

Moving Closer To Speaking the Unspeakable: White Teachers Talking about Race

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Those most often entering teaching continue to be White, monolingual, middle-class women (Clark & Medina, 2000; Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995), despite the fact that our student population grows increasingly diverse each day (AACTE, 1999; Latham, 1999; Yasin & Albert, 1999). Teacher educators have explored ways of helping better prepare these teachers to teach the students they meet in their classrooms—to teach their own and “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1988). However, past experiences in preparing teachers to address the needs of the diverse population they teach have proven to be less than effective in either changing individuals’ perspectives towards diversity and/or multicultural education or their stances towards how to teach diverse students (Colville-Hall, MacDonald & Smolen, 1995; Paine, 1990; McDiarmid & Price, 1990; Melnick & Zeichner, 1995; Solomon, 1995; York, 1997). It is in part for this reason that alternative models of both pre-service and in-service professional development have been pursued to better prepare teachers to teach the diverse populations they serve.

In contrast to more common professional development models where teachers are “in passive roles as consumers of knowledge produced elsewhere”

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(Little, 1993, p. 142), some more recent models are dialogic, asking teachers to be active participants and knowledge constructors. In addition, prompted by narrative approaches in teacher education (Beattie, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), many of these models tend to place narrative text—autobiography in particular—at the center of that work (see for example Clark & Medina, 2000; Goodwin, 1997). More traditional models are those that have been non-reflexive, programs that essentially “ignore the cultural baggage” that the teachers carry with them into the professional development experience (Britzman, 1986, p. 443). Alternative models ask teachers to reflect on—and at times interrogate—their own perspectives and the influence their personal stories and experiences have on their practice and thus on their students’ classroom learning experiences (see for example Cochran-Smith, 1995b; _____, Florio-Ruane, 2001; Florio-Ruane & deTar, 1995; Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1997).

Together the tools of personal narrative and discourse may prove more promising than past tools in teacher development that seek to support teachers in their work with all students. The hope is that dialogic opportunities around personal narratives of self and others will help “teachers to see their lives in different ways, to make new meanings, to find meanings which may not have been clear before and to transform their understanding to new ways of acting in their professional lives” (Johnston, 1994, p. 12). Close analysis of these learning opportunities is critical if we are to continue to use narrative and dialogic approaches in teacher education. We need to know what teachers talk about when they come together around text to explore topics of culture, identity and diversity.

Exploring the Topic of Race

One of the criticisms raised against programs that inadequately prepare teachers for diversity is that they leave teachers with a stance of colorblindness, “a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort ‘not’ to see, or at any rate, not to acknowledge, race differences” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 143). The most disheartening result of this practice is that it assumes the non-existence of distinct cultures. As Ladson-Billings (1994) cautions, “by claiming not to notice [race], the teacher is saying that she is dismissing one of the most salient features of a child’s identity” (p. 33). Though race is only one aspect of the larger construct of diversity, it is the one I focus on, given the persistence of colorblindness in classrooms of all sorts (Nieto, 2000). One of my goals as a teacher educator is to enable teachers to enter into contexts in which they can explore with their own students issues of race and culture, explorations I and others (i.e., Cochran-Smith, 1995a; hooks, 1994; Nieto, 2000) believe are critical if we are ever to alter the inequities within the world in general and the world of education in particular.

Toni Morrison (1992) reminds us, however, that silence and evasion have historically ruled the discourse of race (p. 9). This is particularly true

among White, middle-class women who have consistently avoided the topic of our own race and that of others (Frankenburg, 1993; hooks, 1990; Landsman, 2001; McIntyre, 1997). We seem to believe that “the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (Morrison, 1992, p. 9-10). Can narratives—growing more common in teacher education—which explicitly include discussion of race or that portray the lives of individuals who have been subject to racism—bring the topic to the forefront of discussions, a necessary step to move us away from an all-too-common notion of colorblindness? Can our reading and response to this literature as teachers make the “unspeakable” speakable (Morrison, 1989)? To address these questions, I studied discussions by a group of White, female educators of two of Maya Angelou’s autobiographical texts. I wondered how our identities as White women might influence talk about this taboo topic: Would we raise it in conversation? If so, how? If not, why not? I investigated these questions in the context of a book club for teachers that started as a graduate course and continued for two years as the voluntary Literary Circle.

Data Collection and Methods

In the fall of 1995, a group of ten White women enrolled in a master’s in literacy course designed by Susan Florio-Ruane titled “Culture, Literacy and Autobiography.” These women were experienced teachers, representative of the current and continuing demographics in teaching. All pursuing their master’s degrees in literacy instruction, the students ranged in age from their mid-twenties through their late forties. Frustrated with the traditional transmission model of teacher education which “typically does not foster in teachers a sense of culture as a dynamic process whereby people make meaning in contact with one another” (Glazier, McVee, Wallace-Cowell, Shellhorn, Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2000, p. 287), Florio-Ruane was joined by Taffy Raphael—co-principal investigator on the project—and three research assistants in exploring how reading and discussing ethnic autobiographies in the format of teacher-led book clubs might influence teachers’ learning about the cultural foundation of literacy in their own and others’ lives, perhaps leading ultimately to change in teaching practice. When the course ended, participants chose to continue to meet and read and talk about texts, forming what they called the Literary Circle. Data we collected during the course and the subsequent Literary Circle included: an instructor’s journal, students’ written texts, participant observer field notes, audio and videotapes of book club discussions, and follow-up interviews with participants conducted after both the course and the first six months of the Literary Circle.

