

Learning The Blues: Transcending Essentialist Readings of Cultural Texts

Ruth Vinz, Teachers College, Columbia University

Then I heard Bolden's cornet....I thought I had heard Bolden play the blues before, and play the hymns at funerals, but what he is playing now is real strange and I listen carefully, because he's playing something that, for a while sounds like the blues, then like a hymn....He is mixing up the blues with the hymns. He plays the blues real sad and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the blues sadder than the hymn. That is the first time that I ever heard hymns and blues cooked up together. Strange cold feeling comes over me: I get sort of scared because I know the Lord don't like that mixing the Devil's music with his music....I close my eyes, and when he blows the blues I picture Lincoln Park with all them sinners and whores shaking and belly rubbing. Then, as he blows the hymn, I picture my mother's church on Sunday, and everybody humming with the choir (Neal, 1989, pp. 108-109).

There are contending evocations here. On the one hand, the listener, Dude Botley, describes this musical experience as one filled with tension -- between aspects of the secular and the sacred. The portending dark and cold along with the sinister aspects of the sinners and belly rubbing vie for position with the radiating light, hymn, and mother's church. The situation illustrates how emotionally charged, what sheer exhilaration comes from participating in the musical possibility offered in Buddy Bolden's transcendence of the boundaries that are often perceived as competing forms and content in the African American musical tradition (Cone, 1972). Neither is Botley's response dichotomous, the either/or of secular and sacred. Both the music and the response to it manifest the dialogic, a complex blending of Botley and Bolden's cultural knowledge of blues and hymns, the evocation of emotional and cognitive responses, and the near paradoxical valuing of both the secular and sacred. And, Bolden's "hymns and blues cooked up together" suggest the dynamic in art, an example of how art forms keep changing with each reinterpretation or recreation. This transcendence of boundaries between what has been understood as two distinct styles in African American music offers an example of breaking through "the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" (Dewey, 1954, p. 183). Beyond the crust and routine are the covert, the implicit, and the unconscious which are central to the meaning of the art form and to the interpretation of it.

I invoke the Bolden/Botley incident as an example of how

conventionalized ways of producing or reading a cultural text can be transcended for more dynamic and dialectic ones. The definition of text, as it is used throughout this article, is taken from Bakhtin's (1986) conception of text to be "understood in the broad sense -- as any coherent complex of signs -- then even the study of art (the study of music, the theory and history of fine arts) deals with texts" (p. 103). Some current elaborations on multicultural education, with emphasis on differences or particularities of cultural, gender, racial or other socially-inflected identities, fail to present cultural productions as dynamic, fluid, and slippery. In what follows, I demonstrate how multiple readings of any cultural text are a necessary step in avoiding essentialist readings, and I describe

how I evoke that principle in my work with pre- and in-service teachers. Throughout, I emphasize that the promise of multicultural education is in teachers' and students' abilities to develop dialogic habits of mind. To do so, however, requires knowledge of the complexities and a belief that contradictions should not be compartmentalized in ways that make it easy to generalize meaning from cultural texts. Current conceptions of multicultural education and the strategies, assumptions, and outcomes located within those views sometimes obscure the intellectual wrestling required to produce fuller understanding rather than surface answers.

Multicultural Curricula: Practices of Dialogism?

The history of multicultural curricula is a story of competing versions of how to educate for cultural understanding. Traditionalist versions advocate assimilationist themes and emphasize cultural literacy (see Schlesinger, 1992; Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch, 1990; Hoover, 1987); others suggest we reconceptualize the melting pot into a stew (Henry, 1990); and various reformers recommend that teachers become informed about ethnic lifestyles and experiences (Gay, 1977; 1983). Tiedt and Tiedt (1986) advocate the importance of a curriculum that emphasizes similarities within cultural differences. Other versions focus on uniqueness (Banks, 1988; Sleeter & Grant, 1988). As John Higham (1993) states, we lack an overall theory of multicultural education. Hazel Carby (1980) decries the "compatibility approach" as a paradigm that "excludes the concept of dominant and subordinate cultures -- either indigenous or migrant -- and fails to recognize that the existence of racism relates to the possession and exercise of politico-economic control and authority and also to forms of resistance to the power of dominant social groups" (p. 64-65).

The means and ends of current conceptions of multicultural

curriculum have not been thoroughly interrogated. Peter Taubman (1993) suggests that current approaches have a misplaced focus: "If it is true that identity is central to understanding who we are and what we know, but not synonymous with either, then current approaches to multicultural and antibias education are simplistic and flawed. Not only have they failed to address how identity is formed, what it might mean, and how it functions, but they also left unexplored the way the approaches themselves consciously or unconsciously are used to create identities" (pp. 287-288). At a time when some advocates of multiculturalism are satisfied with a Rousseauian conception of the politics of recognition (hopefully leading to harmonious understanding) within a universal identity (Taylor, 1992), Cameron McCarthy (1993) notes the failure of many current approaches: "As departments of education, textbook publishers, and intellectual entrepreneurs push more normative themes of cultural understanding and sensitivity training, the actual implementation of a critical emancipatory multiculturalism in the school curriculum and pedagogical and teacher-education practices in the university has been effectively deferred" (p. 290).

Additionally, much of the current debate regarding multicultural education ignores the less visible but nonetheless important processes of developing habits of mind that give us the capacity to examine confusing or contradictory information for more than the express purpose of possessing certain knowledge or developing certain attitudes about others. A multicultural curriculum that

promotes the dialogic contains differing perspectives on competing knowledge, considers motives and intentions, and uncovers conflicting values and ideologies, not in a search for correct answers within the multiplicity, but to recognize the complexity. And, depending on what teachers value in mindfulness or open-mindedness, or what they view as the spectrum leading from relativist to essentialist versions, they will confront many contradictory yearnings about the purposes and processes of educating through a multicultural curriculum. There are no final or easy solutions for how we might educate ourselves and others into the multiplicity of histories, discourses, and political deliberations. But, it seems necessary that we look beyond simplified representations of race, ethnicity, class, or any other of the finite exemplars of difference. As the French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle (1990) argues, "Cultures aren't situated one next to the other like Leibniz's windowless monads" but each culture exhibits the product "of intercultural relations of forces" (p. 55).

Sustained Encounters With Multiple Texts

One of the great challenges in developing multicultural curriculum is how to facilitate, for students and teachers alike, a way of studying culture that brings latent structures, themes, and ideologies into focus. Through sustained rather than short-lived encounters with various cultural texts, we can promote transcendent rather than essentialist readings. I use the term transcendence in the Aristotelian sense, referring to the consciousness which operates beyond fixed boundaries. Multiple readings allow the reader to negotiate the meaning of diverse vantage points, contexts, disagreements, and contradictions -- representing the heteroglossia that Bakhtin (1981) describes as "specific points of view of the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically" (pp. 291-292).

