

Reading *with* and *against* a risky story: How a young reader helps enrich our understanding of critical literacy

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Understandings of critical literacy are increasingly rooted in observations, reflections and analyses of classroom practices (e.g., Ball, 2000; Christensen, 2000; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Edelsky, 1999; Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2008; Morrell, 2004, 2008; Vasquez, 2004). Across these accounts is a shared focus on teachers and students examining language and texts, from literature to a range of popular culture texts, with this language and textual work aligning with broader democratic goals, such as, identifying, reducing and eliminating injustices to sustain a more equitable world.

With the intention to better understand critical literacy work in classrooms, Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys (2002) distilled four dimensions of critical literacy from their synthesis of the literature: disrupting the commonplace; interrogating multiple viewpoints; focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. Comber (2001) outlines “some core dynamic principles and repertoires of practices” involved in critical literacy work with teachers and students. These include: engaging with local realities; researching and analyzing language-power relationships, practices and effects; mobilizing students’ knowledge and practices; (re)designing texts with political and social intent and real-world use; subverting taken for granted “school” texts; focusing on students’ use of local cultural texts; and examining how power is exercised and by whom (p. 276). In more recent work, Lewison, Leland & Harste (2008) offer a model of critical literacy instruction that involves a dynamic transaction among personal and cultural resources, critical social practices, critical stance, movement between the personal and social, and context.

I find these guiding principles and models, along with others (e.g., Christensen, 2000; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Janks, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Morgan, 1997; Shannon, 1995), helpful in guiding my teaching, thinking, and scholarship about critical literacy. Viewed as a set of tools, rather than blueprints, these principles and models (along with personal and professional experiences) help frame my work and engender questions to explore. And one of the most persistent and provocative questions has been: what do we, as critical literacy educators, do with texts that deal explicitly with social injustices, especially texts that depict or “bear witness” to horrors of human history, such as slavery or genocide?

I take up this question here and offer a response by drawing upon a research project with Ruthie Riddle, a first-year teacher. At the time Ruthie was working in a diverse urban fifth-grade classroom (10 students identified as African American, 10 as European American, 4 as Latina (o), 4 as multiracial) and I was a graduate student committed to conducting collaborative research with Ruthie; with both of us interested in what critical literacy and teaching for social justice might mean in her classroom. In this article I consider what happened when Ruthie used an illustrated children’s book that vividly depicts the atrocities of slavery, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (Lester, 1998). The use of this text was part of five-month language arts inquiry-based unit about freedom and slavery. After I describe Ruthie’s social justice commitments for this unit, I consider her moves during a class discussion to guide the children’s responses to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. What becomes clear is a conception of critical literacy

teaching with this text that is marked by a reading *with* stance and set of practices. This stance and practices seemingly sits in contrast to Ruthie's teaching with other texts in the unit, what I would call a reading *against* approach.

As I explore the ways Ruthie and students responded to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, I attend particularly to one student's response as a way to envision an approach that integrates reading *with* and reading *against* instructional goals for this type of text. I describe how this student read *with* the text, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, learning content about slavery not previously known to him, and read *against* this text, talking back to the ways the author constructed the text. I also consider implications for language arts educators about ways to work with texts like *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, and I conclude with a call to understand critical literacy as composed of two core compatible practices: reader reflexivity and textual critique.

Risky Stories

For the past decade elementary language arts educators have advocated that teachers promote critical literacy goals by using books that deal with difficult social issues (e.g., Harste, Vasquez, Lewison, Beau, Leland, Ociepka, 2000; Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, Vasquez, 1999). One such text is *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, which grapples with a profound social injustice, the dehumanization and annihilation of millions of enslaved Africans. The book could be characterized as "brave and diverse" (Ballentine & Hill, 2000), "critical literature" (Houser, 1999), or a "social issues" text (Leland, et. al., 1999). In this article I enlist the term "risky story" (Simon & Armitage-Simon, 1995) to foreground the challenges involved in teaching and responding to a book like *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, a text that "graphically deal[s] with degradation, pain and death" (p. 28).

