

Broken Silences: Writing and the Construction of 'Cultural Texts' by Urban, PreAdolescent Girls

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In the fifth grade urban classroom in which I have been doing ethnographic research over the last two and one half years, the Latina and African-American preadolescent girls talk about stories of expectations and conflicting roles that they must perform in their schools and communities. These young women often feel afraid to speak, afraid to break the silences they know they are expected to keep. In this article, I argue that one of the best ways for young women to begin to break these silences, at a "critical moment" (Gilligan, 1990) in their psychological development, is to talk about their particular experiences through writing, developing *cultural texts* to be used for further examination and discussion as part of the literature of the classroom.

Dans une classe urbaine de cinquième année, dans laquelle j'ai effectué une recherche ethnographique pendant deux ans et demi, les jeunes préadolescentes américaines, d'origine latino-américaine et africaine, parlent des attentes et des conflits avec lesquels elles sont aux prises dans leurs écoles et leurs communautés. Ces jeunes demoiselles ont souvent peur de parler, peur de rompre le silence qu'elles se croient devoir garder. Dans cet article, j'insiste sur le fait qu'une des meilleures manières pour ces jeunes filles de rompre ce silence "à un moment critique" (Gilligan, 1990) de leur développement psychologique, est de parler de leurs expériences à travers l'écriture. Elles peuvent ainsi développer des "textes culturels" qui pourraient être utilisés à des fins d'analyse et de discussion dans la salle de classe.

Writing is one of the ways I participate in struggle – one of the ways I help to keep vibrant and resilient that vision that has kept the Family going on. Through writing I attempt to celebrate the tradition of resistance, attempt to tap Black potential, and try to join the chorus of voices that argues that exploitation and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary. Writing is one of the ways I participate in the transformation ... Writing is one of the ways I do my work in the world.

(Toni Cade Bambara, 1980, p. 154).

In the fifth grade urban classroom in which I have been doing ethnographic research over the last two and one-half years, the Latina and African-American young women talk about their struggles; struggles to understand others' expectations and perceptions of them and struggles to perform the responsibilities and conflicting roles demanded of them by their schools and by their communities. Like Toni Cade Bambara (1980), these girls would like to resist the racism and sexism that is entwined with these struggles. Unlike Toni Cade Bambara, however, these young women feel afraid to speak, to resist, to transform their struggles; afraid to break the silences that they know they are expected to keep.

In the urban classroom in particular, I argue that one of the best ways for young women to begin to break these silences is to talk about their particular experiences through writing. Writing provides them with both a private and public format to construct and reconstruct the texts of their lives, thereby beginning to name, define, describe, explore, and transform both the sexism and racism that threaten to suffocate their voices altogether.

The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, I share some of these urban, preadolescent girls' voices, experiences, knowledge, and learning through their own writing. Writing may be a major avenue by which young women, in particular, can begin to integrate what Gilligan (1990) calls formal educational experiences with powerful learning experiences. Because all language is social, writing becomes a social activity in which a community of writers interacts to negotiate and construct meaning and texts. Writing, although social, is at the same time personal, and is inextricably bound to one's culture (Burke-LeFevre, 1987). Indeed, according to Willinsky (1990), through writing, students can shape, construct, and reconstruct the experiences of their lives. For example, Shuman (1986) describes how writing provided the urban adolescent girls in her study a way to work out ideas and problems in the midst of their ongoing experiences. Writing about their experiences, both in school and at home, helped them to express their voices as they learned to construct texts to reveal what was significant and relevant to their lives. Writing became an important context in which these girls could "as part of an ongoing situation say things that they could not easily say orally" (Shuman, 1986, p. 150).

Second, through sharing some of the young women's writing, I show that it may be particularly worthwhile to explore not only the *process* of their writing but also the *product* of their writing. Process in and of itself is crucial in the classroom for helping young women to develop a sense of confidence in their abilities as, for example, they and their peers learn to be both critical and supportive of their work. An exploration of the process of writing may

not be enough. Instead, it may be necessary to investigate the product, the actual texts they create, to consider how, why, when, and where these texts perpetuate versions of gender, race, and class. I argue, therefore, for an emphasis on developing one's voice through the process of writing, coupled with a critical reading of the product or actual text in the classroom. This critical reading of the product, then, may reveal the "text's ideology," forming a "cultural text" (Gilbert, 1989) that can be used for further examination and discussion in the classroom. Both teachers and the students can learn to develop ways of analyzing versions of the texts that the young women typically produce.

