SHARING MULTICULTURAL POETRY WITH ELEMENTARY EDUCATION STUDENTS: A TEACHER INQUIRY INTO DEVELOPING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

A Thesis in
Curriculum and Instruction
by
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Abstract

This is the story of my teaching and learning about multicultural poetry with elementary education students taking Teaching Children’s Literature, a required course for elementary education majors, at The Pennsylvania State University’s University Park Campus during the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006. My purpose as a researcher was to investigate the students’ cognitive and affective interpretations and reinterpretations of multicultural poetry in a learning environment supportive of each person’s awareness of himself/herself as a maker of meaning (Berthoff, 1990). Conscious awareness of oneself as a maker of meaning in a social context is integral to the development of critical consciousness, which encourages human agency.

In my teaching as inquiry into developing critical consciousness, I share my philosophy of education informing my agency as a teacher and researcher. I discuss interpretation of language, curricula and culture, connections through poetry in curricula, pedagogical approaches for developing critical consciousness and agency, and evaluative approaches for growth in terms of multicultural poetry for children as essential to education for shaping the mind and nourishing the spirit. I also discuss my philosophy of poetry focusing on multicultural poetry as political and potentially transformational. I believe reading and hearing multicultural poetry can help nurture students’ aesthetic readings, raise social and environmental awareness, develop critical consciousness, and encourage human agency.
As I share the students’ and my dialectical writings making meanings of multicultural poems, I explore our revisiting of uses of rhyme and rhythm—often associated with humor and playful narrative poetry—in contexts of poetry and verse as voices for social justice. I also relate our responses to selected multicultural poems as we surface and extend perceptions through moments of connection, questioning, struggle, and imagination. Multicultural poetry is essential for young people’s education for a pluralistic, democratic society as it shapes the mind, nourishes the spirit, and encourages agency for a more humane, peaceful, and just world.
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Engaging with Multicultural Poems: “Powers of Critical Consciousness”
Foreword

Because of complexities associated with obtaining reprint permissions from publishers and copyright holders for poetry, I am providing a list of poems with bibliographical information below rather than reprinting poems discussed in this dissertation. As poems sometimes appear in more than one publication, the bibliographical citations for these poems are not comprehensive.

Chapter 2 Education and Multicultural Poetry for Children: Shaping the Mind and Nourishing the Spirit

“Chemistry 101” by Marilyn Nelson

Chapter 3 Multicultural Poetry as Political and Potentially Transformational

“Little Tom Tucker” by Eve Merriam

“Lunch in Nablus City Park” by Naomi Shihab Nye

“The Guest House” by Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

“My Grandmother in the Stars” by Naomi Shihab Nye

“My Memories of the Nicaraguan Revolution” by Eugenio Alberto Cano Correa
Chapter 4   Revisiting Familiar Forms, Lessons, and Poets

“Jack Be Nimble Jack Be Quick” by Eve Merriam

“Take-a-Tour, Take-a-Tour, Congressman” by Eve Merriam

“Little Jack Horner” by Eve Merriam

“Taxi Man” by Eve Merriam

“Harriet Tubman” by Eloise Greenfield

“Harriet Tubman Speaks” by J. Patrick Lewis

“Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes


“Dinner Guest: Me” by Langston Hughes

“Dreams” by Langston Hughes

“Reasons Why” by Langston Hughes
“Children’s Rhymes” by Langston Hughes

“Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou

“Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou

“Alone” by Maya Angelou

“Woman Work” by Maya Angelou

“Africa” by Maya Angelou

**Chapter 5  Surfacing and Extending Perceptions through Interpreting Multicultural Poetry: Moments of Connection, Questioning, Struggle, and Imagination**

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“Learning English” by Luis Alberto Ambroggio, translated by Lori Carlson

“Translating Grandfather’s House” by Ed Vega

“A Puerto Rican Girl’s Sentimental Education” by Johanna Vega

“The Changeling” by Judith Ortiz Cofer
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“and sometimes i hear this song in my head” by Harriet Jacobs
“Rock Drawings” by Nancy Wood

“Knoxville, Tennessee” by Nikki Giovanni


“The Desert Is Theirs” by Byrd Baylor

“Solitude” by Nancy Wood

Chapter 6 Learning and Teaching for the Future

“Common Dust” by Georgia Douglas Johnson


“Our Children” by Nancy Wood
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My teacher inquiry into developing critical consciousness is shaped by my experiences and interactions with many individuals who embrace learning and teaching. I would like first to express my appreciation for my committee members, Daniel D. Hade, Miryam Espinosa-Dulanto, Steven Herb, and Madhu Suri Prakash.

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Professor Prakash opened worlds for me that continue to shape my mind and nourish my spirit. Her guiding questions about my philosophy of education helped me
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I thank my students for their thoughts and feelings responding to multicultural poetry. Their interpretations and reflections helped me grow as a teacher and learner—and as a human being.

Many individuals have provided support and encouragement while I have been pursuing my doctoral studies. I would like to thank Sara Willoughby-Herb for her warmth and caring. I also thank Eunja Yun, Jamie Tsai, Teresita Santiago, Karla Schmit, Mary Napoli, Susan Lunsford, Julianne Guillard, Martha Freeman, and Wan-Hsiang Chou for their friendship and support.

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Most especially, I thank my husband Stephen O’Bryan Hopkins for his love and belief in me. His passion for music and achievement of a doctorate in music theory inspired me to go for my dreams. His artistry as a composer affirms my faith in God and my belief in the powers of love and prayer. I dedicate this dissertation to Steve.
Chapter 1
Multicultural Poetry in Education: Changing the Cycle of a Marginalized Necessity

Background

Much of my experience as a student in the K-12 public school system was focused on the mind without balanced attention to emotion, body, and spirit. Engaging the rational mind was the norm, and poetry was completely marginalized in the curriculum during the upper elementary and middle school grades. In high school, with little prior experience reading poetry, I found the difficulty level of poetry and searches for meaning intimidating. I had moved away from interpreting poetry with my feelings and senses, and the journey back to appreciating poetry took years. A graduate course in Romantic literature helped me enjoy poetry and re-connect with a delight in poetry’s sounds and images that I had experienced as a young child. This was a beginning, but it was not until I started teaching children’s literature at Penn State University that two major shifts happened for me. The course has a multicultural literature emphasis, which helped open my eyes to literature as political and a means to focus on social issues with future teachers. I also immersed myself in reading a lot of multicultural poetry, became less concerned with whether I understood everything in a poem, and found myself more attracted to the heart-opening feelings I was experiencing. As I read poems by poets such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Pablo Neruda, Marilyn Nelson, Gary Soto, Janet Wong, Ashley Bryan, Joy Harjo, Walter Dean Myers, and Nancy Wood, I felt my compassion growing. I realized that a transformation of my own critical consciousness had begun, and I wanted
to keep reading multicultural poetry and bringing it into the classroom to share with students.

In my work with elementary education majors taking children’s literature, I have observed that many students do not particularly like poetry. Oftentimes these students mention negative experiences, such as required memorization and individual recitations in front of the class, as well as trying to figure out the “right” (the teacher’s) interpretation. Students often tell me about a lack of exposure to poetry between the early elementary grades and high school. Poet and educator Georgia Heard (1999) suggests that poetry becomes marginalized as a consequence of education in schools:

Now I’m beginning to understand the answer to Adrienne Rich’s question, ‘What is it that allows many people in the United States to accept the view of poetry as a luxury rather than food for all: food for the heart and senses, food of memory and hope?’ Perhaps it’s the way it has been taught and presented to us that makes so many people exclude it from their lives. (p. xi)

Influencing how poetry is taught and presented to future teachers has the potential to shift poetry and multicultural poetry from the margins of a literature curriculum to a place of frequent and welcomed inclusion. As Cecilia Espinosa and Karen Moore (2000) state in their article, “Understanding and Transforming the Meaning of Our Lives through Poetry, Biographies, and Songs,”

We want our students to be awakened by poetry in such a way that their thoughts and feelings are given body and shape by its power. We also want them to know about the lives and work of poets like Pablo Neruda, Rafael Alberti, Alfonsina Stormi, Gabriela Mistral, Rubén Dario, Sandra Cisneros, Nikki Giovanni, Gary Soto, and others. As teachers we know that the struggle starts with us, that children won’t take poetry as something indispensable unless we do. (pp. 75-76)¹

¹ A note indicates that this piece is reprinted from the second chapter of Making Justice Our Project, edited by Carole Edelsky.
As a teacher and researcher who has come to “take poetry as something indispensable,” I believe that when a teacher values multicultural poetry, students sense that and may be motivated to develop a life-long interest in reading multicultural poetry and possibly in writing their own poetry. Part of what poetry gives us, I believe, is human connection and fresh ways of visioning through poetry’s invitation to interpret with our whole beings. With its diversity of individual voices, multicultural poetry is essential to a literature curriculum that seeks to develop students’ social and environmental awareness and critical consciousness; multicultural poetry also has the potential to nurture empathy and develop compassion. And poems, Naomi Shihab Nye observes, “respect our ability to interpret and translate images and signs” (http://scholar.lib.vt/edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring95/Nye.html).

While I recognize that not everyone is going to like poetry as a genre, I hope to inspire future teachers to share poetry and multicultural poetry regularly with their future students. I love Charlotte Huck’s statement of her goal in teaching a graduate course on poetry for children: “My major goal in this class was to help teachers become excited about poetry and then in turn to excite their own students” (quoted in McClure, 1990, p. ix). My focus is on multicultural poetry because I view multiculturalism as a means to work toward social change and social justice (Hade, 1997, p. 240). I believe reading and hearing multicultural poetry can help nurture students’ aesthetic readings, raise social and environmental awareness, develop critical consciousness, and encourage human agency.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate pre-service elementary teachers’ cognitive and affective interpretations and reinterpretations of multicultural poetry in a
learning environment supportive of each person’s awareness of himself/herself as a maker of meaning (Berthoff, 1990).

Conscious awareness of oneself as a maker of meaning in a social context is integral to the development of critical consciousness, which encourages human agency. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, Paulo Freire “never spoke of conscientization as an end itself, but always as it is joined by meaningful praxis”2 (p. 47). Developing critical consciousness is a process of thoughtful awareness that informs interpretations, nourishes imagination, and energizes agency.

**Guiding Questions**

What cognitive and affective interpretations and reinterpretations of multicultural poetry do elementary education children’s literature students have?

What interpretations and reinterpretations do these pre-service teachers have when keeping a dialectical notebook for their multicultural poetry readings?

What imagery and metaphors from the poetry are significant in this meaning-making process? What imagery and metaphors do students use in their own writing as they interpret and reinterpret meanings? For students inclined to respond to multicultural poetry through writing poetry, what poetic representations of their interpretations do they create?

**Why imagery?**

In *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School*, Georgia Heard (1999) describes “the transformational power of poetry” as “the power to feed the heart and senses” (p. xvi). Imagery in poetry not only invites sensual responses,

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2 hooks (1994) defines “conscientization” as “critical awareness and engagement” and “praxis” as “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (p. 14).
but it also evokes emotions and connections with personal experiences. Imagery is integral to interpreting with our whole beings, and paying attention to imagery can help people exercise their powers of imagination and can encourage more focused observations in life. In her article “Territories of the Voice: Social Context in Poetry for and by Children,” Mary Kay Rummel (1995) remarks, “It is through image making that we participate in a feeling relationship with the world around us” (p. 93). Reading and interpreting imagery in a poem, I believe, is akin to perceiving and making sense of the world (Berthoff, 1990, p. 109).

**Why metaphors?**

“Metaphor is the core and soul of poetry,” says Judith Steinbergh (1999) in her article, “Mastering Metaphor through Poetry” (p. 325). Steinbergh describes how metaphor “brings thought and emotion to the reader in a way that can be visualized, touched, heard, tasted, smelled” (p. 325). The abstract thought and concrete connections to experience that metaphors can nurture and evoke have the potential to help students honor their prior knowledge and extend their sociocultural perceptions (Rummel, 1995). Rummel observes, “Through metaphor our social context can widen” because metaphor is key to voice (p. 89). When students read and hear poets’ metaphors, they have models to discover and create their own personally meaningful metaphors; and they can draw upon this knowledge as they develop voice and subjectivity. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) state in *Metaphors We Live By*, “A large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives” (p. 233).
Description of the Students

During the fall and spring semesters of the 2005-2006 year, I worked with 45 students, who were 1 Latina and 44 Caucasians, 43 women and 2 men, ranging in age from 20 to 22. These students were Language and Literacy Education students at Penn State University’s University Park Campus enrolled in sections that I taught of Language and Literacy Education (LLED) 402, Teaching Children’s Literature.

In their response papers about poetry, twenty-one of the students brought up the topic of not having liked poetry as they recalled their experiences with poetry in school. Alice, for example, writes about her experiences with poetry:

Growing up in a school setting, hardly ever being exposed to poetry is something that I have experienced. Out of the thirteen years I attended elementary, junior high, and high school, I can honestly say that I may have read ten poems at most—only ten. Perhaps never having much exposure to poetry is the reason why I did not take a liking to it; that is, until recently when I discovered how much emotion I can feel from it. However, children today must experience the world of poetry often in order to appreciate the richness that it has to offer.

Nodelman and Reimer state, “Above all, we suspect that so many people don’t like poetry simply because they’ve never learned how to like it. Among those who don’t, unfortunately, are many teachers” (271). I believe this statement is true because children in most classrooms are never given a chance to really understand what poetry is, and that inhibits them from actually appreciating it. From personal experience, whenever I read a poem in class it was because I had to analyze it. Poetic terminology was introduced to me before I even had the opportunity to feel a connection to poetry. I
think that many children are exposed to poetry in this way because teachers never were exposed to poetry in a positive way themselves; therefore, the stigma held toward poetry is passed down from generation to generation until someone decides to take initiative to teach children how meaningful poetry can be.

Alice’s reflections capture the cyclical dynamic of how poetry continues to be marginalized in the literature curriculum. Another student named Amy opens her response paper with her original poem:

Poetry, Oh Poetry!
(Inspired by the song: “Oh, Christmas Tree”)

Poetry, Oh Poetry!
How I detest this genre.
Clever at times, those cheesy rhymes,
Rambling on— line after line.

Subjectivity— anything it can be.
Who decides what poems are good?
Who knows? Definitely don’t ask me!

Read, make connections, discuss, overanalyze.
Then overanalyze that same poem all over — time after time.
How I detest this genre.

Reading poetry takes too much thinking to be fun—
Unless you’re reading Shel Silverstein stuff.
Can’t I stick with him till this unit is done?

My efforts in vain,
I’ve tried time after time to interpret each page
But, my eyes become dull— a motionless gaze.

Poetry, Oh Poetry!
How I detest this genre.

Amy, like Alice, remembers analysis at the expense of enjoyment. Her line “Reading poetry takes too much thinking to be fun” suggests that poetry was presented as something to be responded to mentally rather than holistically. And Amy’s mention of
Shel Silverstein strikingly represents the popularity of this poet among the students. During interviews, twenty of the students named Shel Silverstein as a favorite poet. Many of these students said they had heard Silverstein’s poems in elementary school, and several said that their parents had shared Silverstein’s poetry with them. Amy continues her response paper with the following reflections:

After reading this poem, someone might think that I have a much skewed perception of poetry—including the value of exposing children to it at a young age and encouraging their developmental understandings as they grow. I, along with many other people, have read and been exposed to children’s poetry early and frequently during my lifetime. However, I feel that poetry was not a subject that I was encouraged to enjoy in my free time. Teachers placed an emphasis on realistic fiction, historical fiction, mysteries, picture books and biographies as the apparent main genres of enjoyable reading. Poetry was taught through the careful dissection of sonnets, haikus and list poems which often lead to dry lectures and class work on the topics of line length, end rhymes, alliteration, line breaks, etc. If my apparent dislike for poetry seems distorted, it was the very study and examining of poetry at a young age, as a genre, unrelated to my life—forced and mechanical, which drove me to avoid poetry as much as possible.

Alice and Amy both highlight an important aspect of teaching poetry that can influence students’ experiences with poetry—students need spaces to connect with poetry through their emotions and life experiences. An agenda of analysis without these spaces works against poetry’s invitation to interpret with our whole beings, and such an agenda has the potential to sap people’s enjoyment of the genre.

3 The second most frequently named favorite poet was Robert Frost. Nine of the students included him; three mentioned especially enjoying “The Road Not Taken,” and two especially liked “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”
Some of the students, however, did write and talk about positive experiences with poetry in school. Oftentimes what students mentioned appreciating about reading poetry is its openness to interpretation. Catherine, for example, writes in her response paper,

*Every individual that reads a poem finds their own individual meaning within it—that’s what makes poetry so unique. One hundred people could read the same poem and each thinks something completely different. The message of many poems may not be straightforward or obvious. They leave your mind to wander down a trail of creativity. This trail can only lead to better understanding of words and a more open mind to the endless options. Personally, I know there are poems I have read one time and fell in love with. It is very common for people to treasure particular poems that they hold dear.*

I love Catherine’s holistic metaphor, “They leave your mind to wander down a trail of creativity,” for interpreting poetry as a beginning to further creativity and exploration. Another student, Jeanne, told me in an interview that she had especially positive experiences writing poetry. She said that during her upper elementary school years, she kept a journal which included her own poetry, and in 7th grade each person in her class wrote a poem. Jeanne said the teacher made the students’ original poems into a book, which the teacher gave to each person in the class. Jeanne still has her copy.

For the most part, though, the students recounted having little exposure to poetry and even less exposure to multicultural poetry during their K-12 experiences. When asked during interviews to name favorite poets, eleven of the students said that none came to mind or they did not have one. One of these eleven students, Jeanne, remarked that she prefers to think in terms of favorite poems rather than favorite poets; and she named Langston Hughes’ “Dreams”; Sylvia Plath’s “Metaphors,” and Robert Frost’s
“The Road Not Taken” as some of her favorite poems. Other students, such as Rhonda, Ginger, and Virginia, specifically mentioned that a lack of exposure to poetry made it difficult for them to name a favorite poet.

Few students had any recollections about reading multicultural poetry in school, and the ones who did usually talked about a particular class or teacher during my interviews with them. Catherine, for example, had an 11th grade teacher who especially loved Pablo Neruda and shared Neruda’s poetry regularly. Denise told me that during 5th grade she had an African American language arts teacher who shared a lot of African American poetry with her students. Ginger and Rhonda recalled having some African American poetry in grades K-8 during African American History Month, and Scarlett read some of Langston Hughes’ poetry during middle school and in 11th grade. Wayne had an African American studies class in 10th grade, which provided some exposure to African American poetry. Julia remembered reading Maya Angelou’s poetry during an African American poetry unit when she was in 11th grade, and Hazel had an 11th grade American literature class that studied themes such as class differences in stories and poetry. Michelangelo told me that she had a 4th grade teacher who loved Maya Angelou’s poetry and would share it during African American History Month. These few examples from my conversations with the students summarize their comments about experiences reading and hearing multicultural poetry during grades K-12. As I heard these students talk about teachers they remember valuing and loving multicultural poetry, I thought of Cecilia Espinosa’s and Karen Moore’s belief that when teachers share multicultural poetry as necessary to the curriculum, students will take notice and possibly embrace multicultural poetry also.
Overview of the Course

LLED 402, Teaching Children’s Literature, is a required course for elementary education majors. These students take the course as part of a language and literacy education block with reading and language arts, and they take all three of these classes having the same classmates. Most of these students are also taking art education and music education during the same semester as their language and literacy education block.

On the first page of the syllabus above the course goals are two statements that describe the spirit of children’s literature in education and present key elements of the course philosophy. The first statement is a quote from Charlotte Huck:

Literature records the depths and heights of the human experience. It can develop compassion by educating the heart as well as the mind. It can help children entertain new ideas, develop insights they never had before. It can stretch the imagination, creating new experiences, enriching old ones. It can develop a sense of what is true and just and beautiful.

I find this quote inspiring and energizing, and especially appreciate Huck’s emphasis on compassion, imagination, and experiences. The second statement provides the framework for teaching children’s literature as it names literature’s personal, social, and political importance in our lives and outlines the pedagogical assumptions guiding the course:

Stories are how we understand our world and ourselves. Literature deals with matters of morality, power, feelings, beauty—those ideas and emotions which give our lives meaning and purpose. Children are learning best with literature when they can play with the forms of language, ponder the ideas, and then enter into conversations with other readers.

The view that children learn literary forms through playing with them is central to the course. Whether taking delight in language, looking for secrets in illustrations, reading unconventional books, or “entering the story world” in joy or seriousness, children must
have opportunities to experiment and discover diversity in meanings (Hade, 1991). Approaching reading literature as play nourishes the imagination and keeps children involved in their learning (Hade, 1991). The idea that reading is a social activity informs the entire course as we explore literary genres; discuss social influences upon creating and interpreting literature; seek understandings of human differences; investigate popular culture’s influence on children’s literature; and articulate responses to literature in terms of enjoyment, as well as questions and concerns.

During the semester, we discuss professional readings about literature for children; examine resources for evaluating and selecting books; and read and share responses to folktales, myths, picture books, fantasy novels, realistic fiction, historical fiction, nonfiction books, books of poetry and verse, and books from book series popular with children. Required texts for the course include The Pleasures of Children’s Literature (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003), Tell Me: Children, Reading, and Talk (Chambers, 1996), Picture This: How Pictures Work (Bang, 1991/2000), “Being Literary in a Literature-Based Classroom” (Hade, 1991), “Reading Multiculturally” (Hade, 1997), and “Curious George Gets Branded” (Hade, 2001). These texts provide terms and ideas for talking about children’s books in ways that develop future teachers’ conscious awareness about cultural, social, political, and economic issues related to literature for children. Students also select books from book group lists to discuss readings held in common and then share their responses with the rest of the class. These book group discussions take place several times during the semester and provide opportunities for experiences with different genres and a wide variety of books, play and creative representations, enthusiasms, questions, observations, connections, and sharing.
As part of the course requirements, students complete several written assignments to consider and articulate their responses to readings and class discussions as they draw upon concepts, theories, and resources to apply knowledge gained from the course.

Written assignments for the students I taught during 2005-2006 included response papers, a picture book critique, a reading diary, postings to an online discussion board, and a dialectical notebook for multicultural poetry. I had selected a dialectical notebook as a required assignment because I wanted to put theory into practice and learn more about developing critical consciousness through interpretations and reinterpretations of multicultural poetry. Not only does the dialectic notebook have the potential to help students “discover the power of language itself and thereby the power of their own minds” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 100), but it also provides a means to encourage interpreting holistically, with feelings and sensual responses as well as thoughts. The basic structure I established for writing a dialectical entry—taken from Ann Berthoff (1990)—is to write initial interpretations, impressions, and quotations on the left side of the journal and then re-visit these notes and write re-interpretations and additional impressions and connections on the right side. As Berthoff states, “In this way, students are practicing recording that very dialectic which constitutes the inner dialogue we call thinking” (p. 100). All of the written assignments for the course contribute to supporting each person’s growth and agency as a future teacher.

An introductory reading assignment in the course includes this quote from William Zinsser’s (1989) Writing to Learn: “Writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts. Writing is how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Writing enables us

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4 The students in my sections completed a dialectical notebook for multicultural poetry instead of a novel critique. Because they were not writing a novel critique, they focused one of their response papers on a novel.
to find out what we know—and what we don’t know—about whatever we’re trying to learn” (quoted in Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 11). I agree with Zinsser and believe that writing is an important aspect of awareness of oneself as a maker of meaning.

**Theoretical Framework**

At the core of the theoretical framework for my inquiry are the ideas that readers’ thoughts and emotions are important in interpreting literature, that writing and reading are social, that literacy education is political, and that valuing readers’ abilities and experiences encourages human agency. Louise Rosenblatt’s (1938/1995, 1978/1994, 1982) transactional theory of reading, reading as interpreting signs (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994; Hade, 1997; Berthoff, 1987, 1990), Paulo Freire’s pedagogy for critical consciousness (1973, 1985, 1994, 1998a, 1998b), and bell hooks’ (1994, 2000) feminist theory are the sources for the theoretical framework informing this study. Rosenblatt, influenced by John Dewey and using his term *transaction*, views reading as “a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (1982, p. 268). Both Rosenblatt and Freire recognize the importance of a reader’s experience in making meaning and the political non-neutrality of literacy education. Rosenblatt advocates promoting democratic values through education, and Freire works to develop critical consciousness in order to seek social change through a “pedagogy of knowing”⁵ (Berthoff, 1990). Rosenblatt and Freire also emphasize the importance of reading with thought and emotion, and this connection energizes and inspires my inquiry.