The term "risky story" is useful in two important ways. First, it foregrounds how reading and responding to this type of text in classrooms can pose psychological and emotional risks for readers, asking them to negotiate a potentially diverse range of complicated thoughts and feelings, including guilt, sadness, hostility, fear, anger, and shame (Felman & Laub, 1992; Robertson, 1997) – often stemming from the complexities of identification with characters in the texts. Readers, for example, might respond with guilt through association with oppressors, adopt a victim stance through association with the oppressed, or disengage because historically "their" families were not directly involved (Damico & Apol, 2008). In many risky stories the experiences of the characters (real or fictional) are narrated as *testimonies*, imbued with description of devastating experiences – such as the racial violence depicted in the picture book, *Whitewash* (Shange, 1997), when a young African American girl is attacked by a group of Caucasian boys who paint the girl's face white. Readers are invited if not impelled to bear witness to these accounts (Boler, 1999; Simon, 2005). While young readers can experience a range of complicated thoughts and feelings with any text, risky stories, as described here, increase the likelihood of a reader experiencing these complicated thoughts and feelings.

Second, the term risky story signals how teachers might not feel equipped to facilitate potentially complicated responses from students, a belief reinforced by a prevailing perspective, held by many teachers, school administrators, and parents, that it is inappropriate if not miseducating to expose children to severe social injustices, especially the horrors of human history. Thus, teachers who choose to use risky stories can run the risk of being ostracized or admonished by colleagues, principals, and parents.

*Reading with Risky Stories:
Moving from the Margins, Learning New Content, Cultivating Inquiry*

One compelling rationale for using risky stories in classrooms is that it opens up curricular and learning spaces for readers to engage with particular subject matter, often topics or issues not typically explored in elementary classrooms, such as the enslavement and brutal treatment of slaves, the Holocaust, the displacement and genocide of indigenous peoples (Eppert, 2000), as well as contemporary instantiations of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance, etc. The inclusion and implementation of risky stories in classrooms can serve to “disrupt the commonplace” (Lewison, et. al., 2002) and “subvert taken for granted school texts” (Comber, 2001), which can deepen readers’ self-awareness and guide them “from the unknown to the knowable” as they confront and explore the “truths” of racism and other injustices (Ballentine & Hill, 2000, p. 11) and develop empathy for others (Housser, 1999). Students can also learn important historical content and connect events of the past to the present. In other words, students not only can learn about traumatic historical events on a systemic scale, they also come to better understand “the ongoing implications and effects of catastrophic suffering in the world today” (Robertson, 1997, p. 462). One pedagogical purpose here is for students to “remember” or to be “against forgetting” (Forche, 1993). Simon and Armitage-Simon (1995), in their discussion about the importance of using risky stories, contend

This is consistent with contemporary assumptions regarding what education must be accountable to: developing a moral sensibility that would not be indifferent to suffering and the infringement of the rights of others; a critical understanding of stereotyping and prejudice and how these are integral to racism, sexism and antisemitism; and a sense of responsibility and ability to take action in support of those democratic institutions that protect a tolerance for diversity and human rights. (p. 29)

Using risky stories can help students learn about these injustices, make connections to their own lives and broader social contexts, and consider potential actions to redress these injustices. Teachers can also use these texts to promote conversations and inquiry-based investigations for students and teachers to, for example, better understand why injustices persist and what might be done about them (Leland & Harste, 2003).

Classroom examples

Lee Heffernan, a 3rd grade teacher, decided to use the text, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* despite initial concerns that the book, with its graphic depictions and descriptions of slavery, might not be appropriate for her students (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000). She found out that with teacher guidance the choice to read this text was appropriate because “not only did they [the children] show no signs of being traumatized ... they displayed an amazing eagerness to talk about the book” (p. 17). Guiding this group of young readers to respond to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, Heffernan posed these questions: What do you want to remember about the book? What surprised you? What questions do you have? What connections can you make to our world today? (p. 220).

I see this as an example of guiding students to read *with* this risky text. The teacher’s stance and commitment opened up curricular and learning possibilities where students were invited if not compelled to compare this account of slavery with more sanitized accounts of slavery found in textbooks. This group of third graders learned, for example, how slaveholders chained slaves on the slave ships and how the slaves were thrown overboard when they were sick. This led to remarks from the students like “it’s good to know what happened” which suggests that this

group of students did not want to be shielded from the realities of history, that they believed they should know what really happened in the past and that they, even as young readers, were capable of engaging with this content.