Samples of the written products from some of these fifth-grade, preadolescent, urban girls illustrate how their life experiences, knowledge, and learning are revealed through their writing as they develop their voices through the construction of cultural texts. From these cultural texts, a number of persistent themes emerged. Among those I share here are the themes of domestic responsibilities in the home and evolving sexuality. These themes show clearly how expectations and perceptions operate within the social context of the classroom and the community to produce versions of the young girls' lives which are neither held in high regard nor made problematic. I argue that these cultural texts should become part of the literature of the classroom if we are to bring young, urban women's learning up from the "underground" (Gilligan, 1990) and back into the classroom. The classroom may be a critical site for these young women to begin to name, define, describe, explore, and transform sexism and racism as daily realities.

Developing Voice

"I don't have anything to write about," said Carmen,¹ a fifth grade Mexican-American girl. "Why don't you write about what you do after school?" I offered. "Naw," said Carmen, "I just wash the dishes and clean and that's not very interesting." Carmen often insisted that she simply had "nothing good to say," adding that no one would find her life very interesting anyway.

Carmen has continued and will continue to struggle with finding her voice in school. (As a non-native speaker of English, she, like many of her peers, also struggles with her written English, having been in bilingual classes until fourth-grade.) However, because Mr. Russel, her classroom teacher, introduced a process writing approach into his curriculum, with student-devised topics, Carmen was able to slowly develop a sense of confidence, community, and camaraderie. She learned that she could create written pieces on themes and topics that were of genuine interest to her and

that her peers and Mr. Rassel could be both critical and supportive of her work. Through a community setting of peer conferences, author's chair (Graves & Hansen, 1983), individual teacher conferences, and large-group collaboration, she was able to learn that, indeed, her knowledge and experiences were not only valuable but interesting to others. Carmen began to accept that she and the other girls could experiment with both oral and written language through process-writing activities and begin to relate their experiences through the larger context of process-writing in the classroom.

When Carmen first began to write in Mr. Rassel's classroom she retold what she thought Mr. Rassel wanted to hear. In "All about school," Carmen told me, she wrote just as she had always written – safely.

All about school²

I love math it is nice I read in school I have fun in school. When I go home I do my homework. I hate spelling. I Love art my school name is [] school it is so nice. I go to school at 9:00 a.m. my friend she is so funny some times. I don't do my homework. My friend she is so funny she don't do her work in class.

Near the middle of fifth-grade, however, Carmen had learned that it was alright not only to write about what she wished but also to begin to express her voice. She had learned to think about the many aspects of her thoughts around an issue and spent a lot of time making extensive semantic webs before beginning to write. Furthermore, she learned to thrive on the feedback of her peers and was always happy to read a piece in front of the classroom. "Are [our] teacher" shows clearly how she had begun to grapple with issues of authority, love and discipline, genuineness and fairness, and finally, voice. It was also the only piece she says she ever truly liked.

Once there were teachers who didn't like there boss. And some don't But some talk about Mr. [vice principal] And like other teachers, the teachers think there god. When [principal] is there, Mr. Rassel ask [acts] like he's bad. But when she not around he thinks he's very nice to us. But Mr. Rassel loves us a lot but for me I don't belive him. But I now [know] he does. It makes me feel go [good] to say it.

Implementing a process approach to writing in the classroom may give young women like Carmen opportunities to learn the value and purpose of peer review, collaboration, shared knowledge, and community. In addition, the process itself may help them to experiment with and emphasize self-expression and voice through their writing. More importantly the process of writing allows these young women the opportunity to create a text which then may be used for further discussion and critical examination in the classroom.