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⁵ Berthoff reminds us that Freire suffered political consequences for his literacy work. She writes, “If meaning is reduced to meaning graphic codes, without accounting for social contexts and cultural frameworks, then we shouldn’t be surprised when this so-called literacy turns out to have no social significance or political consequences. Freire was not sent into exile because he was teaching *ba-be-bo-bu*. His government [and don’t ever forget that your government and mine aided and abetted the government of Brazil: the CIA burned his primers and smashed his slide projectors] feared him because literacy for Freire entails the development of critical consciousness” (1990, p. 141).
And, as Berthoff points out, Rosenblatt and Freire’s pedagogies both also consider “the social contexts of meaning,” which is a basic premise informing this study (Berthoff, 1990, p. 113).

Reading as interpreting signs, arising from the work of semiotician C. S. Peirce, is central to this work as a means to teach “readingmulticulturally” for social change and justice (Hade, 1997). As Daniel Hade states in “Reading Multiculturally” (1997), “If we view reading not as comprehending existing messages, but interpreting certain signs with which we have a relationship that includes experience, culture, and value, we can see readers as becoming more powerful interpreters of their reading and of their world” (p. 240). Berthoff (1990) also discusses the power of interpretation stemming from the triadic model of symbol, referent, and interpretant. She states,

If we let the idea of triadicity guide us, the possibilities are endless. If we make interpretation central in our teaching (as it is in all knowing), it will be central in our students’ learning. As interpretations are interpreted, students learn how to make the powers of language a resource in their reading and writing…The generative powers of language are evident as we observe how representations are interpreted, how interpretations are to be represented. Meaning emerges in that process and, as is reflected upon, reconsidered, revised, and represented anew, everybody learns. (p. 5)

In valuing students’ experiences and abilities to interpret, educators encourage human agency. As Berthoff (1990) notes, Freire believes “that naming the world becomes a model for changing the world” (p. 121).

As a theory that critiques power relations and seeks change, feminist theory is essential to this framework. Reading and discussing poetry using a feminist lens can be a powerful anti-oppression stance to use with students who will be teaching children. As I discuss in my beliefs and ideologies section of this chapter, bell hooks (2000) recognizes that children in school are “forming beliefs and identities” (p. 23), so literature that has a
politics of anti-oppression is extremely important in a curriculum. Influenced by Paulo Freire, hooks views love as a transformative political force, and I agree that this consciousness-raising kind of love has the potential to empower social action.\textsuperscript{6}

The theory informing my choice of the dialectical notebook as an assignment comes from Ann Berthoff (1981, 1987, 1990). She asserts that dialectical writing is key to developing critical consciousness through representing meanings and representing them anew. She writes,

The dialectical notebook—the double entry journal—encourages those habits of mind most needed by writers: the ability to look and look again; to question answers and to formulate new questions which will lead to new answers; to tolerate ambiguity; to take cognitive risks, if you like the concept Jeanne Bamberger deploys; to know one’s knowledge, as Coleridge put it. Above all, this kind of notebook enables students to discover the power of language itself and thereby the power of their own minds. Keeping a dialectical notebook helps reclaim imagination, which is so often debased by those who think of it as a fantasy generator, without realizing that it is the forming power of mind, ‘the prime agent of all human perception.’ (1990, pp. 100-101)

Philosophically I am drawn to this pedagogical approach because it values “the power of language itself and thereby the power of [the students’] minds.” Creating and interpreting literature are expressions of human consciousness.

\textbf{Research Strategies}

My study is teaching as inquiry, drawing upon ethnographic methodology. Because the study focuses on teaching and learning about multicultural poetry in the context of selected children’s literature classes during two semesters, it has elements of a case study. As such, it “[shares] with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and [a goal of] the end product being

\textsuperscript{6} hooks discussed this belief about the transformative power of love during her address at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Convention on November 20, 2004.
richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, pp. 178-197). As it explores interpretations, it is also phenomenological (aiming “to identify and describe the subjective experiences of respondents” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 192)).

As a study focusing on the meaning making of students as active readers of multicultural poetry, it is reader-response research. One challenge of such research concerns the need for “some verbal or material form” of representation in the response process (Marshall, 2000, p. 382). Referencing I. A. Richards’ term audit of meaning, Berthoff (1987) says, “Writing as a way of knowing lets us represent ideas so that we can return to them and assess them” (p. 11). The dialectical notebook, then, is of strategic importance in making this process visible, as well as being influential in developing critical consciousness. As reader-response research, this study concerns individual readers, individual texts, and cultural contexts (Marshall, p. 382).

James Marshall (2000) asserts in his chapter “Research on Response to Literature” in the Handbook of Reading Research that I. A. Richards (Practical Criticism, 1929) and Louise Rosenblatt (Literature as Exploration, 1938) are foundational to contemporary reader-response research (p. 385). Richards’ work is particularly influential in my study as he was, according to Berthoff (1990), “the first critic—have there been others?—to take student writing as texts which required interpretation” (p. 137). An essential part of my study is sharing and interpreting the students’ writings about their responses to the multicultural poetry they read for our class.

**Research Design**

The design of this study is shaped by Amy McClure’s ethnographic research with Sheryl Reed and Peggy Harrison’s teaching poetry to their combined fifth- and sixth-
grade classrooms. McClure (1990) describes her book *Sunrises and Songs: Reading and Writing Poetry in an Elementary Classroom* as “[telling] our story” of experiences working with children to nurture a “community of poetry lovers” (p. xiii). I view my study of pre-service teachers’ interpretations and reinterpretations of multicultural poetry as telling a story also, and I hope to encourage a love of poetry. McClure notes that Reed and Harrison keep their own poetry journals “in which they record observations, snatches of phrases that pop into their heads and sometimes whole poems” (p. 15). The students also kept poetry journals. Reed explains: “A daily entry can be a new poem, a revision of a poem written previously, or a brainstormed list of topics. They don’t have to write a new poem every day. They can just go back to anyplace in the book and revise” (quoted in McClure, p. 20). While I designed this study hoping students would include their own poems as interpretations in their journals, my focus is on their written interpretations and reinterpretations of published multicultural poetry for children and adolescents.

I designed the study to be organic to the course Teaching Children’s Literature, which has a multicultural literature emphasis. Because I did not know which students were participating and which students were not while I was teaching the course, I conducted interviews during class only. Individual interviews were up to ten minutes per student, and I had two sets of questions (part one for the first set of interviews, and part two for the second):

Part One
What were your experiences with poetry and multicultural poetry in grades K-8?
What were your experiences with poetry and multicultural poetry in grades 9-12?
What are some of your favorite poems?
Who are some of your favorite poets?

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7 Amy McClure’s book is revised from her 1985 dissertation, *Children’s Responses to Poetry in a Supportive Literary Context*, The Ohio State University.
What do you like about poetry?
What do you dislike about poetry?

Part Two
What are your reactions to writing dialectical notebook entries?
What changes would you make to the use of dialectical notebook entries for interpreting poetry?
Follow-up regarding specific entries

During the semester, we routinely started the class with read-alouds by students and sometimes by me, so several of my read-alouds were multicultural poems by poets such as Eloise Greenfield, Janet Wong, Ashley Bryan, Leslie Marmon Silko, Eve Merriam, Gary Soto, Pablo Neruda, Angela Johnson, Alan Barlow, Hope Anita Smith, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Rumi. When we studied poetry, I brought additional examples of multicultural poetry books into the classroom. The course’s poetry book group list below already included multicultural poetry books and anthologies with multicultural poems:

*Cool Salsa* edited by Lori Carlson
*Rising Voices* edited by Arlene Hirschfelder and Beverly Singer
*Honey, I Love* by Eloise Greenfield
*The Dream Keeper* by Langston Hughes
*Knock at a Star* edited by X. J. Kennedy and Dorothy Kennedy
*What Have You Lost?* edited by Naomi Shihab Nye
*The Oxford Illustrated Book of American Children’s Poems* edited by Donald Hall

For my study, the most significant change I made to the syllabus was the inclusion of the dialectical notebook for multicultural poetry as a source of data.

My literature review of teaching and learning with dialectical notebooks indicates that they can be useful for a variety of ages and curricula. Diane Barone (1990) describes in her article “The Written Responses of Young Children: Beyond Comprehension to Story Understanding” how she used dialogue journals and dialectical notebooks with her second grade students. Barone used dialogue journals, or letters from students about their reading to the teacher and the teacher’s responses, after having read Nancie Atwell’s
(1987) description of using dialogue journals with middle school students to integrate reading and writing. Barone also used a modification of Berthoff’s (1990) dialectical notebook in which students would write quotes on the left side and their thoughts on the right side. Barone states, “As they continued to respond, their writing became interpretive, often blending their personal experiences with the events of the story” (p. 55). Julie Wollman-Bonilla and Barbara Werchadlo (1995) describe their exploration of using literature response journals in a first grade classroom to “[tap] the potential of writing to stir thinking” (p. 562). Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo identified patterns of text-centered responses and reader-centered responses and conclude, “there is considerable interdependence among reading, writing, discussion, and thinking in the response processes of first graders [that helps] to illuminate how children learn to transact with texts (Rosenblatt, 1978)” (p. 569). Karen Ernst (1993) included a dialectical notebook with her drawn observations as part of her project to narrate the creation of an artist’s workshop for elementary school children in an effort to combine the arts with literacy. Phyllis Sammarco Prestia (1997) investigated third grade children’s uses of dialectical notebooks to respond to literature. She found that the children’s responses became more developed during the time of the study, and she categorized the students as interpreter, questioner, illustrator, dialoguer, and formatter. Monica Ann Ellis (1994) also used a dialectical notebook with third graders, but the context was a social studies class. Her findings included that the children enjoyed and valued using their notebooks, and the notebooks were a helpful communication tool to learn more about the meanings the children were making about the social studies content. Anglea Scanzello’s (1988) dissertation, In Their Own Voices: An Ethnographic Study of Reentry Women, Their
Responses to a Poem, and Their Understandings of the Functions of Written Discourse, included using Berthoff’s (1981) double-entry journal to respond to a poem. Her research indicated that lived experiences and personal usefulness were important to the women’s responses to the poem. The degree of structure in dialectical notebooks is flexible and adaptable. Berthoff (1981) asserts, “…any writing assignments that encourage students to look and look again will be teaching critical reading and critical thinking” (p. 46).

The dialectical notebook is a specific form of a general approach of journal writing to enrich and deepen responses to literature. Patricia Kelly (1990), for example, describes using writing prompts with her multiethnic third-grade class to encourage a diversity of responses to literature evoking observations, emotions, and personal connections. Marjorie Hancock (1992, 1993a, 1993b) explores sixth-grade readers’ responses using journals based on Flitterman-King’s (1988) definition of a literature response journal as “a sourcebook, a repository for wanderings and wonderings, speculations, questionings…a place to explore thoughts, discover reactions, let the mind ramble—in effect, a place to make room for the unexpected” (quoted in Hancock, 1992, p. 36). Like Kelly, Hancock observed the importance of aesthetic response through a literature journal in “[transforming] the printed page into a personal reading experience” (Hancock, 1993a, p. 473). The dialectical notebook shares with literature response journals the opportunity to explore aesthetic responses and encourage diverse interpretations. The dialectical format, though, represents a conscious choice to focus on looking and looking again with thoughts, feelings, and the senses (Berthoff, 1981, p. 46).
As I experimented with writing dialectical notebook entries before the fall of 2005, I realized that including reflections about the dialectical entries could help clarify and deepen understandings of experiences interpreting and reinterpreting selected poems. I also thought reflections about writing the entries would help strengthen the validity of the data, so I included this component as part of the assignment. In addition to the students’ dialectical notebook entries, interviews, and response papers about poetry, other sources of data include the students’ reading diary entries for poetry books, my dialectical notebook, and my teaching journals with observations and reflections.

**Generalizability Issues**

As a case study, the analysis of the data will not produce generalizable results. However, my hope is that readers will “learn from these cases and perhaps transfer some of the knowledge gained to [their] own situations, [their] own practice” (Merriam, 2002, p. 180). Like reading a story, that experience becomes part of a knowledge base that can help inform pedagogical choices and making meaning in similar contexts. As Amy McClure (1990) states in *Sunrises and Songs*, “It is our hope that after reading this story you will be stimulated to take our ideas and techniques, focus them through your personal teaching lens, and create your own community of poetry lovers” (p. xiii).

**Internal Reliability and Validity**

In *Qualitative Research in Practice*, Sharan Merriam (2002) defines “reliability” as referring “to the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (p. 27). As Merriam asserts, “Reliability is problematic in the social sciences simply because human behavior is never static, nor is what many experience necessarily more reliable than what one person experiences” (p. 27). The question, then, “is whether the results are
consistent with the data collected” (italics Merriam’s, p. 27). Maintaining an audit trail through my teaching journal has been an important task, as well as obtaining feedback from readers who can respond to the content of the results to critique understandability and consistency (Merriam, p. 27).

As Merriam discusses, member checks, reader reviews, reflexivity, and collecting data over a long enough time to obtain rich data are vital to validity. Merriam advises: “The best rule of thumb is that the data and emerging findings must feel saturated” (p. 26). I felt it was important to gather data over two semesters so I could work with two different groups of students during different times of the year. I felt this period of time with different classes would help me deepen the inquiry as I gained experience. For example, my first semester as teacher and researcher, I found it challenging to find my balance between facilitating group discussions and interviewing individual students. With practice, I became more comfortable with interviewing during class time. I was also glad to have the opportunity to include more poetry new to me. During the second semester, for instance, I read aloud Angela Johnson’s (1998) poem “Crazy” about life in Shorter, Alabama, from The Other Side: Shorter Poems because I had been thinking about and appreciating a sense of place in poetry. I had also recently discovered Light-Gathering Poems, edited by Liz Rosenberg (2000), and read aloud Rumi’s “#82” translated by Coleman Barks. Sharing poems new to me is a way for me to model my own learning and growth.

Laurel Richardson’s metaphor of crystallization is also a helpful way to think about and address issues of validity. In “The Choreography of Qualitative Research Design,” Valerie Janesick (2003) explains, “Crystallization recognizes the many facets of
any given approach to the social world as a fact of life. The image of the crystal replaces that of the land surveyor and the triangle” (p. 67). As one who has a tendency to get too close to my own writing, I appreciate this metaphor as a means to maintain rigor regarding validity. Janesick reflects, “Too often we become comfortable in our worlds and, to paraphrase Goethe, sometimes the most obvious things are hardest to see because they are right in front of our eyes. Thus I propose that we use the notion of crystallization to include incorporation of various disciplines as part of multifaceted research design” (p. 67). Janesick mentions examples of journal writing and creating poetry during the research process as activities of crystallization (pp. 67-68). I find this approach particularly helpful because such exercises provide ways to connect with the right side of the brain, the creative side, which can enable access to insights that might otherwise not surface.

**Ethical Issues**

As required by the ethical research principles established in the Belmont Report, research needs to adhere to principles of “1) respect for the persons, 2) beneficence; and 3) justice” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 219). Protecting identity is an important concern. Denzin and Lincoln highlight the importance of privacy and confidentiality: “The single most likely source of harm in social science inquiry is ‘the disclosure of private knowledge considered damaging by experimental subjects’”8 (p. 218). To protect identities and maintain privacy, I asked students to provide pseudonyms. Also, in my dual roles as teacher and researcher, I did not know which students were participating and which were not until after final grades were posted.

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8 Citation: “Reiss, 1979, p. 73; see also Punch, 1994, p. 93.”
Reflexivity is an ongoing process. As a white, female, middle-class Christian, I recognize the necessity of being steadfastly reflexive about surfacing and challenging my assumptions in order not to sustain an oppressive status quo. I have experienced being “other” as a female in a male-dominated society, but as a white person I am a member of the dominant culture. I believe it is important to learn about the students’ values, beliefs, and experiences as individuals and to continue to reflect on and write about my own worldview.

**Beliefs and Ideologies**

My beliefs and ideologies continue to evolve as I grow by learning from people, books, artistic expressions, and experiences. In my effort to surface, understand, and clarify my beliefs and ideologies, I am using headings to name them.

*Education is important.* I grew up in a family that valued K-12 education and esteemed higher education. I have always placed a high priority on my studies and see the process of learning as a lifelong endeavor.

*Education is inherently political.* I view education as a non-neutral endeavor because schools are social institutions that influence minds, bodies, emotions, and spirits in cultural and historical contexts. I agree with education theorists Donald Macedo and Lilla Bartolomé (1999), for example, who state that “teaching is not a politically or ideologically neutral undertaking” (p. 147). Rebecca Powell (1999) also emphasizes teaching as political: “Even a teacher who consciously attempts to be politically ‘neutral’ makes hundreds of political decisions—from posters on the wall to attitudes toward holidays” (p. 40). Posters matter, and so do books and words.
Multicultural literature is essential to my teaching and research. Daniel Hade’s (1997) chapter “Reading Multiculturally” in Using Multicultural Literature in the K-8 Classroom provides a description of “multiculturalism as a social movement” that guides my work. Hade states:

For me, multiculturalism as a social movement has three aspects. First, multiculturalism is a systematic critique of the ideology of westernness. This means we challenge the domination of assumptions held by our western culture. Second, multiculturalism is also the challenge of living with each other in a world of difference. Multiculturalism means searching for ways to affirm and celebrate difference, while also seeking ways to cooperate and collaborate across different groups of people. Third, multiculturalism is a reform movement based upon equity and justice. Goods and privileges are concentrated with white, wealthy males; they are not distributed justly across race, class, and gender. Multiculturalism is about social change and social justice. (p. 240)

Questions matter. Questions are the seeds of curiosity. Maxine Greene has helped me recognize the importance of questions. In Markie Hancock’s (2001) documentary video, Exclusions and Awakenings: The Life of Maxine Greene, Greene says that the object of education is not to answer questions but to engage students in the search. She tells us, “The right to phrase a question is as important as to name what’s happening around you.” In Landscapes of Learning, Greene (1978) says “critical questioning” is “learning how to learn” (p. 39). Questioning, then, is about shaping minds for lifelong learning.

Reading enriches life and informs involvement in society. When I was ten years old, I discovered my passion for reading and realized the influence that someone who brings children and books together can have. The librarian at my school introduced me to E. L. Konigsburg’s (1967) From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, and I’ve been an avid reader ever since. My emphasis area is Language and Literacy Education because I want to help inspire in children a lifelong love of reading and a passion for knowledge. I am especially drawn to poetry because, as Louise Rosenblatt would say,
poems invite readers to take an aesthetic stance. She characterizes aesthetic reading as “a special kind of intense and ordered experience—sensuous, intellectual, emotional—out of which social insights might arise” (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 221). I believe that aesthetic reading experiences may help children discover insights that will inform their participation in a democratic, pluralistic society. I also agree wholeheartedly with Paulo Freire’s (1973) description of education as “an act of love, and thus an act of courage” (p. 38). Freire (1985) also talks about the importance of children’s spontaneity and curiosity and says, “The basis for critical reading in young children is their curiosity” (p. 19). I believe that it is essential to know children as individuals (backgrounds, preferences, interests, etc.) and to provide them with a wide variety of books to stimulate their reading, thinking, and discussions.

**Spirituality is not the same as religion.** I am a lifelong Episcopalian. Sometimes I feel very postmodern in the sense that I draw comfort from the rituals and traditions of my Protestant religion, but I also see a church critically as a social and political institution with its own history and agendas. As I grow older, I feel more in touch with spirituality in my effort to live a balanced life. I am not an evangelist, but I feel my best work happens when I choose love rather than fear. Nurturing my spiritual life helps me make this choice; my belief in a spiritual realm and a Higher Power also infuses my life with hope.

**Patriarchy is a problem.** I learned this early in life, although I didn’t recognize it until later. My mother was a housewife and did not have an occupation that would provide monetary compensation for her labors, and I was troubled by the power imbalance that I
saw in my parents’ relationship. I am a feminist because I see a patriarchal structure as an oppressive one.

**Feminism and spirituality can work together.** I see Matthew Fox’s (1991) *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth* as a “heart-centered” and feminist tradition. Fox states, “Creation spirituality promotes healing because it enlarges the heart” (p. 37). He also says, “Awakening the imagination awakens the heart and stretches it” (p. 37). For me, the potential of a feminist politics combined with spirituality for positive change is awesome!

**Children’s literature is an important site for feminism.** In bell hooks’ (2000) *Feminism Is for Everybody*, she states, “Children’s literature is one of the most crucial sites for feminist education for critical consciousness precisely because beliefs and identities are still being formed” (p. 23). hooks’ overtly political description of feminism as “passionate politics” is a passion I embrace. Her declaration, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. viii) resonates for me.

**Poetry is political.** This belief crystallized for me in February of 2003. Before the United States went to war with Iraq, there was to have been a poetry symposium at the White House early that month. Lady Bush, anxious that the symposium would become an opportunity for already openly anti-war poets to speak out, had canceled the symposium. The poets found another venue and held instead “A Poetry Reading in Honor of the Right to Protest as a Patriotic and Historical Tradition.” Grace Paley, a peace activist and Vermont’s state poet, participated in the alternative symposium (April 20, 2003 *Centre Daily Times* article). At the same time, I was in my first year teaching children’s literature when I experienced the shift to viewing literature as political and a
means to focus on social issues with future teachers. It was then that I decided to make poetry the focus of my studies.

**Poetry is potentially transformational.** Related to my belief in choosing love rather than fear is a desire to keep my heart open. Georgia Heard’s (1993) article “Living Like a Poet” is a major influence on me. She states, “Poetry has the power to change us, by helping us open and lead more examined and perhaps, more authentic lives” (p. 118). She also says, “poems remind [her] to keep [her] heart open” (p. 119). I have come to realize that poems help me keep my heart open, too. The poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye, for example, has been particularly influential for me as I am drawn to her warmth and compassion for people and places. My heart opens and grows when I read her poetry.

As I have thought about poetry as an important genre to share with children, I see Mary Kay Rummel’s (1995) “Territories of the Voice: Social Context in Poetry for and by Children” as an influence on my research. Rummel says poetry is transformational “when it relates to our own passions and purposes, so as we expose children to new models in literacy, we must value and affirm their prior knowledge” (p. 85). As I read this, I think of Freire’s ideas about children’s curiosity. Poetry can be transformational for children, I believe, when their curiosity about the world becomes the passion that informs their purposes. In “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde (1984) describes so beautifully through a metaphor of light how poetry can be transformational. She writes, poetry “forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (p. 37).
Writing is not “neutral.” An expository style that is authoritative is not neutral, and neither is a more postmodern approach to writing up research. Reading Laurel Richardson’s (2003) “Poetic Representations of Interviews” in Postmodern Interviewing has shaped this belief for me. Richardson says that form shapes content (p. 187) and “writing is never innocent” (p. 189). She proposes representing interviews as poetry and states, “Poetic representation offers social researchers an opportunity to write about, or with, people in ways that honor their speech styles, words, rhythms, and syntax” (p. 190).

Images are important. I have always been drawn to imagery and patterns of imagery when reading and interpreting literature. I am intrigued by Adrienne Rich’s (1993) observation and advice about images: “You yourself are marked by family, gender, caste, landscape, the struggle to make a living, or the absence of such a struggle. The rich and the poor are equally marked. Poetry is never free of these markings even when it appears to be. Look into the images” (p. 216).