Each member of the research team pursued collective and individual analyses (see Florio-Ruane, Raphael, Glazier, McVee & Wallace, 1997). My research ques-

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tions stemmed from my perception of a gap in conversation. I had joined the Literary Circle early in 1996. In my second night as a participant, the group discussed Maya Angelou's *Gather Together in My Name*. As an educator deeply committed to and interested in issues of race and culture, I was taken aback by what I perceived to be a lack of discussion by the members of the group of the topic of race, a theme that permeates Angelou's work and life.

I used ethnographic and sociolinguistic methods of analysis to pursue the research questions formed after this initial observation, specifically: (1) How do Maya Angelou's autobiographical texts foster or silence discussion about the topic of race? and (2) How does the make-up of this particular teacher group influence discussion of the topic? I conducted close analysis of discourse (Gee, Michaels & O'Connor, 1992; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Tannen, 1989) of the two book club conversations: the first, which took place in September, 1995, around Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and the second, occurring in February, 1996, around her *Gather Together in My Name*. Analysis of transcripts, fieldnotes and interviews enabled me to determine topics of conversation, forms of participation, and conversational moves.

What was revealed was that participants initially avoid the topic of race, choosing to explore other topics instead. Race is "hot lava": as in the children's playground game where the goal is to avoid stepping on spots that represent "hot lava," the same occurs in conversation.¹ When the topic of race appears on the floor, participants often dash around it. However, analysis of talk over time revealed participants' willingness to begin to place the "unspeakable" on the table as they grew more familiar (1) with a discourse format; (2) with one another; (3) with the authors and texts they read; and (4) with their own discourse moves, in particular with their habits of avoidance around certain topics.

Talking About *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*

Six White women, half of the participants in the Culture, Literacy and Autobiography course, sat around a table in one of the two book club groups to discuss Angelou's work:

**Figure 1:
Seating During the September 25, 1995 Book Club Discussion**

Taffy	Bonnie	Hannah	Mary ²
	Kate	Beth	

Hannah is an elementary school teacher in a mixed rural/suburban area; Bonnie is a school librarian in an urban area; Kate is an elementary teacher in an urban area; and Beth is a substitute teacher in a suburban area. Taffy and Mary are participant observers with many years of teaching experience between them. Though the class had been in session since the beginning of September, this evening was the group's second experience with the Book Club format (McMahon & Raphael, 1997) and their first in-class experience with an autobiography of an ethnic minority, two aspects that influence the nature of the discussion.³ The previous autobiography had been Vivian Paley's (1979) *White Teacher*, an exploration of Paley's work in classrooms with her diverse group of kindergartners. The decision was made to begin with Paley's work since her experience as a White teacher could prove to be more similar to the experience of these teachers.⁴

Conversation during the small group book club moved at a stop and start pace.

Participants moved in and out of discussions of multiple *topics*—like themes within a literary text—during the conversation. Thematic analysis of conversation revealed at least 12 different topics that were brought to the floor during the 65-minute conversation.

Figure 2

Topic	Description	Frequency
Dignity	References to the characters in the text displaying dignity	7
Abruptness of text	Related to Angelou's pithy statements throughout the text	6
Humor	Related to the humor that participants mention that they find in the stories that Angelou tells	5
Transitions	References to the perceived lack of transition within the text as Angelou moves from one topic to the next; also references to transitions observed in Angelou's thinking	5
Questions for Angelou	Participants remarks about the questions they have for Angelou in reading/discussion of the text	4
Grandmother's role	Related to the participants talking about the role that Angelou's grandmother played in her life	3
Power of writing	References to the power of Angelou's writing style	3
Rejection of victimization	Comments related to seeing Angelou and/or her grandmother as not presenting themselves as victims	3
Sense of self	Direct references to Angelou and/or her grandmother's sense of self-identity	3
Birth Order	References to the birth order of individuals in the text	2
Inability to return home	References to Angelou's not being able to return home	2
Movie	References to the film version of <i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i>	2

Often these topics were raised by a participant and discussed briefly, only to resurface later in the conversation, frequently brought to the floor by its originator. As Figure 2 reveals, topics were varied, and the talk around them was unsustained—participants' turns were not tied together to a single topic. Often, the same speaker would reintroduce the same topic throughout the conversation with little uptake from others. The conversation lacked repetition: a crucial involvement strategy indicative of mutual participation. Tannen (1989) writes: "Repeating the words, phrases, or sentences of other speakers (a) accomplishes a conversation, (b) shows one's response to another's utterance, (c) shows acceptance of others' utterances, [of] their participation, and [of] them, and (d) gives evidence of one's own participa-