As Carmen and some of the other young women in Mr. Russell's classroom began to understand that the context of the writing-process approach provided them with an avenue for expressing their opinions and describing their experiences, their voices began to resonate more clearly and loudly through the texts themselves. Issues central to their lives as urban, pre-adolescent Latina and African-American girls began to surface as they began to deal with more personal, confusing, and often frightening issues.

Extending Voice at a Critical Moment: Producing Cultural Texts

Early adolescence, which includes roughly the ages between ten and twelve, represents a time that "precipitates a developmental crisis in girls' lives" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 6) as they begin to "show signs of losing their ability to know what is relationally true or real" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 5). The period of transition from early adolescence into adolescence and womanhood places girls at a "heightened psychological risk" (p. 2) as they learn both in school and out of school that their voices are not legitimated. What young girls value as important, such as relationships, connection, and even resistance and disagreement, are rejected by adults as not being nice nor productive. Preadolescent girls, at a critical moment of development, begin to take their learning underground and silence altogether their experiences and, hence, their voices (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1990; Rogers, 1993).

The transition into adolescence by nonmainstream girls is compounded by expectations of society that they have to learn a number of roles as potential wives, housekeepers, mothers, and job-holders. Preadolescent girls, in general, must begin to deal not only with issues of physical change (menarche, puberty) but also with issues of emotional change. Urban, poor adolescents, however, may experience additional struggles, as they begin to deal in the future with the realities of their present and potentially devalued roles, requiring them to "establish identities in a greater number of domains," that is, greater than mainstream adolescents (Harter, 1990, p. 380). As a result, increased conflict may erupt among poor, urban girls as they move through adolescence into adulthood.

The young women in Mr. Russell's classroom revealed through their writing a sense of such an increased conflict, which, indeed, tended to center on the notion of multiple roles and identities, both within school and within their homes and communities. One such source of this conflict lay in the role many of these young women found themselves increasingly fulfilling: that of being primary caretakers of younger siblings, a task which was often required

in lieu of doing homework, socializing with their friends, or in some instances, of even going to school.

Nayda, an eleven year-old Mexican American girl, spoke often about her struggle with her role of caring constantly for her younger sister at the expense of playing with friends after school. In "*My dum [dumb] sister*," Nayda expresses her frustration in writing with this increasingly demanding and troublesome role:

My sister is always getting me into trouble. She does stuff like, bosses me around and when I hit her I get into trouble. Another thing I don't like about her is that she always wants to come with me to my friends house and I hate that and her. My sister is getting on the end of my rope and I am hateing her more.

Shortly after writing this piece, Nayda talked about turning her thoughts into a play so that she could talk more about how her life was just unfair. In anticipation of writing this play, Nayda spent a great deal of time eliciting similar stories from some of the other girls in her class, validating her feelings that life for all of them was simply unfair.

Ellen, a ten-year old Puerto Rican American, expressed much of the same frustration as did Nayda, telling me that "everyone [girls] has problems with their sisters and others." She, too, was relegated to the role of primary caretaker of her younger sister, Marcia, a role which Ellen found confusing because even though she was in charge of her younger sister, she was not allowed to discipline her in the way she had been disciplined. In "*My sister*," she explains:

My Sister

My baby sister is Marcia but we call her Marcy. We call her Marcy because when she was born my grandmother decided to call her Marcy as a nickname. She is 3 years old. She sometimes get me introuble like if I hit her my father comes and say's, what did you do to the baby? I told him she has to learn discipline. He goes so, you could teach her when she's bigger. I go yeah whatever whatever. There is one more way she gets me in trouble. When I stop hitting her she say's stop Ellen stop and I go shut-up not doing anything to you now. My father told me to stop and I said, I'm not doing anything to her my mother told him the same thing. When my father goes to sleep I tell my sister she's a pain in the butt. If my baby sister makes a mess I got to clean it up. She always makes the mess in the living room. She likes to make the mess with any kid that goes to my house. You know I love her but is just sometimes I hate her cause of what she has done to me.

Ellen's ending, "I love her ... I hate her" clearly shows a confused, tentative voice, one which struggles with issues of authority, love and discipline, and fairness. However, through her writing, she, too, was able to begin to discuss these issues with other members of her class. These discussions helped her to feel that she was not alone in her struggle as a young urban female.