As sites for the study of culture, such texts offer examples of contested versions of multiple and interacting consciousness that exist across historical, political, aesthetic, critical, and ideological occasions. As my opening example illustrates, the dialogic principle operates within and around cultural text: Bolden's musical version of blues/hymn, Botley's account of the incident, implicit versions of the blues historically/ideologically/philosophically, the relationship between blues and hymns in the African American experience, and the larger context of tension of secular and sacred. To transcend a fixed reading requires understanding of multiple versions as well: Bolden's blues/hymn form, Botley's secular and sacred blending, challenges to fixed forms of blues in composition, motivation, or style, an acceptance of the separation of secular and sacred, and the laying bare of embodiments of ideological perspective.

I use Bakhtin's explanation of the dialogic principle speculatively -- as a way of conceptualizing how to study cultural texts. Hence, I make his theoretical principles on the dialogic into programmatic and pedagogical ones as they apply specifically to multicultural curriculum. As Bakhtin (1984) indicates, "The single adequate form for verbally expressing

authentic human life is the open-ended dialogue....To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth" (p. 293). Dialogic interaction competes with what Bakhtin (1984) describes as monologism. Monologism "denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach

(in its extreme or pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness... Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force" (p. 292-293). This tension between the dialogic and monologic cannot be eliminated, but it can be confronted in multicultural studies. We have only to determine meaningful ways to move beyond static readings by emphasizing multiple versions of a cultural text as well as examine the assumptions and resistances of the learners. In doing so, essentialized readings might be decentered by the continual flux of meaning represented in multiple perspectives. Transcendence, then, connotes the recognition of the permeability and mutability of both the cultural text and its reader.

I would draw your attention back once more to the opening example of Bolden's experimentation with the blues form and Botley's informed reaction to suggest that this is a concrete example of the dialogic of culture: the interrelationship of blues and hymn, the knowledge demonstrated within Bolden's artistic rendering, the relationship between the artist and the listener, and the reader's understanding of the event. Bakhtin (1986) theorized a dialogic of culture out of his dialogic principles:

In the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully, because there will be cultures that see and understand even more)... We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions on it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without one's own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign (but, of course, the questions must be serious and sincere). Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched (p. 7).

Through Bakhtin's conception, it becomes easier to recognize that there can be no singular explanation for multiple perspectives. There can be questions raised and an ongoing, collaborative decoding of cultural texts. The web of understanding remains incomplete but spun more intricately through multiple viewpoints. This, of course, is what I think multicultural education needs to be about -- transcending one-dimensional, objectified histories, art forms, or human beings.

Challenging Assumptions

The blues are obviously not the only text which has the potential

for transcendence through multiple interpretations, but I offer this as one example. It so happens that the blues became a site for this investigation because of a particular incident that occurred in a graduate class for pre- and in-service teachers that focused on issues of diversity. During the third week of

class students shared their topics for an extended project for the course. One female student found herself subject to criticism for deciding to study the blues. Twelve out of the forty students in the class, in varying degrees of confirmation, informed her that a twenty-two year old Jewish girl from Park Slope couldn't understand "diddly squat" about the messages or the medium of the blues. Broadly speaking, their strategy here was to stake a claim for authenticity of a black musical genre that they believed couldn't be understood by others.

This led the class into a lively discussion on issues of appropriation, on empathy, and on the ability to understand the artistic practices of those distanced from the self by race, class, gender, or other socially-inflected identities. Robert, one of the first year teachers in the group, suggested that "it didn't much matter anyway because the blues is a dead form. That's about slave days, times past. Nobody in my family listens to the blues anymore. The blues is history." I believed him for a moment. His argument was seductively easy and could, after all, have been the last word. But, it wasn't. Quame disagreed, "Anyways, man, the blues is still alive in rap cause signifying is new and old." Regina remembered that her grandfather "would enter sort of a trance-like state, sort of transported beyond suffering" when he listened to the blues. That brought a response from Raymond. "Listening to these guys moanin' about their lives must have been a peak experience when you were suffering yourself. They knew what it means to be black." Their multiple versions of the blues became texts that complicated an essentialist reading of cultural production. To claim that the moment elicited transcendence rather than fear and trembling on my part would be an example of the faulty power of remembrance.

We worked through the anger, assumptions, and rhetoric, and we provided the kleenexes to dry the teary eyes of a young woman who had been challenged in ways that shook her to the foundations of her identity. Moments such as this one urge both students and teachers beyond what is comfortable and familiar and challenge assumptions about the processes and problems faced in the study of culture. Most of the students had opinions if not about the blues specifically about the texts of culture in general. Their understandings about how they acquire such beliefs was much less certain. This was an incident that led me to remember Toni Morrison's (1992) suggestion to be "mindful of the places where

imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision" (p. xi). And I wondered again whether the multicultural curricula we study and create can be of the kind that will encourage such vigilance toward our imaginative selves.

The students enrolled in the diversity class came with various understandings about the cultural certainties and confusions in their own lives as well as with agendas and questions about how these issues might be important to their and their students' lives in school. In this class -- made up of African American, Latino, Asian American and white students from a variety of economic backgrounds and ages, sexual orientations, and a near equal gender split -- I found a lively and disparate group. For the most part, however, they were similar in the privilege that they inherited from their experiences in prestigious undergraduate schools. Although they as well as I were skilled in a rhetoric that challenged the oppressive social and political formations around us, we stood at some distance from the very conditions that we were learning to represent. We colluded in

more ways than we could uncover in the societal representations and structures that oppress. They and I both knew the discourse of critique and possibility, but most of us hadn't investigated how social construction of knowledge operates, or how we might be implicated in the perpetuation ourselves. Added to this, the effects of spending our days in inner city classrooms as student teachers, teachers, or supervisors strained our sense of balance and certainty.

The sounds of gunshots, strident yelling, and the whine of ambulance sirens flowed with the spring air into these classrooms where they taught and into the lives of the adolescents congregated there who were in the process of scrambling toward their futures. It was unnerving to consider with some exactitude how in this place called school -- in West and East Harlem, 72nd Street, Greenwich or the East Village, the Bronx or Brooklyn with students like Jamal, Leticia, Shenequa, Keisha, Danielle, Tan Ching, and Grace -- we might deal with the terrors and exhilaration that become a matter of survival in both a physical and spiritual sense. Behind our textbook and intellectual questions lurked a central question that we longed to find the answer for: How do we keep the human hope going? So, in some ways our project with the blues led us away from, yet closer toward making problematic our positions of partiality as well as recognizing the bewildering disjunctions between what we said and what we hoped could be a part of the education of difference in schools.