Metaphors are creative tools. I started thinking about metaphors and poetry for children when I read Mary Kay Rummel’s (1995) article in The New Advocate. She talks about “associative leaps” (p. 84), and emphasizes metaphor as essential to poetry. More recently, reading George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s (2003) Metaphors We Live By helped me understand cultural and experiential influences on metaphors. They state, “Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness. These endeavors of the imagination are not devoid of rationality; since they use metaphor, they employ an imaginative rationality” (p. 193).
Environmental problems are social problems. As a U.S. citizen who has already moved nine times in her life, I am becoming increasingly aware of my need for a sense of community and connection with place. David Orr (1992) describes the “displacement” that many of us experience:

The average American moves ten times in a lifetime, and spends countless hours at airports and on highways going to places that look a good deal like those just left behind. Our lives are lived amidst the architectural expressions of displacement: the shopping mall, apartment, neon strip, freeway, glass office tower, and homogenized development—none of which encourage much sense of rootedness, responsibility, and belonging. (p. 127)

I have grown up in a culture that fragments experience by maintaining a Western patriarchal spirit/matter dualism, and this dualistic view has led to environmental injustices such as short-sighted exploitation and pollution of the ecosystem. Feminist writer and poet Susan Griffin (1990) writes, “Consciousness is an integral part of nature….When we take the soul from nature, what we are really doing is fragmenting human wholeness. Most mystics will tell you that whatever you do to others you are doing to yourself in some sense” (p. 88). My growing appreciation of nature’s consciousness is integral to my own spiritual development, and I believe reading and hearing poems such as Joy Harjo’s “Eagle Poem” can help us “…see ourselves and know / That we must take the utmost care / And kindness in all things” (quoted in Paschen, 2005, p. 30). As author and educator Derrick Jensen (2004) reminds us, Albert Einstein remarked that “the significant problems of the world cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness at which they were created” (p. 326).

People need hope. Paulo Freire (1994) describes hope as “an ontological need” and says, “Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings, and become a distortion of that ontological need” (p. 8). I believe in the importance of hope in literature for children
I have hopes for my work, too. As a lifelong learner, I see this research project as a beginning for my long-term work studying and writing about how reading multicultural poetry is potentially transformative. My hope is that if multicultural poetry is central to a literature curriculum that helps future teachers expand their sociocultural contexts, challenges their thinking, and values their emotions, they will take this knowledge and consciousness with them into their future classrooms as they shape the minds and nourish the spirits of young people.

**Overview of Remaining Chapters**

Chapters 2 and 3 are foundational chapters for this story of my teaching and learning about multicultural poetry. Chapter 2, *Education and Multicultural Poetry for Children: Shaping the Mind and Nourishing the Spirit*, is my philosophy of education informing my agency as a teacher and researcher. In this chapter, I discuss interpretation of language, curricula and culture, connections through poetry in curricula, pedagogical approaches for developing critical consciousness and agency, and evaluative approaches for growth in terms of multicultural poetry for children as essential to education. Chapter 3, *Multicultural Poetry as Political and Potentially Transformational*, is my philosophy of poetry focusing on multicultural poetry. In this chapter, I build upon a foundation of literacy education and multicultural poetry as political, and then consider holistic aspects of multicultural poetry as opening spaces for transformations. I begin to share my own teaching journey of growth and compassion and explore three students’ individual responses to Eugenio Alberto Cano Correa’s poem “My Memories of the Nicaraguan Revolution.” In my inquiry and interpretations, I view multicultural poetry as nourishment for what Albert Einstein terms the intuitive mind.
Chapter 4, Revisiting Familiar Forms, Lessons, and Poets, explores students’ revisiting of uses of rhyme and rhythm—often associated with humor and playful narrative poetry—in contexts of poetry and verse as voices for social justice in Eve Merriam’s *The Inner City Mother Goose*, Eloise Greenfield’s “Harriet Tubman,” and J. Patrick Lewis’ “Harriet Tubman Speaks.” This part of my story of teaching and learning about multicultural poetry also includes students’ and my responses to poems students selected by Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, two poets with whom several of the students were already familiar.

Chapter 5, Surfacing and Extending Perceptions through Interpreting Multicultural Poetry: Moments of Connection, Questioning, Struggle, and Imagination, continues this story as students and I keep interpretation central in our reading and learning. In this chapter I discuss students’ and my dialectical writings about selected poems by Grace Nichols, Luis Alberto Ambroggio, Ed Vega, Johanna Vega, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Amado Nervo, Taisha Lewis, Fred Voss, Janet Wong, Gary Soto, Eka Budianta, Naomi Shihab Nye, Walter Dean Myers, Ashley Bryan, Harriet Jacobs, Nancy Wood, Nikki Giovanni, and Byrd Baylor. Through moments of connection, questioning, struggle, and imagination, we surface and extend perceptions as we make meaning and develop critical consciousness.

Chapter 6 is the future-oriented conclusion of my story of teaching and learning about multicultural poetry. I believe education is inherently concerned with the future, or as John Dewey (1938/1997) says, an “educator…is concerned to have a long look ahead” (p. 75). In this chapter, Learning and Teaching for the Future, I relate reflections from two students’ dialectical notebook entries, one about Georgia Douglas Johnson’s
“Common Dust” and the other about Nancy Wood’s “Our Children.” I include these two students’ reflections among the conclusions because both discuss multicultural poems with an orientation toward the future. I then return to the idea of transformations inspired by my belief that engaging holistically with multicultural poetry has the potential to open spaces for transformations, and I share my original poem, “Transformations,” as a representation of my teaching and learning journey of growth and compassion. In my concluding reflections, I discuss the significance of multicultural poetry in shaping the mind and nourishing the spirit through curricula and pedagogy as a means to work for a more humane, peaceful, and just world.
“It is necessary to say...that we study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body. With feelings, with emotions, with desire, with fear, with doubts, with passion and also with critical reasoning. However, critical reasoning alone is not sufficient. It is necessary to dare so that we never dichotomize cognition from the emotional self.”
—Paulo Freire (quoted in Macedo and Bartolomé, 1999, p. 30)

“The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.”
—Albert Einstein

In the pages that follow, I explore the role and significance of poetry—especially multicultural poetry for children in the upper elementary and middle school grades—in shaping people’s minds and nourishing the spirit. My framework for this exploration is a philosophy of education that values the process of experience, curiosity, growth through social interactions, compassion, and Paulo Freire’s idea of “the courage to dare...to speak about love without fear of being called ascientific” (quoted in Macedo and Bartolomé, 1999, p. 30). Sharing multicultural poetry can enrich and broaden students’ educational experiences by providing models of diverse voices using rich, evocative, and powerful writing that invites what Charlotte Huck (2001) describes as a “total response from the individual—all the intellect, senses, emotion, and imagination” (pp. 350-351). As an “expressive” genre, poetry has the potential to nurture students’ “passions and purposes” (Rummel, 1995) and to develop their critical thinking skills, compassion, and connections.
with people and the earth. While my focus is reading, hearing, and discussing multicultural poetry, I believe that writing poetry can be a powerful and effective way to help students who are drawn to poetry develop voice and use creative expression through language to convey perceptions, cares, questionings, imaginings, memories, thoughts, experiences, and emotions. Such self-expression, I believe, is a means to encourage students to examine their own lives, give voice to what matters to them, and live as empowered human beings in their communities and in society. Henry Giroux (1992) states, “I believe schools are major institutions for educating students for public life. More specifically, I believe that schools should function to provide students with the knowledge, character, and moral vision that build civic courage” (p. 18). And as John Dewey (1909/1975) reminds us, ethical knowledge for moral vision requires emotional responsiveness:

Unless there is a prompt and almost instinctive sensitiveness to conditions, to the ends and interests of others, the intellectual side of judgment will not have proper material to work upon. Just as the material of knowledge is supplied through the senses, so the material of ethical knowledge is supplied by emotional responsiveness. (p. 52)

My belief is that multicultural poetry can be a vital means to help students grow in their critical thinking in conjunction with the development of their emotional selves as they gain knowledge and develop character and moral vision as citizens in a democratic, pluralistic society.

My focus is poetry for children in the upper elementary and middle school grades because I have encountered a marginalization of poetry during these grades, both through personal experience and through the writings of poets, educators, and researchers. I believe regular exposure to a variety of poems during these grades can help students
enjoy and respond to more difficult poetry in high school and can encourage a lifelong love of poetry.

In my K-12 experience, I did not have much exposure to poetry during the upper elementary and middle school grades, and what exposure I did have was limited to an Anglo-American cannon. The poem I remember best from those years is Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” I remember enjoying this poem’s imagery, feeling of quietude, and the beauty of lines such as, “The only other sound’s the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake” (Frost quoted in Ferris, 1957, p. 67). I cared about the “little horse” and the speaker with “promises to keep” (p. 67). This poem appealed to my senses and warmed my heart. By the time I read poetry in high school, though, I felt pressured to comprehend difficult poetry infused with bewildering figurative language and to determine “the meaning.” I focused on deciphering and did not feel particularly moved by the poetry I read and heard. I could have related to X. J. Kennedy and Dorothy Kennedy’s (1999) statement that “a distaste for poetry sets in like winter frost” usually in middle school or high school (p. 159). Kennedy and Kennedy explain this dislike as follows: “It tends to arrive when children are obliged to discuss poems in class, sometimes at great length, or when they’re assigned to write papers about poems. They come to suspect that the meaning of a poem is a secret, the exclusive property of teachers” (p. 159). In The Pleasures of Children’s Literature, Perry Nodelman and Maivs Reimer (2003) discuss a perception that poets themselves obfuscate meanings and even intentionally frustrate readers:

…many people come to believe that poetry is purposely obscure—that for no clear reason, poets like to frustrate others by never saying what they mean. According to this common assumption, all poems have ‘hidden meanings’: secret
messages that are fairly simple but that poets have concealed under layers of complicated symbols and images. (p. 272)

I once held such perceptions about interpreting poetry, but now I am drawn to poetry.

I started opening to poetry again when I took a Romantic literature course as a master’s student in English. Poems by poets such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats nourished my imagination and refreshed my enjoyment of poetry. I remember enjoying, for example, Coleridge’s poems “Frost at Midnight” and “Kubla Kahn” (or “A Vision in a Dream”) for their sensual imagery, atmosphere, and beautiful language. This was a beginning, but it was not until several years later, when I started teaching children’s literature and reading poetry to share with my students, that poetry—specifically multicultural poetry—became necessary to me. Teaching the course helped open my eyes to literature as political and a means to focus on social issues with future teachers. I also started to find poetry that feeds my being. Naomi Shihab Nye’s poetry especially moved me from being receptive to poetry to absolutely loving it. Her poem “My Grandmother in the Stars” from 19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East, for instance, conveys warmth and caring that inspires me to slow down and experience the power of love through human connections across time, space, and cultures. My appreciation of poetry’s diverse, individual voices continues to deepen as it has become integral to my artistic, spiritual, and professional growth. As I think about education, poet and writer Georgia Heard’s (1999) reflections resonate for me:

Now I’m beginning to understand the answer to Adrienne Rich’s question, “What is it that allows many people in the United States to accept the view of poetry as a luxury rather than food for all: food for the heart and senses, food of memory and

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hope?’ Perhaps it’s the way it has been taught and presented to us that makes so many people exclude it from their lives. (p. xi)

Infrequent exposure to poetry during the transitional grades from elementary school to high school deprives children of the opportunity to respond to a range of poems that can enrich and inform their oral and written literacies and expand their understandings of sociocultural contexts (Rummel, 1995). Poetry, as “the language of emotions” (Huck, 2001, p. 350), can be a vibrant genre to communicate human experiences and “develop compassion by educating the heart as well as the mind” (Huck, Penn State’s LLED 402 syllabus).

I believe it is essential to provide students with literature that offers “a multiplicity of perspectives” in order to extend students’ abilities to consider diverse perspectives and viewpoints (Powell, 1999, p. 72). In my emphasis on multicultural poetry, I draw upon the distinction made by Violet Harris (1996) between “multiethnic” and “multicultural” literature:

Race and ethnicity are not synonymous. However, the historic development of academic studies that focused on race issues resulted in their being tagged with the label ‘ethnic.’ The conflating of race and ethnicity is evident also in the terms multiethnic and multicultural. Here multiethnic refers to groups such as those of African, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/a, or Native American ancestry. In contrast, multicultural can include race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other elements that denote difference. (p. 109)

I am not proposing the exclusion of poetry by white, heterosexual, middle- and upper-
class men shaped by the dominant culture, but rather to emphasize providing students with experiences reading and hearing an enriching, thought-provoking, and inspiring diversity of individual voices reflecting different world views, ways of living, and sociocultural contexts. I also view Daniel Hade’s (1997) assertion that multiculturalism

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is a social movement as a political basis for selecting multicultural poems to share with children. In “Reading Multiculturally,” Hade states:

For me, multiculturalism as a social movement has three aspects. First, multiculturalism is a systematic critique of the ideology of westernness. This means we challenge the domination of assumptions held by our western culture. Second, multiculturalism is also the challenge of living with each other in a world of difference. Multiculturalism means searching for ways to affirm and celebrate difference, while also seeking ways to cooperate and collaborate across different groups of people. Third, multiculturalism is a reform movement based upon equity and justice. Goods and privileges are concentrated with white, wealthy males; they are not distributed justly across race, class, and gender. Multiculturalism is about social change and social justice. (p. 240)

Because multiculturalism is a means to work toward social change and social justice, it is about working for a more humane, peaceful, and just world in the future.

For me, viewing multiculturalism as a reform movement includes feminism as a political stance. In *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, bell hooks (2000) asserts, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. viii). hooks remarks that she likes this definition because it reminds people that boys and girls experience socialization “from birth” that perpetuates sexism (p. viii). I find hooks’ feminist politics particularly inspiring because she recognizes the importance of children’s literature in shaping students’ development. She writes:

Children’s literature is one of the most crucial sites for feminist education for critical consciousness precisely because beliefs and identities are still being formed. And more often than not narrow-minded thinking about gender continues to be the norm on the playground. (p. 23)

I believe it is important to provide children with literature that educates for critical consciousness because literature transmits ideologies that, over time, have the potential to shape students’ minds. The stories and poetry children read and hear become part of their textual prior knowledge as they grow and form their worldviews.
Working toward a healthier physical world is also crucial to humanity’s well-being and as such is a significant aspect of social justice and social action (Enciso et al., 1999, p. 193). People live not only in relationship with other people but also with the earth, sea, sky, and the flora and fauna sustained by our planet’s ecosystem. Multicultural poetry can be a vital part of social and environmental consciousness-raising curricula that encourage students to make thoughtful choices as they shape the future.

Because multicultural poetry communicates personal experiences of the world in a way that evokes personal responses (Atwell, 1987, p. 210), I see it as a potent means to help people grow. It is through sharing experiences, feelings, thoughts, and knowledge that people help one another mature and gain wisdom as human beings. I agree with John Dewey’s (1938/1997) assertion that there is an “organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 25). Following Dewey, I believe education is growth through life experiences, and it is a lifelong process. Social interactions are the basis of education, and education is essential to survival, identity formation, well-being, and struggles for social and environmental justice. Education is also inherently concerned with the future, or as Dewey says, an “educator…is concerned to have a long look ahead” (p. 75). Shaping the minds and nourishing the spirits of today’s children is one of the most important endeavors in our democratic society. Multicultural poetry can have a particularly important role in this work because it offers readers and hearers opportunities to broaden horizons and experience literary expressions of humanity by people from diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts. As Patricia Enciso et al. (1999) assert in “Social Justice and Social Action in Everyday Worlds: Literature Bridging History, Hope, and Action,” “An important part of our exploration of social
justice with children is helping them understand that contemporary stories of justice and social change are part of a history of hope and action in the face of oppression” (p. 192).

How can education in schools help children in their growth and agency as they experience life? As social institutions, schools are sites where daily interactions and cultural immersion can have tremendous influence on children’s development. For these experiences to be positive, I believe it is essential to build and nurture community and to provide learning opportunities that engage curiosity. I am continuously inspired by Paulo Freire (1973), who describes education as “an act of love, and thus an act of courage” (p. 38). I believe he has an enlightened understanding about children and how they learn. In a 1985 interview with *Language Arts*, “Reading the World and Reading the Word,” he asserts the importance of children’s spontaneity and curiosity:

> In the last analysis, the kids should come full of spontaneity—with their feelings, with their questions, with their creativity, with their risk to create, getting their own words ‘into their own hands’ in order to do beautiful things with them. The basis for critical reading in young children is their curiosity. (p. 19)

Spontaneity and curiosity are central to a lifelong passion for learning, for they energize pursuits of knowledge. Because people are never only their minds, I believe education must always maintain connections between, as Freire says, cognition and the emotional self. As Louise Rosenblatt (1980) would say,

> Cognition, it is now increasingly recognized, is always accompanied by affect or feeling….The referent of a verbal symbol has an aura of affect or feeling, even perhaps a physical component. Efferent reading will select out the desired referents and ignore or subordinate affect. Aesthetic reading, in contrast, will fuse the cognitive and affective elements of consciousness—sensations, images, feelings, ideas—into a personally lived-through poem or story.  

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4 In Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, she describes a continuum of efferent and aesthetic reading. The term “efferent” comes from the Latin “effere” or “to carry away,” and in this kind of reading, “attention is directed outward, so to speak, toward concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading” (1978/1994, p. 24). At the other end of the continuum, aesthetic reading is the
Shaping the mind is a process of developing consciousness, and honoring the wholeness of the self in this process is a means to nurture the spirit. In *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*, Matthew Fox (1991) describes the spirit as “breath, life, energy” (p. 12). For me, nurturing the spirit is nurturing the soul, the essence of my being. I believe that education, as an act of love, is about shaping the mind and nurturing the spirit in a process of living consciously and in relationship with one another to promote agency for ongoing efforts toward anti-oppressive social and environmental change. In the sections that follow, I discuss curricula, pedagogy, and evaluative approaches, but first I address the role of semiotics and the importance of interpretation in my philosophy of education: Interpretation informs thinking and learning.

**Interpreting Language**

Because language is central to sharing knowledge and experience, an understanding of language in terms of *signs* as social and cultural constructions is relevant and empowering. Several scholars and educators who have greatly influenced my thinking—Louise Rosenblatt, Daniel Hade, and Ann Berthoff—all discuss importance of interpretation and the triadic model theorized by Charles Sanders Peirce, whom Bertoff (1990) calls “the father of semiotics” (p. 1). Rosenblatt (1978/1994) cites Peirce as an essential influence in the development of her transactional theory, which values the role of the reader and the reader’s “personal linguistic-experiential reservoir, the residue of past transactions in life and language” (p. 182) in interpreting a text “at a

“lived through” experience a reader has, focusing attention on the reading “*during the reading event*” (italics hers, p. 27).
particular time and place” (p. 6). Hade (1997) explains the role of signs in readings that emphasize interpretation rather than comprehension:

How do race, class, and gender, as signs to be interpreted, mean in the stories we put before children? I am using sign in the sense that the semiotician C. S. Peirce (1931-1935) used it. A sign is comprised of an indivisible and triadic relationship of symbol (what appears on the page), referent (the object that is represented by the symbol), and an interpretant (the meaning brought to the sign which mediates between the symbol and the referent). This means that we do not think to get meaning, but rather we use meaning to think…Reading is inherently social and is dominated by culture. (p. 235)

Reading with an understanding of signs is a means to recognize sociocultural influences on writing and reading, and such awareness can be a basis for reading literature and the world critically and consciously as makers of meaning. As Hade asserts,

If we view reading not as comprehending existing messages, but interpreting certain signs with which we have a relationship that includes experience, culture, and value, we can see readers as becoming more powerful interpreters of their reading and of their world. (p. 240)

This emphasis on readers having authority is important to curricular choices and pedagogical approaches that, to borrow Giroux’s terms, educate students for public life. Using the terminology of the triadic model and, as Hade says, “reading a book in the context of another book” (p. 252) are ways to provide critical language and reading experiences through a curriculum and pedagogy designed to promote “multiculturalism as a social movement” (p. 240). Ann Berthoff (1990), who argues for “a pedagogy of knowing and a theory of imagination as the forming power of the active mind,” also discusses the power of interpretation stemming from this triadic model (p. 1). She states,

If we let the idea of triadicity guide us, the possibilities are endless. If we make interpretation central in our teaching (as it is in all knowing), it will be central in our students’ learning. As interpretations are interpreted, students learn how to make the powers of language a resource in their reading and writing…The generative powers of language are evident as we observe how representations are interpreted, how interpretations are to be represented. Meaning emerges in that
process and, as is reflected upon, reconsidered, revised, and represented anew, everybody learns. (p. 5)

The centrality of interpretation is a means to connect theory and practice. Valuing interpretation is also a way for classrooms to be sites for dialogic exchanges among teachers and students who learn from each other in the process of articulating meanings.

**Curricula and Culture**

“The choice of what we want to know is primarily political and ethical.”

Curricula are inherently political because they are about shaping minds to influence the future. In *Culture and Truth*, anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989/1993) considers political implications of educators’ concerns for the future. He states,

> In my view, the current battle about how best to prepare students for life in the twenty-first century revolves around questions of the degree and significance of human differences, whether change or stasis is the natural state of society, and to what extent struggle shapes the course of human events. (p. 224)

In my growth as an educator, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of political and ideological clarity in curriculum development and pedagogy. As Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer (2003) observe, “Ideology is always a matter of politics. That is, it relates to the ways in which people get and maintain power over one another” (p. 80). Teaching is not a neutral endeavor. Rebecca Powell’s (1999) *Literacy as a Moral Imperative* has been a particularly influential book for me in recognizing the importance of self-analysis of beliefs, ideologies, and mission. She urges teachers “to question why they are educating, and whose purposes it ultimately serves” (p. 127).

Powell also makes apparent the prevalence of political decisions that a teacher makes consciously or unconsciously every day: “Even a teacher who consciously attempts to be politically ‘neutral’ makes hundreds of political decisions—from posters on the walls to
attitudes toward holidays” (p. 40). Curricular choices and classroom practices, then, can exist to sustain a dominant culture status quo through a “hidden curriculum,” or they can be part of a social movement for a more just future.

For me, surfacing ideological assumptions has become an ongoing exploration of the extent to which culture influences self-concept and expression. Just as ideology can be so ingrained as to seem obvious or as “common sense” (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, pp. 80-81), culture is the medium through which ideology permeates and shapes people’s worldviews. I love anthropologist Ruth Behar’s (1996) metaphor about the relationship between culture and identity. She writes, “cultural forms run deep into the rivers of being” (p. 70). Renato Rosaldo (1989/1993) describes this relationship another way. He asserts, “Even when they appear most subjective, thought and feeling are always culturally shaped and influenced by one’s biography, social situation, and historical context” (p. 103). Curricula reflect and transmit culture as they present knowledge and ways of understanding the world.

Henry Giroux (1987), following Paulo Freire and others, discusses schools as cultural sites, emphasizing the importance of “understanding how texts, classroom relations, teacher talk, and other aspects of the formal and hidden curricula of schooling often function to actively silence students” (p. 177). Renato Rosaldo’s (1989/1993) preface for Culture and Truth opens with a quote from Adrienne Rich’s “Invisibility in Academe” that I believe powerfully and hauntingly conveys a sense of the psychic costs of such silencing:

When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (p. xxi)
At the heart of ideological clarity and conscious political decisions supporting social justice are ongoing critical readings of privilege, legitimization, and confirmation of experience as well as ways of making meaning (Giroux, 1987, pp. 176-177). Because schools are sites that transmit culture, they influence identity formation, and it is imperative for educators to evaluate and revise curricula and classroom practices that “give the appearance of transmitting a common culture, but …more often than not, legitimate what can be called a dominant culture” (Giroux, 1987, p. 176). Giroux (1987), drawing upon Donald Graves’ approach to critical literacy, highlights the importance of “a more critical understanding of how experience is named, produced, sustained, and rewarded in schools” (p. 177). Viewing language as signs constituted by social and cultural meanings and juxtaposing texts are ways to utilize language consciously and critically to examine, question, and learn from cultural influences on interpretation.

Considering metaphors is another way to recognize the extent of cultural influences on reading and making meaning. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) state in *Metaphors We Live By*, “metaphor plays a very significant role in determining what is real for us” (p. 146). Lakoff and Johnson’s views about metaphor have become influential in my efforts to understand how culture and experience shape the mind. Notions of experience and truth inform curricular choices. Lakoff and Johnson explain that myths are like metaphors in that they help us understand the world (p. 185). The myth of objectivism, they assert, “is part of the everyday functioning of every member in this culture,” but objectivism as a dominant ideology carries with it a marginalizing of emotion and imagination (p. 189). Their “experientialist account of understanding and truth” appeals to me greatly because it recognizes the importance of metaphor in
“[uniting] reason and imagination” (pp. 192-193). Lakoff and Johnson state, “Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness. The endeavors of the imagination are not devoid of rationality; since they use metaphor, they employ an imaginative rationality” (p. 193). Lakoff and Johnson’s idea of imaginative rationality is an expression of Freire’s urging teachers “to dare so that we never dichotomize cognition from the emotional self” (quoted in Macedo and Bartolomé, 1999, p. 30). Awareness of metaphors can contribute to making education in schools more holistic and consciousness-raising.