Struggles for love and fairness were revealed in the texts of other girls as well. Walinda, an eleven-year-old African-American, tells about how her mother and older siblings work at night. She is left home alone to be responsible for the daily cooking and cleaning, a role so demanding, she is literally alone, not able to find the time to visit friends or have them in. She is left by herself to rely on the phone and television for companionship. Her story, "*All alon [alone] at home*" is a particularly poignant one, and is, according to Walinda, her favorite piece because it's "hard to write about [her] family":

I am all alone at home and I am scary and staring at the pone
[phone] I wait and want some more and no one calls it it is such a
bore. I clan [clean] the house and I saw [sew] and cook and thin
[then] I think I call my frinds my pal my budy to the pone. I grap
[grab] the pone no longing [longer] blue and I love and talk with
you

Current research which focuses on issues of class, race, and gender among school-aged girls (Gardner, Dean & McKaig, 1992; Finley, 1992; Luttrell, 1992) supports, and makes problematic, the notion that many working-class girls perform multiple roles and accept multiple responsibilities for their families and communities. For example, Finley (1992) found that among working-class young women, aspirations of continued schooling were often squelched precisely because of the restrictions placed on them by their families in the form of domestic responsibilities and roles at home.

Research, too, has shown that women, in general, because of their devalued future role statuses, "have fewer options than do men to achieve control over competing role demands" (Barnett & Baruch, 1987, p. 135). Further, the "coping mechanisms" for young men, such as dating, sex, and marriage may, indeed, serve only as additional sources of stress for young women as they seek to sort out these conflicting demands (Bush & Simmons, 1987, p. 201). Conflicting or competing notions of future expected social roles, then, provide "key sources of stress for adolescent girls" (Bush & Simmons, 1987, p. 201), stress in the case of poor, urban girls that may be exacerbated by race and class.

This social role phenomenon takes on additional significance in the study of poor, urban girls because the intersection and the interaction of the effects of race and class on female adolescents have been understudied (Bush & Simmons, 1987; Gilligan, 1990; Entwisle, 1990; Feldman & Elliott, 1990; Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990). Most research has focused on the normal adolescent, that is, the white, middle-class, primarily male, developing adolescent. Among this population, much research has focused on identity development in relationship to mainstream society (Harter, 1990). That is, the normal adolescent's identity formation is contingent upon her or his eventual acceptance of the standards, morals, and values of mainstream society. Identity formation among nonmainstream adolescents may be particularly troublesome, therefore, because it is this population of adolescents who may often find themselves enveloped and evaluated by values and standards contrary to their culture. In fact, Spencer & Dornbusch (1990) report that nonmainstream adolescents are "keenly aware of the evaluations made [about them] by the mainstream," (p. 130) and that the impact of these negative appraisals may manifest in withdrawal or feelings of powerlessness and voicelessness. As a result, they drop out of school and mainstream society, altogether.

Preadolescence represents a time in a young person's life that is "intrinsically stressful" (Bush & Simmons, 1987, p. 186). Because adolescence is socially constructed, the family and the school setting take on special significance for the social organization of adolescence. However, we do not know enough about how the organization of schools interacts with gender in particular but also with race, class, and age to produce what Bush and Simmons (1987) call, "a constellation of stress" (p. 209).

The stress that many of the young women in Mr. Russell's class felt manifested itself, too, through their writing. As the school year progressed, and the young women became increasingly comfortable in constructing texts that more closely revealed their lives, writing emerged that clearly reflected the daily realities and struggles they encountered around their evolving sexuality as young women.

Breaking Silences: Naming and Critiquing Experiences Through Cultural Texts

The young women's relationships with their families, teachers, and particularly the boys in the classroom, were dictated in very real and frightening ways, as these young women often felt they were expected to be silent about being treated as sexual objects, objects of ridicule based on physical appearance, and as potential childbearers.