In an example with a different kind of text, Copenhaver-Johnson, Bowman, and Johnson (2007) demonstrate how picture book 'read-alouds' of a text with a black Santa Claus could lead young children to advance their understandings about race and power. The choice and use of this text – namely, the creation of a classroom space for children to pose and pursue questions and postulate theories about the viability of a Black Santa Claus— helped the children “rethink assumptions that uncritically privilege whiteness” (p. 234). In other words, the children were seemingly encouraged to read *with* this text to embrace the possibility of a black Santa Claus, which then served as a launching pad to “challenge normative race assumptions” (p. 234).

Reading against Texts:

Questioning Authors' Choices, Challenging Cultural Assumptions

A core critical literacy practice involves careful scrutiny of “how texts work” (Luke & Freebody, 1997). This places a pedagogical priority on issues of authorship as teachers support students to question the choices that authors make (and consequences of these choices), as they guide them to understand the work that authors do. Because all texts embody values and agendas and thus can never be neutral, readers are encouraged to adopt a healthy skepticism toward texts, to pose questions about the ways texts promote different views of the world and to consider whether they, as readers, should accept these views (McLaren, 1999). In this sense, readers are encouraged to analyze how texts “imply” readers (Iser, 1974) and invite them to take on particular roles (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003) or to respond in particular ways (e.g., to adopt political perspectives, purchase products, etc.) because texts create and transport representations of the world and these representations have implications for how gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, nationality, and individuality (among others) are viewed and, in turn, constructed. Thus, it is crucial for readers to develop understandings of “how, why, and in whose interests particular texts might work” (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 218).

This approach can be labeled reading *against* texts. Rather than embrace the storyline of a text to learn perhaps deeper truths about social injustices or be challenged to rethink assumptions about race, this approach places a premium on the analysis of texts and reading *against* the ways texts are constructed. A desired result of engaging in these textual practices is “the development of alternative reading positions and practices for questioning and critiquing texts and their affiliated social formations and cultural assumptions” (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 218). It also bears mentioning that this approach is often framed in terms of readers needing to “step back” from a text (i.e., gain a critical distance from it) to better discern the ways authors, illustrators, publishers, and the like, aim to produce desired effects in readers. In this sense, critical textual analysis tends to be understood as a rational, intellectual endeavor, rather than an emotionally laden one (Damico & Apol, 2008).

Classroom examples

Lewis (1999) describes how a fifth/sixth grade teacher, Julia, facilitated literature response with her students in ways emblematic of a reading *against* approach. Julia explains that one of her central goals was for students to develop a questioning stance toward textual ideologies and cultural assumptions: “I want kids to know there is no right interpretation, even about nonfiction. I want them to read with a little bit of doubt in their minds about anything they read... a little skepticism, a little distance from it” (p. 165). Lewis then presents several examples of students

employing “resistant readings” or reading *against* texts. In one case, a young boy discusses his frustration with books that have unrealistic happy endings, specifically leveling a critique of *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O’Dell, 1960) and the ways it, along with many other books, are written for children. Similarly, another student renders problematic how “the good guys” in many books almost always win out in the end. Julia also guides the students to read against the dominant themes or messages of individuality and non-conformity in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), helping the students adopt an alternative reading of this text through posing questions about the potential benefits to communities, such as promoting equity goals in education and the economy. Across these examples of textual analysis we can see evidence of “disrupting the commonplace” and “interrogating multiple viewpoints” (Lewison, et. al., 2002). This type of work, examining texts and their effects, is crucial to children’s emerging empowerment as readers, as Comber notes:

... it is in children’s individual and collective interests to know that texts are questionable, [that] they are put together in particular ways by particular people hoping for particular effects, and they have particular consequences for their readers, producers, and users. (1999, p. 7)

Reading against texts – identifying and questioning assumptions, discerning included and omitted perspectives, determining dominant and absent themes—is foundational to critical literacy. Yet what would it mean to question and challenge – to read *against* – a risky story about slavery? Stepping inside a fifth-grade classroom helps us think through a response to this question.

