superior race, ideology and culture? Do people who behaved in a characteristic prejudiced or racist manner know why they are racist or prejudiced?

Raymond Williams reminds us that hegemony extends beyond simple definitions of domination and subordination to acknowledge the forms of these power relations as a saturation of the whole process of living.

Hegemony is a whole body of practices and expectations over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values--constitutive and constituting -- which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming (110).

A question of Power? If it is not who we are or what we are

made of, then the question is about Power, what systems are formulating our thoughts and our actions? The answer has to go deeper than legislation outlawing racist behavior or authors writing novels condemning such practices as slavery. Even though Paula Fox's The Slave Dancer was meant to be a condemnation of slavery, the representations of the passive ignorant slave in novel in many ways justified the barbaric institution, she sought to condemn.

Thus, by refusing to critique essentialism and social construction African American scholars may not be in a position to intellectually challenge the existing social structures of White supremacy. bell hooks suggests that a critique of essentialism does not preclude blindness. In order to examine the impact of essentialism, it is not necessary to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience. She adds that such a critique

allows us to affirm multiple Black identities, varied Black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of Black identity which represent Blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain White supremacy (Yearning 28-29).

Just as Keith Gilyard stated earlier concerning language acquisition, it is not necessary to eradicate one tongue to learn another (161). Neither should the elimination of Black culture be a prerequisite for establishing an "oppositional and liberatory" self identity (hooks, Yearning

29). Diane Brunner adds to this discussion,

Culturally, we (teachers) and students are specifically located within social categories that define our positions along social, class, race, and ethnic lines. Whether we conceive culture as a social construct or as an instrument of the status quo may thus have the greatest impact on how on how we see ourselves socially (Inquiry 54).

While each of us operates out of a history and a world view, it may be our capability to dislocate boundaries, to negotiate meanings in any given situation that may define our roles as teachers and learners (Brunner, Inquiry 55).

Paulo Freire adds

only an education facilitating the passage from naive to critical transitivity, increasing men's (and women's) ability to perceive the challenges of their time, could prepare the people to resist the emotional power of the transition (32).

The people in Power may not necessarily change--yet if we (who are typically marginalized, disenfranchised and silenced) can create a new image for ourselves then we may be in position to fight racist Power structures. But we must know where we (educators and students) are socially positioned in order to do this.

The novels used in "Value" offer many insightful situations that call for the characters to dislocate boundaries and negotiate meanings. Of those I have just selected a few that are illustrative of negotiated meanings by the students of "Value" and/or the authors of the novels. In both Words By Heart and Roll of Thunder, the mothers are given decision making roles. However, Claudie Sills' role is

so undefined that the students barely mentioned her in their narratives and no mention is made of her speech near the end of the book:

We know how to earn our keep. And we know how to knuckle to you. Only we mean to work and to knuckle the way we choose to. I have two boys coming up to be the same threat to all you that Ben was. You better be ready for them, because I'm going to have them ready for you (Sebestyen 133).

The natural question here given the story of Words By Heart, is "ready for what?" Work has to be the answer; Ben never was a threat to anyone in that "White" community of Bethel Springs. He was just a hard worker. Perhaps because this was not a declaration of a Black woman saying to White people, I hold you responsible for my husband's death, the students of "Value" were not impressed enough to even mention it. A.J. not only provides very limited recognition of Claudie in his narrative, he discounts her ability to help her sons grow into prosperous individuals:

Her Mom is probably used to working in the kitchen she is not used to working in the fields. That means Lena will have to teach her young brothers, young siblings to learn from her and to prosper.

On the surface level it would appear that A.J. is given to stereotypes about women's roles in the kitchen. However, because Ouida Sebestyen never gave Claudie a role or a voice outside that of homemaker, in this case A.J. is reading with the author. Also it should be noted that since A.J. designated Lena to be the new family leader he was not given to stereotypical representations of women, "To me Lena was

strong, she might not be physically by looking at her (book cover), she might not be a muscle bound woman. But still she is very powerful in her mind."

Mary Logan, the mother in Roll of Thunder, in contrast to Claudie Sills, is a fully developed character who really dislocates boundaries of a racist society and negotiates positive meanings for her family and her community. In the words of LeTasha, "she is an intelligent Black woman."

LeTasha continues,

She always seemed to have situations under control even when her husband went away (David Logan worked on the railroad). She knew how to run the house without a man or someone else there. She had a good head, she knew what to do to help the other families. [Mary Logan not only took food to the Berry's she help organize the Black community boycott of the Wallace store. Mr. Wallace a member of the night riders responsible for burning Mr. Berry.]