Until I read Metaphors We Live By, I had not considered the prevalence of everyday conceptual metaphors in culture shaping my perceptions of the world, uses of language, thoughts, and actions. Lakoff and Johnson state, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (italics theirs, p. 5). They discuss a variety of frequently used metaphors such as “argument is war” (pp. 4-6), “time is money” (pp. 7-9), “understanding is seeing” (p. 48), “love is a physical force” (p. 49), and orientational metaphors such as “happiness is up; sad is down” (p. 15). Such metaphors are certainly not universal. Lakoff and Johnson invite their readers to imagine a culture using a metaphor of argument as dance rather than war (p. 5), for example, and they note that some cultures give “balance or centrality” priority as a spatial orientation (p. 24). I think of First Nation educators who describe the importance of balance in the medicine wheel concept (Horsman, 2002, p. 77). The wheel can be drawn using quadrants to represent the emphasis given to each aspect of body, mind, emotion, and spirit by a person or society. If a person or society focuses on or values the mind and
neglects spirit, for instance, the wheel is out of balance (Horsman, p. 77). Common everyday expressions reinforce ways of experiencing the world, and metaphors are pervasive in people’s thinking and interactions with others.

Recognizing cultural influences on curricula through metaphors can be an effective and empowering way to surface assumptions about ideologies as learning about metaphors can help students grow as interpreters and makers of meaning. Because we experience the world through our bodies, we use metaphors that reflect the physicality of our experience within a social, historical, and cultural context. As ecofeminist, writer, and poet Susan Griffin (1990) asserts, “The body, all earthly existence has meaning. Metaphor derives its power from the intrinsic significance of the material world” (p. 94). Griffin’s connection between metaphor and sensual, earthy experiences appeals to me greatly because it values knowing, as Freire would say, “with our entire body” (quoted in Macedo and Bartolomé, 1999, p. 30). Teacher and poet Judith Steinbergh (1999) echoes this idea of knowing with our bodies. She writes, “Poetic metaphor brings thought and emotion to the reader in a way that can be visualized, touched, heard, tasted, and smelled” (p. 235). Steinbergh also provides reflections about the concept of metaphor that emphasize its importance toward growth:

Metaphor is rooted in the Greek *metaphora*, to transfer, to carry across, so the intention is to convey a clearer or fresher meaning by use of a figure of speech (an image where the meaning is not literal). Metaphor is often chosen over literal description because it is concise, vivid, memorable, and at times, the only way to express what we have to say (Ortony, 1975).\(^5\) Roland Bartel (1983)\(^6\) writes that metaphor merges two unrelated terms to form new images and concepts and claims that metaphor is an indispensable basis for all growth and progress. (p. 324)


Because poetry is a genre that relies deeply upon metaphor to convey meaning, providing students experiences with poetry can be a means for them to understand metaphor experientially by making personal connections to a poem and aesthetically through fresh expressions of “imaginative rationality” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 193). Exploring metaphors through multicultural poetry can help students consider sociocultural contexts with thought and feeling as they extend their own sociocultural perceptions (Rummel, 1995).

In the section that follows, I discuss ways in which poetry can enrich curricula as a means to help students make connections among a variety of subject areas such as science, mathematics, and social studies. I believe that poetry’s music, imagery, and figurative language encourage abstract thought and heighten powers of observation.

**Poetry in Curricula: Making Connections**

“Poetry is for thinking and feeling.”
—Donald Graves (1992, p. 171)

In *Children’s Literature in the Elementary School*, Charlotte Huck (2001) explores connections between literature and critical thinking. Reading literature can help students observe patterns to discover themes; compare versions of stories to consider biases or ideological perspectives; connect with the emotions, conflicts, and experiences of characters; learn about the world; and imagine a life different from one’s own (p. 12). Because literature can inspire imagination, it nurtures creative thinking as well as critical thinking. Huck states,

> All areas of the curriculum can be enriched through literature. Children might start with a story and research the facts; or they might start with the facts and find the true meanings in the stories surrounding those facts. Literature has the power to educate both the heart and the mind. (p. 12)
While nonfiction books, for example, can “add both facts and human perspective to the curriculum” (p. 12), poetry can help students experience ideas, images, and feelings through language in a concentrated form.

For teachers who like poetry or are open to using poetry for cross-curricular connections, poetry can be a stimulating genre for thinking and discussion. Poets are keen observers of the world, and they create their verbal art through carefully selected words and phrases, distilling ideas to express them concisely and sonorously. Because the very appearance of a poem on a page invites an aesthetic stance, a slowing down, an openness to the moment, reading or hearing a poem related to an academic topic can help students focus their attention and be in touch with emotion as well as cognition.

Donald Graves’ (1992) ideas about bringing poetry into curricular areas such as science, social studies, mathematics, and the visual arts are influential in my belief that cross-curricular connections through poetry can be beneficial to students’ growth. Graves notes that both scientists and poets “[look] at the commonplace with fresh eyes” (p. 156), ask questions, and “are careful to use precise words” (p. 158). Poetry, like other genres, can help make topics in social studies come alive by focusing on the humanity shaping and shaped by historical events in cultural contexts (pp. 160-162). Mathematics and poetry both “[express] complex ideas in symbolic ways” and “attempt to order and understand reality and experience” (p. 163). Poetry and the visual arts are both “art forms in which the artist tries to say more than is immediately evident to the senses” (p. 167); poetry and visual arts can complement one another as composition processes leading to discoveries and self-expression (p. 167). Incorporating poetry into curricula
can also be, to borrow Freire’s terms, a means “to dare so that we never dichotomize cognition from the emotional self” (quoted in Macedo and Bartolomé, 1999, p. 30).

Marilyn Nelson’s (2001) *Carver: A Life in Poems* is, I think, an inspiring and powerful example of multicultural poetry with applicability in multiple areas of study. The poems in this Coretta Scott King Honor and Newbery Honor book have the potential to shape the mind and nourish the spirit. George Washington Carver, who was born a slave in the 1860s, went on to earn a master’s degree and accepted Booker T. Washington’s invitation in 1896 to head the new agricultural department at Tuskegee Institute. Carver was a botanist, inventor, musician, painter, lace-maker, teacher, and activist who believed “A personal relationship with the Great Creator of all things is the only foundation for the abundant life” (quoted in Nelson, p. 6). The poems in this book bring history and aspects of Carver’s legacy alive for thinking and feeling, and they show readers Carver’s creative resourcefulness and passion for making a positive difference in the world. For me, this poem exudes hope and possibility as it shows Carver’s way of seeing ordinary or imperfect objects as tools. Nelson’s book exemplifies helping children “understand that contemporary stories of justice and social change are part of a history of hope and action in the face of oppression” (Enciso et al., 1999, p. 192). A man who had been a slave, Carver helped alleviate poverty among African American farmers through his work with soil-replenishing crops; and he was an artist, musician, and educator with a strong faith in “the Great Creator of all things.” For me, Nelson’s poems are consciousness-raising as they celebrate the life of a gifted person who overcame oppression and left a legacy of social action that offers inspiration for students and
People learn through observing, imitating, questioning, interpreting, expressing understandings and ideas, and taking risks in a process of growth to gain knowledge and develop critical self-awareness and agency. In the discussion that follows, I explore how pedagogical approaches such as cooperative talk, play, juxtaposing texts, and writing about a reading can inform a practice which values the process of experience, curiosity, growth through social interactions, compassion, and critical thinking acting in concert with the emotional self. As Freire asserts, “we study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body,” with emotions and cognition (quoted in Macedo and Bartolomé, 1999, p. 30). I believe people learn holistically, and processes of learning and teaching, as well as reading and writing, shape one another.

**Pedagogical Approaches for Developing Critical Consciousness and Agency**

“*Reading* works as a metaphor for interpretation because what we do with language is fundamentally the same as what we do in perception, in making sense of the world. Saying and seeing are both ways of forming, ways of knowing, ways of making meaning.”

—Ann Berthoff (1990, p. 109)

People learn through using language or other forms of representation to discover, shape, and communicate meanings made individually and collaboratively. For me, Ann Berthoff’s (1990) beliefs about ways to teach reading and writing are central to an anti-oppressive pedagogy:

…both reading and writing are activities impelled by ‘the sense of learning,’ the inborn, species-specific capacity to recognize, to form, to abstract, to represent,—and to re-represent. I believe that if we set aside the conviction that the way to teach reading is to test ‘comprehension’ and that the way to teach writing is to assign topics (complete with Study Questions); if we abandon the pedagogy of
exhortation (which is a variant of the pedagogy of the oppressor, the one who knows what you should know); if we can finally liberate ourselves from both positivistic and mystic versions of a view of meaning as substance or essence or code, we might then be free to move toward what Paulo Freire calls a ‘pedagogy of knowing,’ a philosophy of education which sees reading and writing as ways of recognizing representations, of representing recognitions. (pp. 105-106)

Reading and writing are “interpretive acts” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 115); and learning and knowing happen in a process of interpreting representations and representing interpretations (Berthoff, 1990, p. 5). Processes of recognition and representation are inherently social and have the potential to nurture positive experiences of participation in a learning community in which making meaning is valued and respected.

Growth through social interactions is at the heart of an educational practice, and cooperative talk is a means for students and teachers to grow as makers of meaning. In *Tell Me: Children, Reading, and Talk*, Aidan Chambers (1996) asserts, “helping children talk about their reading [helps] them be articulate about the rest of their lives” (p. 2). As children say their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, they develop their voices and authority as readers and interpreters. Cooperative talk also offers spaces to “keep the questions open and alive” (Greene, 1978, p. 175). For me, cooperative talk means there is agreement that “everything is honorably reportable” (Chambers, p. 38) or, as Daniel Hade (1991) states in “Being Literary in a Literature-Based Classroom,” “children’s responses are accepted as honest and meaningful” (p. 9). As Hade notes, “There is in every sharing of a story a ‘class text,’ an official response,” so a teacher needs to be aware of and consider social matters shaping this class text (pp. 9-10). Inviting and honoring honest reactions is vital to providing a space where students will feel comfortable enough to share their interpretations and experiences reading.
While educational experiences for the development of critical consciousness and agency clearly involve work, there is an important place for play in learning. I think of play as creative experimentation, and according to L. S. Vygotsky, play is part of the development of consciousness of children as they gain powers of imagination. In *Mind and Society*, Vygotsky (1978) states, “Like all functions of consciousness, [imagination] originally arises from action. The old adage that child’s play is imagination in action must be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and school children is play without action” (p. 93). An experience I had with a second-grader named John⁷ has been particularly influential in my belief that play is important to pedagogy. In 2002 I worked with John while I was a family literacy tutor in Madison, Florida. Twice a week, John and I met at the public library to help him build fluency in reading aloud and talking about his reading, and to share my love of reading with him. John was reading at grade level after having been deaf the first four years of his life; he loved to draw and appeared to me to be a visual learner. Freire (1985), in an interview with *Language Arts* “Reading the World and Reading the Word,” says, “Teachers must be able to play with children, to dream with them. They must wet their bodies in the waters of children’s culture first. Then they will see how to teach reading and writing” (p. 18). John loved literary play through drama and “entering the story world” (Hade, 1991, pp. 3-4). We spent time on the floor looking through books together, and we made up stories playing with puppets at a theater set up in the children’s section. Because John had a passionate curiosity about dinosaurs and dragons, we also went in search of books about these creatures. Reading was play because it had “value and importance” to John (Hade, 1991, p. 6). Play nurtures creativity, and curiosity is a desire to know that energizes seeking knowledge and

⁷ a pseudonym
understanding. Offering students choices of books to read is a powerful way not only to help build a varied repertoire, but also to engage energizing curiosity.

As discussed earlier, juxtaposing texts is an important way to help students develop critical consciousness. Such juxtaposition influences interpretations by helping make assumptions in texts more apparent. As Hade (1997) says in “Reading Multiculturally,”

> Doesn’t reading a book in the context of another book interfere with the meaning a reader might otherwise make? Absolutely! But not to make the signs visible is to cede the meaning of the sign to the orthodoxy of a dominant and popular culture. This is imposition by omission—a far more insidious interference than directly confronting our assumptions. There cannot be a context free of cultural and social influence. Every day mass media, popular culture, religion, and school textbooks ‘interfere’ with the meanings children make. Multiculturalism disappears without the challenge of critique. (p. 252)

Hade explains, for example, that sharing Shel Silverstein’s (1964) *The Giving Tree* alongside Anthony Browne’s (1986) feminist *Piggybook* can make the gender of the tree in Silverstein’s book more obvious, causing readers to be more conscious of, and possibly reconsider, their interpretations (pp. 246-247). This approach of juxtaposing texts can work in support of a politics of multiculturalism.

Another pedagogical approach, writing about a reading, is an important way to represent interpretations. I agree with William Zinsser’s (1989) assertion in *Writing to Learn*, “Writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts. Writing is how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Writing enables us to find out what we know—and what we don’t know—about whatever we’re trying to learn”8 (quoted in Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 11). Inviting students to write also about their aesthetic responses is a

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way to draw upon “the cognitive and affective elements of consciousness” (Rosenblatt, 1980, 388).

In *Literacy as a Moral Imperative: Facing the Challenges of a Pluralistic Society*, Rebecca Powell (1999) asserts that holistic and critical theories informing literacy can be empowering methodologically and politically. She states:

Holistic theory informs methodology; critical theory infuses methodology with political force. Holistic theory considers the wholeness of the human experience—social, cultural, cognitive, physical, affective, spiritual; critical theory demystifies the ways that differences in the human experience have been used to privilege and oppress. Holistic theory leads to classrooms that affirm and nurture the linguistic, cognitive, and spiritual development of each child; critical theory directs students’ development toward transformative versus solely individualistic ends. (p. 121)

As Jenny Horsman (2002) states in *Too Scared to Learn*, “It’s not just the mind that goes to school—it is the whole person” (p. 334). Providing reading experiences that invite an aesthetic stance to draw upon emotions, sensuality, and thought is a powerful way to teach holistically; and poetry is a genre that can help bridge a body-mind dualism.

Poet and lifelong feminist Eve Merriam describes, for example, how poetry can be felt in the body:

I feel that poetry, the sounds of words, are directly related to the rhythms of one’s body. I can’t recite poetry and sit still. I have to be standing. I have to be able to move my whole body. I think that the body is so involved in poetry that one must just use it to develop the rhythm. So there, then, you can feel tensions in your body as you’re breathing in, as you’re breathing out, as you have a long flow of words or something staccato…(quoted in Cox, 1989, p. 142)

Merriam’s (1985) suggestions for teaching poetry include breathing exercises for body awareness before reading aloud a poem (p. 80). In the spring of 2005, I had my first experience leading a class of elementary education students in these breathing exercises. Before we did a choral reading of Paul Fleischman’s (1988) “Mayflies” from *Joyful*
Noise: Poems for Two Voices, we breathed in and out together and stretched our arms, and I felt joy. I sensed that focusing on breath contributed to a feeling of community and slowing down together to be present in the moment. I shared with the group that I had practiced the pre-poetry reading breathing exercises at home and had noticed feeling more centered afterwards. That moment of authenticity, connecting personal experience and myself as a learner with teaching, energized me beautifully and showed me a direction for growth in my own teaching practice. Since then, I have found myself connecting with that energizing, inspiring moment each time I practice these exercises with students.

I believe that poetry’s music, imagery, figurative language, and concentrated form offer representations that speak to a wholeness of being and interpreting with body, mind, emotion, and spirit. A multicultural literature program using holistic approaches to teaching not only has the potential to raise critical awareness but also to nurture empathy and compassion. Such growth is what can help children gain, to borrow Giroux’s (1992) terms, “the knowledge, character, and moral vision that build civic courage” (p. 18).

In this next section, I discuss evaluative approaches that reflect my belief that learning and teaching shape one another, and that teachers need to balance clear expectations with opportunities for risk-taking when evaluating students.

**Evaluative Approaches for Growth**

Teachers are engaged in a constant process of learning: learning from students, other teachers, continuing education, and experiences in and outside the classroom. As Dewey (1938/1997) says, educators are “concerned to have a long look ahead” (p. 75), so the process of growth, improvement, and change is future-oriented but is also socially,
culturally, and historically situated. Freire describes the inter-relationship between learning and teaching:

Socially and historically, women and men discovered that it was the process of learning that made (and makes) teaching possible. Learning in social contexts through the ages, people discovered that it was possible to develop ways, paths, and methods of teaching. To learn, then, logically precedes to teach. In other words, to teach is part of the very fabric of learning.⁹ (cited in Macedo and Bartolomé, 1999, p. 119)

Ongoing reflection, networking, study, and feedback from students inform evaluative approaches for teaching. Whether used for current adjustments or future curricular choices and pedagogical and evaluative approaches, these sources of insight and information are important to a teacher’s growth.

Evaluative approaches for students should be designed to benefit their growth and encourage continued learning. I believe seeking a balance between clear expectations and opportunities for risk-taking is key to effective evaluation. By risk-taking, I mean making connections, developing metaphors, and using creative expression to discover and represent meanings. Having some ungraded writings and using portfolio assessments can be ways to encourage students to stretch their thinking or exercise their imaginations. Teachers create spaces for constructive feedback through their evaluative approaches. Informal observations and formal evaluations offer opportunities for teachers to nurture gifts and strengths, as well as identify areas for more specific attention, clarification, and coaching. Writing comments on papers also supports a dialog between teachers and students in the process of “representing recognitions” and “recognizing representations” (Berthoff, 1990, pp. 105-106).

Through engaging curiosity about ourselves, other peoples, and the world, both education for a democratic, pluralistic society and multicultural poetry nurture a desire to know through the interpretive abilities of our whole beings. Both education and multicultural poetry have the potential to shape minds for social justice and environmental healing by developing critical consciousness in conjunction with the emotional self; both also have the potential to nurture compassionate spirits for human agency. In order for education to help people make a positive difference in the world, educators need to remember and honor what Einstein calls “the intuitive mind,” and poetry is a genre well suited to exercise the intuitive mind through its connotative expression, emotive power, and nourishment for the senses and spirit. In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne Langer (1942/1957) says the intuitive mind offers insights “without due process of thought to fill the gaps in the edifice of discursive, or ‘rational,’ judgment” (p. 98). Sometimes poems need to be felt to be understood, and poetry is—to quote a phrase from Marilyn Nelson’s (2001) poem “Chemistry 101”—“the waters of imagining” (p. 37) for the intuitive mind.

In my growth as an educator, I am increasingly drawn to learning more about multicultural poetry as a genre for teaching holistically in working with students to develop critical consciousness and agency. For me, teaching holistically requires a willingness, as Freire would say, “to speak about love without fear of being called ascientific” (quoted in Macedo and Bartolomé, 1999, p. 30). Powell (1999) also urges educators to speak of love:

In our quest for professional objectivism, we tend to avoid words like *love* that would cast us into the metaphysical realm, that would make us appear unscholarly or even melodramatic. Yet in so doing, we deny the part of our existence that excites our imagination, that inspires us to reach new levels of creativity, that
dares us to be whole. We also deny the forces of passion and pain that join us as a human race and that compel us to work for justice—that enable us to forge transforming relationships that make systemic change possible. (p. 99)

Poetry, like other art forms, connects people by giving expression to meaningful ideas, thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Because poetry invites an aesthetic response, it is vital to a curriculum that recognizes the importance of emotion, body, and spirit as well as the mind. Poetic expression, like other creative endeavors, is a form of power. The diverse, individual voices of multicultural poems can name and expose social and environmental injustices, honor struggles, celebrate the joys of life, and be integral to what Dewey (1938/1997) terms an “organic connection” between education and human experience (p. 25).
Chapter 3

Multicultural Poetry as Political and Potentially Transformational

Reading and hearing poetry invites us to slow down and immerse ourselves in the experience of reading with thought and feeling. Poems can affect us in particularly powerful ways as they draw upon rhythm, sound, images, and figurative language to distill experiences that speak to mind, emotion, body, and spirit. Poetry and especially multicultural poetry, though, exist in the margins of curricula for many elementary and middle school students. A hope I have for my teaching and learning with future teachers studying children’s literature is to help shift poetry and specifically multicultural poetry from the margins of curricula to frequent inclusion. I believe positive experiences with poems and multicultural poems in school can encourage people to view poetry as the nourishment for living that Adrienne Rich describes, “food for the heart and senses, food of memory and hope” (quoted in Heard, 1999, p. xi).

In exploring the human condition through multicultural poetry, teachers have opportunities to shape minds, nourish spirits, and open spaces for transformation through sharing and discussing poetry from diverse individual voices. Extending students’ sociocultural perceptions (Rummel, 1995) through multicultural poetry is a means to engage what Ann Berthoff (1990) terms “the transforming power of language” (p. 121). Berthoff says that through valuing students’ experiences and viewing them as “meaning makers,” teachers can encourage students to ask, “What do I think about all this?” (p. 124). Such questioning and dialogue are at the heart of developing critical consciousness and being a participant in democratic discourse in a pluralistic society.
In this chapter, I discuss literacy education, poetry, and multicultural poetry as inherently political; I state ideas shaping my work to change the cycle of multicultural poetry as a marginalized necessity in education. I also present holistic aspects of multicultural poetry as opening spaces for transformation in a process of developing critical consciousness. With this foundation, I begin to share my own teaching journey of growth and compassion and explore three Pennsylvania State University elementary education students’ individual responses to Eugenio Alberto Cano Correa’s poem “My Memories of the Nicaraguan Revolution.” In my inquiry and interpretations, I view multicultural poetry as nourishment for what Albert Einstein terms the intuitive mind.

**Literacy Education Is Political**

“A pedagogy of knowing converts learners to agents who are actively aware of what they are doing…. It is central to Freire’s pedagogy that learners are empowered by the knowledge that they are learners. This conscientization or ‘critical consciousness,’—this awareness of oneself as a knower, as meaning maker—is brought into being in the course of dialogue…learners are engaged continually in thinking about thinking, in those reflective acts of interpreting interpretations which language makes possible.”

—Ann Berthoff (1990, p. 118)

In *The Sense of Learning*, Ann Berthoff (1990) discusses how a pedagogy that seeks to develop critical consciousness, or *conscientização*, in students positions them as knowers, as meaning makers. She draws connections among educators and authors I. A. Richards, Louise Rosenblatt, and Paulo Freire, asserting, “Rosenblatt’s theory of reading is, like Freire’s pedagogy of knowing and Richards’ philosophy of rhetoric, informed by a trust in what Coleridge called ‘the all-in-each of human nature’” (p. 133). Berthoff describes this expression as being “Coleridge’s wonderful name for the special powers

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1 Freire, P. (1973/2002). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum, 8. Translator’s note: “A ‘massified’ society is one in which the people, after entering the historical process, have been manipulated by the elite into an unthinking manageable agglomeration. This process is termed ‘massification.’ It stands in contrast to *conscientização*, which is the process of achieving a critical consciousness.”
[language and imagination] which belong to all of us and which are realized socially, communally” (p. 146). All three educators, Berthoff states, are important thinkers and writers because they can serve as guides to help us vitalize the “power of the active mind” (p. 113). Berthoff asserts that alongside Richards’ ideas about practical criticism, the pedagogies of Rosenblatt and Freire are particularly relevant and significant as they consider “the social contexts of meaning” (p. 113). This theoretical stance of belief in the power of people’s minds offers hope for a better future and names the foundation for developing critical consciousness through literacy education as making meaning in a social context.