As a class, then, we agreed it would be productive to engage in

an extended examination of the blues as a musical and cultural manifestation of more than individual performers, particular songs, political or ideological discourses, and arguments about who can learn the blues and who can't. Through such a sustained encounter, we hoped to ground our questions, confront our tensions, and construct meaningful discourses about the issues of our cultural confusions and comfortable trust in binary oppositions. For me, it became an opportunity to examine a concrete form of the complex processes of articulation, negotiation, and invention that characterize the dialogics of culture and transcendence that I was attempting to work out theoretically using Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic. We devoted the next several weeks in this course to the study of ourselves as we studied the blues. In the earlier part of the semester we had discussed and read examples of injustice and inequality in schools and classrooms. We'd interrogated autobiographical accounts and considered how classroom practices affirm or deny difference. We'd even described our own political agendas and agreed heartily to disagree but not attack.

When the blues overtook us, we began again. Reading Houston Baker (1984) got us started. For him, a study of the blues involved "a willingness on my own part to do more than merely hear, read or see the blues. I must also play (with and on) them. Since the explanatory possibilities of a blues matrix -- like analytical possibilities of a delimited set of forces in unified field theory -- are hypothetically unbounded, the blues challenge investigative understanding to an unlimited play" (pp. 10-11). We took ourselves less seriously when we thought of unlimited play. In some ways Baker set the tone of our exploration. Once we stood back to see what was happening, we made an attempt to transcend the space of difference through our willingness to "do more than hear, read, or see the blues." We

learned to "play (with and on) them."

The implications for me as a teacher were multiple, but I'd suggest at least two facets of particular promise. First, I learned to focus on moments when it is worthwhile to stop the flow of rhetoric and forward movement and to read, meditate on, write about and keep the dialogic between the perennial text and its ever changing readings. Second, this study of the blues became a discursive space in which I set aside my predetermined curricular agenda to create real curriculum from the very flow and demands of what was happening in the classroom. Pedagogically, I chose to accomplish this by engaging in successive readings that produced an ever-varying text of understanding. Through the search itself, through the ever changing narrative of what the students and I were learning and

questioning, we examined what meaning the blues carried into our understanding of culture. We learned about ourselves and our ideologies as we challenged our common and differing experiences, beliefs, and interpretations. We began a process of reading that helped us accommodate the complexity of the dialogics of culture that Bakhtin imagined.

Narratives of Partiality

The working title of this section was conceived with some deliberateness. It is meant to suggest that a study of the blues or of any cultural text is both partial to aspects of the text under consideration and represents only one aspect of the possible content or approaches that are available. The dual definition illuminates the consideration: Webster's dictionary defines partiality as "a quality of being partial, of favoritism; fondness for." I'd suggest that what is presented in the following readings of the blues, in emphasis and specificity, would indicate those areas that for whatever reasons became central aspects in the study of the blues for this particular group of students and their teacher at a given moment in time. I also mean for the title to suggest the word partial from the latin *pars* as in "a part or aspect of." Obviously what texts were studied and how these were analyzed, as well as what I've chosen to report here, represent only my interpretation of what transpired. The students would have some thirty other narratives of the experience. Fundamentally, our combined readings became a collective tale only partially uncovered here, but I offer four of the multiple readings as examples.

Reading 1: Roots in the Blues

We began this reading with a question: What are the varying explanations of blues' origins? What we discovered was that many anthropologists and folklorists give partial answers to this question but have not come to a singular understanding. Their examinations reveal a profusion of regional styles, a gradual absorption of one style into other performance styles, and a reassertion of specific folk practices into new locales. We attempted to discover how context shaped explanations of origins. As Bakhtin (1986) suggests, "Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) -- they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue" (p. 170). To make the idea of roots or origins unstable seemed particularly important as a goal to help us transcend essentialist readings. Students undertook various

readings in small study groups and shared those with classmates.

They developed a particular sensitivity about reading any of the accounts or interpretations as the final or most accurate word on the subject. Of course, this was difficult for all of us who, with a habit of searching for answers and certainty, were asked to complicate our understanding rather than seek closure. As Anika, one of the student teachers in the class, wrote, "Learning through reading or listening to the talk, trying to keep an open mind -- these are things I'm thinking are obligations that I have to the people I'm studying. Teaching entails handling cultural products with integrity and making a dialogue out of more rather than less."

This was not a genealogical reading in the Nietzschean (1961) sense of origins -- mapping roots and main shifts (pp. 142-144). Rather, our reading focused on the multiple perspectives of the blues' genesis and mutability. Although this reading contained socio-historical components as part of the meaning implied by roots, it extended such an examination to include the ideological functions in the generative as well as interpretive practices which produce or explain the production of the blues as a cultural text. It entailed a reading of racial matters as these appear in the ongoing discussions of how, where, and when technique, form, and subject of the blues were co-opted by recording studios and white performers as well as the possibility of the reciprocal nature of these exchanges. For example, we moved beyond a singular search for origins (for some of these students the idea of origin is equivalent to ownership) to a more inclusive search for the cultural and material forces that sustain or nourish the perpetuation and mutation of blues (i. e. using definitions of 'root' in Webster's to include: to plant, impress, establish, uncover, rummage or be a vital part of).

Several groups examined folk blues, concentrating on interpretation of melody lines, instrumental figures, and song lyrics from local traditions (Evans, 1982; Ferris, 1978; Dixon, 1989; Palmer, 1981). They studied written accounts of rural or small town folk blues as well as compiled oral histories with musicians or fans who lived in New York City and had experience with either the rural or urban blues traditions. They listened to retrospective collections and examined explanations of folk processes -- how the folk blues were learned, transmitted, and recomposed. Other groups looked more closely at the form and content of the blues as it has been influenced by the urban context (Keil, 1991). They examined prevailing conventions in popular taste to determine how dependence on radio stations, clubs, and record companies control issues of production. They considered the influences of large, live audiences as well as the context of drugs, drink, and violence in urban environments.

Another group considered roots of a different kind by examining

how blues specialists have explained the lyrics as expressions of tragedy, protest, or self-pity. Eddie House (1965), a Mississippi blues singer, states: "People wonder a lot about where the blues came from. Well, when I was coming up, people did more singing in the fields than they did anywhere else. Time they got to the field, they'd start singing some kind of old song. Tell his ol' mule, "Giddup there!" and he'd go off behind the mule, start plowing and start a song" (p. 45). Origins in this version were interpreted as an artistic outlet, a cathartic moment meant to ease the burden. What this group of students found was an age old explanation of art as a form of emotional

release. From this perspective, the blues reflect the socio-historic and spiritual environment in which they develop. It is well documented that the Delta Blues had a particular effect on the Rolling Stones, Bobby Dylan, Eric Clapton down to the metal or glass slides on their fingers (Ferris, 1978). Behind the overt connections, themes such as lamentation, survival in the struggles of daily life, and hopes for a better future paved the way for rhythm and blues.