It could be a testimony to quality writing on Mildred Taylor's part that LeTasha found a positive role model in one of the novel's secondary characters more so than in the lead character, Cassie. Or it could be indicative of the cultural reading LeTasha was bringing to the text.

Speaking of positive role models Maya does an interesting read of the father figures in Words By Heart and Roll of Thunder:

The dad in Roll of Thunder was a little more secure in his Blackness than the dad in Words By Heart. ...they were kind of on the same line of thinking but the dad in Roll of Thunder was a little smarter, he had more knowledge and he wasn't as passive, he wasn't playing stupid sometimes. I mean like that last part in Words By

Heart, to me that was not smart.

One of the early questions I posed for "Value" was would students bring a Black cultural reading to the texts? Well the students of "Value" certainly read with a traditional African American revolutionary spirit. Amiri Baraka calls literature based on the revolutionary spirit, "art based on struggle" ("Afro-American" 12). The following excerpt from a sonnet by Gwendolyn Brooks both describes art based on struggle as well as the texts created by the students throughout this project:

First fight, Then fiddle
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, may be not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace
(from "The Womanhood").

Whether it was by means of physical change or via a new rhetoric the students of "Value" felt a need to right the wrongs present in the texts we read. Here are just a few examples of this revolutionary spirit I found in the students narratives. Concerning the enslavement of the Africans in The Slave Dancer, students wrote:

If we all had the same language we could have turned our backs and had a good plan and we could have whipped their butts (A. J.).

Just how they treated us back then, just made me real mad. I wish I was back there. So I could beat them up (Constance).

If I [were Jessie and I] went through that experience I would not want to be around slave markets, and I think that I would really fight for an end to slavery because I know what they had to go through (Maya).

Concerning the fate of the father's assailant in Words By Heart the students wrote:

I don't know what but I would have done something. I don't know if I would have hit that boy or maybe yelled at him (LeTasha).

...but I would still kick the jerk out of him. I think he deserves a beating, in fact I think he deserves a burning, but I would help him if my Dad asked me to (A.J.).

I wouldn't help that boy who shot him, because I would be mad at him. I would just leave him there. Maybe tell his folks to come get him (Constance).

(It) would have been really hard to love Tater and also not tell people that Tater killed her father. I would have been like, "He did it and I can show you the proof right over here" (Maya).

Embodied in a narrative of political resistance, Maya works through some possible consequences if Lena had revealed her father's murderer.

But it was hard. Really, really hard for her to sit there and smile and not tell. But they can make up all kinds of stories. There are lots of ways to get around what Tater did. They would say that he was drunk or whatever they would say...

In the following narrative concerning the father's death in Words By Heart, A.J. recognizes boundaries and negotiates meanings.

She did the wrong thing not telling. If I was the person, I would say "Tater did it." Cause he deserves to be in jail, but they probably would not have done anything. Cause back in those days

they probably got paid for shooting an African American, like "Oh you shot a nigger, you get 15 dollars." I think she should have told the sheriff, but if she knew they would get away with it then I would not have told. But I still would have kicked his butt though. That's the part I believe to be false about Words By Heart when her dad said to help the person who shot him and leave him (the dad) there to die, and she did it.

In these spaces of reflection the students of "Value" were able to work with, understand, and create challenges to those systems in authority. Diane Brunner writes, "by taking up, puzzling over, and questioning not only institutional hierarchies but all relations of power reflections can become a site of operational resistance and struggle" (Inquiry 47). This discussion on resistance naturally leads into the next theme I want to address, that is the students responses to the representations of power they found in The Slave Dancer, Words By Heart, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

Representations of Power

Another question I posed for "Value" was would students see this or that text as racist or will they simply say,

"That's how it was." or "That's how it is."

The students' responses were never as "simple" Yes, this is racist or No, this is not racist. Throughout this project students gave elaborate complex responses often times negotiating meanings as they articulated their thoughts. Let's ease-drop once again as Maya politicizes resistance

concerning the Bible verse contest prize in Words By Heart

I would be very nervous being in the contest. Being the only Black person would also be really weird. I would step up to the mic and I would recite my first verse being sure to speak my words clearly and slowly so they could be understood. I would always be reciting verses in my head and I would feel for those who were out. Hoping that the next one wouldn't be me. At first I was amazed about the prize Lena received. This really shows that they favored the Caucasian boy over any other person in the competition. I didn't agree with Lena throwing the tie in his face. I would probably take the tie, throw it on the ground and step on it. Well, I thought I had to be drastic. I mean she deserved a prize. I'll just take it and throw it away when I get home, but I'm not going to throw it in his face. That would be tacky. The people didn't expect the girl to win. I also think that people have a stereotype of Black people that they are going to get to me. Just take me smiling and you know be happy with it would have been more... Because they would have been like, she's suppose to get mad because that's the stereotype. Nowadays if she would have taken it, it would have been more effective... If she'd taken the tie and smiled and been happy with it or acted like she was happy with it. Now that would have, WOW! been something drastic! I would have taken it home and then threw it away or gave it to my little brother when I got home.