A Social Justice and Critical Literacy Stance in the Classroom

During the last five months of Ruthie’s first year as a teacher she guided her students in an investigation of freedom and slavery as part of a language arts unit. In this unit Ruthie and the students read and responded to a range of texts, including biographies of Harriet Tubman, picture books about slavery, movies about the “Underground Railroad,” and songs about freedom. Throughout this time I served as a collaborative researcher and critical colleague for Ruthie. I was in the classroom daily, meeting with Ruthie before and after class sessions to discuss her plans or debrief lessons and I documented what transpired during the unit (e.g., taking field-notes, audio or videotaping small group and large group discussions, photocopying documents, etc.). There were also times when I co-taught or individually led lessons with the students. I also jointly examined with Ruthie all the students’ work (literature response journals, essays, tests, poetry, and final projects). For the work described in the ensuing section related to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, I videotaped the class discussion and composed field notes when class concluded. I did not participate in the discussion or engage with the students during this class session.

This unit embodied several guiding principles of Ruthie’s commitments as a social justice educator. The content of the unit centered upon social injustices. Slavery, Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad were the initial curricular focus; racial profiling, child slavery, censorship and affirmative action were subsequent foci as the students completed their own research projects. The unit was also inquiry-based with students playing a central role in posing and pursuing questions about social injustices that mattered to them. Having students play an instrumental role in their own learning aligned with Ruthie’s broader goal for students to see themselves as empowered to “make a difference in the world” as children rather than just in the distant future as adults. Cultivating a strong sense of student agency, which Ruthie thought was best nurtured through an inquiry-based approach, permeated just about everything Ruthie did in

this classroom. One consistent goal was for students to make strong personal connections to all the texts and issues in the unit and then to seriously consider the implications of these connections to their own lives. For example, when reading about Harriet Tubman, Ruthie moved between facilitating a discussion about the risks Harriet took on the "Underground Railroad" to a discussion about what risks the students might take to help people in their communities.

Throughout the unit Ruthie facilitated reading *with* and reading *against* texts. She consistently guided the students to read *with* texts to learn and investigate content about slavery (the next section highlights this approach with *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*). Ruthie also regularly guided students to read *against* texts. One way she did this was by juxtaposing texts (Luke & Freebody, 1997; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004) to demonstrate multiple perspectives on an issue and to help readers more readily discern textual assumptions or authors' agendas. For example, after reading and responding to several books about Harriet Tubman's life (which contained different and seemingly conflicting details), the students began to question why authors decided to highlight certain details and ignore others. This led to discussions where students impugned assumptions that biographies are inherently "true". Ruthie also guided students in close analyses of language-power relationships, practices and effects (Comber, 2001). For example, she helped deconstruct the sentence "The slaves came to America" (a description from one of the older social studies resources in the classroom). After discussing what this sentence made the children think about (e.g., slaves elected to come here, "makes it feel like they went on vacation"), Ruthie discussed how passive constructions like this sentence remove agents from historical events (i.e., the person or group responsible for actions), thus obfuscating issues of power. Ruthie then encouraged students to "redesign" the sentence "with political and social intent and real-world use" (Comber, 2001), which they did, coming up with "White European slave traders enslaved Africans and forced them to America against their will." (Note the inclusion of the agent, slave traders, and the action, enslaved).

Teaching From Slave Ship to Freedom Road

While the content across most texts used in the unit could be categorized generally as "risky," Ruthie believed *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* was the most risky story in the unit. In the preface to the story, the author, Julius Lester, suggests that engaging with the text, requires an active, invested commitment from readers, a willingness to put "on the skins of others." Lester's narrative and Rod Brown's illustrations depict the barbaric treatment of enslaved Africans, graphically describing them being terrorized physically (beaten, whipped, and hanged). With each turn of the page, Lester challenges readers to imagine themselves into the terrifying experiences of the slaves. Lester also heightens the demands and responsibilities placed upon his readers by creating three "Imagination Exercises." Explicitly naming his readers and suggesting particular subject positions, the first exercise is "For White people," the second is "For African Americans," and the third is "For Whites and Blacks." In Exercise One, White people must imagine the pain, hurt and terror of enslaved Africans and examine how this legacy of slavery functions in contemporary society. In Imagination Exercise Two, African Americans are challenged to interrogate their shame, a shame (or an unwillingness to acknowledge and work through this shame) that works to deny the strength and dignity of their African ancestors and, as a result, impedes their own progressive movement (Damico & Apol, 2008). Imagination Exercise Three is for both "Whites and Blacks", requiring both groups to engage in "collective witnessing" (Boler, 1999) to imagine a shared trait of their humanity – evil aggression.