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tion” (p. 52). On this particular evening, repetition of words and phrases occurred often *within* a speaker’s own talk, implying an effort on the part of a participant to garner support for the topic she had placed on the table, but rarely across speakers, suggesting a lack of uptake. In the following excerpt, Bonnie introduces the topic of guilt and then repeats the term three times within her turn. However, no one after Bonnie pursues this topic:

Figure 3

Bonnie: Well, you would think that the mother, I don’t know, I’m just guessing here but, I would think she felt a great deal of *guilt*. I mean, the reason _____⁵ one of the reasons Maya was raped was because she had stayed out all night and her boyfriend was angry at her. And so he took it out on her child and I think there must have been some *guilt* feeling about, obviously they had the kind of relationship where she partied quite a bit but that was a night when she didn’t come home at all and I would feel real *guilty*, and I think even her mother probably was kinda like a living reminder of, um, something she hadn’t handled real well.

Kate: Yeah.

Kate: Could very well be.

** 27 second pause**

Kate: I was just gonna ask you people what, what you would ask [Angelou] if you had an opportunity to ask her a question.

Triangulation with field notes from participant observers supports the finding of the unsustainable nature of conversation. Taffy wrote, for example, “My notes aren’t detailed above because this felt like a sort of ‘lag’ in the conversation, one where participants were searching for where to go next.” Mary later described that one participant “seems to be suggesting major themes of the book. Although the group skirts the edges of the issue, they don’t really seem to pick up on or continue discussion of themes here.” The conversation is replete with lags—pauses, indicating a difficulty to “keep talk going” (Tannen, 1989, p.52). During the discussion, there are sixteen pauses ranging from three to twenty-seven seconds.

Overall, talk during this night was challenging, which is perhaps not surprising. After all, this was a new context where students were only beginning to get to know each other while attempting to figure out how this thing called Book Club actually works. As Beth mentioned in her follow-up interview: “At first, when we were together...it was a bit uncomfortable, like it is in any new group. Getting your feet wet, not knowing what your boundaries really are with each other” (interview, 11 July 1996).

Continuing the Conversation:

Gather Together in My Name

In February, 1996, five book club meetings after *I Know Why the Caged Bird*

Sings, all 11 members of the course, along with me and Julie—the two new members of the group—and Florio-Ruane engaged in a conversation around Angelou's *Gather Together in My Name*, the second of her autobiographical works. The context was no longer a university classroom but rather a professor's home. Students had volunteered to continue as members of the self-titled Literary Circle that met monthly. The group began meeting in January and had decided to read second books by the authors they had read during the fall semester.

Since the first discussion of a book by Angelou, many of the course participants had had multiple "Maya sightings," occasions where they had seen Angelou on a television program or read about her in a magazine or book, and it had become routine to mention these moments to the whole group. It was clear that Angelou had not quite left their minds since they had set the first book down five months earlier. She had become more a part of the participants' daily lives. Rather than a slow, staggered start to the discussion as was the case in the first Angelou conversation, participants were off and running. Here there was no structured format like Book Club. Hannah, Pam, and Jerri—all elementary school teachers—spontaneously opened the conversation by sharing information about Angelou's life based on a televised interview they had seen. The whole group participated in an informal question-and-answer session during the first fifteen minutes of the evening, fleshing out as many details as possible about Angelou's life.

In this conversation, in contrast to the September discussion, there were many rounds of collaborative talk, "collaborative venture[s] where two or more people . . . jointly built one idea, operating on the 'same wavelength'" (Edelsky, 1981, p. 384). Participants developed talk together around specific topics. One example occurred during the discussion of Angelou's marriages:

Figure 4

Bonnie: Yeah, but they all said they were married.

Hannah: Married, right...And the second one, is that the one she talked about him like real affectionately?

Jerri: Really all of them she did. Cause we mentioned how she sounded so—

Pam: —*positive* and

Jerri: *positive* about all these . . .

Hannah: I think it was the last one . . . that the relationship *didn't work out*.

Pam: It *didn't work out*.

Hannah: . . . but she just only had very *positive*, good things to say.

Here, the repetition across speakers related to the same topic (i.e., repetition of the phrase "didn't work out" and the word "married"), the overlap of participants' talk (Pam and Jerri's speaking the word "positive" together) and the completing of one another's sentences (i.e., Pam's saying the word "positive" to complete Jerri's

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sentence) are all indicators of a collaborative development of the conversation about Angelou's marriages.

Again, as in the earlier conversation, the topics in this discussion were varied and included many of those that were present in the first conversation such as dignity, Angelou's experiences with literacy, and the role of the grandmother. But conversation this time was sustained. First, a single topic was picked up in the same segment of discussion and carried by multiple participants, as evidenced in the short segment quoted above from the discussion of Angelou's marriages, which, in its entirety, consisted of more than 30 speaker turns. Second, there were only two short pauses during the entire eighty-one minute conversation, indicating engagement by participants. Third, there was quite a bit of repetition of certain phrases and words *across* speakers, as evident in the above exchange. This repetition not only tied the stream of discourse together but also worked to "[link] individual speakers in a conversation and in relationships" (Tannen, 1989, p. 52). In addition, individuals collaboratively constructed sentences, forming them together as evidenced in Figure 4. Overall, talk in this second discussion flowed.