Before we get into a discussion of representations of Power, let's look at one more example of a student wrestling with political hierarchies manifested in White supremacy. Here A. J. discusses T.J.'s fate in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry:

I think that T.J. became a part of the chain gang. Nothing happened to the Simms boys, them punks. Nothing would happen to them in the future, unless they re-opened the case, which they probably wouldn't do cause they were Caucasians. The Simms boys did all the bad stuff killing Mr. Barnett and beating his wife-knocking her out. T. J. didn't do that much but take that gun. They took the money. They did whole thing almost. T.J. got the blame because he was Black. But even

if T.J. said who did it they wouldn't take the words from an African American's mouth. Even is he said R.W. and Melvin Simms did it they wouldn't believe him, cause they are White.

Pardon this side-bar: but so many times while the students were working their way through a novel, trying to make sense of the social institutions that structure much of our lives, I felt the pain of their struggles. I wanted to grab them and in the spirit of Peter Pan fly off to some "La Land" where no such oppression existed. But without those sort of Hollywood capabilities, I must, we must as educators devise ways to help students come to grips with the social issues manifested by works of literature. By placing the question of Power at the core we are in position to critique properties of social institutions such as racism, classism, sexism. In the spaces of these reflections the students addressed several of these "isms." Let's touch base on a couple of them and particularly how they played out in terms of: a) gender, b) racial stereotypes.

Contrary to "unpopular" critiques, African American students are not just concerned with racial representations in novels. The students of "Value" were disturbed by the fact that it was pre-determined that a boy would win the Bible verse contest in Words By Heart.

...that's like saying boys are supposed to win, or that they are better than girls because they can memorize something. I don't like it when things like that happen, it just irks me (LeTasha).

That was very sexist the way they treated that

girl. They never expected her to win. Cause they thought a woman couldn't do it. ...I don't think that they should have done that, estimated who would win (A.J.).

Moving beyond the issue of sex-role stereotyping the students saw this as an issue of injustice. "Value" has been in position to look at examples of Power, how Power is realized in a cultural context how Power is played out in the novels, and now, how the students reading Power in the novels. In these spaces of reflection students are able to question Power and in that questioning they were able to make sense of the structures that framed those moments.

Thus, the second "ism" I thought we should touch on here is that of racism. Without a doubt racism, racial construction, and representations of African American culture are the foci of all the novels used in this project. Whether we are talking about the treatment of the Africans brought aboard the Moonlight, the death of Ben Sills, or the fate of T.J.,

But he didn't actually kill, the White guys killed the store owner. But I think that they will kill T.J. for it, [be]cause he is Black (Constance).

we are describing literary events that are laced with manifestations of White supremacy. In the words of Toni Morrison, literature is complicit in the fabrication of racism, but it also explodes and undermines it (Playing 16). If the text does not explode the myths of racism within it or the society it is addressing, then students need to be

allocated space to interrogate the text along those lines. As we have seen with "Value," given the space students will read beyond the text. In other words, by interrogating the novels, students were able to identify ways societies worked, as well as formulate ways they should work.

In an early conjecture I wondered if students were bringing an essentially Black cultural reading or socially constructed reading to the text or would their concepts of African American culture be shaped by the readings. At times the students were more objective than subjective whether this is an indicator of an essential or a constructed view of race or it may just be an indicator of how much of a personal investment they are willing to make at that time is a question for further research. What we did learn was that the students read from an African American cultural perspective. Clearly these are the issues that teachers should consider as they prepare to invest their students learning experiences in these novels. Because this was a research project, I was not able to direct the students to possible solutions. However, we will discuss some implications for classroom teachers as well as some implications for research in Chapter Seven. Here I would just like to say that I do not believe that "Value" left these African American young adult readers consumed with anger without hope. A. J. provides the following illumination

I think that the way us African Americans are treated today is very much different than the way we were treated in the past. ...Racism has decreased. It is not over, no, never, it probably will never be. But we can teach the people, show them the light of day, show them the right way.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PEDAGOGICAL VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

"Playin like I'm 1 down"

"If something doesn't work in the classroom,
it doesn't matter whose fault it is; it needs
to change."