When Ruthie and I were reviewing a range of potential curricular resources before the unit began, she expressed the most concern about this text, stating: "*This is a really deep book. Do*

you think this is something dangerous to introduce to the kids?" Ruthie thought the children might be too emotionally upset by the text and that parents might prefer the book not be used in class. However, after additional conversations between us and gaining approval from the principal to use this text in the unit, Ruthie decided to use the book. She felt confident enough to work with students' responses, with whatever came up in the classroom, and she acknowledged that she had earned the trust of parents by this point in the school year.

When Ruthie and I discussed plans for using *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* our thinking was driven by a reading *with* approach. We knew it was an evocative and a provocative text that would open conversational spaces about slavery and its ongoing effects in United States society and we suspected that the students had not been exposed to the graphic descriptions and imagery of what many slaves experienced (this proved to be accurate). We did not discuss desires for Ruthie's students to read *against* this text or what reading *against* it might look like.

Ruthie used *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* roughly three weeks into the five-month unit. She began by reading the book aloud, occasionally walking around the room to show the illustrations, and then facilitating a discussion. This discussion focused primarily on differences between this book and *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* (Sterling, 1954) and larger inquiry questions for the unit about how people take big risks to help others. More specifically, Ruthie posed the following questions during this discussion: What is striking about this book? What is an example of a connection to *Freedom Train*? Did Harriet (Tubman) have courage and fears? How can she have both? What is an example of courage from *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*? Would you risk your life to make changes in the world that you might not live to see? How many of you feel like you are here for a reason or purpose? How many of you feel like you have experienced freedom? What does the author (Julius Lester) mean with the last line: "Freedom. It is like a promise we are still learning how to keep"? The students' responses either reflected a reading *with* perspective to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (e.g., the illustrations were "difficult to look at", "the book shows what really went on," "it tells a lot of stuff that other books leave out") or engaged with the larger unit questions which were not tied closely to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (e.g., the kinds of risks children their age might take to improve their neighborhoods and communities).

Ruthie then gave the students three writing prompts. How has reading *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* helped you better understand *Freedom Train*? Based on pp. 33-34 in *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, what could Harriet's dream be? Do you have anything else you would like to write about? Most student responses across these writing prompts reinforced the reading *with* responses from the class discussion, pointing out that *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, both the written text and the illustrations, "showed more stuff" than *Freedom Train*, which, consequently, helped students "understand what really happened." Some students explicitly described the "more stuff" as the "actual punishment" of the slaves (e.g., "hanging them" which was "more violent" than in *Freedom Train*). However, one student responded differently to the prompt.

"I am not white..."

Eduardo wrote the following entry in his response journal:

I know slavery is something sick and horror and something bad for what the whites did. I am not white. I am Irish, Indian and Latino.

Eduardo embraced an understanding of how horrific slavery was for Africans as he explored connections between the past and present and expressed disgust and “horror” at what happened to slaves. This is emblematic of a reading *with* stance, a stance that was confirmed in subsequent journal entries from Eduardo and in a follow-up interview with him a few months later. For example, in another journal entry, Eduardo noted that the images in *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* helped him realize that scars from being whipped “won’t go away and remind you forever.” During the interview he expressed that he felt “very moved” and “upset” by this text as well as grateful for how it helped him deepen his understandings about “what really happened to slaves.” He cited, for example, how he became more aware of the vast number of Africans who perished en route to the United States as well as the severity of daily suffering of slaves. He even added, “all kids should learn about this.” (Many of Eduardo’s classmates expressed similar views).

The initial response journal entry from Eduardo also highlights how he read *against* the text and the ways the author, Julius Lester, positions him as a reader. Eduardo considered the relationship between himself and White slave owners, explicitly naming “whites” as the perpetrators of the horrendous crimes, and he distanced himself and his racial location from the Whites who committed these horrible acts. He claimed an identity in response to the text, naming the racial categories to which he belongs and to those he does not. Julius Lester divides his readers into two groups: Whites and Blacks, but Eduardo, as primarily Mexican American, did not fit into either of these categories. Moreover, Eduardo’s attempt to distance himself from Whites might have reflected his concerns that in a world where readers are either White or Black, his racial identity (as a boy with light complected skin) would more likely be linked to the White slave owners.