Carmen, the young woman I introduced earlier, spent a great deal of time complaining both orally and in writing about how the boys in the class sexually harassed her, and she was very frustrated that no one seemed to listen. In the following letter to me, Carmen explains clearly her experiences with being sexually harassed in the classroom and her response to the eventual outcome:

There was this boy who always grabbed my butt and he thought I would do nothing. So I went to the teacher and he got in trouble every week. But he [teacher] just *said* he getsuspended.

Although Mr. Rassel took Carmen's allegations very seriously, eventually removing the boy from the classroom, it was not an issue which was discussed in class to Carmen's satisfaction, and as a result, she felt strongly that justice had not been done. After all, she told me, "He'll just keep doin' it somewhere else." Carmen never complained again.

According to Fine & Zane (1991), public schools continue to be "laminated in denial as if race, class, and gender were neutral" (p. 78). Among nonmainstream girls in particular, the politics of being "female, low-income, and of color [in contemporary public schools] denies these women full participation inside public schooling....they are neglected, dismissed, and relegated to positions of substantial educational, economic, and social risk" (Fine & Zane, 1991, p. 80). The denial of these girls' experiences may very well lead to their early exit from school.

Those young urban women who do remain in school are continually presented with messages that require them to subscribe loyally to traditional views of both minority and gender roles (Fine & Zane, 1991). These messages impose an artificial split between public and private issues, as young non-mainstream girls' experiences are "reserved for outside of class." This not-naming and silencing represents a "betrayal of these young women's lives" (Fine & Zane, 1991, p. 85).

The betrayal which many young women in Mr. Rassel's classroom felt stemmed from how they perceived others, that is, families, teachers, and boys in the classroom, viewed them. As these young women wrote and talked about this sense of betrayal, it became clear that this betrayal was rooted not only in clearly delineated societal expectations but also in their struggle to name, question, and critique these perceptions and expectations in the classroom setting.

Nayda was a constant subject of ridicule by many of the boys in the classroom, who spent an inordinate amount of time dreaming up ways to compare her body to the whales in their nature unit and to the submarines in

their journeys unit. It was not uncommon, in my observations, to even hear her referred to as a "fat bitch" or a "fat Spic." In the following piece, Nayda begins to name this sense of betrayal of having to maintain, in the eyes of both her family and her peers, an attractive appearance and good grades. To her, maintaining an attractive appearance and getting good grades were mutually exclusive. She writes:

My mother says she wants me to look nice she doesn't want me to look fat and stuff but she still wants me to do good in school. Like before I said I'm too fat and have to exercise and now I don't care I eat what I have to eat. I'm getting fatter and they [family, boys] pick on me but I'm doing better in school.

Nayda was acutely aware of the comparisons and name-calling, and as the school year progressed, she became alternately silent and aggressive, often spending her energies arguing and disagreeing with most of those around her.

Through her writing, Nayda grew to be an activist. Perhaps because she could not control what others said and thought of her, she attempted to control that which she could: her thoughts and her ideas written down so that all would listen to her in author's chair or so that all would see the published text, hanging from the bulletin board. Her writing gave her an important opportunity to be heard.

The following piece, "*Freedom of choice*," illustrates how Nayda helped transform the pain of hurtful sexist and racist comments into productive activism. In this text, she is able to identify, critique, and therefore directly challenge, an injustice she believed she had suffered at the hands of her teacher. By directly challenging her teacher through her writing, she was able to gain a sense of power and voice.

I think that kids should be able to buy what they want from [book publisher].

A reason is we are paying for what we buy, not our teacher. Just because a book doesn't match our [thematic] webs, we can't buy it All kids should buy what they want. Another thing why kids ain't buying, is because our teacher crosses out stuff we like, for example fairy tales, famos peoples book, stickers, joke books, and posters. All these things give us "Ideas" for pieces.

As I said, "we should be able to have freedom of choice when buying books."