Diane DuBose Brunner

"Without African American history there is no
American history, without American history
there is no African American history, we need to
stop imagining that they exist exclusively of each
other."

Rashidah Jaami' Muhammad

In this final chapter of "Value," I would like to
divide my responses into three sections: 1) limitations of
the study, 2) implications for teaching, and 3) implications
for research. Within these sections I hope to entertain
some of questions "Value" left me to puzzle over.

Limitations of the Study

One major limitation of 'Value', that really disturbs
me is that there was no space for me to challenge the

students based on my understandings of the novels without directing their readings. I could not say "I have major problems with this character, or What do you think about the racism in this text." I regret that they may have left The Slave Dancer believing that Africans were solely responsible for the institution of slavery. I regret that they may have left Words By Heart believing that African Americans did not value or try to earn the ability to read and write until after the Civil War. I regret that they may have left Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry believing that Black people of that time period could not outwit a conniving White person. Even though Roll of Thunder has been praised for its authenticity, this study did not allow me to interrogate the text the students were bringing to the text. There was no room for me to say to the students, "Perhaps, if we looked at it like this or..." Also there are several historical inaccuracies in the literature selected for "Value," about which I feel guilty as a language arts instructor, as a parent and as an African American, that I did not compel the students of "Value" to challenge; e.g., the socio/political context of the novels used in this study.

Because the purpose of "Value" was to discover what A.J., Maya, Constance, and LeTasha found of value or what they believed were authentic representations in the works selected for this study, I could not shape their readings by having them respond to my interpretations. I can only be

consoled by two facts 1) if they read this study in its entirety, they may be moved to take a second or third look at the literature used in "Value" and 2) that this study provided them with a space to look at readings more critically so that in the future they may be more likely to interrogate the literature that they come across. Thus, the balance of this last chapter of "Value" is devoted to implications for teaching and research.

Implications for Teaching

Even though I used it as an independent study method, the methodology that I employed in "Value" could be a dynamic way into novels in the classroom. Using my protocol this could be an "individual" project for the whole class. In other words students would still read on their own, outside of class. We would of course have to be more strict about a time frame than I was for "Value" Based on their reported reading rates, most students in the middle school grade range could complete each of these novels within a three-week period. I would also assign journals or reading logs, many students found it beneficial to record in-process reading thoughts. While some students gave more abbreviated written responses, they all enjoyed talking about the books. Therefore using the "Value" protocol in the classroom, I would build weekly or bi-weekly rap sessions. Rather than saving all the questions till the end of the reading

process, I would pose questions based on the assigned portion of the novel.

As with "Value", in the classroom, I would not just leave the students alone to read the books. Not only did I encourage them to take notes as they read, I also checked with them from time to time to see how their reading was coming along. I should note here that even though the students knew going in this study that they would be reading three novels, I only gave them one novel at a time. Then I would check with them after about two weeks, in order to see if they were ready for me to bring the list of questions over (See Appendix B for a list of the questions). Because I did not want the questions to direct their readings, for each novel I did not give them the list of questions until they had completed the reading.

Questions

I wrote the questions for "Value" with two thoughts in mind, one I wanted the students to do a close reading and two I wanted them to "own" the experiences of their readings. So I designed the questions that students would feel comfortable answering, but at the same time would require them to seriously contemplate the readings. The questions were open-ended requiring their completion in any manner comfortable for the students. Students were free to draw, write poetry, write short answers or even give

detailed essays. Whatever option they chose these written responses were spaces for the students to begin to look at the novels more critically. What often began as non-scholastic drivel evolved into elaborate critical responses. If students are forced to stay with the text, then we may not get the elaborate responses, like those that came from the students of "Value."

Ideas for Teaching the Novels of "Value"

"Value" demonstrated that it is important to include outside research with the reading of historical novels. The students in this study indicated that they could not determine what was true or false about The Slave Dancer, because they did not know enough about slavery. Thus rather than leave students to wonder should they accept this as fact or not, they should be encouraged to do research. Without exception, the students of "Value" noted the importance of doing research before writing a book. Equally important is to do research before, during and while reading a novel, especially one that represents particular events and time periods.