Curricula and pedagogies are inherently political because they are about shaping minds to influence the future. In a 1985 interview with Language Arts, Freire states, “Political events are educational and education is politicity, it is never neutral. When we try to be neutral, like Pilate, we support the dominant ideology” (p. 17). Pedagogies that strive for the development of critical consciousness, I believe, are political because they invite dialogue, questioning, and viewing oneself as able to make a positive difference in the world. Drawing upon the idea of a faith in people or “a trust in…‘the all-in-each of human nature,’” Freire (1973/2002) describes the “creative” and open discussion necessary to democratic education:

Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in men, on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion. (p. 38)

Freire’s literacy education work with Brazilian peasants was political because he viewed them as knowers and believed “that naming the world becomes a model for changing the
world” (Berthoff, p. 121); and the Brazilian government exiled Freire because they feared his literacy work developing critical consciousness and human agency (Berthoff, p. 141).

As bell hooks (1994) reminds us in *Teaching to Transgress*, Freire “never spoke of conscientization as an end itself, but always as it is joined by meaningful praxis” (p. 47), or “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (p. 14). A practice of engaging voice and developing critical consciousness in conjunction with praxis encourages people to be subjects who value their experiences and, as Freire would say, “read the world” as sources of knowledge and insight. A practice informed by a view of love that includes engaging in creative and open discussion to problematize social issues offers hope for a healthier, more socially just future. Although children and adolescents do not have the accumulated life experiences of adults, they are nevertheless makers of meaning and—through their growth as subjects—they are our hope for a better future.

Whether consciously political or not, educators make choices of content that are political. As Freire (1994) says in *Pedagogy of Hope*,

> The fundamental problem—a problem of a political nature, and colored by ideological hues—is who choses (sic) the content, and in behalf of which persons and things the ‘chooser’s’ teaching will be performed—in favor of whom, against whom, in favor of what, against what. (p. 109)

I believe it is important to remember steadfastly that curricula reflect and transmit culture and ideologies as they present knowledge and ways of understanding the world. Curricular choices and classroom practices can exist to sustain a dominant culture status quo, or they can contribute toward education promoting the growth of critical consciousness joined with praxis.

Sharing multicultural literature with young people is essential to democratic education for a pluralistic society. Educator and poet Nancy Larrick, in her 1965
Saturday Review article “The All-White World of Children’s Literature,” discusses the lack of diversity in books published for children at that time: “Across the country, 6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them” (p. 63). Larrick voices her concerns about potentially “irreparable” damage done to nonwhite children and observes that through all-white books, “Although his light skin makes him one of the world’s minorities, the white child learns from his books that he is the kingfish” (p. 63).

The all-white Dick and Jane basal readers I remember from the late 1960’s exemplify the antithesis of working toward social change and social justice through literacy education. Joel Taxel (1991), in his editorial notes for The New Advocate, “On the Politics of Children’s Literature,” addresses the historically prevalent “depoliticization” of determining what books are “good” books for children. He argues that children need to engage in dialogue about important social and political issues “inseparable” from a book’s literary quality (p. xi). Taxel points out that claiming a separation of literary elements from social and political issues is itself “profoundly political because it effectively masks and thereby removes from the realm of possible discussion that which is denied” (p. x). I believe that discussing “literary merit” divorced from social and political contexts does students a disservice and an injustice.

Students need experiences reading and hearing an enriching, thought-provoking, and inspiring diversity of individual voices reflecting different world views, ways of living, and sociocultural contexts. I view Daniel Hade’s (1997) assertion that multiculturalism is a social movement as a political basis for selecting multicultural
literature to share with young people in the spirit of democratic education. In “Reading Multiculturally,” Hade states:

For me, multiculturalism as a social movement has three aspects. First, multiculturalism is a systematic critique of the ideology of westernness. This means we challenge the domination of assumptions held by our western culture. Second, multiculturalism is also the challenge of living with each other in a world of difference. Multiculturalism means searching for ways to affirm and celebrate difference, while also seeking ways to cooperate and collaborate across different groups of people. Third, multiculturalism is a reform movement based upon equity and justice. Goods and privileges are concentrated with white, wealthy males; they are not distributed justly across race, class, and gender. Multiculturalism is about social change and social justice. (p. 240)

The stories and poetry that teachers share with students become part of the students’ textual prior knowledge as they grow and form their world views. I appreciate Cecilia Espinosa and Karen Moore’s (2000) reflections about sharing poetry with students in their multiage classrooms in Phoenix, Arizona. In their article, “Understanding and Transforming the Meaning of Our Lives through Poetry, Biographies, and Songs,” they write:

We want our students to be awakened by poetry in such a way that their thoughts and feelings are given body and shape by its power. We also want them to know about the lives and work of poets like Pablo Neruda, Rafael Alberti, Alfonsina Stormi, Gabriela Mistral, Rubén Dario, Sandra Cisneros, Nikki Giovanni, Gary Soto, and others. As teachers we know that the struggle starts with us, that children won’t take poetry as something indispensable unless we do. (pp. 75-76)

Something about poetry I love deeply is this quality of awakening thoughts and feelings. I also believe that when a teacher values multicultural poetry, students sense that and may be inspired to develop a lifelong interest in reading multicultural poetry and possibly in writing their own poetry.

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2 A note indicates that this piece is reprinted from the second chapter of Making Justice Our Project, edited by Carole Edelsky.
I believe it is essential to provide children with literature that educates for critical consciousness and praxis because literature transmits ideologies that, when repeated over time, have the potential to shape student’s minds and self-perceptions. In Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics, bell hooks (2000) emphasizes the importance of children’s literature in shaping students’ minds. She writes:

Children’s literature is one of the most crucial sites for feminist education for critical consciousness precisely because beliefs and identities are still being formed. And more often than not narrow-minded thinking about gender continues to be the norm on the playground. (p. 23)

I view bell hooks’ assertion, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. viii) as a powerful statement of feminism as a political stance in literacy education for children of all ages. I also find insight and inspiration in Rudine Sims Bishop’s (1997) reflections about multicultural literature:

The function of multicultural literature is to ensure that students have the opportunity to reflect on [the human condition] in all its rich diversity, to prompt them to ask questions about who we are now as a society and how we arrived at our present state, and to inspire them to actions that will create and maintain social justice. (p. 19)

Critiquing, questioning, and participating in dialogue are essential to democratic discourse. They are integral to finding and having voice. As bell hooks (1989) observes, “Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others” (p. 12). To have voice is to have power and agency. And as Donaldo Macedo and Lilia Bartolomé (1995) assert, “Voice is a human right. It is a democratic right” (p. 35). Drawing upon multicultural literature in education is important to education for critical consciousness because it positions students as meaning makers with subjectivity. I agree with Ann Berthoff’s (1990) assertion, “Education does
not substitute for political action, but it is indispensable to it because of the role it plays in the development of critical consciousness” (p. 121).

**Poetry and Multicultural Poetry: Politics, Art, and Critical Consciousness**

“*Power* is the means by which social structures do this not-exactly-fair work of sorting people according to the few or many life-chances they get. Power may simply, if incompletely, be defined as the social energy of structures. Power is the determining force that causes some people to get less and some more of whatever is considered desirable in a social world.”

—Charles Lemert (1997, p. 129)

When poetry describes social and environmental problems and injustices, it becomes a means, as Adrienne Rich (1993) would say, “to enter with other humans, through language, into the order and disorder of the world” (p. 6). Rich states, “Poetry and politics both have to do with description and power” (p. 6). Politics, I believe, concerns issues of power, authority, and control within a society, and a “political” poem is one that raises consciousness regarding issues of social and environmental injustices. Whether or not poetry is consciously political, though, it is inherently political as literary art intended for sharing with an audience.

Poetry, like all art, is political. In *Feeling and Form*, philosopher Susanne Langer (1953) makes a distinction between art and reverie that illuminates the political nature of art. Art, put simply, “is for other people”: “A work of art has a public—at least a hypothetical public…and its social intent, which is essential to it, sets its standard of significance” (p. 392). Poets write poems in social contexts, and audiences interpret them in socially, culturally, and historically shaped moments. As a creative literary representation, a poem invites a personal connection and offers opportunities for “shared contemplation,” with thoughts and feelings (Chambers, 1996, p. 12).
Poet and feminist Eve Merriam had passion for writing social poetry that addresses issues such as war, sexism, and inner city crime and poverty. In “The World Outside My Skin,” Merriam (1993) writes, “Poetry can’t solve problems, but it can air them in a more directly emotional way than any other form of writing. It can lead to discussion of feelings, it can even lead to some forms of action, however small” (p. 51). Merriam’s (1996) collection of poems in The Inner City Mother Goose, she explains, follows the political folk tradition of Mother Goose rhymes that were originally “taken as social and political commentary on the vice-ridden times” of the 17th and 18th centuries (p. 6). Responding to a need to bring attention to inner city problems—“inadequate housing, unemployment, rats, cockroaches, crime and violence in the streets, noise pollution, graft…” (p. 9)—Merriam’s rhymes describe these problems using “down-to-earth language” (p. 8). In “Little Tom Tucker,” for example, Little Tom gets “A budget cut” after singing for “his school lunch” (p. 51). “Little Tom Tucker” goes to the heart of politics negatively impacting a child’s nutrition. Not only can these rhymes inspire discussion about the inner city problems they describe, but they offer a springboard for students’ descriptions and dialogue about problems they see in their neighborhoods and communities, which could inspire action, “however small.” Nikki Giovanni says in the Introduction, “Eve Merriam took the spirit of Mother Goose to the inner city to give voice to those who were being silenced” (1996, p. 2). Giovanni and Merriam both note, though, that Merriam’s rhymes generated controversy resulting in banning. Maybe her book was censored because, as one supportive television official in Baltimore said, “it deals with the truth” (p. 11).
Poetry is political when it raises social awareness relating to oppression and issues of “race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other elements that denote difference” (Harris, 1996, p. 109). As Rich (1993) advises, “You yourself are marked by family, gender, caste, landscape, the struggle to make a living, or the absence of such a struggle. The rich and the poor are equally marked. Poetry is never free of these markings even when it appears to be. Look into the images” (p. 216). In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) metaphorically describes relationships among images, consciousness, and language. She writes,

> An image is a bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge; words are the cables that hold up the bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness. (p. 91)

Anzaldúa, I believe, describes beautifully in this bridge metaphor the interplay between images and words in the growth of human consciousness to empower struggles for social justice. Looking into the images is a way to bring attention to power, or “the social energy of structures” (Lemert, 1997, p. 129), and politics in poetry.

Poetry is also political when it opens hearts and minds to empathetic awareness, to human connections. Naomi Shihab Nye, for example, seeks to improve readers’ understandings of people in the Middle East through her novel *Habibi*, much of her poetry, and some of her poetry anthologies. Her hope is for peace as she tries to bring her readers closer to Middle Eastern peoples. In the introduction to one of her books of original poems, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*, Nye (2002) urges us to remember “innocent citizens of the Middle East who haven’t committed any crime”—“especially the children, who struggle to maintain their beautiful hope. And the old ones, who have been through so much already” (p. xvii). In her poem “Lunch in Nablus City
Park,” for example, the speaker describes having lunch in a Nablus cafe during the aftermath of war and says, “…certain words feel impossible in the mouth. / Casualty: too casual, it must be changed” (p. 35). For me, the descriptions of place and people in the poem are so immediate to my senses that I feel I am at this cafe in the park witnessing physical, psychological, and spiritual traumas and struggles of innocent people and their place threatened by war. I feel moved by lines such as the speaker’s question, “Where do the souls of hills hide / When there is shooting in the valleys?” (p. 36). In an interview with Bill Moyers, Nye states, “…every time you care about something or somebody that relates to a different place in the world, then your empathy grows” (http://www.pbs.org/now/printable/transcript_nye_print.html). In a literature curriculum seeking to promote social change and social justice, multicultural poetry is necessary to education for critical consciousness and as nourishment for holistic growth to inform and inspire agency.

Opening Spaces for Transformations

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

—From Rumi, “The Guest House”
(Rumi translated by Coleman Barks, 2003, p. 179)

In a culture with many material distractions and fast-paced lifestyles, it can be hard to nurture a healthy sense of self and a feeling of community. It can also be difficult to embrace the full range of emotions Rumi’s poem “The Guest House” encourages us to greet warmly and openly (p. 179). I believe that wholeness requires being authentic, and Georgia Heard (1993) is on point when she says, “Poetry has the power to change us, by helping us open and lead more examined and perhaps, more authentic lives” (p. 118).

Words expressed authentically resonate and can spark insights, nurture the spirit, engage
the mind and senses, and open the heart. These are the very elements of self-
transformation and for effecting changes for transformations beyond the self. I agree
with Georgia Heard (1999), who describes “the transformative power of poetry” as “the
power to feed the heart and senses” (p. xvi). Through connections with poets’
connotative, distilled representations, we can see the ordinary in new ways, refresh our
visioning, learn and discover personal and political truths, and nourish our spirits. I love
Matthew Fox’s (1991) description of the spirit in Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts
for the Peoples of the Earth: “The Spirit is life, ruah, breath, wind. To be spiritual is to
be alive, filled with ruah, breathing deeply, in touch with the wind” (p. 11).

For me, my spirit is my soul, the essence of my being, and that essence seeks to
give and receive love. For this reason, following Freire, I believe that “the courage to
dare…to speak about love without fear of being called ascientific” (quoted in Macedo
and Barolomé, 1999, p. 30) is integral to helping students develop critical consciousness
and exercise human agency. I am inspired by bell hooks’ (2000) description of love in
her assertion that to choose feminist politics “is a choice to love” (p. 104). She states:

When we accept that true love is rooted in recognition and acceptance, that love
combines acknowledgment, care, responsibility, commitment and knowledge, we
understand there can be no love without justice. With that awareness comes the
understanding that love has the power to transform us, giving us the strength to
oppose domination. (1999, p. 104)

Love, I believe, is what energizes conscientization and praxis; and literacy education that
acknowledges love can help students see themselves as being able to make a positive
difference in the world. Rebecca Powell (1999) also urges educators to risk speaking of
love and asserts, “Students must see that their words can become a voice of resistance
that can help to overcome social barriers to change…To be truly transformative, the
power of their words must be motivated by love, by agape, by the desire to make all persons free” (p. 99).

In exploring the human condition through multicultural poetry, teachers have an opportunity to nourish spirits and open spaces for transformation through sharing and discussing poetry evoking a full range of human emotions. In Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth, Matthew Fox (1991) writes about the feminist pedagogy of creation spirituality arising from ancient tradition that offers ways toward healing and compassion. The goal of the creation spirituality journey is compassion, which Fox describes as “living out our interdependence in celebration and in justice making” (p. 97). According to creation spirituality, it is through opening ourselves to the awe and wonder of being alive, feeling the heaviness of pain and sorrow, and then embracing creativity and imagination that people experience transformations bringing joy and compassion. Fox states,

The Four Paths of creation spirituality tell us what matters. We are told in Path One that awe and delight matter; in Path Two that darkness, suffering, and letting go matter; in Path Three that creativity and imagination matter; and in Path Four that justice and celebration, which add up to compassion, matter. (pp. 17-18)

In “Living Well in a Time of Terror and Tests: A Meditation on Teaching and Learning with Literature,” Daniel Hade (2002) draws upon creation spirituality and suggests stories and poems that can “provide both form and substance” in “the exploration for meaning in the human experience” (p. 294). Regarding poetry, for example, he mentions Eloise Greenfield’s (1978) poem “Honey, I love” as “an example of expressing the passion of being alive” (p. 294) and Naomi Nye’s (1999) anthology What Have You Lost?, which includes a “wide-ranging collection of poetry exploring painful and pleasant losses with
honor and compassion” (Hade, 2002, p. 295). Hade describes the challenge and possibilities such an exploration can present:

One of the challenges I believe we face when teaching and learning with literature is the creation of an inner, spiritual landscape, an interior sacred space in which our students can explore fully meaning in human existence. If we can manage this difficult challenge, I believe we will be opening ourselves and our students to the joy of the universe, summoning the courage to dare the dark, running the risks of imagination and playfulness to participate in the great work of the cosmos, and inviting transformation, justice, and healing to happen. (pp. 300-301)

I believe providing “education for souls instead of roles” (Hade, 2002, p. 299) can help young people grow in their compassion.

As an act of love, teaching is also itself a creative process in action. In “Reading the World and Reading the Word,” Freire (1985) states,

…education is politics, art, knowing. Education is a certain theory of knowledge put into practice every day, but it is clothed in a certain aesthetic dress. Our very preoccupation with helping kids shape themselves as beings is an artistic aspect of education. While being a teacher demands that we be simultaneously a politician, an epistemologist, and an artist, I recognize that it is not easy to be these three things together. (p. 17)

Following John Dewey (1938/1997), who observes that an “educator…is concerned to have a long look ahead” (p. 75), I believe shaping the minds and nourishing the spirits of today’s young people is one of the most important endeavors in our democratic, pluralistic society. Poetry can help in this political endeavor and spiritual journey, helping prepare students, in Rainer Maria Rilke’s words, to “go and do heartwork…” (quoted in Heard, 1999, p. vii).

A Journey of Growth and Compassion

To begin to tell my story of teaching is also to share my journey as a reader and a scholar. I enjoyed a literacy-rich environment as a child, and I first realized my passion for reading when I was ten years old. The librarian at my school, Mr. Brazinski (Mr.
“B.”), handed me E. L. Konigsburg’s *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* and casually said that he thought I might like it. As I read about Claudia and her brother Jamie’s adventures living in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and solving a mystery about the identity of a beautiful statue’s creator, I identified with Claudia because she took violin lessons and liked to spend time in a major art museum. I also admired her courage, intelligence, and ingenuity. For the first time, I experienced losing myself in a book through independent reading. I started immersing myself in the world of literature and later decided to pursue English as my academic discipline and teaching as my occupation.

While studying English with an emphasis in literary criticism, I experienced reading, discussing, researching, and writing about literature intended for adult audiences. I especially enjoy literature that stirs my imagination, shows me new ways of thinking or seeing the world, and moves me emotionally. Studying literature at the College of William and Mary and later at Florida State University was intellectually engaging and often inspiring. I am a visual person and enjoy producing mental imagery when I read, so much of my research involved examining imagery and discussing my interpretations of thematic implications of that imagery. For example, my master’s thesis, “Window Imagery in Selected Works of Virginia Woolf,” explores uses of window imagery as a framing device to facilitate reflections on themes of time, perception, and marriage. I focused my research on Virginia Woolf because I am drawn to the sensual richness of her writing, her painterly style, and her development of characters seeking to shape moments of beauty and human connection—artists in the process of making of the moment something enduring. Her feminist views also resonate for me.
While I worked on my master’s degree, I also started my teaching journey. I taught freshman English composition and tutored at Florida State’s Reading/Writing Center. These experiences helped me see teaching and learning as interconnected, and I felt affirmed that I wanted to continue to work with students because I value education and find fulfillment in helping students work toward their academic and professional goals.

I did not pursue a doctorate in English, though, because I needed time to reflect on my path. I knew that I enjoy teaching and love the process of learning, but the prospect of academic research in English did not energize me. I wanted to pursue research that would be more socially oriented and help me serve others through literacy education.

My work at North Florida Community College in Madison led me to decide to pursue a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction, with emphasis in Language and Literacy Education. I started working at the college in 1996 and initially advised students and ran a reading/writing lab. Later I taught developmental reading and writing as well. Among a racially and ethnically diverse population, most of the students with whom I worked were low-income, first-generation college students who had grown up in rural north Florida; and many of the students had difficulties with reading, according to a placement test for reading comprehension. Working with these students was enriching because they brought a wealth of experiences to the lab and the classroom, and I found teaching to be the most fulfilling work I had ever done. At that time, my educational background focused on literary criticism and teaching writing, so I felt a need to learn more about teaching reading to better inform my own teaching practice. I took a leave of
absence to begin my program in Reading and Language Arts at Florida State and later decided to commit myself to my studies full time. During the fall of 2001, I rediscovered my love of children’s literature and knew I had found my area of specialization. The following year I relocated to State College, and I began teaching children’s literature and studying at Penn State.

As I reflect on my experiences working with students at North Florida Community College, I realize that a seed was planted in my consciousness during those years. The focus was on reading comprehension, but intuitively I was not satisfied that such an emphasis was the best thing for students. Since then, I have come to recognize that teaching for reading comprehension does not encourage students to ask the question, “What do I think about all this?” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 124). Ann Berthoff tells us that “learning to return to what they think about all that, to think about their thinking, and to interpret their interpretations” are “powers of critical consciousness” (p. 124). She points out that in Freire’s pedagogy, “decoding is always carried out simultaneously with the making of meaning: reading the word and reading the world” (italics hers, p. 122). It is this “transforming power of language” that is necessary to developing critical consciousness and informing praxis (p. 121). As Freire says in Pedagogy of Hope (1994): “The reading and writing of the world would always imply a more critical rereading of the world as a ‘route’ to the ‘rewriting’—the transformation—of that world” (p. 42). Following Louise Rosenblatt, Paulo Freire, Daniel Hade, and Ann Berthoff, I view reading as interpretation rather than comprehension, and this perspective of a reader’s agency is at the core of my work teaching and learning with students.

Berthoff notes that Freire “differentiates decoding—matching sound and letter shape—from decodification, which is interpretation, in order to ensure that they not be pedagogically separated” (italics hers, 122).
My first year at Penn State, I also experienced two other major shifts in my thinking about literature and especially poetry. The multicultural emphasis of the children’s literature course I had started teaching helped open my eyes to literature as political and a means to focus on social issues with students; and reading a lot of multicultural poetry to find poems to share with students has been opening worlds to me that stir my imagination, stretch my thinking, and speak to my heart. These realizations helped me know that I want to contribute to changing the cycle of multicultural poetry’s marginalization in education through my teaching and research with future teachers taking children’s literature.

Selecting a dialectical notebook for multicultural poetry as a course assignment and data source for my research contributed to my growth as a teacher, reader, and scholar. I have always loved the versatility of notebooks and believe that they are wonderful for recording observations, wonderings, dreams, struggles, quotations, insights, and creative ideas. I have kept reading journals, too, to explore my thoughts and feelings about books, but prior to reading Ann Berthoff’s (1990) *The Sense of Learning*, I had not used the format of a dialectical notebook for interpretations and reinterpretations. Her description of the possibilities of dialectical notebooks resonates for me:

The dialectical notebook—or the double-entry journal—encourages those habits of mind most needed by writers: the ability to look and look again; to question answers and to formulate new questions which will lead to new answers; to tolerate ambiguity; to take cognitive risks; if you like the concept Jean Bamberger deploys; to know one’s knowledge, as Coleridge put it. Above all, this kind of notebook enables students to discover the power of language itself and thereby the power of their own minds. Keeping a dialectical notebook helps reclaim imagination, which is so often debased by those who think of it as a fantasy generator, without realizing that it is the forming power of mind, ‘the prime agent of all human perception.’ (1990, pp. 100-101)
For me, this description brings together elements of Freire’s (1985) belief that “education is politics, art, knowing” (p. 17). Berthoff’s statement is politically infused with a belief in human agency, and her emphasis on observation, questioning, imagination, and perception are ways of creating and knowing. I feel especially drawn to maintaining such a notebook for readings of multicultural poems because it creates a space for asking questions; exploring ambiguity; and interpreting with thoughts, feelings, and the senses.

The format of the dialectical notebook, Berthoff explains, is simple. To write a dialectical entry, write initial interpretations, impressions, and quotations on the left side of the journal. Then revisit these notes and write reinterpretations and additional impressions and connections on the right side (p. 100). In my preparation for teaching and research, I experimented with maintaining a dialectical notebook for multicultural poetry. I first tried writing an entry for Naomi Shihab Nye’s (2002) poem “My Grandmother in the Stars” from 19 Varieties of Gazelle. Here is my entry 4:

“It is possible we will not meet again on earth. To think this fills my throat with dust.”
grieving anticipated loss

powerful line break, emotional force, the hope of life after time on earth; shift from “think” to feeling in the body—I often feel sadness in my throat—with dust—hard to swallow, hard to speak because the sadness is so intense; dust as mortality

“Just now the neighbor’s horse…”
(lines 5-7)
focusing attention
transporting across space

focus on the moment, such a shift through remembered experience—knowledge of daily life; love “hoof on stone” with its groundedness and connection with the earth; “waiting” reinforces patient; “day to open”—flower, blossoming metaphor, beautiful and a gift—every day is a gift. I want to think like this!