Jenna, an African-American girl, also wrote about issues that were important to her as a young woman, issues that often went unanswered by any adult in her life. This became apparent, when, during one of our group writing conferences, she desperately needed to know whether "boys got periods too"

and was confused as to whether "sperm was like [our] periods." She continued to ask questions, ending the conversation with "we go to a cheap school" (because there is no nurse to answer questions), and "I wish that boys got pregnant too." Jenna eventually wrote a piece (untitled) about her resentment, anger, and sense of betrayal surrounding issues which, important to her, were wrongly addressed or virtually ignored by the adults in her life. In the following text, Jenna criticizes her father, challenging both his treatment of her male friends and his caveat about why girls should stay away from boys:

My father was talking to me and he told me boys are only after one thing because he was a boy before. There was this boy and he wouldn't let me play with him my father tried to keep him away and if he did something bad to me my father would hang him up. My father says boys don't care what they do to you because if I get pregnant if we get pregnant its our problem. I would like that boys got pregnant too.

Although Jenna was never able to articulate to me exactly what she meant by saying if she got pregnant, it was our problem, she gave me the sense that her father meant our to include African-American girls as a group — one of society's racist assumptions, which although still obscure to Jenna, was assumed to be true by her father.

Conclusions and Implications

Emphasis in the process-writing classroom has typically, and traditionally, been placed on the process by which students create texts. However, I argue that, especially among young, urban females, it is just as crucial to emphasize the product, or the cultural text, which they produce. That is, an emphasis needs to be placed on not only how the text is socially and culturally constructed from such notions as gender, race, and class, but on what the text actually says, revealing issues of gender, race, and class, that are particularly salient to urban, poor young women. These issues, then, in the form of written texts, should be used as part of the literature of the classroom. Both students and the teacher can use such texts as points of critique for further discussion and examination. In other words, the notion of "cultural texts" becomes "of little value unless there is also a consideration of how [these] texts are *used* [italics added] in women's lives and how meanings are made of them" (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991, p. 53). By implementing a process approach to writing in his classroom, Mr. Russell provided these young women an initial context in which not only to explore community and camaraderie through the process of writing but also to find an

opportunity from which to begin to explore the meanings of their lives through the product of their written pieces. These young women, then, began to value writing as an initial way of naming, describing, and expressing that which they had never felt comfortable expressing before.

These fifth grade girls, much like the girls Shuman (1986) describes, valued writing for three reasons. First, writing allowed them to create and develop a sense of community through the writing process as they learned to construct mutually supportive environments in which to create. Second, writing gave these young women an opportunity to talk about issues they otherwise felt they could not discuss, regardless of the perceived risks involved. Writing helped them to express their voices as they learned to write and talk about what was important in their daily lives. And finally, writing helped them to create cultural texts, providing them with the opportunity to begin to name, to critique, and to understand their roles and their lives as urban, poor young women. A critical reading of the cultural texts presented here lends support to the research that shows that young, urban women in particular have to deal with competing demands, multiple roles, and perceptions and expectations that are often both racist and sexist. These issues become increasingly complex as the young women enter and move through adolescence.

Writing in the classroom may be a first step in giving young, urban girls some sense of control over meaning both in their texts and in their lives. This, in turn, may provide them with an avenue by which they can begin not only to understand themselves but also to make sense of and understand, as young, poor, urban women, their relationships with others in their society. Further, their writing may give educators an opportunity to identify and explore more closely particular aspects of their lives that contribute to increasing fear and silence.

Including a discussion of girls' experiences as important contexts for learning in the classroom is especially crucial as urban, poor females are critically underrepresented in studies about adolescence, especially within a central area of adolescent life: the school. Because the experiences of many urban, poor female adolescents are complicated by issues not faced by white, middle-class females, there is a compelling need to gain more insight into the intersections of race and class with gender, to begin to better describe what Gilligan (1990) calls, a critical juncture in the psychological development of young women in general. Issues of racism and sexism combine with the issues of the young women's daily lives to make their experiences, and, in turn, their psychological and social development, particularly compelling.