While it did not preclude them from reading the novel the students of "Value" indicated that they were not sure of the language patterns in The Slave Dancer. Because language provides such dynamic cultural perspective it is also important with the study of these novels to explore language

patterns in the social political context of the novels as well as the evolution of those linguistic patterns and styles. In our conversations all the students of "Value" masterfully mixed the languages of African American Vernacular English with Standard Edited American English, resulting in very creative narratives. Additionally considering current educational efforts to make our students more multi-lingual, using these novels would be an excellent way to study language variations within the English language.

As Maya did with the characters of Ben Sills and David Logan (fathers) in Words By Heart and Roll of Thunder students can use chief characters from two different novels in order to get a better understanding of the forces driving each character. More than a compare/contrast study, students could be encouraged to read the characters against each other within the socio/political context of each novel.

In order to be in a better position to challenge the students, teachers have to know more. They need to do additional research in the areas of critical teaching, readers response, literary theory and African American culture, history and language. Additionally teachers must put themselves in the position to interrogate "Whiteness." As long as every other culture remains "Other", "Whiteness" continues to be privileged and therefore educational, social, cultural equity will remain a goal, lofty indeed,

but still just an unrealized goal. As Constance pointed out during the showing of the Martin Luther King, Jr. film at her school, the White students showed no interest and the teacher just focused on the Black students perhaps to see if they were in touch with the film.

Implications For Research

In order to really free students to make honest reflections of the works being studied, we must find ways to remove the teacher as the authority figure. Even in this study, when I was not in their presence during most of the time, I felt that sometimes students were looking for the "teacher-expected" answer. No matter how much I insisted that I wanted their opinions, often times they still wanted to know, what I wanted them to say. Studies that enhance students' roles in classroom discourse and reduce teacher-centered learning are avenues needing further exploration.

More response studies with African American students in whole class as well as isolated interview settings are needed to give voice and vision to those most often silenced. In particular the work that I have begun with "Value" aims to show not just that students read the racism (that either exists in the novel or via the text they bring to the novel), but that they are capable of engaging in critical dialogue.

More studies that explore students' powers of critique

can create spaces that have long been vacant. When students have the opportunity to show what they know, rather than what they do not, then teachers can base assessment on a dynamic performance model. Research into performance-based assessment might also continue the work I began here in "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature."

In this study I had sought to level the playing field by internally citing everyone by first names only. Since the real scholars of "Value" are the young adult student readers, I wanted their voices to be valued as much as any professor, doctor, or academic "grown-up" that I have cited in this work. However this format not only gave pause to those accustomed to the traditional surname referencing style, I was directed to adhere to the established hegemonic pattern for citations. Even though I was not allowed to use a format that visualized a stage for students' voices to sing with the academic voices, I believe "Value" provided the concert. I also hope that my call for changes in format may open doors to further research on "naming" practices in African American culture.

In Chapter One we briefly touched on this issue in our discussion on the scene from Roots, in which Kunta Kinte is beaten until he claims the massa' name. There is however much more to African American naming than just the retention of the slave master's names. Building on the work of

Lorenzo Dow Turner (Africanisms in Gullah Dialect, 1949), Joseph Holloway (Africanisms in American Culture, 1990), and Joseph Holloway and Winifred K. Vass (The African Heritage of American English, 1993), educational researchers could study the "toby" complex--the effects of African American naming on Black student empowerment, identity, and/or voice. Also the fact that the "toby" complex could be an early manifestation of what William Edward Burghardt DuBois labeled double-consciousness is another issue for further research. W.E.B. DuBois described double-consciousness as a "peculiar sensation."

...this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (45).

Do African American students on the heels of the 21st Century read with the double-consciousness that W.E.B. DuBois described in 1903? Clearly, this is an area that needs further research.

Questions Unanswered?

One of the early questions I posed for "Value" was would students be more willing to actively engage a novel outside the confines of a traditional classroom. This question could not be determined with "Value." Perhaps they

were more willing, and we can tell from their well articulated elaborate responses that the students really got off on The Slave Dancer, Words By Heart, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. But the fact that this project did not count in terms of their grades, it often earned whatever space was left over after, homework, chores, sports, TV, etc.

Concluding Reflections

There were several humorous moments gathering this data that served to remind me just how serious it is to pay attention to young people. One such moment readily comes to mind; A.J. was discussing the Bible verse contest in Words By Heart with fantastic rhythm and speed. At first I was not sure what we was doing until he mentioned the NBA playoffs. Then he seemed to superimpose his own narrative on that of Ouida Sebestyen's, thus the speed and the accuracy with which Lena delivered her lines seem to match the speed of a made basket. And remarkably A.J. never lost sight of either narrative. I choked, all the while I was impressed by his performance; I knew such antics in the classroom would not merit him a passing grade. Teachers would have, I would have cut him off before he made the connections. Why? Was it the language? Was it the gestures? Perhaps it was his use of an unorthodox correlation. Maybe he was just taking too much class time.