None of our readings provided answers, but each jarred a normalized or essentialist reading. Students determined that one of the major difficulties in understanding the blues was the sheer quantity and variety of the expressions within shifting situational contexts. They learned strategies for studying cultural text from what they read and learned, including aspects of folklorist field work, theoretical endeavors, and historical or sociological accounts. They became articulate on aspects of controversies -- the paths and meaning of development, the psyche and referents behind the lyrics, and the contested borders musically, artistically, and economically. But, the difficulties they encountered provide a partial explanation for why multicultural studies become simplified. Lack of time, difficulties in searching out multiple perspectives, and student resistance to the lack of resolution can have a normalizing effect on multicultural curricula. Carrie, one of the first year teachers in the class, suggested that "Students rebel at uncertainty. They want answers. I think it will take re-educating them and me. We need to un-learn much of the learning process we've been involved in."

One group who examined African roots found the lessons learned by one researcher appropriate to the search they were undertaking as well. Samuel Charters travelled to West Africa to find the roots of the blues. Although he believed that the blues sprang from the complex cultural period of slavery in the United States along with harmonic forms and instrumental styles derived from the European context, he suggested certain elements in the singing

style and rhythmic structures might have their genesis in the distantly remembered African background. He speculated that the West African tribe of griots was the closest to the blues singers. The subsequent journey, beginning in February 1974, is described in *The Roots of the Blues*. Charters (1981) attempted "to find traces of an experience, and not only that, I was looking for traces of an experience that had occurred hundreds of years before" (p. 2). As with any search, his was a complicated one. When he first heard the music of Jali Nyama (nayama, the singer) in the city of Banjul, Charters was surprised how little the music sounded like the blues in rhythm, harmony, melodic figures, and the lyrics (sung in Mandingo). Yet, Charters heard overtones of mood and style that seemed related to the blues.

One particular moment in his search demonstrates the complexity. He became interested in a small, 5-string banjo, the *halam*. The instrument had the "bright jangling sound of the southern banjo" (p. 60). Charters noted that the player, Camara, used a finger pick "placed it on the top of the nail and used it on the downstroke, just as the banjo players do today in Kentucky and Virginia. I was seeing something that had a clear connection with the United States, but this time, ironically, it was something associated now with white musicians in the South. The instrument had been adopted by whites as part of their impersonations of blacks in the minstrel shows, and in the rural

areas whites had learned much of the early banjo techniques...from their black neighbors" (p. 60). Through the entire journey he found elusive little fragments -- similarities in the style of singing, of rhythmic figures, of texturing of voice and accompanying rhythm. At the end what Charters described is inherently interesting to a study of multiculturalism and the accompanying strategies of the dialogic: "I had come to Africa to find a kind of song, to find a kind of music and the people who performed it. But nothing can be taken from a culture without considering its context....The journey I'd begun had take me to places I hadn't expected, and the ideas and attitudes I had at the end of it were different from where I'd started....It was these things I had to carry along with me, along with the tapes and notes in my bag" (p. 150).

As a class we came to recognize, as had Charters before us, that our study was rudimentary and a preliminary investigation with much left unexplored and unexplained. What was centrally important for me was that we had begun to see the strenuous effort it takes to examine the dialogic within any cultural text. Bakhtin's (1986) conception of unconstrained dialogism has important implications for transcending the essentialist readings: "At any moment in the development of the dialogue

there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every new meaning will have its homecoming festival" (p. 170). It seems to me that any curriculum that is designed with the goal of studying culture must heed Bakhtin's contentions. Important components of multicultural curriculum, then, include a study of changing contextual meanings, of how forms shift and change but do not abandon older forms, and of how meaning is never absolute.

Reading #2: Living In The Landscapes Of Double Consciousness

In our next reading, we set out to fathom the complexities of those who created the music. We began with what DuBois (1961) described as the concept of double consciousness. He expressed it in this way: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, 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 two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body...to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost" (pp. 16-17). The conception of double consciousness provides a perspective on the lived world and a point of entry into the alternative visions not only between the inner and outer world or among diverse people, but also the contours of difference within a person. The lyrics of blues disclose the paradoxes of living in landscapes of divergent needs and of recognizing passions and contradictions that exist within and outside individuals.

Blues singers shape their double-voiced identities in diverse ways. In our study we set out to determine the purposes and techniques of doing so. The students examined various forms of the double-voiced in the blues. One group interpreted the trope of duality as an exemplification of displacement -- in effect, a shuttling between center and margins. From the Delta jump-ups to Mager Johnson's songs, lyrics contained expressions of leaving:

"I'm a traveling man" and because life is difficult, the singer laments, he has traveling on his mind. He plans to buy a train ticket and follow the tracks to a place that may promise a better future (Evans, 1982, p. 229). As James McPherson (1976) writes, the train was an image of promise that "might have been loud and frightening, but its whistle and its wheels promised movement. And since a commitment to both freedom and movement was the basic promise of democracy, it was probable that such people would view the locomotive as a challenge to the integrative powers of their

imaginations" (p. 6).

Students examined how the effects of displacement were detailed in blues lyrics, noting particularly the conflict between lovers or spouses, separation from a religious life, or lack of hope for a better future. Students discovered persistent acknowledgment of oppositional and contradictory worlds in lyrics. The lyrics of many songs forecast the break up of relationships: "I'm goin' away sweet mama" the singer announces to get his woman off his mind and end his worries (Oliver, 1968, p. 90). The tension between the secular and sacred life led to lyrics that range from mild cynicism to rage about the ineffectiveness of the preacher or church to alleviate the suffering encountered in life. There are also lyrics that suggest that the temptations for the secular life are too great to be ignored: "I bow down to pray," but, the singer counters, the blues overtook that mood as did women and whiskey (Oliver, 1968, p. 47). Paul Oliver (1968) suggested that while many lyrics create an association of the blues with depression, lethargy, or despair, the blues are not solely about the lack of hope. The blues have deeper significance as "an essential part of the black experience of living" (p. 284).

With this thought in mind, students noted an equally compelling desire for continuity, the desire to reestablish relationship, and the impulse to return home. Bumble Bee Slim sang: "I had so much trouble" that, the singer suggested, his nerves were wearing down. He considers hitching a ride on the train to escape but expresses his fear of leaving. His double consciousness, his mind to go and to stay breeds indecisiveness (Oliver, 1990, p. 60). Many contours of meaning shape the stories told in blues lyrics -- singers aware of the possibilities and limitations, of rewards and liabilities, and of leavings and homecomings. The lyrics provide a field of interrogation through the multiple versions and perspectives they create. As students acknowledged variety and dissonance, they confronted contradictions. This was what I was hoping for -- a reading of cultural texts that provoked students to reach beyond their assumptions and their experiences and to take heed of others' constructed lives. As Sarah, a first year teacher, acknowledged, "I am feeling a commitment to remind my students of the mystery below the surface of what other people create. It isn't just the song, the novel, or the painting, it's the beliefs, the yearnings, the numerous frailties that are some of what lie beneath."