Complicated Positioning

The concepts reading *with* and reading *against* can help us think about critical literacy work with risky stories. Each upholds a vision and embodies a commitment to cultivating a critically-informed citizenry better equipped to create more humane, socially just conditions and experiences. The “critical” component in each is what differs. A reading *with* approach involves making visible injustices as a pathway toward critical consciousness. A reading *against* approach entails making visible textual moves of authors to detect the ideological trappings of the text.

Thus, it is not surprising that reading *with* texts and reading *against* texts are often viewed as opposing activities; readers can either embrace the storyline, immersing themselves into the text *or* they can critique or challenge the ways an author positions them. Readers can either “go along with” authors and illustrators, or they can challenge the text, often by getting a critical distance from it, refusing to be pulled in. Davies (2003) offers a way out of this trap, arguing that at times “teachers and students need to immerse themselves in the text and distance themselves from that text at the same time” (p. 65). This requires engaging in a “complicated positioning” such as when a reader fully enters a text world and identifies strongly with a character or characters while also retaining some distance to the text and skepticism about the ways an author constructs the storyline (Lewis, 1999, p. 182). Eduardo’s response is emblematic of complicated positioning. He embraced the content (“I know slavery is something sick and horror and something bad for what the white did”) and he claimed a response location against the text as a non-white and non-African American reader (“I am Irish, Indian and Latino.”). Enciso (1994) provides a comparable example of a young reader in a fourth/fifth grade classroom who responds to the book, *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990) with “...there’s a black part (of town) and a white part. Where would the Mexicans or Chinese or someone like that be?” (p.

524). Similarly, Laman (2006) notes how a young bilingual girl responds to the book, *Freedom Summer* (Wiles, 2001) with “What happened to Mexican kids during the Jim Crow laws?” (p. 203).

The idea of complicated positioning also suggests that there was a great deal of potential in Eduardo’s journal entry response, which I frame here as unanswered questions and missed opportunities.

Missed opportunities

Unfortunately, Ruthie and I did not come to more fully appreciate and inquire into Eduardo’s response until after the school year concluded. Because we believe insight often “comes from readers delving into their own reactions to the texts they read” (McGillis, 1996, p. 179), we would have liked to provide Eduardo with more scaffolding opportunities to explore his reactions to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* and to learn more with, and from him about the challenges and possibilities of reading this type of text. For example, did Eduardo consider his response to this text a challenge to Ruthie’s goals with this book (e.g., He did not share his response during the whole class discussion of this book). Did he perceive himself being marginalized by any other texts in the unit? If so, in what ways?

Ruthie and I could have made explicit and modeled for students reading *with* and *against* approaches. We could have employed the terms ‘reading *with*’ and ‘*against*’ as well as the term ‘complicated positioning’ to frame some of the core reading practices and goals for the entire unit and then applied these practices to texts like *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. In terms of reading *with* this text, we could have further stressed the significance of what a text like *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* offers to deepen our understanding of what slaves experienced (e.g., conditions of slave ships, the number of slaves who died en route to America, etc.). In terms of reading *against* this text, in addition to discussing how the author solely addresses ‘Whites’ and ‘Blacks’, we could have guided students to examine closely how and why the author’s language and word choice and the artist’s illustrations evoke such strong, visceral responses in us. We also could have drawn upon Eduardo’s journal entry (with his consent) to launch an exploration of how readers can enact complicated positioning and the value in doing so. This value includes students and teachers: gaining deeper and more nuanced understandings of important social issues, cultivating their critical reading capacities and understandings about “how texts work” (Luke & Freebody, 1997), and more fully realizing that where they, as readers, read *from* matters – i.e., that is, our various social locations – race, gender, social class, ethnicity, sexuality, dis/ability, religion, nationality, among others – inform and shape the ways we read (Brooks, 2006; Damico, Baildon, Exter & Guo, 2009; Enciso, 1994). At the same time we would need to keep in mind the danger of placing readers into rigid “sociological categories of race, social class, ethnicity and family structure” (Lightfoot, 1978, p. 211). McCarthy (1998) echoes this sentiment, arguing that “race is never an absolute structuring force, but is instead one variable in an immensely rich and complex human environment” (p. xii). Ruthie and I could have helped the students understand that their response locations, as with all readers, are dynamic and pluralistic, that they “are not simply stepping into pre-configured and solid identities such as African American, Jamaican, Italian, or Mexican, but are both re-inventing and questioning the very constructs of these imagined national and racial communities” (McCarthy, 1998, p. 159). What we can learn from Eduardo, for example, is not to reify a one-to-one correspondence between racial identity and response (e.g., all Latina (o) students would read *against* *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* in a similar way) but rather to recognize the rich range of response possibilities for readers.