What is important here, however, is that the student owned the text, made sense of it, and made connections to real life experiences.

There is no end, no conclusion to "Value". I will be reflecting on the lessons this study has taught me for years to come. Perhaps the most important thing I learned from this research project is to just shut-up and listen. Because I wanted to be solicitant rather than directive, I deliberately sat on my tongue. This was made possible in part by the open nature of the questions I posed for "Value." Thus, throughout the interviews, I was in position to only request further information based on their previous statement. My often used line was: "Please tell me more about that..." In these spaces the students became the teachers, seriously schooling me on the novels. They knew what they said mattered and that they were making valuable contributions to a project that may change the way teachers think about teaching historical novels about African American experiences in this country.

Closing Note

The sub-title I adopted for this chapter comes from ease-dropping on a conversation in which Michael Moore was talking about improving his son's game. He said, "I keep telling him always, always play like you are one down."¹⁰ "Playin like I'm 1 down" defines my pedagogical stance, it

reminds me that I have a way to go but my goal of helping students become critical readers, thinkers, and writers of our tomorrows is within reach.

CHAPTER ONE NOTES

1. Molefi Asante describes the Diaspora as Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, various regions of Asia and the Pacific, wherever people are who declare themselves African despite the distance from the African continent or the recentness of their out-migration (1990, p.15).

2. For additional information on the Herskovits-Frazier Debate please see Africanisms in American Culture (Holloway, 1990), Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives (Whitten and Szwed, 1970), and The Negro Church in America (Frazier, 1963).

3. The context in which passing occurs varies for example from Black individuals who because of White physical features adopt the White race and culture as their own, to those with identifiable Black features but choose to "live" in White Culture (See Haney Lopez, page 49).

4. The use of a lowercase "w" here indicates that the reference is not to racial identification but to cultural preference.

5. The Logans were not able to pay Mr. Morrison much money, therefore he primarily worked for food and shelter and the sense of belonging to a family that came with being with them.

6. For more on this discussion about the meanings created by readers based on ideological codes, see Umberto Eco's The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semeiotics of Texts.

7. Diane's statement here comes from a conversation we shared in June, 1995. For a fuller discussion of her thoughts on the selective tradition and African American literature please see pages 144-164 of Inquiry and Reflection: Framing Narrative Practice in Education (Brunner, 1994).

CHAPTER TWO NOTES

8. Here I have borrowed bell hooks' term to describe the nature of American society. For a more detailed examination of the term see her works: Black Looks: Race and Representations and Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations.

CHAPTER SIX NOTES

9. For a more elaborate discussion of Malcolm X's statement and on "naming" please see Kimberly W. Benston's "I yam what I am: the topos of un(naming) in Afro-American literature" in Black Literature & Literary Theory edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., New York: Routledge, 1990, pp. 151-174.

CHAPTER SEVEN NOTES

10. This comment comes from a personal conversation between Michael Moore, myself and several others at the National Council of Teachers of English Spring Conference, March 1995, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

**MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY**

January 25, 1995

TO: Rashidah J. Muhammad
Dept of English
5 Morrill Hall

RE: IRB#: 94-581
TITLE: VALUE AND AUTHENTICITY: YOUNG ADULT READERS TO
AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
REVISION REQUESTED: N/A
CATEGORY: 1-C
APPROVAL DATE: 01/21/95

Respond

The University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects' (UCRIHS) review of this project is complete. I am pleased to advise that the rights and welfare of the human subjects appear to be adequately protected and methods to obtain informed consent are appropriate. Therefore, the UCRIHS approved this project including any revision listed above.

RENEWAL: UCRIHS approval is valid for one calendar year, beginning with the approval date shown above. Investigators planning to continue a project beyond one year must use the green renewal form (enclosed with the original approval letter or when a project is renewed) to seek updated certification. There is a maximum of four such expedited renewals possible. Investigators wishing to continue a project beyond that time need to submit it again for complete review.

REVISIONS: UCRIHS must review any changes in procedures involving human subjects, prior to initiation of the change. If this is done at the time of renewal, please use the green renewal form. To revise an approved protocol at any other time during the year, send your written request to the UCRIHS Chair, requesting revised approval and referencing the project's IRB # and title. Include in your request a description of the change and any revised instruments, consent forms or advertisements that are applicable.