As they proceeded with a study of lyrics, students discovered submerged themes that masked political activism and hostility. What they were reading, buried within many of the same lyrics they had studied earlier, were messages of resistance. Bakhtin described both verbal subterfuge and masking as forms of resistance, in both cases covering up purposes and identities

while probing beneath the surface appearances in the subterranean edges or boundaries (Gardiner, 1992). The deliberate intention to obscure meaning arises from various motivations. Consider,

for example, the manner in which protest exists in the song "Strange Fruit." The singer introduces a contention that southern poplar trees bear a strange fruit, a fruit composed of black bodies hanging in trees whose leaves and roots are blood soaked (White, 1966, p. 55). The song contains a powerful protest image that is not uncommon in the lyrics of blues. Messages housed in many such songs are reminders of the repression and subsequent resistance. These messages need to be taken into account and studied for what they reveal about past as well as current oppressions. As Larry Neal (1989) stated, "Behind the lyrics of the blues and the shuffling porter loom visions of white throats being cut and cities burning" (p. 72). Whether the songs serve as a reminder of the hope for a better future or the impossibility of better times, of defiance or endurance, it is not surprising that concealment and discretion were ways of avoiding retribution. As one singer warns: "You better be smart," you better make the right moves, and not protest loudly or you will surely have trouble with those in power (Nash, 1969, p. 44).

As a class we made efforts to read the messages more carefully and confront our understanding of how multiple texts can rupture our retreat into a singular intellectual reading. The blues, for us, became one record of this journey, and it was an unsettling one. Cone (1972) suggested that "it is necessary to view the blues from the perspective of black people's attempt to survive in a very hostile white society. The blues are not political treatises, and neither are they radical statements on social revolution....The blues are statements of and for black people who are condemned to live in a extreme situation of oppression without any political leverage for defining their existence" (p. 119). Margarita, one of the veteran teachers added, "I am moved by the metaphors and images in blues to recognize the brutal savagery of marginalization and create a metaphor for myself. The silence of marginalization is a low moan, an interrupted howl, and a long note of yearning."

As a group, we found it important to emphasize the dialogic between experience and expression. This became an important principle throughout the rest of our study. For example, we discovered how the trope of dualism may have contributed to stereotyping as the blues became popularized and distributed in mass media through records and live performances with large audiences. A blues singer's message can, both explicitly and implicitly, create a metonymic displacement wherein the message

represents the reality, in beliefs and actions, of black people's motivations and lives. The lyric as expression blurs with the lived life of people. It is possible to suggest that not only whites but blacks may be taken in by such stereotyping. The lyrics often portray messages that represent people who are driven by drink, promiscuity, and anger. Charlie Patton, for example, in "Elder Green Blues" sings that he likes to fight, get sloppy drunk, "ball" and "walk the streets all night" (Palmer, 1981, p. 70). Song after song reinforced the message. The artistic and idiosyncratic yearnings get dangerously muddled in a representational ground that blurs artistic expression with the lived experience of blacks. Whether to forget their troubles, create distance for catharsis, or to mask complaint, the blues singers communicated a representation of black identity.

The concept of the double voice is evident in the signifying practices within the lyrics as well as the music. As Gates

(1988) defines it, "Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced" (p. xxv). He identifies four types of double-voiced relation: a trope repeated with differences, oral narration, talk between one black text and another(s), and refiguration (pp. xxv-xxvii). Bakhtin (1986) describes the double-voiced utterance (both word and discourse) of signification as the process of inserting new meaning into an utterance that carries prior meaning. Geneva Smitherman (1977) labels several rhetorical strategies in signification. Among them are: indirection, metaphorical/ imagistic/rhythmic language, humor and irony often in the form of puns (p. 121). Themes work in contrasting pairs: leaving and returning; self-pity and boasting; abuse and praise. The dialogic between contrasting pairs has its effect. Take a song like "Baby, You Sho' Lookin' Warm" (Evans, 1982, p. 50). The woman's pleasant appearance is contrasted with the condition of the singer who is shabby, feeling tired and fearful that he will fail. The singer's intention of leaving to improve his lot in life contrasts with the woman who has already left. Form, style, and content serve to create contrasts and tensions. Rhythmic tensions and uncertainties emphasize the underlying ambiguity and compactness that is supported by the call and response pattern and contrasting images.

As Bakhtin (1981) delineates the concept: "The audience of a double-voiced word is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view (or "semantic position") and the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view" (p. 108). This led the students in the diversity class to consider how in the blues, signifying turns audience expectation on itself -- what the listener expects and what is delivered by the singer

or instrumentalist. The upbeat is played into the downbeat. The downbeat exists in the silence rather than the sound, working oppositionally to expectation. Expectations in form and key are made elastic, stretched nearly beyond recognition. Ambiguity exists between major and minor harmonies. Structural regularities are easily identified: three call and response sections in common time, twelve bars, and regular rhyme schemes. There is a near double dialogic at play -- every sung or spoken phrase is balanced or connected by an instrumental response. Blue notes sound misleading, flatted on the third and seventh, not quite where our expectations would lead us. It's like playing the notes on a piano in the cracks of the keys. The relentless repetition of phrases in novel combinations reinforce the statements and counter statements.

Signifying disappoints expectations. The dialogic between what is expected and what is produced creates the tension. The overlap of underlying rhythm and harmonic structures results in a counter tension produced by indirection. Forms of signifying include the use of allusions to other's styles and the practice of reading and revising one another's texts. Devices used to distort or mirror expectations are: the use of caesuras (breaks), talking the story, repetition of melody or lyric with variation, refiguration or blending of one piece with others, and use of rhetorical tropes (metaphor, metonymy, and irony). When the expectations are thwarted, when something lurks behind and between what is said, Signifyin(g) must be going on. Signifyin(g) has often been interpreted to be a form of indirect argument or veiled persuasion (Abrahams, 1970, pp. 51-51).

Of course, we learned much more. We heard and interviewed blues

singers, and listened to song after song now recorded on shiny silver CDs that belie the origins of these folk songs. Throughout our study of the landscapes of double consciousness, we tried to represent the range in moods, themes, and aesthetic practices that spoke to us across cultural, racial, ideological, and musical distances. As we had learned through our first reading on origins, there are qualities of meaning that cannot be captured in generalization. Multiple readings may cause confusion but innumerable variants, as with the bending and flattening of notes in a blues song, can help us appreciate the complexities of entering another's world. This second reading represented a concrete enactment that demonstrates how ideology is a material force that shapes and influences the cultural texts produced, the processes that support or thwart that production, and the way a cultural text is read across historical, ideological, and aesthetic distances. Working from my stated intention of using Bakhtin's conception of dialogism as a

speculative framework for programmatic and pedagogical principles of reading cultural texts, we recreated in practice a version of his conception of the dialogic rather than monologic -- often disparate, contradictory and stratified.