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4 Quotations represented here are abbreviated versions of the ones from my notes.
"village’s one heroic cow" suggests community and reinforces the poem’s coherence following “the neighbor’s horse”; heroic cow—mysterious—what makes a cow heroic? why one?, what’s the story?

appreciation for teacher
feeling of humility

such reverence, recognition of grandmother’s knowledge, her interpretations of the world

"rugged feet”
long travels, simplicity

connection with the earth and suggestion of walking a lot and walking barefoot; nice contrast with the focus on the horse’s hoof and gives a sense of experience and groundedness

“moth-eaten scarves”

not materialistic, not fighting nature, still having a use for something that many people would throw away

“Our hearts…”
(lines 13-15)
flashing losses?

sense of fatigue, suddenness, surprise—the light imagery contrasts with the “hoof on stone”—a sense of balance and a shift to the celestial; things happen suddenly sometimes—sudden losses, changes; a consciousness? knowing through our hearts?

“…Take this home…”
(lines 18-19)

I think “this” is love connection, transcending space and time, the present moment which can be recollected as a selected impression (Langer, 1953)

“…memory making us rich.”

beautiful alliteration and idea of what is “rich”; what do we take with us?, what shapes consciousness?

Once I completed the entry, I realized that writing reflections might help me learn more about what I had just done.

Reflections: My first readings of this poem focused mostly on the powerful connection between the speaker and grandmother across time, place, and culture. The sadness of being apart was something I felt immediately emotionally and physically. When I wrote the notebook entry, I noticed the strong sense of community—a feeling of caring toward and appreciation of the neighbor’s horse and the village’s cow.
Writing and revisiting my notes opened spaces for interpretation and enhanced my enjoyment of the poem through making my thinking visible and “[keeping] the questions open and alive” (Greene, 1978, p. 175). I feel much closer to the poem as I have learned more about my experience with it. I do not think, for example, that I would have been so aware of the sense of community in the poem without the benefit of noticing through writing.

I continued to experiment with writing entries for other multicultural poems and knew that writing such entries could be a means to develop critical consciousness and nourish compassion, but I needed to think through a key pedagogical decision: whether to model writing an entry for my students. The main reason I decided not to show them my example of an entry was because I wanted them to shape their own experiences writing their entries. The guidelines were simple, and I offered to look at drafts to alleviate any concerns about earning credit for the assignment (dialectical notebook entries with reflections for four multicultural poems written for children or adolescents). As a result, the students showed me several different approaches for writing dialectical entries: some students wrote notes, some wrote paragraphs, and some placed the poem in the middle of the page and wrote comments on the left and right sides, occasionally circling significant words and phrases. I wanted the focus to be on their discoveries and development of critical consciousness rather than adherence to a detailed method. As Ann Berthoff (1981) asserts, “…any writing assignments that encourage students to look and look again will be teaching critical reading and critical thinking” (p. 46).

Being a researcher as well as a teacher has deepened my own sense of agency. As I read more and more multicultural poetry and have been working to develop my own
critical consciousness as I learn with students, my belief in the potential for multicultural
poetry to provide “food for the heart and senses, food of memory and hope” (Rich quoted
in Heard, 1999, p. xi) continues to inspire my work with future teachers.

“My Memories of the Nicaraguan Revolution”

Eugenio Alberto Cano Correa’s poem “My Memories of the Nicaraguan
Revolution” is an example of a poem that stirs my imagination, stretches my thinking,
and speaks to my heart. It is also part of my story of teaching and learning with students
because three students selected this poem for their dialectical notebooks for multicultural
poetry, and their interpretations and reinterpretations give me much food for thought.
Cano Correa’s poem appears in English in Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up
Latino in the United States, edited by Lori Carlson (1994, p. 38). It is also translated
from English by Alexandra López. In the Biographical Notes, Carlson tells us Cano
Correa was born in Guatemala and has a Salvadoran mother and a Nicaraguan father (p.
120).

When I first read the poem, I appreciated its vivid imagery and economy of
language. Through learning about my students’ responses and through writing my own
dialectical notebook entry for the poem, I have become more conscious of reasons why
Cano Correa’s poem is so powerful and memorable.

Brittany writes:

*I feel that the best poems are those which evoke your emotions so strongly that
when you read the poem, it is as if you are experiencing what is being described. As I
read this poem, I envisioned very clearly the scene the artist seeks to paint with his
poetry. I imagined myself running through the same field and down the bullet shell road.*
I saw the wheelbarrow…and the smoke column ahead of me. Then suddenly, I saw my mother reach out to hug me. I could feel the emotions the narrator must have felt: the fear, the disgust, and the despair.

In her reinterpretation, Brittany elaborates on her memory evoked by the poem:

I’ve never experienced anything so emotionally trying as what the author of this poem, or his character from the poem, went through. However, I do relate to the feeling of being alienated and disturbed, wondering where to go and longing for the comfort of my mother. When I was [six or seven years old] I wandered away from my parents in the bathroom of the Port Authority in New York City….For the better part of an hour, I walked around the busy bus station crying and terrified out of my mind. There were frightening homeless people and in general, people who just plain made me uneasy. In the chaos of it all, I finally heard my mother yell out to me, while she stood next to several security guards. I don’t think I’ve ever been so relieved about anything, even to this day.

As I read Brittany’s experience reading the poem, I think of Nancy Larrick’s (1993) statement: “It has been said that poetry is the most personal form of literature with at least two people collaborating: the poet, whose words can only suggest a situation or idea—and the listener who fleshes out those lines to reflect his experience and his feelings” (p. 103). For me, Brittany’s interpretations exemplify a fusion of cognitive and affective elements of consciousness as Cano Correa’s poem evokes memories of an experience that is part of her life narrative. In her response paper about poetry, Brittany remarks,
By using poetry in the classroom, and having students share their interpretations, they can not only develop a strong sense of their own beliefs at a young age, they can also gain insights from their peers and instructors to help them in re-evaluating what they know, and they can gain respect for differences of opinion.

I read her reflections as a description of critical self-awareness that, through social interactions, grows into critical consciousness.

Kathleen writes:

My first reaction to this poem was sadness. Imagining what the person who wrote this had to go through, along with countless others, is very frightening. The poem also seemed to paint a strange sense of quietness and calm amidst the fighting that was going on....I also feel as though this moment is a vivid memory in the diary of this man’s mind. The way he describes the scene, the emotion that can be felt through the words…it is very powerfully written for being so seemingly simply stated.

In her reflections about interpreting the poem, Kathleen remarks:

It is hard to imagine someone retelling such a vivid memory and yet getting the message and imagery of the situation across to the audience so concisely. For some reason, I felt close to this poem. Perhaps it was the simplicity in the descriptions, and the way the author told it as if the reader, too, knew or had experienced something similar.

In Kathleen’s interpretation, I read an appreciation of intimacy between herself as a reader and the speaker in the poem. As she revisits her initial impressions, she mentions “the diary of this man’s mind” and a directness in the emotions evoked by the imagery and listening to the speaker’s voice. Kathleen’s connection with Cano Correa’s speaker reminds me of social scientist Laurel Richardson’s (2003) comment, “To
paraphrase Robert Frost, poetry is the shortest emotional path between two people” (p. 189).

Wayne writes:

*Powerful imagery—* His innocence is lost; signified by the bullet shells replacing the pebbles. *The bloody wheelbarrow shows the severity and insensitivities of war—people dragged away in wheelbarrows—very methodical and business-like. The hug of protection after the slogan is cried may mean that the boy and his mother see a long road of fighting ahead and question its importance. [Cano] Correa just mentions a “slogan” without saying what it is, showing that he may question its importance and honor.*

In his reflections about interpreting the poem, Wayne remarks:

*This is a sad and powerful feeling. I think this poem is a great example as to why reading multicultural poems is good for people. Most Americans have never had to live with a war being fought on their home soil unless they are immigrants escaping such hardships…. We are able to tap into his sense of sorrow and hopelessness as he describes all the horrible things he sees. It also made me think about all the times we as Americans have called on foreign countries to overthrow their governments. We have no right to do so. We are not there experiencing the pain as this boy did…*

For me, Wayne’s interpretations of the bullet shells and bloody wheelbarrow as signs of loss of innocence and war’s dehumanizing loss of life name some of the poem’s emotional and intellectual impact. The characters and situation come alive for him, and the poem compels him to raise questions.

In his response paper about poetry and an interview, Wayne told me that he had recently “opened” to poetry through the “gateway” of music. He explained that listening
to artists such as Bob Dylan and learning about poetry in his language and literacy education classes helped him transcend “negative stereotypes” about seeing poetry as something “girly.” In his response paper, Wayne explains, “...[it’s] important to give yourself more than one chance with something, because you will never know how your feelings have changed unless you do.”

As I read Cano Correa’s poem, I too and moved by the vivid imagery showing moments of a young person’s consciousness while perceiving signs of killing across a war-torn landscape. Each indefinite article introduces another focused image, and the sequence of these indelible memories pulls me close to violence I have never experienced. I feel a sense of shock and fragmentation, as if the speaker’s experience is too intense to remain fully present. The introduction of one image after another contributes to this sense of fragmentation until the “hug of protection.” Without this hug, I believe the poem would be relentlessly devoid of hope.

Brittany’s sensations and personal connections with the poem, Kathleen’s imagination, and Wayne’s readings of signs all suggest how the power of Cano Correa’s words engage the power of their minds as readers and interpreters. A consistent theme in the students’ response papers was poetry’s “ambiguous” quality mentioned by Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer (2003) in *The Pleasures of Children’s Literature*. Nodelman and Reimer remark, “…the words seem to resonate beyond themselves, to encourage readers to consider several possible meanings, instead of focusing on the most obvious one” (p. 254). And poems, as Naomi Shihab Nye observes, “respect our ability to interpret and translate images and signs” (http://scholar.lib.vt/edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring95/Nye.html).
My journey of growth and compassion as a teacher is about working for a better future. I believe reading and hearing multicultural poetry such as Eugenio Alberto Cano Correa’s “My Memories of the Nicaraguan Revolution” can be a vital means to help teachers and students grow in their critical thinking in conjunction with their emotional selves; and it is through such growth that people shape the knowledge and wisdom of their intuitive minds while nourishing their spirits.
Chapter 4
Revisiting Familiar Forms, Lessons, and Poets

In my teaching and learning about multicultural poetry with elementary education students, connecting with experiences serves as a foundation for our work together. In this chapter, I share patterns that emerged as students responded to multicultural verse and poetry, and as they selected poems for their dialectical notebooks. In particular, rhythmical verses with rhymes—an often remembered and sometimes current poetry preference reminiscent of studies of elementary school students’ poetry preferences (Terry, 1974; Fisher & Natarella, 1982)—took on new dimensions as part of a multicultural poetry study. While many students had associations of rhyme and rhythm with humor and playful narrative poetry, they revisited uses of rhyme and rhythm in contexts of poetry and verse as voices for social justice. Also, as students selected poetry for their dialectical notebooks, several students chose poetry by Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, two poets with whom several of them were familiar. In this part of my story, I share students’ and my interpretations and reinterpretations of selected poems by these poets as we make meaning and develop critical consciousness.

“Hard Hitting” Mother Goose Rhymes from The Inner City Mother Goose

When I first encountered Eve Merriam’s (1996) The Inner City Mother Goose, I was intrigued by Merriam’s bold approach to addressing social issues such as urban poverty, crime, and drug abuse. She tackles these problems head-on and uses the nursery rhyme tradition of “social and political commentary” (p. 6) to make them memorable. As Nikki Giovanni states in her May 1996 Introduction, “Eve Merriam took the spirit of Mother Goose to the inner city to give voice to those who were being silenced” (p. 2).
Learning that the book had been banned made it all the more interesting to me, and I had to share it with my students.

“Jack Be Nimble Jack Be Quick”

I selected the rhyme “Jack Be Nimble Jack Be Quick” (p. 21) as a read-aloud for its brevity and power. I had felt the punch of the sudden shift from the familiar Mother Goose two-line opening to imagery of violence in the third line. Never allowing her reader to relax and enjoy “safe” and comfortable rhymes in *The Inner City Mother Goose*, Merriam constantly utilizes the familiar to shock her audience with urban realities. In “Jack Be Nimble Jack Be Quick,” she shows us a whole different way of being “quick” and “nimble” by juxtaposing the familiar Mother Goose opening lines with harsh reality, creating a startling contrast that is very physical with the onomatopoeic “snap” and “flick” of the blade. I feel as though the speaker is showing me while talking, and the remark “It’s easily done” refers to stealing the purse being easily done both physically and psychologically. We never learn about the victim, which suggests an emotional detachment from harming a person. When the speaker says, “Then just for kicks / Just for fun,” I feel I am witnessing the interior world of the robber as the verse slows down and disturbs me with “fun” being violence as an antidote to boredom.

When I read “Jack Be Nimble Jack Be Quick” to my students and looked around the room, many of them appeared aghast. I handed the book to a nearby student to take a closer look and begin passing it around the room. Right away they started questioning what age range would be appropriate as this book challenged concepts of childhood innocence and made visible children’s literature as political. I had prepared for discussions about age appropriateness by having available professional reviews by
sources such as Booklist, Horn Book, Cooperative Children’s Book Center Choices, and The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books provided on the Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database. The youngest age any of these reviews suggest is twelve, and several state fourteen as the beginning age range. These evaluations seemed to alleviate some concerns about age appropriateness and to stimulate their thinking about book selection and censorship. Sharing *The Inner City Mother Goose* is a way to take the familiar—often a child’s first experience of “the pleasures of literature” (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 252)—as a form revisited and remade for older or more experienced readers of juvenile literature. As a student named Kathleen comments in her reading diary entry for *The Inner City Mother Goose*, “These are certainly not appropriate for young children, but unfortunately many of the situations portrayed in these creative nursery rhymes may pertain to your students’ backgrounds, lives, and/or surrounding living situations.”

“Take-a-Tour, Take-a-Tour, Congressman”

The description “Hard Hitting” in the heading for this section comes from a student’s response to “Take-a-Tour, Take-a-Tour, Congressman” (p. 22). Rhonda selected this verse for her dialectical notebook, and in her reinterpretations she writes:

> This poem is packed with hard hitting statements directed toward the government and the population in general because of their disregard for the social issues such as poverty.... These poems are a gateway for people to realize the issues that many people face every day and as more people become more aware of the problem more pressure will be put on the government to fix the problem.
Rhonda’s naming of these poems as “a gateway” for consciousness-raising is, I believe, a great metaphor for literature’s ability to help readers see and care about the lives and concerns of “others.” Eve Merriam (1993) expresses this consciousness-raising in sensual metaphorical terms:

Poetry possesses the empathy to reach out to differences as well as resemblances. To stretch from the house of one’s own body and one’s inner private feelings to emotional dwellings beyond. To the world that is too much with us late and soon. To social concerns. Problems. Neighborhoods beyond the one we live in. (p. 49)

As Rhonda describes, these contemporary Mother Goose rhymes are “packed” with purpose in bringing attention to inner city problems.

In my notes interpreting and reinterpreting “Take-a-Tour, Take-a-Tour, Congressman,” which alludes to the traditional nursery rhyme “Pat-a-cake, pat-a cake, baker’s man,” I notice the subtle ways the rhythm suggests meaning. The hyphenation of “Take-a-Tour, Take-a-Tour” sets up a fast pace to introduce the second stanza about a politician’s covering “ghetto” ground rapidly, which suggests not looking closely or lingering long enough to talk with people. The line “And file under P” emphasizes bureaucracy and tucking a problem away, tidily and conveniently. Neatly filed in the cabinet, “Poverty” can sit without any action and remain a big, nebulous, without-a-face problem. I believe “Take-a-Tour, Take-a-Tour, Congressman” slams the politicians who go for appearances and keep a distance from the people they are supposed to represent.

“Little Jack Horner”

With “Little Jack Horner” (p. 51), Merriam draws upon the traditional nursery rhyme “Little Jack Horner sat in a corner, / Eating his Christmas pie…” to give voice to minority children expected to learn to read from the “all-white world” (Larrick, 1965) of
Dick and Jane basal readers. Alice selected Merriam’s “Little Jack Horner” for her dialectical notebook, and in her reinterpretations, Alice imagines Jack’s perspective:

*Jack is looking through the Dick and Jane book, but is probably not interested.*

*He sees these “perfect” children—those who are white and have everything. He might be jealous of everything Dick and Jane have that he can’t have. If he had books that he can relate to, the child would probably be interested in learning to read.*

Alice’s assertion that Jack’s interest in reading is negatively impacted by dominant culture reading materials brings to my mind Nancy Larrick’s 1965 *Saturday Review* article, “The All-White World of Children’s Literature.” Larrick discusses the lack of diversity in books published for children at that time and states, “Across the country, 6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them” (p. 63). She voices her concerns about potentially “irreparable” damage done to nonwhite children and observes that through all-white books, “Although his light skin makes him one of the world’s minorities, the white child learns from his books that he is the kingfish” (p. 63). And the minority child learns that he or she is not important. In “Little Jack Horner,” Merriam shows her reader some of the harm of the stereotypical Dick and Jane basal readers to a minority child labeled “Dumb.” The irony of the question “Why don’t you learn to read?” exposes the dynamics of blaming a child when the schooling is the problem. In Alice’s reflections about interpreting “Little Jack Horner,” she recalls her own experiences in school and shares her belief in the importance of multicultural literature:
The poems in this book are very real, telling the truths about inner city life. While reading this poem, I imagined a little boy of another ethnicity, perhaps African-American or Latino, sitting in a corner looking confused and angry. He is looking at a Dick and Jane book, examining the characters’ Caucasian traits. They are white and have the perfect lifestyle. He is from another race and is stuck living in the inner-city slums. How can a boy relate to a book like this one? If he had a variety of multicultural books, he would probably want to read...Teachers cannot blame this boy for not being interested in reading the books that are available to him.

When I was growing up, I had no classmates of another ethnicity. My teachers never explored multicultural stories, except for maybe once a year during Black History Month. I guess I never before took the time to think about implications these actions can have on students. Not teaching students about different cultures is the same thing as telling them that other cultures are not important. I thought I had a good education, but looking back upon my schooling I realize that I feel very deprived. Teachers today need to expose students to a wide variety of genres and cultures in literature to ensure that each and every student appreciates everything our world has to offer. As a teacher, I know that I will provide books of many cultures to my students so that they can feel connections to a variety of multicultural characters.

Alice’s insight, “Not teaching students about different cultures is the same thing as telling them that other cultures are not important,” describes the message that can become the “psychic disequilibrium” Adrienne Rich names in “Invisibility in Academe”: “When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw
nothing” (quoted in Rosaldo, 1993, p. xxi). As I read Alice’s commitment to providing multicultural literature for her future students, I read her agency.

“Taxi Man”

Another student named Kathleen describes the “hard hitting” truths of The Inner City Mother Goose. In her reading diary entry, she relates her experience encountering the book in class:

*When I was first introduced to this book I could not put it down. Initially it was because I was expecting cute Mother Goose rhymes with an urban twist and instead was hit with profanity and heavy violence. Perhaps it was that shocking slap of reality that made me realize not only were these ‘nursery rhymes’ extremely well written, but they were also, unfortunately, extremely accurate. I had to continue reading if not out of curiosity then at least to get some sort of insight into what really goes on—the things that people are always thinking but never saying; the things that are always happening but that somehow remain hidden.*

Kathleen selected Merriam’s “Taxi Man” (p. 31) for her dialectical notebook. With “Taxi Man,” Merriam draws upon the rhythm and situation of the traditional nursery rhyme “Ladybird, ladybird / Fly away home / Your house is on fire / And your children are all alone.” In Kathleen’s initial interpretations, she comments, “My initial reaction was shock and disbelief not at the bluntness of the statement being made here, but by the truth in it.” In her reflections, she writes:

*These poems, such as “Taxi Man,” …went right to my gut and stayed there, stewing for quite some time. I really have to say that my initial impressions, while certainly more shocking than the later ones, still shine through on most occasions….The*
words describing the multi-cultural settings and the racism and inequality that is being faced is quite astounding, and should continue to be read about and understood to promote a change for the better.

Kathleen has been taking steps to share this book beyond the class. In her response paper about poetry, Kathleen shares her feelings about the book, as well as her agency:

   Not only are the themes heavy, but they are real, and that is why this book is so important to me, and I feel as though all future teachers, and current, should read this book. The poems in it are extremely eye-opening, and mind-opening as well, if you let them. After seeing these pieces I went to the library and took out the original 1969 version. Although it does not have the same illustrations done by David Diaz, which are featured in the newer 1996 edition, it has extremely artful and purposeful photographs that were shot in the Sixties [visuals by Lawrence Ratzkin]....The information and insight that this book gives to those who have never experienced such atrocities is unmatched in its skill and tactful bluntless. I myself have ordered a used copy of this out-of-print book, and am waiting for it to arrive. I will certainly hold on to it and share it with as many people as I can. I’ve already shared with my roommates, as well as a professor or two. I truly intend to continue sharing this book in hopes to open minds, create thoughts, and stir up some meaningful discussion on the topics that Merriam touched upon.

With her descriptions of the book as “eye-opening” and “mind-opening,” Kathleen’s impressions echo Rhonda’s “gateway” metaphor for Merriam’s consciousness-raising through the many voices in The Inner City Mother Goose.

   As I read “Taxi Man,” I am struck by the power of fear. The cab driver’s reply begins with an apology as he has already made up his mind. The line “Cabs don’t go to
Harlem” sounds like all the cab drivers know not to go there. “Taxi Man” brings to my mind jazz musician Branford Marsalis’ (1992) piece “Brother Trying to Catch a Cab (On the East Side) Blues” from his album I Heard You Twice the First Time. This track begins on the city street with a man hailing a taxi. When the taxi driver asks him where he wants to go and he answers “Brooklyn,” the driver replies, “Oh, no, no no” and says he is sorry. At the end of the piece, we again hear this man trying unsuccessfully to get a cab to take him to Brooklyn. There are borders in the city, and fear of crossing them keeps people from helping each other, “Even in an emergency” (Merriam, 1996, p. 31).

These students’ cognitive and affective interpretations and reinterprétations of selections from The Inner City Mother Goose exemplify poetry’s power to open spaces for explorations of personal problems as social issues (Lemert, 1993). Alice, for example, considers the feelings of a minority child labeled “Dumb” because he is not learning to read from a basal reader for middle- and upper-class white children. Through her use of the Mother Goose form, Merriam takes the rhythm and familiarity of nursery rhymes to shock her reader with urban truths. As “gateway” social poetry, these verses offer beginnings. In Merriam’s article “The World Outside My Skin,” she (1993) writes, “Poetry can’t solve problems, but it can air them in a more directly emotional way than any other form of writing. It can lead to discussion of feelings, it can even lead to some forms of action, however small” (p. 51). Social poetry such as The Inner City Mother Goose can raise consciousness and encourage human agency.

**The Story of Harriet Tubman: More Memorable Than Facts**

As one who values holistic education, I view poetry as a means to facilitate cross-curricular connections. In particular, history’s stories of lives and events become more
personal and memorable through poetry’s invitation to engage the heart as well as the mind. Eloise Greenfield’s (1978) *Honey, I Love and Other Love Poems* offers such an invitation to learn about Harriet Tubman (1820-1913), a slave who found freedom and worked as a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. Four students, May, Jane, Cindy, and Miranda, selected Eloise Greenfield’s poem “Harriet Tubman” (np).

**“Harriet Tubman” by Eloise Greenfield**

May describes how Greenfield’s poem offers aesthetic pleasure while providing a history lesson. In her initial interpretations, May notes loving the rhymes and remarks that the poem is “fun but informational.” In her reinterpretations, she comments that the poem “says you can do whatever you put your mind to” and says the poem “makes me want to meet her, learn more about this courageous woman.” Here are May’s reflections about reading and interpreting Greenfield’s “Harriet Tubman”:

*I like poems that rhyme and poems with a beat, so this poem was right up my alley. This poem is fun to read. I think kids will like it because it sounds like a kid wrote it. It gives you some facts, running in danger for freedom, nineteen times to the south, got 300 others, so you learn while reading. I also loved how it repeats, pulls it close.*

In May’s comments, I see her recognition of poetry’s potential to help students connect with the human stories that make “living history” rather than dry facts (Graves, 1992, p. 160). May’s enjoyment of the rhyme, rhythm, and repetition not only helps her learn about Tubman’s agency, but also engages her curiosity and imagination as reading the poem makes her want to meet “this courageous woman.”