OFFICE OF
RESEARCH
AND
GRADUATE
STUDIES

University Committee on
Research Involving
Human Subjects
(UCRIHS)

Michigan State University
225 Administration Building
East Lansing, Michigan
48824-1046

517/355-2180
FAX: 517/432-1171

**PROBLEMS/
CHANGES:**

Should either of the following arise during the course of the work, investigators must notify UCRIHS promptly: (1) problems (unexpected side effects, complaints, etc.) involving human subjects or (2) changes in the research environment or new information indicating greater risk to the human subjects than existed when the protocol was previously reviewed and approved.

If we can be of any future help, please do not hesitate to contact us at (517)355-2180 or FAX (517)336-1171.

Sincerely,

David E. Wright
David E. Wright, Ph.D.
UCRIHS Chair

DEW:pjm

cc: Diane D. Brunner

Parental Consent Form

I, _____, grant permission for
(please print parent/legal guardian's name)

my son or daughter, _____,
to (please print son/daughter's name)

participate in Rashidah Jaami' Muhammad's research study
"Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to
African American Literature." In this ten-week study, I
understand that my child will read and respond to three
commonly-used classroom novels:

Paula Fox's The Slave Dancer, Ouida Sebestyen's Words By
Heart, and Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

I understand that the novels noted above along with
notebooks, and pens/pencils will be provided for my child by
Rashidah Jaami' Muhammad.

The reading/responding time chart will look like this:

<u>Week</u>	<u>Reading</u>	<u>Notes</u>	<u>Questions</u>	<u>Talks</u>
One	<u>Slave</u>	X		
Two	<u>Slave</u>	X		
Three	<u>Slave</u>	X	X	
Four	<u>Words</u>	X		
Five	<u>Words</u>	X		
Six	<u>Words</u>	X	X	
Seven	<u>Roll</u>	X		
Eight	<u>Roll</u>	X		
Nine	<u>Roll</u>	X	X	
Ten	All			X

As noted on the previous page, my child will have three weeks to read and respond to each novel. On the third and final week of each book, my son/daughter will be requested to answer four or five questions specially written for that novel. Following the reading of all three novels, my child will meet and talk with Rashidah about the whole reading experience. I understand that these talks will be tape recorded. Since this study is built on what students think

about these novels, my son/daughter will have the option of deleting and/or re-stating any comment he/she does not feel accurately reflects his/her thoughts. Additionally, my child may request that tape-recording be stopped at any time.

If my child does not feel comfortable answering the questions, he/she will not be compelled to continue participation in that session or in the project.

I understand that my child will be awarded a certificate acknowledging his/her participation in the study. Also there will be a group dinner at a local restaurant following the completion of the study.

I have indicated my willingness for my son/daughter to participate in this reading/response study by signing on the "yes" line below.

_____date_____

Yes, My Son/Daughter may participate in the reading/response study described above.

_____date_____

No, My Son/Daughter may not participate in the reading/response study described above.

Appendix B-2

Student Consent Form

I, _____, am willing to please print your legal name participate in Rashidah Jaami' Muhammad's research study "Value and Authenticity: Young Adult Readers Respond to African American Literature." In this ten-week study, I understand that I will read and respond to three commonly-used classroom novels:

Paula Fox's The Slave Dancer, Ouida Sebestyen's Words By Heart, and Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. I understand that the novels noted above along with notebooks, and pens/pencils will be provided for me by Rashidah Jaami' Muhammad.

The reading/responding time chart will look like this:

<u>Week</u>	<u>Reading</u>	<u>Notes</u>	<u>Questions</u>	<u>Talks</u>
One	<u>Slave</u>	X		
Two	<u>Slave</u>	X		
Three	<u>Slave</u>	X	X	
Four	<u>Words</u>	X		
Five	<u>Words</u>	X		
Six	<u>Words</u>	X	X	
Seven	<u>Roll</u>	X		
Eight	<u>Roll</u>	X		
Nine	<u>Roll</u>	X	X	
Ten	All			X

As noted in the chart above, I will have three weeks to read and respond to each novel. On the third and final week of each book, I agree to answer four or five questions specially written for that novel. Following the reading of all three novels, I will meet and talk with Rashidah about the whole reading experience. I also understand that these talks will be tape recorded. Since this study is built on what students think about these novels, I will have the option of deleting and/or re-stating any comment that I feel does not accurately reflect my thoughts.

Additionally, I may request that the tape recording be stopped at any time. If I do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions, I will not be compelled to continue participation in that session or in the project.