We might expect and hope to see such differences in this second conversation, indicating change over time. These differences are a function of participants' growing familiarity with one another, with a discussion format and with Angelou and her writing. In fact, because these differences are apparent and are in line with our expectations, we may overlook the similarities between these two discussions. The profound differences in the sounds of the two conversations may have curbed any inquiry into these two discussions had I not entered into the data with the question I had informally composed on the night I first joined the Literary Circle: What happens to the topic of race during these discussions?

Taking a Closer Look

I returned to the September discussion of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and listened in particular to the moments before and after what seemed to be the trouble spots: where pauses, abrupt topic shifts, changes in participants' tone or pace, topic re-labeling (when a topic discussed changes form to become a different topic—e.g., a participant's mentioning Angelou's "powerlessness," which then transforms to become Angelou's "dignity") or nervous-sounding laughter were evident. Shifts in the topic of conversation appeared to represent either an unconscious or patterned move away from a challenging topic and towards one perhaps "lighter" or less problematic. It is telling that topics that focus on the style of writing in the text and on the positive aspects of the author's story and storytelling were the topics that were most frequently brought up in conversation, particularly in the first discussion. In discovering these gaps in conversation, these evasions of topic, I was reminded of the game of hot lava. A similar evasion was happening in conversation: there were hot lava topics participants were avoiding, particularly

the topic of race.

The following example is one illustration of this avoidance:

Figure 5

1. Mary: On that same page that you were talking about . . . the last two paragraphs I think are really interesting because she's talking about being Black and being female. And then she says that "the fact that the adult Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence," which is really interesting. . . .

5. Kate: I kinda put, it's interesting. I wrote 'transition' on the top of that page and put an arrow down, so to me the whole thing in there seems like she was making a transition there in her thinking. Or realization.

8. Hannah: That second paragraph, "to be left alone on the tightrope of youthful unknowing": I mean that's just a neat paragraph.

Mary wrote in her field notes about this segment of talk: "Here, I really wanted to talk about the issue of race and especially gender. I was a little disappointed when no one picked up on it." In this instance, as in others in the transcript, the topic was reframed and moved to safer ground. Kate reframes Mary's point at line 5, moving the topic to Angelou's writing style. This pattern maintains throughout the evening. During the September discussion, when the topic of race is brought to the conversational floor, there is no uptake. It remains only briefly on the floor the few times it arrives there.

A second example from this conversation is evidenced in the following segment:

Figure 6

1. Bonnie: So they had to memorize something by a Black author. I thought that was kinda interesting.

3. Taffy: It says a lot about what the cultural mores were within the family in this other sense of trying to build who they were.

5. Bonnie: Uh huh. She's kind of reading Shakespeare on the sly, but he'd been dead for so long, she forgave him for being White. . . . Surely it can't matter any more after all these years.

7. Kate: She, it was really nice cause she made it, made you really, not fully understand but she lets you have a picture into the thinking, you know, of what it was like. Just talking about how, when she went over to the White side, they were not people. They were not folks. They were not real. I think that was interesting, she didn't think, um, she wanted to touch their flesh, um, to see if they were real. I can remember feeling that way about the nuns but, you know (*laughs*). I mean, seriously, I did not think they had breasts. I'm serious. When I was little, I didn't

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think they did. I really think they were—And so I could relate to that when she said that she didn't think White people were really alive or really real. That's kind of interesting.

15. Hannah: And you're wondering what ages she was referring back to. That's what I really, you know, fell out of kilter within the book is, you know, when she would go back like into a little synop, or an episode and I was like, um, okay, where is she at this point? But I mean that's part of what she wanted to do. You know, I don't think that's a failure of the book. It's exactly what she wanted.

20. Kate: She threw her age in here, here and there.

Here, Hannah changes the topic of conversation from race and whiteness—something brought up by both Bonnie and Kate—to the safer topic of Angelou's writing.

Similar patterns appear in the group's discussion of *Gather Together in My Name*. In the following example, Taffy brings up the topic of Angelou's talking about Whites in this text in a collective sense. Pam moves discussion to Angelou's marriage to two White men. The topic of race lingers at the edge of the floor. While there is some curiosity about Angelou's choice to marry these White men, there is no direct discussion on the topic.

Figure 7

Taffy: . . . there's a line in *Gather Together* where she talks about how she really couldn't tell the difference between the White people. They were all just pale and skinny (laughs). I thought, yeah—

Pam: Well, I thought it was interesting when we were watching the . . . interview with her and I found out that she was married to two White men. . . .

Kate: What? What?

Susan FR: How many times did she get married?

Pam: . . . It kinda surprised me . . .

Hannah: I think I knew. I think Bonnie had told me . . .

Bonnie: Her name was from the Italian, which was her first marriage, Angelous and it was um, shortened to Angelou because it sounded more exotic for the stage . . .

The discussion continues in this vein, focused on “getting the facts straight” rather than on the topic of race. The turning away from the topic of race in the *Gather Together in My Name* conversation appears subtler, however, than the turning away evidenced in the *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* discussion. In general, there were longer discussions around the topic during the second night of talk, lasting up to three minutes in length. Talk around the topic appeared more exploratory.