Reading #3: On Men and Women

From the beginning of this study of blues, students grappled with what the lyrics suggest about sexual explicitness and the politics of gender. I do not mean to portray, by dealing with this topic in the third reading, that the issues of sexual messages in lyrics did not occur earlier. Students questioned from the beginning whether or not the songs perpetuated representations of gender that carried negative connotations. Many students reacted angrily to what they perceived as violence toward women. "How," one young woman asked, "can there be a normal, respectful relationship when women are fantasized about through violent acts?" Others felt their sense of morality was challenged. As one young man suggested, "I get put off by all the explicit sex. I've always thought sex was a private act, not for public display. In these songs, it's like a celebration sometimes and then I see denigration as well. It's confusing." A few questioned whether or not such lyrics promote and perpetuate inequality and in some cases brutality toward women. One young woman informed us that she was "offended. How could women listen let alone sing some of this garbage? It belittles women and men too. There's no real feeling. I guess it's like this is the alternative if you're frightened to give anything of yourself for fear of getting hurt." Students interrogated the assumptions that caused their reactions. We determined that there is a danger in passing judgment without careful critique.

The subject matter of the blues deals often with the frustrations as well as the exhilaration of love. The lyrics contain imagery rich in the erotic, boastful accounts of sexual prowess, and laments about the misunderstandings associated with infidelity and disintegrating relationships. As Botley suggested in the opening example, there's some devil music in the blues. There is a female singer lamenting about always being kicked and dogged by her man, but she goes on to lament that she can't get him off her mind (Smith, 1928). And a male singer boasting that he "roots everywhere I go" (Williams, 1937). Often the lyrics have been interpreted as a pornographic boasting about sexual exploits. For example, in the song "Spike Drive Blues," the singer boasts that his "spike it never bend" and of his prowess in conquest,

technique, and frequency (Darby, 1937). How or do such lyrics influence the construction of gender relations? The overt sexual casualness encourages representations of women as sex kittens or

victims. I use the word representation here to suggest that cultural texts construct images of gender relationships. In addition, those are taken in and rendered into representations by an audience. If the emphasis in blues lyrics on preoccupations with sexual acts and male/female relationships represents an imagined rather than a lived life, then representations of mating and love-making may suggest stereotypes rather than reality. Perhaps, however, images do inform or construct reality.

We set out to study the issue more carefully as a response to the students' strong reactions. Some of the questions that guided our study were: What is the relationship between reality and representation? How do our ideological and moral stances influence our readings? How have these issues been dealt with in the textual criticism on the blues? What are the reactions of contemporary black feminists to the lyrics of the blues? We undertook a reading of the discourse on gender represented in the lyrics and critical commentary written about the lyrics.

One group of students compiled material that suggested how the conditions black males faced resulted in a powerlessness that may have influenced what the students described as sexist behavior. Unemployment, low paying jobs, and racism may have encouraged violence toward women. As Oliver (1968) suggests, "This projection of the self-image in the blues is sexual fantasy which has its parallels in pornographic invention. In blues songs the dream world of sexual mastery is realized and the realities of racial oppression are side-stepped. The power-seeking manifestations of masculinity in an Adlerian sense are denied most Negroes and are expressed instead through aggressive sexual fantasies....Such expressions of unreasoning violence are sung as humorous songs, but the humour is chillingly grim" (p. 255). This group examined images of sexual oppression and the subordination of women. They found expressions of women from slave days that encouraged stereotypical images of black women as concubines, conjurers, breeders, and property. While a black male-defined ethos equated manhood to sexual prowess, the male was powerless in most areas of his life, leading him to seek out ways to feel in control.

Black women became a cultural construct through which that power was exerted. As Civil Rights activist Septima Clark stated: "I found all over the South that whatever the man said had to be right. They had the whole say. The woman couldn't say a thing" (Brown, 1986, p. 79). Several students cautioned that this particular argument decenters females, undermining their identity and allowing their identities and bodies to be usurped because of the sympathy for the male's struggle for power. They quoted bell hooks (1990) to support their perspective: "Feeling as though they are constantly on edge, their lives always in jeopardy, many

black men truly cannot understand that this condition of 'powerlessness' does not negate their capacity to assert power over black females in a way that is dominating and oppressive; nor does it justify and condone sexist behavior" (p. 74).

Other students found that women singers perpetuate sexual explicitness themselves. In many versions of "Kitchen Man Blues," appreciation for a man's jelly roll received several stanzas of elaboration that conclude with the singer's

recognition that she just can't live without her man (Martin, 1928). Another sexually explicit rendering of male prowess and the woman's pleasure in her man's exploits can be found in various versions of "My Man O' War." Images of big artillery, bullets, and hit the mark figuratively describe the sexual act (Miles, 1930). Students in the class grappled with this new information and questioned again whether or not the tensions between men and women that might be distorted in the expression are true to the actual experience of black men and women. We focused for a time on what women blues singers revealed about their feelings toward males in the images created and in the relationships described. Was such sexual play an adopted stance, a male way of seeing and believing? Was it necessary for women who were to have a voice as a blues singer to adopt this stance as well? We questioned our mores -- the social and cultural codes with which we've learned to engage in gendered relationships. We also realized that our reactions might be anachronistic, reflecting the influence of feminist studies that made us question the sexual politics reflected from another time and place. But, Thelma objected to this idea, indicating that in the class where she was student teaching, "these adolescents need to get in touch with their histories and see how those histories have changed and need to change."

Although some students called the lyrics earthy and healthy, others found them offensive. Maybe the songs suggest erotic play, a healthy attitude toward a celebration of the physical aspects of life. Possibly the men and women behind those representations in the lyrics had a common understanding. As James Cone (1972) suggests, "Only those who have been hurt can appreciate the warmth of love that proceeds when persons touch, feel, and embrace each other. The blues are openness to feeling and the emotions of physical love" (p. 118). Our curiosity overtook us and we kept searching for other explanations.

In an attempt to look at the issues more closely, students interviewed blues singers on the subject. One male singer suggested a similar theme to what we had read: "So many songs are about escape from pain. And that's primarily a male thing.

Women, well, they take a beatin' because of male impotence in the career area." Another suggested that "The blues are the way out and a way into identity. It's mostly messing around with a feeling and not to be taken seriously. It's the performance that counts." A third, the only woman, said, "Maybe it's just playfulness, these songs. That's the way I feel about it when I'm singing. It's not real life -- just like movies -- it's playful and sexy." Maybe there is a common understanding between men and women about the open acceptance of sex and the vivid ways of describing the pleasure or pain one experiences.