I understand that I will be awarded a certificate acknowledging my participation in the study. I also understand that there will be a group dinner at a local restaurant following the completion of the study for all the participants.

I have indicated my willingness to participate in this reading/response study by signing on the "yes" line below.

_____date_____

Yes, I agree to participate in the reading/response study described above.

_____date_____

No, I do not agree to participate in the reading/response study described above.

Appendix C

Name _____

Date _____

The Slave Dancer

Note: Any time you need more space, please feel free to use the back of the page or additional paper.

Thank you,

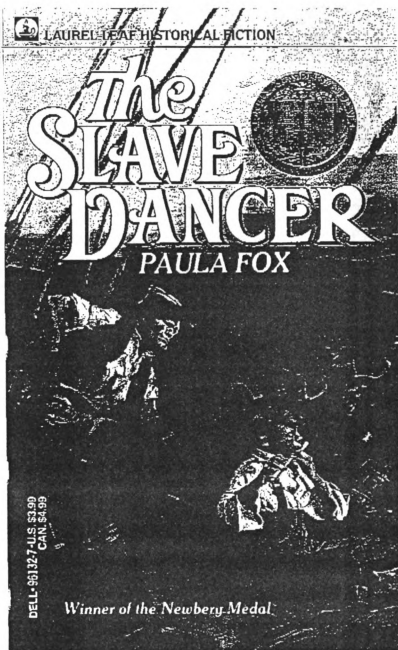
1. First imagine yourself aboard the Moonlight, then describe your life on the journey from Louisiana to Africa and back from Africa to Louisiana. (If you choose to draw your description, then please add a note explaining what is happening to you aboard the Moonlight.)

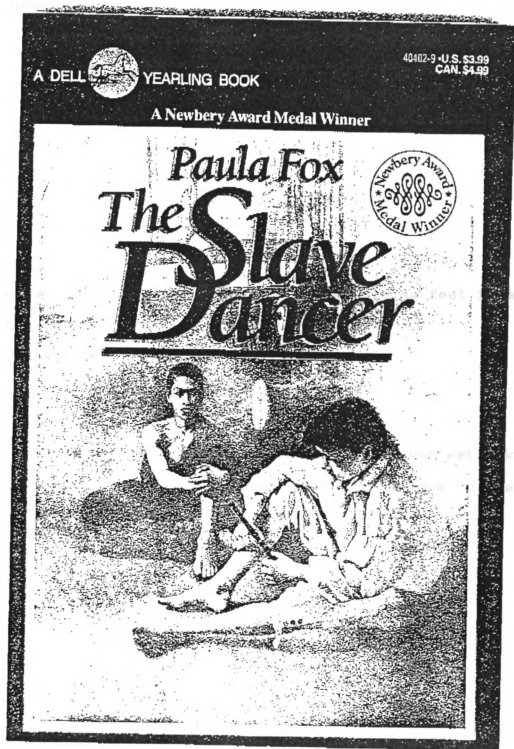
2. Please tell me what you think about the language (the way people talked) in The Slave Dancer?

3. What does The Slave Dancer tell you about being Black?

4. a) What do you believe to be true about The Slave Dancer?

4. b) What do you believe to be false about The Slave Dancer?





Appendix E

Name _____

Date _____

Words By Heart

Note: Any time you need more space, please feel free to use the back of the page or additional paper.

Thank you,

1. Imagine that you are in a Bible verse contest like the one talked about in the first part of the book, please tell me what would happen.

2. Please tell me about Mrs. Chism, why do you think she is important to the story?

3. Imagine you are Lena, what would you do after you found your Dad shot and bleeding?

4. a) What do you believe to be true about Words By Heart?

4. b) What do you believe to be false about Words By Heart?

5. a) What does Words By Heart tell you about being Black?

5. b) Please draw or write out your feelings about this book, Words By Heart.

Appendix F

Name _____

Date _____

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

Note: Any time you need more space, please feel free to use the back of the page or additional paper.

Thank you,

1. Please tell me about your favorite character in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

2. Would you like to go to school in Mississippi in 1933?
Please write about the teachers, the students, the books,
and the school bus in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

3. Why do you think Big Ma made Cassie apologize to Lillian Jean?

4. a) First imagine that you are T.J., now, please tell me about yourself.

4. b) What does Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry tell you about being Black?

5. a) What do you believe to true about Roll of Thunder,
Hear My Cry?

5. b) What do you believe to be false about Roll of Thunder,
Hear My Cry?

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