Another similarity across these conversations occurs with the simple use of

the term “interesting,” a word that appears prominently in Figures 5, 6 and 7⁶ and indeed throughout both conversations. That particular term in and of itself—and then coupled with terms like “neat” and “nice”—may serve multiple purposes. Though the term allows us to keep the conversation moving, the conversation remains vague and non-committal. What is it we are talking about with and through this word? What does using this word allow us *not* to talk about? The vague terminology essentially allows participants to talk about race and racism in a noncommittal way. In addition, the words serve to keep Angelou as a museum piece, something participants continue to gaze at from afar.

Like the hot lava of the children’s game, participants scoot conversationally around the topic of race, though more adamantly in the first conversation than the second. This finding raises questions about the limits and possibilities of Euro-American, female teachers learning about difference by reading and discussing literature, thus problematizing the more narrative-based approaches to teacher education related to issues of diversity. Why is this topic so difficult to address? To determine that we need to look carefully at text, audience and discussion format. Is it with the topic of race that we as White women may be implicated and therefore avoid discussing the topic? Do we intentionally avoid the topic—as is the case in the game of hot lava—or do we do so unconsciously, unaware of the socially constructed moves we make? Do the texts challenge us as readers in ways that make us unsure how to respond, how to talk about this often silenced issue? Does the particular discourse with which we’ve become conditioned further constrain us, particularly if the discourse is the traditional and constrained school discourse? We must explore these questions in order to grow wiser about efforts in teacher education that will best allow teachers to move beyond colorblindness first among their peers and then with their own students.

Examining Audience

Texts influence different readers differently (Rosenblatt, 1938/1983). How might the fact that we are a group of White women influence how we talk about Angelou’s texts? How might our histories, including the fact that we as teachers are enmeshed in institutions (schools and universities) that continue to be racist despite appearances otherwise (McLaren, 1998; Nieto, 2000), prevent us in some ways from forging ahead to talk about race? Race “is the tar baby in our midst; touch it and you get stuck, hold it and you get dirty, so they say” (Golden, 1995, p. 3). White, middle-class women in particular learn not to touch the tar baby. A monocultural view of the world, often unconsciously learned over time (Frankenburg, 1993; King, 1991; McIntosh, 1990), encourages an employment of a lens that conceals differences. Color evasiveness (Frankenberg, 1993) perhaps enables Whites to place the issue of White privilege on the back burner, allowing us to continue to cling to the “myth of meritocracy” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 9).

Talking about race brings us closer to disrupting a comfortable norm as we may

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see it and essentially forces us to engage in a discussion of our own race, our own Whiteness, something that remains both unnamed and unexplored (Frankenburg, 1993; hooks, 1994; McIntosh, 1992; McIntyre, 1997). Rarely asked to explore their own culture, Whites often perceive themselves as a) having no culture and further b) not recognizing possible privilege because of the seeming 'non-culture' called Whiteness (hooks, 1990; McIntosh, 1992; Scheurich, 1993). As Jerri remarked in her follow-up interview, "I was one of those people in the beginning who [thought] I had no culture. There's nothing to me. I've had no experiences" (interview July 1996). This response echoes work in the field of cultural studies that suggests an assumption of an amorphous monoculturalism and a stance of colorblindness, both of which limit discussions of race (e.g., Frankenburg, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Additionally, disengaging with conversations about race—or engaging with them by using bland and non-committal terms such as "interesting"—convinces us that we are acting in an appropriate, nearly righteous way.

There is a profound belief that being silent and engaging colorblindness means not being racist (Landsman, 2001; Morrison, 1992; Paley, 1979/89). Frankenberg (1993) suggests that "in a racially hierarchical society, white women have to repress, avoid, and conceal a great deal in order to maintain a stance of 'not noticing' color. From this point of view, there are apparently only two options open to white women: either one does not have anything to say about race, or one is apt to be deemed 'racist' simply by virtue of having something to say" (p. 33). For many, then, this leaves only silence when it comes to issues of race, given that we know of no discourse—particularly in schools where "difficult dialogues" (hooks as cited in Britzman, 1992) are discouraged—that allows discussion of the topic.

It is possible that as White women, we may see ourselves implicated in some ways within these texts, so we prefer that race remain "an unspeakable thing" (Morrison, 1989). We choose colorblindness in response to the texts. We may do so unconsciously or dysconsciously (King, 1991), choosing to not pay attention to the privileges we have as Whites. By not acknowledging the role we assume as White women with privilege, we get to maintain that position of privilege.

Further, once we acknowledge our involvement, even our unintentional involvement, in Angelou's life experiences or the lives of others like her, what then becomes our responsibility? Texts, and constructed ways of talking about certain issues, can lead us down some troubling paths, paths that require us to look inward, to be self-critical, to find ourselves written about in the pages of a work, a self that we may not recognize initially. As one participant confided to group members in an October, 1997, Literary Circle meeting, a full two years after the discussion of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*:

... until I really started reading autobiographies, which was really when we started the group, I left all of that so unexamined and sort of thought of myself as I'm, you know, this very tolerant, liberal and ... some of the reactions I've had have surprised me about myself and I realize that if it weren't for having, getting those

reactions out, I . . . would have never examined them, but they clearly have been there. So in some ways these books have been really eye opening for me about revealing prejudices that I'd never even acknowledged that I had. . .