Jane also focuses on Tubman’s courage as she considers learning about history through poetry. In her initial impressions, Jane describes Tubman’s determination to
“have a future life that wasn’t in slavery” and her altruism as the poem “expresses what the kindness of one person can do because she came back to help others escape.” In Jane’s reinterpretations, she recognizes the strength that Tubman had along with her determination “to follow through with it and [help] not only herself but many others.” In her reflections, she connects her experience reading the poem with a familiar lesson:

The Harriet Tubman poem I thought was just originally a retelling of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. Again, with a second reading and a closer look, I saw that it offered much more. It talked about the courage of a person and how the courage of just that one person saved so many other lives. Also it showed determination and helped me see that when you are determined to do something, you can accomplish it, but that it won’t always be easy. I enjoyed this poem very much because I just recently had a class where we talked about the Underground Railroad and I liked how this poem put it in a condensed version to get the main ideas out there.

Jane describes a reason why this poem is significant as an important and inspiring story about courage and determination: one person’s agency can positively affect the lives of many people in struggles against oppression.

Cindy discovers her empathy for Harriet Tubman through her cognitive and affective responses to the poem. In her initial interpretations, she remarks that Harriet Tubman “doesn’t see herself as a slave and doesn’t take any stereotypes from anyone.” In her reinterpretations she says, “After revisiting the text, I had put myself in Harriet Tubman’s shoes. I hadn’t thought how rebellious and courageous she had been. Harriet Tubman had to leave her friends and family behind to travel to the unknown.” Cindy elaborates on her empathetic response to the poem in her reflections:
Throughout my school career I had heard and read a lot about Harriet Tubman. She is a remarkable woman and leader. Until I read this poem and was told to analyze it I truly hadn’t thought of myself being in her position. It is hard enough for me to leave my friends and family when I go to college. Harriet left her loved ones to achieve freedom and respect. Children can learn from this poem. This poem can open up into a deeper and more detailed history lesson about slavery.

Cindy’s experience of reading this poem transforms her intellectual appreciation of Harriet Tubman’s role in history to an empathetic response of imagining Harriet Tubman’s emotions. As I read Cindy’s statement, “This poem can open up into a deeper and more detailed history lesson about slavery,” I think of Donald Graves’ (1992) assertion, “The pace changes when you introduce poetry into social studies….Poetry takes time” (p. 160). And poetry engages the heart as well as the head.

Miranda describes how the rhyme and rhythm of the poem enhance her learning experience. She mentions enjoying the rhyming in her initial interpretations and notices the double negatives that “[sound] appropriate and [go] along with the story.” In her reinterpretations, she describes being more aware of the rhythm and appreciates that opening and closing the poem with the same four lines (with one change in the last line) “creates a sense of closure” and “emphasizes the last point.” In her reflections, she writes:

I enjoyed reading Eloise Greenfield’s entire book, Honey, I Love. I had never heard of her before, but I’ve come to really like her work. This poem really stuck out amidst all the others though. It was one of the few that I felt needed to be read over and over again. I felt compelled to read it with more rhythm, and add emphasis on the first
and last passages. I liked how it told the story of Harriet Tubman in a short piece and with rhythm. It is much better to read along with this than to read a book that just spits out the facts. A greater impact is experienced when experiencing the story through poetry. I have heard about Harriet Tubman before, but I never remembered much about her because what I learned was presented to me via straight facts. This form of presentation—in a poem, makes it easier to remember, and more enjoyable to learn. Learning is made fun and not a task.

Like Jane, Miranda likes the brevity of the poem as a means to learn about Harriet Tubman; and, like May, she appreciates that the poem’s rhyme and rhythm make learning fun. Whether it’s bringing alive the details of Harriet Tubman’s courage or arousing an empathetic imagination, Greenfield’s uses of rhyme, rhythm, and repetition make Harriet Tubman’s legacy more memorable than facts.

In my interpretations and reinterpretations of Greenfield’s “Harriet Tubman,” I notice several details that make this brief poem emotionally powerful. I love that she “sang” the exclamation “Farewell!!” because, for me, musicality suggests freedom and hope through having voice. The imagery of the “dark, hot night” to relate the setting engages my senses and conveys a feeling of danger. As I read about her passion for freedom and her courage, I wonder how she comforted herself and maintained her inner strength. I imagine the powerful bonds she formed with the people she guided to freedom.

“Harriet Tubman Speaks” by J. Patrick Lewis

Another student, Catherine, relates how a different poem about Harriet Tubman helps bring alive the emotions of her work for freedom. Catherine selected J. Patrick
Lewis’ (2000) poem “Harriet Tubman Speaks” (p. 8) from his collection of original poems in *Freedom Like Sunlight: Praisesongs for Black Americans*. In her initial interpretations, Catherine recounts Tubman’s bravery and states, “She just had her faith and the determination that there was a better life for her and many others.” In her reinterpretations, she comments about the poem’s structure and revisits Tubman’s emotional fortitude:

*The words are detailed and descriptive. Although they are not in traditional sentence order, they effectively tell a story. J. Patrick Lewis wants readers to know the conditions in which Harriet Tubman started her journey—without adequate food, clothing, a map, or a destination. Those details show how strong she was. It is also crucial to know that Tubman returned nineteen times in order to rescue more slaves. This demonstrates her courage and strong ideals. It takes a very motivated woman to have the bravery to do this.*

As Catherine revisits her initial interpretation and relates more specifics about how the poem works for her, she raises an important point about the imagery. The vivid details that Lewis includes *show* his reader signs of Harriet Tubman’s experiences. In essence, he encourages the reader’s ability to interpret and imagine through the details, such as corn bread and salt herring. In Catherine’s reflections about experiencing “Harriet Tubman Speaks,” she describes her emotional response to the poem. Catherine writes:

*Despite the fact that I have learned about Harriet Tubman many times within my history classes, I have never read a poem about her. This poem was not only informative, but it also created a mood within its rhythm that spells out fear, pain, and passion for*
freedom. I really can hear the words of Tubman in my ears. This poem makes me sympathetic for the danger and pain these people had to go through.

Catherine’s reflections about her aural experience and emotional response to the poem describe the potential for poetry to inspire a reader’s sympathetic or empathetic connection with a poet’s distilled imaginative representation.

In my interpretations of Lewis’ poem, I notice the power of personification and rhyme to contrast freedom and oppression through Harriet Tubman’s voice. For example, “the House that Evil built” brings to my mind the cumulative story of “The House that Jack Built” in naming slavery as evil, the opposite of Lady Freedom. For me, the speaker expresses a beautiful intuitive connection with Lady Freedom’s caring, guiding voice. The metaphor of “turned the handle” rhymes with the word “candle” pairing freedom with light in darkness. The rhymes “Indignity Lane” and “bamboo cane” name slave owners’ dehumanizing oppression and violence. In the last stanza, the rhyme of slavery as a “shut-up hive” contrasts with the last word in the poem—“alive”—to leave the reader with a resonating testimony for the courage, voice, and agency of Harriet Tubman, “Abolitionist and Underground Railroad Conductor 1820-1913” (Lewis, 2000, p. 8).

**Interpreting Selected Poems by Langston Hughes**

When I asked the students during interviews about their experiences with multicultural poetry in school, few students recalled any regular exposure to multicultural poetry. Several did, though, remember having some exposure to African American poetry during African American History Month, and two students, Miranda and Scarlett, named Langston Hughes (1902-1967) as a favorite poet. Miranda said she especially
likes Hughes’ poem “Reasons Why” because it is “short and simple,” “meaningful,” and “everyone can relate to it.” Scarlett remembers reading Hughes’ poetry from an anthology during her freshman year in high school. Another student, Jeanne, who prefers to think in terms of favorite poems rather than poets, mentioned Langston Hughes’ “Dreams” as a favorite poem. Jeanne recalled becoming familiar with Hughes’ poetry during 12th grade when she took advanced placement English with a teacher enthusiastic about interpreting poetry. Jeanne, Miranda, and several other students selected poems by Langston Hughes for their dialectical notebooks. Perhaps initially drawn to the rhymes and musicality of the Langston Hughes poems they had selected, these students discovered personal and social truths through interpreting and reinterpreting these poems.

“Mother to Son”

Nancy, Helen, and Christy selected Hughes’ “Mother to Son” for their dialectical notebooks. For our course, this poem appears in two poetry books included as group discussion books, Langston Hughes’ (1994b, p. 64) The Dream Keeper and Other Poems, and The Oxford Illustrated Book of American Children’s Poems, edited by Donald Hall (1999, p. 56).

Nancy relates her belief that this poem tells us handling challenges in life can shape character. In her initial response, she notes that the poem quickly establishes inequities in life, and she especially likes the line “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.” Nancy sees the staircase as representing the speaker’s “journey through life.” In her reinterpretations, she notes that the word “Bare” by itself as a line stands out more for her as she looks again at the poem. Nancy takes “Bare” to mean “having nothing.” In her reflections, Nancy says that the idea of “triumphing through adversity” can be
meaningful for people who are materially well off, as well as for people who have less. Nancy states, “I came to realize that each tack, splinter, and torn board she mentions was an obstacle along her way. Life is not always easy and working through the dark times will make you a better person.”

Helen also focuses on the hardships the poem describes. Her view is that the mother is hoping her son will “work hard to have a better life,” and she interprets the effort on the stair as “trying to find a better place for herself.” Overall she sees the poem as a mother conveying to her son that life’s difficulties can be overcome.

For Christy, “Mother to Son” recognizes and appreciates the experiences and perseverance of mothers. In her interpretations, she remarks that mothers “do know best” and that it is important to “move forward” and maintain hope. In her reinterpretations, she responds to the poem by exploring a mother’s roles and influences:

What is a mother?
Shows us strengths when we are weak.
Shows us love when our hearts are broken.
Shows us life when we want to quit.

In her reflections, Christy states, “I loved this poem because it really does help us to appreciate our mothers and fathers and what they have done to be who they are today….Life has so many trials and tribulations, but we all can work through them to be successful and watch those grow who are younger than us.” Something I love about Christy’s reflections is her orientation toward the future as she thinks of watching children grow. I think of John Dewey’s (1938/1997) statement, an “educator…is concerned to have a long look ahead” (p. 75).
As I read Hughes’ “Mother to Son,” I am struck by the brilliance of the extended metaphor of the speaker’s life being the opposite of a “crystal stair.” The image of the crystal stair—something grand and luminous that even rich people do not have—makes the contrasting stair of the speaker’s life struggles all the more powerful and grounded in harsh realities. Like Nancy, I too notice the word “Bare” sitting alone as a line, and I imagine a “bare” moment being one of aloneness in struggle. Another reason this word stands out is because it rhymes with “stair,” aurally reinforcing the importance of the metaphor. Moments of “reachin’ landin’s / And turnin’ corners” suggest markers of progress in the relentless effort of moving through day-to-day life. Even though the poem explores a serious theme of keeping going when life is hard and unjust, there is a warm caring in the direct addresses “son” and “honey” that help frame the poem’s opening and closing lines. For me, the maternal voice of this poem is authentic, informed by experience, and motivated by love.

“Dinner Guest: Me”

In “Dinner Guest: Me” Langston Hughes creates a different social situation—an African American guest surrounded by European Americans at an upscale dinner party—as he gives voice to problems of race relations. A student named Denise selected this poem from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (1994a, pp. 547-548), for her dialectical notebook. Denise told me during our interview that she read “lots” of African American poetry in 5th grade with an African American language arts teacher who “wanted to bring diversity into the classroom.” Denise said she continued to have exposure to African American poetry during high school.
Denise’s initial interpretations include exploring the poem’s representation of the speaker as “other,” as well as privileged white guilt. She writes:

In the first [two lines], Hughes states, “I know I am / The Negro Problem.” In opening with this statement, Hughes immediately labels himself as a problem or a stigma in the world....Throughout the poem Hughes comments on how he is being questioned the “usual” questions that white people would ask a black man. Obviously he is the “other,” or the “abnormal,” or the “different one” that should be questioned. When first delving into the poem, it seems as if he is being interrogated for his differences and isn’t necessarily appreciated for being black. However, he then implicitly states how they attempt to be polite and dine him with extravagant things such as lobster and wine. Apparently these people are in some sense apologizing to this black man for their past mistakes—perhaps not their individual mistakes, but the white race’s mistakes as a whole.

Denise’s initial interpretations focus on reading the narrative of the “conversation” that takes place during the evening. As the “other,” the speaker is not being recognized as an individual and must navigate white society in the context of this Park Avenue dinner party. Denise follows up on this idea as she opens her reinterpretations:

I believe this poem signifies the struggle to find identity and the obstacle of racism in present day America. African Americans “fitting in” and identifying with a predominantly white society is one of the many hurdles they have come across in their life...

Denise’s response brings to my mind Patricia Williams’ (1991) assertion about self recognition and power. She states, “What links child abuse, the mistreatment of women,
and racism is the massive external intrusion into psyche that dominating powers impose
to keep the self from ever fully seeing itself. Since the self’s power resides in another,
little faith is placed in the true self, in one’s own experiential knowledge” (p. 63). For me, the speaker’s true sense of identity is part of the poem’s ambiguity, but the opening lines, “I know I am / The Negro Problem” suggest the speaker’s anticipation of “dominating powers” as he names how he experiences being viewed by white people.

In Denise’s reflections, she develops further the racial dynamics in Hughes’ poem, as well as his ingenuity:

It was very interesting how this poet addressed the tension between the black and white races. Perhaps it is because I have read a vast amount of African American literature, but this poem seemed to address the issue of racism in a very innovative way—at a dinner table. Through their acts and congeniality, the white race was able to show their appreciation for the black culture. Their shame and humiliation was evident through the statement “I am so ashamed of being white.” I felt this was very powerful. It was also interesting to see how Hughes, as an African American himself, assumed the role as the white race and conjured up his own scenario between a white family and a black man... I also felt connected with Hughes in his poem, for I could almost feel the tension and the awkwardness of the situation at hand.

In Denise’s reflections, I see more of her emotional response to the poem as if through the speaker’s awareness she experiences the racial tensions in the “polite” discourse of the dinner gathering. She also feels the energy in the room through the speaker’s perspective.

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For me, Hughes’ poem also draws upon rhyme as a means to raise consciousness about race relations. The pairings of “wined and dined” (line 3) with “white mind” (line 5), “current democratic night” (line 11) with “white” (line 14), “wine divine” (line 16) with “mine” (line 18) and “eight” (line 20) with “wait” (line 23) subtly create tensions and oppositions that reinforce the speaker’s self-conscious awareness of himself as a sole representative of African Americans among a group of privileged white people. These rhymes support the narrative of the speaker’s minority perspective as the title “Dinner Guest: Me” succinctly suggests.

“Dreams”

Several students wrote about Langston Hughes’ poem “Dreams” in their response papers and dialectical notebooks. This poem appears in The Dream Keeper and Other Poems (1994, p. 4), as well as another group discussion book for our course, Knock at a Star: A Child’s Introduction to Poetry, compiled by X. J. Kennedy and Dorothy Kennedy (1999, p. 96). Drawn to the repetition, rhyme, and figurative language in “Dreams,” four students—May, Jeanne, Virginia, and Donna—explored their thoughts and feelings about this poem in their response papers.

For May, who “never liked poetry,” discovering poetry’s invitation “to explore different meanings, meanings that we come up with beyond our first impressions” became a breakthrough idea in her appreciation of poetry. May explains that repetition and rhyme are ways to engage readers, and repeating a phrase or line can “pull the kids in and place the poem into their memory.” For May, Hughes’ repetition of “Hold fast to dreams” is a way for Hughes’ message to be made easily memorable.
Jeanne, who also mentions not liking poetry, describes Hughes’ “Dreams” as a poem that helped her “come to appreciate poetry more.” She focused her entire response paper on this poem and writes about liking the “length, language and multiple meanings.” She had not liked poetry in high school because it was long and “the figurative language got confusing and tedious.” Jeanne says the brevity of “Dreams,” though, allows her to enjoy reading the poem multiple times. In her discussion of the figurative language, she writes, “When I read the poem I was able to see the bird and the field in my mind, which helped me relate to the poem in a more personal and deeper way.” She describes feeling sad while picturing these images and notes that the personification of dreams dying sends a “powerful message.” Jeanne recognizes the “ambiguous” nature of poetry (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 254) and appreciates poetry’s openness to interpretation. Ultimately, Jeanne says, the poem’s message for her is “about not giving up and striving for your dreams,” and this is why she loves “Dreams.”

Virginia, who feels “bored and frustrated” with difficult poetry, likes the directness in Hughes’ “Dreams.” Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer’s (2003) remark, “Readers will know what Langston Hughes has to say in “Dreams” because he proclaims it loudly in the first line” (p. 253) resonates with Virginia. For her, the poem is “personal and interpretive” because “these dreams could mean different things for different people.” Like Jeanne, Virginia likes the “descriptive language that allows [her] to visualize images,” and she loves the poem’s rhymes.

Donna especially likes poetry’s ambiguity and sees “Dreams” as “a perfect example of the indefinite nature of poetry.” Donna reads “Dreams” as “inspirational” and “motivational.” She reflects, “It motivated me to develop new dreams and start
fulfilling old ones. Being hopeless is about as weak as one can get. At least when one has hope, they have a desire for change.” In her response paper, she explores a different interpretation proposed by Nodelman and Reimer in which if dreams are “daydreams or fantasies,” then the poem may be more about “self-delusion” rather than hope (p. 254). While this interpretation is antithetical to her optimistic view, she appreciates that a different reader could have an entirely different understanding of the same poem. For Donna, poetry’s ambiguous nature “encourages students to view life through a different perspective. Thus, it’s the ultimate challenge for all learners.”

Two students, Lauren and Christy, who selected Langston Hughes’ poem “Dreams” for their dialectical notebooks, focus on the importance of hope to building a future alive with possibilities. For Lauren, dreams immediately bring to mind hope. For Christy, dreams are essential “because we have to have something to live towards.”

In Lauren’s reflections, she describes the metaphor of the “broken-winged bird” as a “portrait.” She relates having “a clear visual of a dream losing its hope and falling to the ground.” Lauren also elaborates on her associations with hope:

*The thought of hope can be for many things; sometimes for people or for something to occur, or it could be for a new, innovative idea. For me, I dream and hope that the things I strive for, that I care deeply about, stay with me and come true.*

In Lauren’s reflections, I see an interweaving of thoughts and feelings as she considers manifestations of hope and her own energizing passions in her response to the poem.

Christy considers her interpretations of “Dreams” in the larger context of a pattern in her dialectical notebook. Initially, she writes about how empty life would be without dreams. In her reinterpretations, she relates her optimistic view that “dreams can come
true” and maintaining dreams can “fill your life with excitement.” She also reinterprets the poem with the question, “What are you living for?” Implicit within her interpretations and reinterpretations is the idea of hope because she expresses her belief that dreams can be realized. In her reflections, she synthesizes her pattern of selecting inspirational poems:

For this project, I chose each poem for its subject matter. Then I realized that every poem I chose had to do with the future, with goals, with dreams and aspirations. This poem brings all of the others together to fully comprehend that we should never stop dreaming, and we should always hold onto our dreams because without them we are empty….I have many dreams for my future, and I know that they all won’t come true but I will still hope and believe.

Through the poem’s concentrated figurative language, rhymes, and repetition, Hughes urges his reader to keep and nourish the dreams—for ourselves and beyond ourselves—that make life meaningful and fruitful. In her reflections, Christy links “dreams and aspirations,” which for me suggests that dreams that inspire hopes for well-being are infused with the breath and spirit of life (Fox, 1991).

“Reasons Why”

Two students, Jeanne and Miranda, selected Hughes’ poem “Reasons Why” from The Dream Keeper (1994, p. 35) for its brevity and representation of love. Both students mention the speaker’s African American dialect as integral to the poem, and Miranda feels it is essential to the voice of the poem because “the informal language used makes it

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2 In addition to Langston Hughes’ poems “Mother to Son” and “Dreams,” Christy selected “And One to Grow On” and “Astronomy 101” from Hope Anita Smith’s (2003) original collection of poems in The Way a Door Closes.
more personal.” For both Jeanne and Miranda, the figurative language is tenderly evocative.

Jeanne, who selected “Reasons Why” because the structure reminds her of “Dreams,” shares that this brief poem has a “powerful message.” Drawn to the ideas of a soul’s fullness of color and a heart’s fluttering to describe interior states, Jeanne writes in her initial interpretations that this love poem conveys “how love can make you feel so wonderful and nervous inside, all at the same time.” In her reflections, Jeanne describes the emotional and physical pleasures evoked by the poem:

Reading about love, especially poems, makes me feel happy and good inside. I think this poem especially was very sweet and touching. I also really liked the figurative language used to convey the message, such as similes and metaphors. I thought they made the poem beautiful and made me connect with what it feels like inside, when I really like someone.

Jeanne’s aesthetic response to Hughes’ figurative language recreates imaginatively experiences of attraction and aliveness.

Like Jeanne, Miranda finds this brief poem “touching.” In her initial interpretations, Miranda notes, “Love, heart and soul are all interconnected…in this short piece.” In her reinterpretations, she comments on the figurative language and says, “The description used is creative, it is as if you can see and feel love—an emotion that is usually indescribable.” As I read Miranda’s insight, I think of Judith Steinbergh’s (1999) assertion that metaphor “brings thought and emotion to the reader in a way that can be visualized, touched, heard, tasted, smelled” (p. 325). In her reflections, Miranda writes,
I liked how a multi-cultural poet can speak from the heart, and speak how he wants to speak, but can relate to so many others. He was able to do this because when speaking about love, anyone can relate, because it is such a universal concept. The poem is so short and simple, yet at the same time so touching.

As both Jeanne and Miranda observe, the concentrated figurative language in this short, two-quatrain poem has the potential to connect reader and poet through emotion.

Like Jeanne and Miranda, I too am drawn to the beauty of this love poem. I enjoy the way this poem nourishes the spirit through focusing on a soul and heart in love, as if to say our souls are beautiful because we love and are loved. There is a delicacy to butterfly wings and an aspen leaf, which requires only a light breeze to be stirred, that contributes to the poem’s tender tone and invites personal responses to “Reasons Why.”

As Miranda says, “If you haven’t experienced love, it makes you want to.”

“Children’s Rhymes”

A student named Rose explores social injustices that Langston Hughes gives voice to in “Children’s Rhymes,” which appears in Black Out Loud: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Black Americans, edited by Arnold Adoff (1970, p. 43). For Rose, this poem compels her to revisit and reconsider the Pledge of Allegiance. In her initial interpretations, Rose states, “The author is conveying the idea that black children are treated much less fairly than white children.” She describes how the spacing of the words and uses of punctuation, such as the colons, create “poetically appealing” sounds and pauses that invite “thinking about the statement before moving on.” She identifies “Liberty And Justice— / Huh!—For All?” as a key example of Hughes’ representation of
injustices of racial inequality. In her reinterpretations, she comments more about these familiar words and the speaker’s response:

_This was by far the most powerful line of the poem. We as Americans say this line all the time and think nothing of it, we don’t question it. This is probably because I am Caucasian and feel I am treated fairly. Seeing it from another perspective is very eye opening to me._

Rose’s description of considering another perspective on reciting these patriotic words relates a story of her development of consciousness. She elaborates in her reflections:

_This poem opened my eyes to some hypocrisy of our nation. We say things like “liberty and justice for all,” and think nothing of it. But when you really think about it, we don’t provide liberty and justice for all, at least not equally among every person. It is unfair and hypocritical of us to say these things. It is in our own Pledge of Allegiance, something we teach our kids to recite every day. We’re teaching them to join in with the hypocrisy of society. Langston Hughes does an incredible job of conveying the idea that black people are not treated as fairly as the white people, even though we like to try and say that they are..._

As Rose continues her reflections, she remarks that Hughes’ first three lines in the last stanza with their inclusion of the word “lies” is “a very powerful, poetic move.” By experiencing the familiar pledge from a different perspective, Rose recognizes that she had said the words without really thinking about them. Hughes’ poem disrupts her habitual view of these frequently spoken words, raising questions for her as an interpreter.
As I read and interpret “Children’s Rhymes,” I am struck by the clear voice of this African American child speaking out about racial injustices. Once again, rhymes are integral to giving voice to issues of social justice, and the rhymes “ain’t sent” with “President,” “me” with “ain’t free,” and “ain’t for us a-tall” with “All?” set up a counterpoint in each stanza to make the statements emphatic. This moment, like Eve Merriam’s “Taxi Man,” reminds me again of Branford Marsalis’ (1992) album I Heard You Twice the First Time. The last piece, “Simi Valley Blues,” begins with children chorally reciting the beginning of the Pledge of Allegiance. At the end of “Simi Valley Blues,” the track returns to the children saying pledge; after they recite “with liberty and justice for all” there is a pause followed by a man shouting, “NOT!” The innocence of the children’s voices juxtaposed with the adult’s bold, knowing statement challenges the status quo and schools’ daily morning practice of reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. In “Children’s Rhymes,” the syntax of pauses created by the colons and the interplay of the rhymes give emotional energy to the poem. I imagine this African American child feels “bugged” each and every day as the class recites the pledge and the white classmates remain privileged in the status quo. I also wonder if the speaker is talking with other African American students. I hear a clear, impassioned voice of a leader.