Beyond Naming: Shaping Others' Voices Through Cultural Texts

Tensions can be created when teachers use cultural texts as important contexts for learning in the classroom. Primarily these tensions result from some teachers' "natural" unwillingness not only to relinquish a measure of control in the classroom, but also to identify clearly their own social visions as "agents" in helping students to "work toward a more humane society" (Bigelow, 1990, p. 445). Teachers are often afraid of these dangerous conversations that both they and the students can create through the creation and discussion of cultural texts in the classroom. Fine's (1987) work in urban public schools supports these assertions as she found few teachers who encouraged the inclusion of students' diverse lived experiences in their curriculum. Those teachers who did listen to their students' voices were summarily reprimanded for introducing "extraneous materials ... teachers too were silenced" (p. 166).

Yet, teachers are instrumental in helping to shape these conversations. Teachers must establish not only a sense of community where they can help shape and share responses, but must also become self-critical of their own "complicity in oppression" (Bigelow, 1990, p. 445), working to purposefully encourage naming oppression, rather than teaching students to "betray their own voices" (Fine, 1990, p. 172) by remaining silent. Second, teachers need to "push students to use their stories as windows not only on their lives, but on society," discovering that "their lives are important sources of learning" (Bigelow, 1990, p. 439). It is in this way that students can find social and political meaning that is a direct source of activism. Third, teachers must provide additional role models for naming, critiquing, and resisting. These role models are found in studying other oppressed groups through literature. Text selection is crucial as students not only can see themselves in the texts, but also can see possibilities and opportunities for social justice and change as their discussions are tied to a larger societal discourse through literature.

Finally, teachers should encourage students not only to write cultural texts for analysis and discussion, but also to explore and express their voices through writing for other purposes. Part of the despair that may become apparent through a continuous discussion of poor, urban girls' lives, for example, arises from a production of texts that leaves no room for improvisation or simply, a joy of writing.

In the words of Toni Cade Bambara (1980), exploitation and struggle need not lead to misery. I suggest that the use of cultural texts as the literature of the classroom can have profound and positive effects on the girls who write them and on others' who hear them for two important reasons. First, the cultural texts that girls create provide models on which others (e.g.

students and teachers) can begin to name and therefore potentially change their social conditions. Second, the use of cultural texts as important contexts for discussion and learning can help to break the silences that poor, urban girls, in particular, have kept and are expected to keep. The breaking of their silences may be one powerful way we can insure that girls remain in school, rather than their searching for "alternative contexts" (Fine, 1987, p. 170) in which to speak and to learn. A search for alternative contexts ultimately leads many of these girls out of school altogether, where their voices may be silenced forever.

Advice From a Poet: Our Silences Will not Protect us

The late poet, Audre Lourde (1984) helps us further understand why breaking these silences is so crucial for women's learning. It is an understanding that may be taken into the classroom.

Lourde tells us of the times she was quiet, afraid, and unable to speak out against daily injustices that engulfed and enraged her. And yet, as she prepared herself for her impending death from cancer, she realized that her silences had never protected her; they had only served to delay her pain and mute her rage.

It seems apparent that women must recognize differences among themselves as powerful tools from which common struggles can be enriched and challenged. From these joint struggles, then, we may learn to speak, breaking the silences that threaten to suffocate us. Our differences become our strength as we "devise ways to take the dailiness of each of our lives and transform this into *our* [italics added] literatures, a recreation of the textures of our lives" (Lourde, 1984, p. 118).

Girls' silences, too, can be explored and broken through writing and the construction of texts in the classroom. These cultural texts, then, can be used not only to recognize and examine similarities and differences among women, but also as a point for being heard: to render the material from experiences of our lives into that which can help shape others' lives.

The effort to break the silences so many women report sharing must begin in the classroom, the precise site from which the betrayal and "tyranny of silence" (Lourde, 1984, p. 11) begins for young women in this society. As teachers, we must not be afraid in the classroom to encourage and listen to the voices which we have been "taught to distrust" (p. 11). It is only through our efforts in helping to break the silences of young women, particularly those which have been most unheard, that we can truly be heard as women in

society, naming and challenging insidious notions of racism and sexism that have been constructed to keep us silent.

Notes: (1) All of the girls' names are pseudonyms. The teacher, Mr. Rassel, wishes his name to appear here as his own. (2) The written pieces are presented in the original, unedited form except where meaning would be lost.

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