Participants nodded knowingly in agreement, interrupting with "um hums," "rights," and "yeahs." It is only through our reading and responding to literature over time, beyond the first year of our meetings, that we became better able to speak the unspeakable.

Examining Text

Angelou's texts can begin to move us along the path to discourse, but these texts may themselves first prove to be challenging hurdles for us as readers. Literary criticism about Angelou's works has focused on the author's place within the genre of African American autobiography and on the stylistic maneuvers she utilizes. As participants engaged in conversation around both *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name*, what became evident was how Angelou's storytelling catches us as readers by surprise, particularly when we enter the text with certain expectations about the genre of autobiography.

Comments of disbelief like "I wonder" or "I'm curious" or "I'm amazed" ran through both discussions. As Beth explained in a follow-up interview: "We couldn't believe this woman had this life" (July 1996). As readers and as White, middle- class women, we have certain genre expectations, ones that are culturally and socially constructed (Lionette 1989; Rosen, 1988; Stone, 1981). Thus, as we enter into Angelou's autobiographies, we do so with certain expectations of autobiographical texts and read accordingly, remarking as Beth does: ". . . You don't sense the pain. I mean all the things that *normally should* be there, we think, just aren't" (Literary Circle, February 1996, emphasis added).

Until recently, often in Euro-American literary and non-literary circles, the traditional assumption has been that autobiography is somehow authentic, non-fictional, authoritative, often seen as a genre accessible equally by all and constructed similarly by all (Couser, 1989). "The audience is expected to accept these reports as true" (Bruss cited in Couser, 1989, p.15). And yet "like all narratives . . . autobiography is simultaneously fiction and fact" (Stone, 1981, p. 7). Angelou's work is no exception. It too is a "tight-rope walk between reality and fantasy" (McPherson, 1990, p. 9). It straddles that dichotomy between fact and fiction, leaving this group of readers asking things like "I really wonder what she left out" (Beth, February 1996) and "Did she run a whorehouse? . . . Really? She said she did?" (Susan W., February 1996). Kraft (1995) offers that many African American women writers of autobiographies are "speaking in a multiplicity of voices, inherent to the African tradition of storytelling, and in so doing they . . . subvert Western informed expectations of 'truth' and genre" (p. 60). Our assumptions about autobiography—and about the possibilities of life—are duly challenged as we read Angelou's texts.

Braxton (1989) writes: "*Caged Bird* shows the influence of myriad folk forms, including the sermon, the ghost story, the preacher tale, the tale of exaggeration, a children's rhyme, and secular and religious songs. The use of these oral forms,

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together with folk language, contributes to the unique tone, texture and style of the autobiography. Their presence also helps identify the autobiographer in a relationship with her community and culture” (p. 191). That tone and texture was identified by Literary Circle participants as a “matter-of-fact” style. This influenced participants to wonder what Angelou “left out” of her autobiography. As Beth remarked: “. . . a lot more is left out than what we’re told.” Hannah further suggested, “some of the emotions seem to be so tone downed, compared to what she chances are experienced at the time” (September 1995). By using understatement, self-mockery, humor and irony (McPherson, 1990), Angelou left these readers wondering how to respond to her texts, evident best perhaps in Bonnie’s remark in September, 1995: “Just, so much of this, I mean, gosh, most of this book is so painful but, you know, you look back and it’s almost funny some of the stuff.”

Angelou’s seemingly matter-of-fact way of describing difficult life experiences, specifically those when she was a victim of racism, may leave White readers wondering how to respond in a way that allows us to remain at arm’s length from these stories which may bring to light our own privileged status. How, for example, should we respond to Angelou’s account of her and her grandmother’s encounter with the White dentist in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*? When the dentist refuses to treat Maya because she is Black, Maya creates in her head a scene in which her grandmother confronts the dentist. The imagined scene is quite humorous, whereas the real interaction between the dentist and the grandmother is painfully bitter. After offering the reader both sides of the story, Angelou ends the section with her grandmother and her uncle “laughing and laughing” about the “white man’s evilness” followed by Maya’s inner dialogue: “I preferred, much preferred, my version,” the face-saving version she had created. Because Angelou and her grandmother appear on the surface to dismiss the conflict, we as readers may be inclined to do the same.

Our responses are unexpected, as Kate said during the discussion of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: “I mean I’m laughing through a lot of this . . . and it’s not funny.” We as readers are safe as long as we stay at one level of the text and read that the racist incident had little impact on Angelou or her grandmother—as long as we take the laughter at face value. And yet this is likely an example of Angelou employing a double-voicedness: “On one level, Angelou . . . writes for white readers; but on another, she gestures toward the black community and ‘signifies’ upon an established Afro-American mode of presenting truths and untruths” (Lionnet, 1989, p. 95). A number of literary critics have suggested that when minority women write their autobiographies, they do so by utilizing a “double-voiced discourse” (Rayson, 1987, p. 43). As Rayson continues, “While these writers are taking off the mask, the outside label that protects them, to face the world, they sometimes paradoxically employ masking devices in their uses of language and silence” (Rayson, 1987, p. 44). As Angelou (1993) herself writes in *Gather Together in My Name*: “Never let white girls know what you really think. If you’re sad, laugh. If you’re

bleeding inside, dance” (p. 86).