Some students focused their study on how standard verses and phrases were passed from singer to singer and singer to audience. Blues singers possessed a large reservoir of traditional blues verses that they used for improvisation. Do such representations of sexuality get passed along in the verses and phrases? The history of the form grows within and outside of the community, carrying with it messages that are continuously reshaped and reformed. Do the lyrics exaggerate fantasies as a way to regulate behavior, release tension, or bring catharsis? The lyrics might be considered outlets that channel expressions that would otherwise remain unspoken. As students described it, the lyrics focus not only on another person but on the identification

of otherness in self. Consciousness of a gendered self as well as a gendered other constructed in society forms a dialogic link between self and society. Bakhtin suggested that the "processes that basically define the content of the psyche occur not inside but outside the individual organism" (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 39). Bakhtin explains further that the "internalization of the voices a person has heard, and each of these voices is saturated with social ideological values...retaining the full register of conflicting social values" (Morson, 1986, p. 85). As a class, we interpreted the lyrics as one example of gendered representation within a social dialectic existing as part of a complex historical, social, and cultural text of sexual politics. As Bakhtin (1981) notes, shared values, norms, and perspectives become a social dialectic (p. 292).

Students discovered that no simple representation or answers exist. While they found women oppressed in some ways, they also discovered that the social function of blues, whether to cope with or transcend the conditions, served to solidify black women. Black women singers achieved a central place in the blues tradition. As Michele Russell (1982) pointed out, the "blues, first and last, are a familiar idiom for Black women, even a staple of life" (p. 130). For some feminists, these women singers defined their identities, analyzed their lives, and took possession of their future through the music (Collins, 1990).

Viewed in this way, many of the lyrics suggest acceptance of womanhood and a spirit of independence. Consider, for example, Bessie Smith's "Cadillac Man." She laments that her man, once a Cadillac and now a worn out Ford, has never supported her. Although she gave him room and board for fifteen years, she plans to change things (Russell, 1982, p. 133). As Jamal, a second year teacher, commented, "The black females in my eleventh grade class have great trust in themselves as shapers of tradition and art. They've read Morrison, Walker, McMillan, and Hurston. They take pride in the strength of these women. My adolescent girls have models now because we "allow" black women writer's voices to be heard."

These perspectives on gendered relations demonstrate the instability of meaning and interpretation. Analyzing the specifics as we did in our study allowed us to examine the controlling images and ways of interpreting the complex relationships, as represented in the lyrics, between men and women. Some songs objectified women as Other; other lyrics illustrated the fierce independence and control that women exerted over their lives. We discovered that each interpretation revealed other angles of vision through which to examine the meaning of the lyrics. Each partial perspective represents one aspect of multiple and competing understandings. Students faced a concrete example of the dialogic once again. In doing so, they became more tolerant of learning from the experience rather than trying to judge or validate it based on their own need to compare other's beliefs with their mores and assumptions. We discovered that each perspective is partial and no matter how many perspectives we studied, these did not make a whole. Accepting the possibility of various ways of interpreting those experiences meant giving up the notion of a norm or standard by which we could judge others' experiences. The lesson in this for a multicultural curriculum is best summarized by Alice Walker (1983). "What is always needed in the appreciation of art or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass

in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity" (p. 5).

Reading #4: "Your Blues Ain't Like Mine"

Lily woke up when the singing began. She lay quiet and still in her bed until her head was full of songs and the strong voices of the fieldworkers from the Pinochet Plantation seemed to be inside her. Part of the song was soft like a hymn; then it would rise

to the full force of vibrant gospel and change again to something loud and searing, almost violent. The music was rich, like the alluvial soil that nourished everything and everyone in the Delta. Lily began to feel strong and hopeful, as if she was being healed. Colored people's singing always made her feel so good (from Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, 1992, p. 9).

Again, we have the image that the music is always becoming, shaping, and transforming culture and our readings of it. Students ended their study of the blues by reading African American literature where so much of blues form and themes penetrate the prose and poetry. Start with Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, mix in Arthur Flowers *De Mojo Blues* and *Another Good Loving Blues*, add poems, short stories, and novels that demonstrate the interpenetration of cultural texts across genre and form. The blues provided technique, story, and structure for many black writers. Sherley Williams' poetry shows the influence of blues improvisation. Jean Toomer's incremental use of repetition functions in ways that emphasize the contradictory world in which Kabnis will achieve manhood. And who can forget Ann Petry's (1966) "Solo on the Drums?" When Kid Jones looks at the marquee and sees his name, it is a moment that clarifies the blues theme of naming as an assertion of identity: "His name was picked out in lights on the marquee. The name of the orchestra and then his name underneath by itself. There would have been a time when he would have been excited by it. And stopped to let his mind and his eyes linger over it lovingly. Kid Jones. The name -- his name -- up there in lights that danced and winked in the brassy sunlight" (p. 165).

We learn from each other. I am reminded of how Ralph Ellison (1966) valued folk culture as a powerful vehicle for understanding the character of a group. He believed that folklore illustrated "the first drawing of any group's character" in which we see the "boundaries of feeling, thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition" (p. 172). And there was the black poet Sterling Brown who travelled throughout the South to discover the folk. He studied the traditional as a repository of historical, social, and psychological portrayals of the contemporary. Add to the list Langston Hughes' poetry for its reliance on the meter and the irony of the blues. Or, Wright's *Bigger* as a characterization from black folk balladry and the physical and spiritual violence that is acknowledged. The recurrent themes, tropes, and practices come back to sound again in contemporary cultural texts. And so it is that the material of triumphs of the human spirit, tragedies of the most sinister kind, love and loss, catastrophe and bounty continue to be themes growing into a network that preserves and extends itself.

The list goes on, but our class recognized the intertextuality in theme and the transformation of technique from music into language. As Houston Baker (1984) suggests, "By writing experience in native (read: blues) as opposed to literary language, Afro-American writers have accomplished the American task of journeying from mastered existence to independent, national form. The subtle, parodic, inversive, complexly reflexive blues texts of black writers testify to the vitality of an Afro-American matrix as they fulfill the longstanding dream of an American Form" (p. 114). With this fourth reading, we moved from the study of culture as an interdependent set of practices and discourses on the blues (related to historical, social, or political contexts) to a study of the influence of blues within the larger formation of cultural texts of black identity.

The purpose of this reading was to decenter the blues in order to emphasize the link to other cultural practices. For teachers interested in involving their students in cultural studies, such readings demonstrate the shifting, the multifaceted, the blurred experiences and expressions represented in cultural texts. For students and more particularly for teachers and prospective teachers, experiencing multiplicity itself, as they did in this study, is a necessary part of modern consciousness. We need to recognize that while "Your blues ain't like Mine (Campbell, 1992)," each of our blues is part of the dialogic. As Maxine Greene (1993) reminds us, "There can only be an ongoing, collaborative decoding of many texts. There can only be a conversation drawing in voices kept inaudible over generations, a dialogue involving more and more living persons. There can only be -- there ought to be -- a wider and deeper sharing of beliefs, an enhanced capacity to articulate them, to justify them, to persuade others, as the heteroglossic conversation moves on, never reaching a final conclusion, always incomplete, but richer and more densely woven, even as it moves through time" (p. 213). I believe that considering how the blues informed African American literature opens new perspectives on what the dialogic means in the interplay among cultural texts. And, behind the intellectualizing of cultural studies, the literature helps us pay heed to what it means to be human and humane in ways that rupture essentialist understandings. And I wonder whether the curricula we can create can be of a kind that will help us care for and wonder about the music we sing. This brings me back to where I began this last reading -- to Bebe Campbell's 1992) Your Blues Ain't Like Mine. Beginning as it does with Lily's longing for song and the vanishing echo of its presence in the Mississippi morning, so it ends. Confronting the contradictions of death and new life, celebration and revulsion of the past, and the desire to touch again and to share the meaning of his

origins, Wydell takes his young son back to where he was raised and where in many ways this story began and was played out:

Wydell stopped the car in front of a settlement of run-down shacks, most of which appeared to be empty. He said, "This is where me and your mother is from. This is where your brother got killed. I thought you ought to see it one time in your life, just so you'd know.