I also wonder if Ruthie and I could have found a way to perhaps better guide the students in navigating their emotions with *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. The day after the read-aloud, the discussion, and the writing in response to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, Ruthie did provide the students with an opportunity to talk and write about “any emotions they felt when hearing the story” and stated that “whatever they were feeling was okay.” Only some students shared their thoughts during this whole class conversation, but all 28 students wrote journal entries and expressed that they either felt sad, bad, mad or angry, shocked, stunned or scared, and ten indicated that they felt two or more of these emotions. Eduardo wrote that “it was not right for white people to put black people in slavery” and that he felt “bad” about slaves “getting whipped.” By creating the opportunity for students to reflect on their emotions, Ruthie validated their feelings and communicated that the affective realm had educational value – that it was worthy of instructional time and that it played a role in fostering literary and subject matter understanding. A next step could be to make the emotional domain an even more explicit and vital component of the curriculum, an integral part, for example, of an investigation of slavery and freedom. This could include focused and deeper explorations with students of the ways that our emotions, individually and collectively, can be/are a powerful source of sense-making and insight – an essential way of understanding the world, especially social injustices.

Critical Literacy as Reader Reflexivity and Textual Critique

The description of missed opportunities and pedagogical moves Ruthie and I could have made engenders implications for how we as teachers conceptualize critical literacy work with students. One viable conception is to understand critical literacy as comprised of two core sets of practices: reader reflexivity and textual critique. Reader reflexivity involves a commitment and set of practices in which readers evaluate the personal and cultural experiences, emotions, values, beliefs, and biases that they bring to texts and their experiences while reading a text to consider how these inform their meaning-making. Reflexivity can also include considering how other readers might make sense of a text. Textual critique is akin to reading *against* texts. It centers upon discerning included and omitted perspectives (e.g., whose voices are heard and not heard in a text) and identifying techniques authors use to position and influence readers (e.g., use of loaded words, emotional appeals, etc.).

Reader reflexivity and textual critique work best in tandem and are especially useful in addressing two central issues related to critical literacy practices in classrooms with risky texts: – 1. How these texts require that young readers navigate the often complicated affective terrain of their responses (sadness, fear, guilt, etc.), *and*: 2. How these texts tend to directly address the social locations of readers with respect to race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, among others. For example, a text about the genocide of Native Peoples in North America addresses Native readers differently than White readers of European heritage. An emphasis on reflexivity would guide a reader, such as Eduardo, to assess what he brings to a text like *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (e.g., background knowledge about slavery, a proud ethnic identity as Mexican American, etc.) and to value and strive to understand his experience while reading the text, such as acknowledging and making sense of his emotions in response to the text – being “very moved” and “upset.” A reflexivity focus along with attention to textual critique would guide a reader like Eduardo to identify marginalized or absent voices in a text and claim his own social location in a response (e.g. as a non-White and non-Black reader to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*).

The need for reader reflexivity and textual critique, of course, also applies to us as educators in our own curricular and instructional work. One way to promote this reflexivity and critique is to continue asking ourselves: What texts are we encouraging, guiding, or requiring students to

read *with*? What texts are we encouraging, guiding, or necessitating that students read *against*? And what is shaping these decisions (e.g., political views we endorse – conservative, neoliberal, liberal, radical)? This commitment to reflexivity and critique can help “raise to consciousness our own presuppositions” about why and how we read and teach “texts the way we do” (McGillis, 1996, p. 21). And it will help us remain vigilant in our efforts to better understand the complexities of our critical work with children and texts in classrooms.

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