Examining Format

As members of the Culture, Literacy and Autobiography course, the students participated in Book Club (McMahon & Raphael, 1997), a somewhat structured approach to discussions of texts. In the course, discussion began with a teacher-led community share, where Florio-Ruane would establish a topic or theme of discussion by introducing students to a text, video or topic that related to the reading. Students then wrote free responses in their journals as a way to prompt their thinking about the text they read for class that day. Next the students would move into one of two small groups for book club discussions, where they would discuss the text for nearly an hour. These book club groups remained constant through the semester. The class would close with a whole-class community share during which time students shared ideas that came up in the two book club discussions. Students appeared to both learn and follow the rules of this classroom format.

At the semester’s end, when participants began meeting as the Literary Circle, they no longer followed the Book Club format. As evidenced during the discussion of *Gather Together in My Name*, participants jointly constructed the discussion and determined where conversation went from its beginning. Rather than the polite turn-taking that seemed so evident initially in the book club discussions, here there began to be many examples of overlapping talk. The discussion of *Gather Together in My Name* appears to be more dialogic and polyphonic (Bakhtin, 1984) in contrast to a more monologic discussion that unfolded around *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It is quite possible that the structure of the Book Club during the one-semester course further prohibited the students from moving ahead with some topics of discussion, fearing toppling the established structure and order. Perhaps Book Club format—in conjunction with the other factors mentioned previously—did not allow in the case of these participants for conversation that pushed the borders and boundaries of traditional discourse, particularly around conversations of race. As students moved away from the traditional boundaries of the university setting—in both context and structure—they began to explore unexplored territory.

Conclusions and Implications:

Why Is This Line of Work Important?

The conversation around *Gather Together in My Name* is different from that around *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. We were more willing to dance with the hot lava topic of race in the second conversation, though it is a fast-paced dance and not all of us are on the dance floor. Being on the dance floor, however, suggests first the strength of the text. Though both texts are equally powerful, additional factors bring the participants to the dance floor in the second conversation. Participants are

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more willing to approach given the development of the group over time, as well as a developing sense of individual cultural identity among participants as evidenced in particular in comments in follow-up interviews, such as “I became aware of my own culture” (interview 10 July 1996) and Beth’s “I didn’t think that my family had culture. And now...I realized I did” (interview 11 July 1996). This developing sense of cultural identity brings the topic of culture—and with it race—more to the forefront of discussion.

Analysis of these conversations reminds us first that authentic conversation, and conversation about race in particular, is challenging. Furthermore, discourse is not transparent: apparent fluidity may mask important gaps, in this case related to topics of conversation. Second, conversation ultimately changes over time as participants become more comfortable with one another, with a dialogic format and with the authors and texts they read. This is a critical point to remember as we continue to teach our education courses according to traditional timetables. We expect that students will delve into substantive conversation in a one-semester course that highlights issues of diversity. This study reveals our need to be both more patient and more vigilant. We ought to begin our work with teachers in their pre-service programs and commit to continue with them through their teaching careers. Themes of diversity must permeate our teacher education programs, not be limited simply to a single semester diversity education class as is often the case. Third, texts (and therefore the authors of these texts) can influence how people will talk about them and what people will talk about. Though narratives may be a useful tool to help stir conversation, all narratives, all autobiographies, are not the same and readers will necessarily respond to these texts differently.

If reading and discussing narratives is part of what we do as educators to help teachers explore cultural experiences and break through stereotypes and expectations which may limit a teacher’s ability to educate diverse youngsters, then it is imperative to determine how teachers may respond to particular texts and why (Jay, 1997; Spack, 1997). In this case, as White women, we struggled to address the topics of race and racism in particular, though Angelou highlights these issues in her texts. Teacher educators need to be mindful of the texts they choose to use with their students and the possible reactions—or non-reactions—students may have to these texts. Perhaps, too, students should be told explicitly what the challenges may be and be prompted to explore their own silences in relation to texts and ideas. Finally, not all dialogic experiences will unfold similarly. Though Book Club format fosters comprehension and critical thinking for young students (see McMahon & Raphael, 1997), it may be a constraining format for some participants. Multiple and varied discourse opportunities may allow different sorts of discussions to unfold.

Additional research in this area will enable teacher educators to better determine how to teach texts, and how to ask teachers to engage with them, in the most educative and meaningful ways such that they will be more willing to address

challenging and important topics both in the company of other teachers and with their students. As we know, in addition to not addressing the topic of race outside of classrooms, White teachers often avoid the topic within their own classrooms. It will be important to explore: (1) what happens over a longer period of time as participants engage with more and different texts (and further, what is the most one can expect of a transaction between reader and text); (2) what happens in more diverse contexts, with diverse groups of participants: how does discussion change; and (3) what other topics of hot lava exist⁷ and how might these topics differ depending on a particular audience and text. Finally we must explore how teachers involved in more comprehensive and transformational explorations of culture in teacher education programs transform their teaching as a result.