You see all that water? Well, it used to be nothing but cotton, and before the machines come, black folks picked that cotton. Me and your mama and your grandparents, your aunties and uncles, we all picked that cotton. We picked that cotton until our fingers bled. And sometimes when it would get

bad -- and boy, it could get real bad -- we'd be in them fields just a-singing, you know. 'Cause them songs, them songs could get you right...." W. T. hesitated for a moment, and then he reached across to his father and wrapped his fingers around his thick wrist. He said, "Dad. What did you useta sing?" (pp. 331-332).

The impulse to share culture and the equal impulse to learn it.

Antagonizing The Discursive Boundaries

And back to the original question: Can a young Jewish woman from Park Slope understand the blues? An answer to this question became less important as we continued our study. However, as Joel Rudinow (1994) has suggested, this tradition of claiming expressive authenticity goes "to the heart of the contemporary debate over multi-culturalism, the canon, and the curriculum" (p. 127). New readings unsettle and sustain traditions. Whether it is of our culture or someone else's, extensive explorations of cultural texts help us gain perspective on the complexity. Throughout this discussion I've considered how important it is to tune our ears to other's voices, to enter their aesthetic spaces, and to experience theirs as well as our own lives. A critical education can lead us beyond comfortable ways of interpreting and can encourage us to interrogate the politics of our locations. The students in this particular class learned to be vigilant to multiple representations and to ask: From whose position? I believe in education that urges us beyond the cultural spaces that we know and beyond essentialist readings. For many of us, the growing consciousness of exclusion and inclusion makes it increasingly difficult to turn a blind eye to the power relations involved in interpreting any creative or aesthetic act.

You and me, the students, Toni Morrison, and Muddy Waters, my

whiteness and someone else's blackness, the signifying and the signified -- differ in the contexts and the content that make up the fabric of our lives, but we searched for the dialectic possibility in our tellings. Bakhtin (1990) called it an "open unity," a unity that is multiple and requires the recognition of other and outside perspectives. He cautions, "Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding - - in time, in space, in culture" (p. 99). I can only say once more that we did not create a tidy or efficient moment of learning; I didn't learn five principles for designing multicultural curriculum; I continue to ask how to create a place in the classroom for students, and most particularly teachers, to continue their work of becoming, imagining, questioning, and transcending. I continue to ask: How might pedagogy address the complex process of transcending space and provide strategies for critique of representations?

I've told something of my beliefs about multicultural education and strategies for reading cultural texts that are heavily informed by Bakhtin's insights. I've suggested how in one class we put those strategies to use. I haven't told completely why this particular study was important to me or where it really began. I'd like to end with that.

For me, the story of the blues began before I was in school. For

years I heard Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bessie Smith, Lowell Fulson, and Booker White well into the dark of night. The voices came strong and true. I began learning the blues. I didn't much understand what was being sung, but I understood it was blue and that my uncles, rural Idaho farmers who had spent the day in the fields and evenings in the barns, found some connection. I could tell by the contemplative yearning of their eyes and the way my Uncle Ned breathed in and let out the smoke from his pipe. I could tell because this was a time when I could stretch out across his lap, lost in blues. He stared off and moved into some place else. I mostly did the same. I cannot date these memories back with exactness. Most nights for several years I watched my uncle wrap himself into his own thinking, claiming a time and space for himself in the music. Mostly he allowed me to be an eavesdropper. I knew enough not to interrupt this time with chatter, so I just took in what the records sang. I still hear phrases and voices. "Peach Orchard Mama," "hitch me to your buggy, mama; drive me like a mule," "She ain't so good luckin', and her teeth don't shine like pearls." I can hear the small click from a scratch crisscrossing the grooves. I still see

the 78 platter wobbling as the arm with its needle brought voices from some great expanse. I didn't know the distance then. Couldn't imagine the separation.

This music was associated with the well-being of our house. During storms or nights when a mare was about to foal or an animal was sick and Uncle Ned stayed long hours in the barn, the house groaned in its own quietness. The women were darning stockings, patching shirts and overalls, or stacking the last of the dishes back into the cupboards. Or, grandmother would be bathing my brother in the tin tub on the side porch. Later, my mother would finish the night braid in grandmother's long hair. These activities separated them from the night music of the uncles who sat smoking and listening and staring off. Never do I remember the women listening to the music or suggesting that it wasn't music fit for a small girl. Never do I remember my uncles suggesting that I shouldn't be on the screened porch listening to Muddy Waters slide his thirds and sevenths into blue notes that signified more than sexual desires, the loss of love, or the need to move on down the line. I don't remember when I quit listening but it must have been sometime after I was well into the rhythm of school, when homework caught up and carried me on a linear progression from one year to the next.

But I can still hear a man singing mournfully about "the woman that I'm loving done been here and gone." I can still hear the harmonica of Johnny Shines, cupped in his hand to make a fluttering sound much like the moan of a human voice, like the voice of my uncle the time he was kicked in the stomach by a wild mustang he'd taken off the range. I can still feel the rhythm of my uncle's fingers as he kept time on my shoulder or arm. And the voices of women, seductive in their lowness, calling for things that I didn't believe the women in our house ever longed for. Once in a great while, Uncle Ned would begin humming and his voice sounded less blue than the one growling from the speaker. Phrases of the women's conversations from the kitchen would mingle with the song. The dog would drowse on the mat near the screen door. The music would linger late into the evening and my uncle Ned would listen, absorbed in some sensations that I couldn't understand.

I don't know, for my uncles have been dead some years now, how

or why they were led to the blues. I only know that they listened, that the music touched them somehow, and that they collected hundreds of platters that were stored carefully in trunks, each separated by green felt swatches when 45s and 331/3s modernized their collection. The trunks were left for me when Uncle Ned died. A handwritten note: "You were always the blues

kid. Listen and have a good cry for all those nights we'll miss." On the other hand, I'm not certain that the motivation matters. They were not attempting to co-op anyone's artistic expression, but there was some complex relation between space and time, manners and matters of living, social acceptance and alienation, and some moment of transcending into an aesthetic space that had power over them, a longing that they brought to me. Something was ringing true for them.

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