Epilogue:

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It's spring 1997, two and a half years after the participants in the master's course first began meeting together. Five of us meet to talk about Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*. This conversation is a departure from the more traditional patterns of evasion of the topic of race. In particular, all participants contribute to our conversation about race and we discuss the topic for more than forty-five minutes, as opposed to the two or four minutes illustrated previously. As the conversation of Walker's text unfolds, we move from a direct discussion of the essays to a broader discussion on the themes that Walker raises in her works, among them race and racism. Bonnie shares a story she had seen on television about an African American man in Colorado who had recently been physically and verbally abused by his White neighbors. As she tells the story, she recalls thinking as she watched: "I cannot believe this just happened." The incident reminds Mary of a story she had recently heard about the murder of three Civil Rights activists in Mississippi during the 1960s. Hannah, who in earlier conversations often changed the topic when race hit the floor, responds to these stories by stating: "I mean I'd like to say that that those things don't happen in the 1990's. And unfortunately they do. Even though you can go back to 'well it doesn't happen in my neighborhood or my town or my . . .'" Lissa, another participant, follows with, "But it just happened yesterday in one of the [local] suburbs," a town a short hour's drive from where we live. The story comes closer to home. And then even closer as Hannah tells us about a conversation that occurred recently in the teacher's room at her school, where a White teacher commented that he wouldn't let his daughter date an African American. Hannah remarks, "[the teacher] just goes on and everybody else just kind of sits quietly. Nobody says anything. It's that whole, it's just kind of a silent thing." Hannah's point here may be in response in part to conversations I had begun to have with the group about my research work and the unspeakable nature of the topic of race.

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Essentially, this conversation grows riskier for us as we move closer to our own experiences, both geographically and in our subject positions. Instead of just talking about what happens over ‘there,’ a place and situation with which we don’t readily connect, we find ourselves addressing the here and now—and ultimately addressing ourselves, our roles as either maintainers of racism through our silences or as change agents through our acquiring a discourse which enables us voice. It’s obvious that Hannah listens ‘unquietly’ to the conversation in the teacher’s room. The ideal would be for her to move to action—to find her voice and speak up. The former she has begun to do in the Literary Circle.

Later this evening, Hannah remarks about the power of the Literary Circle context and its ethnic autobiographical content as a way to put challenging topics on the table, to really grapple with them and begin to find a new discourse. She says “That’s one thing about being able to read the literature and then come to a group to talk about it . . . There’s something disturbing and settling at the same time about being able to have these conversations because you internalize so much of it . . . [like] if we have the knowledge . . . about the underlying racism, about people NOT talking about it . . . it can help you put things in a little bit different perspective and you know I feel like you’re kind of like moving yourself through a maze . . . trying to find the right path to go through.” In time, it’s through the conversation both about and with the narratives that we indeed move closer to speaking what has for so long been unspoken.

The conversations analyzed in this article may be characterized as a modest step forward. The article illustrates how a group of White female teachers begin to step closer to touching hot lava, realizing it cools a bit as we approach. However, the silences around the topic of race that continue to be evident, including the one mentioned by Hannah, indicate the persistent challenge of this work.

Notes

¹ A colleague, Christopher Clark, brought the term “hot lava” to my attention when I described this phenomenon to him during data analysis. The term “hot lava” refers not just to the topic of race but also to other topics that are avoided in these conversations, in particular topics related to social class and gender.

² All names used throughout, with the exception of those of the members of the research team, are pseudonyms.

³ Class sessions were divided between Book Club format, involving discussion of autobiographical texts, and the reading and discussion of theoretical and conceptual texts related to culture and literacy.

⁴ The autobiographies used in the course were chosen because they represented the author’s experiences with literacy and explored the relationship between the author’s cultural identity and literacy or schooling more broadly.

⁵ Four dashes indicate a four second pause.

⁶ I want to thank one of the reviewers of the manuscript for calling my attention to

the repetition of this term, something I neglected to address in an earlier version of this manuscript.

⁷One additional topic identified as hot lava for this particular group was the topic of rape. Conversation around this topic was continually reframed, though, as in the topic of race, the reframing became less apparent during the discussion of *Gather Together in My Name*. In the discussion of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the text in which Angelou first shares the story of her rape, the topic was discussed briefly and then followed by a noticeable, 27 second pause before the topic shifted (see Figure 3). In addition, during the same discussion, the topic is referenced in vague terms (e.g., “that episode” and “that issue”). In contrast, in the conversation of *Gather Together in My Name*, participants engaged in more sustained discussions of the topic. The transition from the topic of rape to another topic was lengthier in the *Gather Together in My Name* discussion, likely indicating a growing willingness on the part of the participants to engage the topic. Additional information on analysis of this topic can be found in Florio-Ruane, Raphael, Glazier, McVee & Wallace, 1996.

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