The Langston Hughes poems the students selected represent a wide range of emotions and perspectives in exploring the human condition. As these students discover personal and social truths relating to ideas and issues such as perseverance, appreciation, hope for a better future, race relations, identity, dreams, love, beauty, anger, and questioning the status quo, perhaps Christy’s question while reinterpreting “Dreams”—“What are you living for?”—is an ongoing question in the development of critical
consciousness. To be aware of our passions, needs, and wants is part of our humanity and agency. In Arnold Rampersad’s (1994) introduction to *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, he relates Hughes’ thoughts about poetry: “‘What is poetry?’ Langston Hughes asked near his death. He answered, ‘It is the human soul entire, squeezed like a lemon or a lime, drop by drop, into atomic words’” (p. 5). As artistic and political expressions of a human soul, these poems extend invitations to readers to experience poetry as Adrienne Rich describes, “food for the heart and senses, food of memory and hope” (quoted in Heard, 1999, p. xi).

**Interpreting Selected Poems by Maya Angelou**

Along with Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou is a multicultural poet with whom several of the students were already familiar. During interviews, Kathleen, Scarlett, and Amy all listed Maya Angelou as a favorite poet. While Scarlett had read Angelou’s poetry from an American Literature anthology her junior year of high school, Kathleen and Amy had heard Angelou speak and read poetry at Penn State. Amy also had exposure to Angelou’s poetry when a teacher shared Angelou’s poems to diversify the curriculum. Amy remembered her teacher’s enthusiasm for Angelou’s poetry and recalled that her teacher would include titles of poems written by Angelou in comments responding to Amy’s work. Another student, Julia, remembered Angelou’s poetry from an African American poetry unit during 11th grade. In their dialectical notebooks, Denise mentions having read many works by Maya Angelou, and Miranda has a recollection of seeing her on Oprah Winfrey’s talk show. As I talked with the students who are familiar

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3 All three students also listed Shel Silverstein as a favorite poet, and Scarlett included Langston Hughes in her list.
with Angelou and read their responses to her poetry, I sensed readers’ connections of poems with poet because of Angelou’s active presence and voice in public forums.

Several students, including Kelly, Brittany, Denise, Miranda, Stella, Tracy Jeanne, and Leslie, selected poems by Maya Angelou for their dialectical notebooks. Each of these students relates stories of their readings⁴ (Chambers, 1996, p. 22) as they consider their cognitive and affective responses to “Caged Bird,” “Still I Rise,” “Alone,” “Woman Work,” and “Africa.”

“Caged Bird”

Kelly and Brittany both wrote about Angelou’s poem “Caged Bird” from The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou (1994, pp. 194-195) as being a metaphor about effects of slavery. For Kelly, the free bird represents people who are “not confined to stereotypes or low expectations” and thus have “limitless” possibilities; the caged bird represents enslaved African Americans denied basic human rights such as freedom, a right taken for granted by people not enduring slavery. As Kelly thinks about the poem in terms of becoming a teacher, she says the poem is important because “you should never underestimate the worth of a child or their potential in this world.” For Brittany, who views “Caged Bird” as an extended metaphor, interpreting the poem evokes thoughts and feelings about the importance of song for emotional and cultural survival.

In Brittany’s initial interpretations and reinterpretations, she focuses on the significance of song in “Caged Bird.” In response to the second stanza, she notes that the description of the caged bird opening his throat to sing reminds her of enslaved African Americans’ work songs. She writes, “They sang songs derived from original tribal folk

⁴ Aidan Chambers quotes Jonathan Culler’s (1982) On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism: “To speak of the meaning of the work is to tell a story of reading” (p. 35).
tales to try to keep their culture alive. Since they couldn’t live their culture, they sang it.”

In her reinterpretations, she elaborates on the comparison between the caged bird and enslaved African Americans:

    This poem likens a bird held in captivity to the enslavement of African Americans. The bird wants to get away, but it doesn’t have use of its wings to fly, because someone has clipped them. Slaves were held in chains and were constantly at the mercy of their masters. They were treated like animals...Just like the bird, a slave would sing to pass the time. It/he would sing out of hope in the presence of great despair. It/he would sing as a form of lamentation for dreams lost and loved ones killed.

I read in Brittany’s reinterpretations a compassionate imagining of the hearts, minds, and memories of enslaved African Americans.

    Brittany continues to explore her thoughts and feelings about the poem in her reflections. For her, this poem is “extremely powerful” as it represents slavery’s psychological effects on enslaved African Americans. She also relates a personal connection evoked by reading and interpreting this poem:

    My grandmother’s parents immigrated from Italy. She used to tell stories of how her grandparents were indentured servants and her parents share croppers. As a child, she used to sing songs to me that her relatives would sing as they worked and toiled in the fields. They were in Italian, but she translated them for me. They were usually about missing family, lost loves, and village memories from childhood. While their experience wasn’t nearly as horrendous as that of African Americans, the purpose of singing the songs remains the same. They sang to escape from their lives of servitude. As I read this poem, I immediately thought of my grandmother.
Singing, like story telling, creates spaces for human connections and understanding. Brittany’s response about singing “out of hope in the presence of great despair” and her memory of her grandmother’s family songs suggest singing’s potential to nourish people’s spirits. I think of Moon Joyce’s (1996) description of holistic benefits of singing, including connectedness with spirituality:

In support of our spiritual capabilities, the process of ‘giving voice’ is sacred work and as such, promotes the full expression of ourselves as spiritual beings. It connects us to our humanity and sacredness; it grounds and centres us to our own power. Singing is a sublime experience that elicits joy, awe, wonder, and reverence—even in the midst of despair and sadness. Singing can also inspire our individual and collective will and desire.⁵ (quoted in Horsman, 2000, p. 228)

In “Caged Bird,” singing of freedom is the remaining hope “in the presence of great despair.”

For me, part of the emotive power of “Caged Bird” arises from the stark contrast between the free bird with an easy, abundant life and the abused, imprisoned bird. I read the poem with knowledge of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s (1899) poem “Sympathy,” which became the source for the title of Angelou’s (1969) controversial autobiography I know why the caged bird sings, and to which “Caged Bird” alludes. Both “Sympathy” and “Caged Bird” have a powerful psychological intensity that contrasts freedom and imprisonment. In Dunbar’s poem, the speaker knows the feelings of the caged bird as he thinks about experiencing the beauty of sunshine on a spring day. In the last stanza, the caged bird’s song is “…not a carol of joy or glee, / but a prayer that it sends from its heart’s deep core” (quoted in Adoff, 1973, p. 9). In Angelou’s poem, he “…sings / with fearful trill” (lines 15 and 16; lines 31 and 32), which is ambiguous because it could be

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from fear or perhaps be extreme, and the song “…is heard / on the distant hill” (lines 19 and 20; lines 35 and 36). Hope flows through song as something sacred and essential to the spirit.

“Still I Rise”

Miranda and Denise both describe reading Maya Angelou’s (1986) “Still I Rise” from the collection And Still I Rise in Maya Angelou: Poems (pp. 154-155) as a powerful experience because of the confident, passionate voice in the poem. For Miranda, “Still I Rise” seemed at first to be about “being oppressed as a woman—being expected to be quiet, passive, etc.,” and then she realized it is about racism. In her reinterpretations, Miranda comments, “She is speaking to the racist individuals who try to put her and others like her down, who are upset or don’t think it is right that she is successful.” In Miranda’s reflections, she writes:

*I have heard of Maya Angelou before, I think I’ve seen her on Oprah. She is a very strong woman, very admirable. That is probably why when I first read this poem I thought it was about being a woman….She does not hold anything back, she is very frank, and to the point. I believe that that is what makes it so powerful.*

Denise also thinks about the poem in terms of voice and agency. In her initial interpretations, Denise details the poetic elements and meanings that raise consciousness:

*This poem is obviously about Maya Angelou’s ability to rise above anything that happens to her or has happened to her. It creates a voice for all people who need to be heard. The poem first begins with a mention of writing her down in history with “bitter, twisted lies.” Here the poet immediately forces the reader to question the skewed versions of history they have been taught over the years. There is a sense of lies and*
silent discrimination that surrounds the history of African Americans, and the history of Maya Angelou should be no exception (according to her poem). She also mentions [rising “like dust” (line 4) and “like air” (line 24)]. Here Maya Angelou suggests that even though the skewed history books and texts are concrete, the dust and air will always rise—indicating that her spirit and the truth will prevail over the lies in the end.

She also compares her victory to things that are certain in this world. For example, in the third stanza, first [two lines], she states she will rise “Just like moons and like sun, / With the certainty of tides.” I feel this is a powerful comparison she makes in her poem. It grants a very effective image to the reader and really affirms her ability to rise above everything.

Throughout the rest of the poem, Maya Angelou firmly questions the reader. However, the questions she asks are asked to those that are perceived as taking offense to the rising of her spirit. The tactic of asking questions really pulls the reader into the poem. Instead of being able to skim over the content of the poem, the reader is forced to examine his or her own beliefs about the poet. It also displays her sense of fearlessness that she carries with her throughout the poem....The mixture of questions and assertion that “I’ll rise” lets the reader know that the answers to the questions are moot...

Denise’s insights about the inevitable rising of dust, air, moon, and sun as natural phenomena name the structural suggestion of hope and confidence in “Still I Rise.” And her choice of the word “victory” brings to mind a battle metaphor in which the speaker has the power to overcome an enemy through affirming knowledge of the truth. As Denise states in her reinterpretations, Angelou challenges people with oppressive power
responsible for silencing voices; she “fights for what she knows is true.” In an interview with Claudia Tate (1999), Angelou states,

All my work, my life, everything is about survival. All my work is meant to say, ‘You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated.’ In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and power to endure. (p. 154)

Perhaps the victory Denise sees represented in “Still I Rise” is the strength and creativity of being a survivor.

In Denise’s reinterpretations, she includes more exploration of the similes of dust and air:

_I absolutely loved the way she compared herself and her rising to things that people cannot control or are not actually tangible. For example, I mentioned how she compared herself to dust and air. These are two things that nature controls—not humans. They are inevitable things in this world, and will always be here no matter what happens. Comparing her rising to dust and air is so passionate and creates such an element of empowerment to the entirety of her message._

In this revisiting of her interpretations, Denise’s cognitive response to the poem’s figurative language combines with her affective response to energize her experience appreciating the poem’s craft and message.

Denise’s connection between poet and poem is evident in her reflections. She writes:

_This poem displays just how confident Maya Angelou is as both a woman and a poet. Through this poem, Maya Angelou creates inspiration for all people to overcome great obstacles and oppression. She is fearless and has no problem challenging her_
reader with rhetorical questions….I absolutely admire her confidence and her passion to move forward in life….This poem truly inspires people to be strong!

Denise’s observation about the speaker’s rhetorical questions, I believe, is an important element in the empowered voice. As Denise mentioned in her interpretations, such questioning engages and challenges the reader, imaginatively engaging and stimulating consciousness. The poem also has the potential to nourish the spirit and inspire agency.

For me, “Still I Rise” is about the power of conscious choice to be a survivor rather than a victim. Angelou says in her interview with Claudia Tate (1999), the poem’s title “refers to the indomitable spirit of black people” (p. 157). The speaker acknowledges that her oppressor can write the “official” story, but she has the power of truth as a survivor; and she appreciates what she has. While oil wells, gold mines, and diamonds are symbolic of material wealth, she has real wealth in her attitude, joy, and sensuality. The water imagery—“Welling and swelling” (line 34)—is sensual too and evokes connection with the creative power of nature as the speaker describes the choice to bring gifts and leave behind the fear that would bind her to the past. I believe this poem is earthy and spiritual at the same time; the shift from rising “like dust” in the first stanza to “like air” in the sixth stanza lifts the rising even more and adds to the poem’s hopefulness. The speaker is a living legacy of her ancestors.

“Alone”

Stella, in her dialectical notebook, relates how her interpretation of Maya Angelou’s “Alone” shifted from seeing the poem as being about one struggling person to being about social unrest. This poem appears in Angelou’s (1975) collection of original poems, Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well (pp. 18-19). Angelou tells us that the
In both Stella’s initial interpretations and reinterpretations, she comments about the idea that money does not guarantee an easy life. She writes:


Initially, my thoughts about the poem are that a person in the poem is feeling very hopeless….She believes that people who have money have just as many problems as she does, and they can not live alone either….People need friends and family members to help them throughout their lives.

In her reinterpretations, she extends beyond immediate social circles to explore the poem’s representation of humanity:


After rereading and thinking about the poem the person is talking about social unrest….She compares her life to the life of millionaires and realizes that in many ways they are the same because poor or rich people need others to survive….she feels that too many people are alone in this world and are suffering because of it. After thinking about the repeated phrase “That nobody, / But nobody, / Can make it out here alone” [lines 8-10], I started to think about the different ways people interact with each other. It is not only our family and friends that people need, it is that people need to work as a society to be able to achieve happiness and stability. That is why she feels humanity is suffering.

The phrase Stella mentions that appears, slightly modified, several times in the poem helps her extend beyond one person’s situation and needs to the much wider social structure of society itself. Isolation threatens emotional survival. As Stella says in her reflections, “It is a condition of being human that people need each other, not something money can buy.”
Like Stella, I too, find myself contemplating the repeated lines. I am particularly struck by the phrase “out here alone,” which to me sounds like being isolated in the wilderness or on the water, adrift perhaps, and vulnerable. The speaker says in the first stanza that her soul needs “a home”; this open and honest intimate sharing brings me close to her, and I feel she has a powerful longing arising from a sense of displacement.

In Maya Angelou’s interview with Claudia Tate (1999), Angelou comments, “My work is intended to be slowly absorbed into the system on deeper and deeper levels” (p. 155). Perhaps this is what happened for Stella as she moved from an interpretation about close relationships to a reinterpretation of “the different ways people interact with each other” in society. I believe the meditative quality of the repeated lines Stella mentions contributes to this poem’s potential to develop consciousness. For me, the poem is about recognizing survival in the wholeness of being—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—through relationships, social interactions, and participation in society.

“Woman Work”

For Tracy Jeanne, interpreting Maya Angelou’s poem “Woman Work” begins with a focus on the poem’s representation of women’s strength and develops into an appreciation of poet and poem as inspirational. “Woman Work” is from the collection And Still I Rise and appears in Angelou’s (1986) Maya Angelou: Poems (pp. 144-145).

In Tracy Jeanne’s initial interpretations, she focuses on how women emotionally survive the endless chores and tasks that keep households and communities functioning. She writes:

*I think that this poem shows the emotions women encompass throughout their life work quite perfectly. It shows that the woman of the piece has a very mundane and*
monotonous life. I get a mental picture of her trapped in a current that never ends. There is always work to be done. It goes around and around like a wheel. I think this is why women are so strong. Though in the past it was much worse for women I think there is still that role many women feel the need to fulfill and carry on the endless work as she did....I particularly like stanzas 2-5 where it shows that she is appealing to nature. I felt like she was connecting with Mother Nature to carry her through.

Tracy Jeanne’s image of the speaker being “trapped in a current” suggests her being swept along in her unwavering daily routine; and Tracy Jeanne’s simile of never-ending work going “around and around like a wheel” brings to mind a water wheel in perpetual and predictable motion like the speaker’s daily expending of energy in rounds of tasks.

In her reinterpretations, Tracy Jeanne considers the poem’s inspiration and nourishment for an appreciation of self and the world despite life’s burdens. She writes:

As I continued to ponder this poetry selection reminded me of the phrase “women wear many hats.” We carry a lot of weight but yet, our journey never ends. From sunrise to sunset, we work at many things and control our presence. After taking this in myself, I encourage every woman to read Ms. Angelou’s poems for not just inspiration but also for realization of who you really are and why “you are worth more than rubies.” As for Maya Angelou, I feel she is a very inspirational and heartfelt writer who has tons of soul! I love how this passion just pours out into her writing. This poem was a breath of fresh air. I feel it is a reminder to those, like myself, who often get stressed by the daily hustle and bustle of action, telling us to step back and put things into perspective, be happy to be alive, and simply to be a part of this beautiful world no matter what one’s work may entail.
For me, Tracy Jeanne’s remark about “taking this in” and her metaphor of the poem being “a breath of fresh air,” recall Angelou’s (1999) interview comment about absorbing her work “into the system on deeper and deeper levels” (Tate, p. 155). As I read Tracy Jeanne’s thoughts about “Woman Work” being a reminder to “be happy to be alive, and simply to be a part of this beautiful world,” I think of Matthew Fox’s (1991) belief, “Gratitude changes our lives. It fills us with energy and vitality” (p. 93).

I believe “Woman Work” suggests oppressed and overworked women’s survival through connection with the earth and the cosmos. The poem’s title, with its alliteration and use of the noun “woman” as an adjective establishes directness in tone and suggests compactness like the workday itself; and the seven couplets and meters, such as iambic dimeter (lines 3 and 4), in the first stanza structurally contribute to a feeling of an exhausting, never-ending workday at home, in the cane and cotton fields, and in the community. We hear about her responsibilities, but we do not learn anything about what the men are doing. Shifting to the direct addresses to, for example, the sun, rain, storm, and snowflakes presents a structural and emotional turn to calling upon nature’s beauty and rhythms to seek relief, make an escape, and obtain rest. It is through the speaker’s connection to earth and the cosmos that the poem offers hope for respite and healing.

“Africa”

Leslie selected Maya Angelou’s poem “Africa” for her dialectical notebook. This poem appears in Angelou’s (1975) _Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well_ (p. 28). For Leslie, absorbing Angelou’s use of personification served as a catalyst for thinking about slavery and appreciating the power of language to open spaces for a new perspective.
In her initial interpretations and reinterpretations, Leslie explores Angelou’s representation of Africa as either a woman or an aspect of Mother Nature. She initially writes,

*I think this is beautiful because it makes Africa seem like more than just a continent, but a living, breathing being or creation of God. This part alone makes me feel even worse about the whole era of slavery. Even though I was not around during that time, and I never had anything to do with it, I still feel for those who did. The poem also states “two Niles her tears.” These rivers represent “her” crying, and since they are always flowing, it’s like “she” is always crying.*

As she reinterprets the poem, she focuses more on the description of the ocean and how the “rime white and cold” (line 10) could also describe the “very cold, or cold-hearted” whites involved with slavery. As she thinks about the brigands and Africa, she says the poem “is so powerful because it is using personification, which makes this land come alive.”

Like Tracy Jeanne writing about “Woman Work,” Leslie also describes “taking it all in.” In her reflections, she comments about her experience rereading “Africa”:

*When I first read this poem, I thought it just sounded good because it rhymes. But after reading it slowly and taking it all in, I realized that there was a lot of meaning behind it, along with symbolism and personification. This poem shows me just how powerful language can be, especially when it is used to personify something that doesn’t literally have human features.*
Although Leslie does not articulate this idea, her focus on the power of personification in Angelou’s “Africa” helps me see some of the brilliance of Angelou’s poetic craft:

Through personifying Africa, she underscores the dehumanization of slavery.

Like Leslie, I too find personifying Africa to be powerful. As I read the poem, I see Angelou’s naming of colonization, slavery, indoctrination, violence, and oppression. Angelou’s (1997) chapter “Africa” from her book *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* is, I think, an informative complement to her poem. In this chapter, Angelou tells us she lived in West Africa for more than four years, and she explores negative images of Africa. She writes,

> Slavery’s profiteers had to convince themselves and their clients that the persons they enslaved were little better than beasts. They could not admit that the Africans lived in communities based on sociopolitical structures no better or worse than their European counterparts of the time. The slave sellers had to persuade slave buyers that the African was a primitive, a cannibal, and richly deserved oppression. How else could the Christian voice be silent—how soothe the Christian conscience? (p. 15)

Angelou’s poem “Africa,” with its sensual, passionate personification of Africa in her vulnerability, memory, and agency, lays bare notions of dehumanization. Despite such oppression, though, hope for healing endures. In the third stanza, Africa now “is rising” (line 18) and “striding” (24), which I interpret as metaphors infused with belief in a better future.

**Engaging with Multicultural Poems: “An Act of Consciousness”**

The students’ and my interpretations of “Caged Bird,” “Still I Rise,” “Alone,” “Woman Work,” and “Africa” are stories of our experiences reading, feeling, and thinking about these poems. Kelly, for example, considers the opposition of the free and caged birds as highlighting the emotional harm that dominant powers can cause. Brittany
brings to her cognitive and aesthetic reading of “Caged Bird” a narrative of her family’s songs in Italian that were part of the fabric of their life struggling in the United States. Denise interprets “Still I Rise” in terms of the poem’s creation of “a voice for all people who need to be heard” and finds inspiration for strength in Angelou’s confidence and passion. Stella expands her interpretation of “Alone” from the immediate situation of the speaker’s aloneness to the larger suffering of humanity in a fractured society. Tracy Jeanne begins her response to “Woman Work” with reflections about demands made on women and the strength women have to persevere, and she expresses an appreciation of Angelou’s passion that she finds “a breath of fresh air.” And for Leslie in her experience interpreting “Africa,” language becomes powerful in the personification of Africa that “makes this land come alive.” First drawn to the poem’s rhyme, Leslie revisits “Africa” and becomes more cognizant of the poem’s representation of slavery. For me, Angelou’s poems go passionately and directly to histories and oppressions that test the human will to survive and find peace. The resilience and hope of these poems are, I believe, expressions of belief in the human capacity to survive and seek wholeness of being.

In Claudia Tate’s (1999) interview with Maya Angelou, Angelou describes her efforts to live what she terms a “poetic existence” (p. 151). She explains, “That means I take responsibility for the air I breath (sic) and the space I take up. I try to be immediate, to be totally present for all my work. I try” (p. 151). I believe this philosophy translates into her poetry as a compelling, passionate voice that engages, challenges, and inspires her reader. Angelou also says she works toward “concentrated consciousness” (p. 151). I love this phrase because she names the conscious awareness that informs her work, and this idea has relevance to interpretation. Maxine Greene (1978) says that “we confront a
writer’s consciousness of (or grasping) a moment of historical time” as we “engage with a book,” and this confronting is “by means of an act of consciousness on our part” (p. 120). By using a dialectical notebook, or as Greene would say, being “stimulated to think about their own thinking and to reflect upon their own reflecting” (p. 61), students and teachers become more cognizant about this “act of consciousness.”

The “hard hitting” nursery rhymes of Eve Merriam, poems by Eloise Greenfield and J. Patrick Lewis bringing Harriet Tubman’s agency to life, Langston Hughes’ poems raising conscious awareness, Maya Angelou’s social poetry speaking out against injustices and inspiring strength—all of these multicultural poems offer invitations to be in moments of “concentrated consciousness” and interpret with our senses, thoughts, and feelings. Louise Rosenblatt (1980) states, “Aesthetic reading…will fuse the cognitive and affective elements of consciousness—sensations, images, feelings, ideas—into a personally lived-through poem or story” (p. 388). Through revisiting familiar forms, lessons, and poets in sharing multicultural poetry, we can build upon individual and collective experiences and provide opportunities for aesthetic reading that exercise our powers of understanding, learning, imagining, and growing as social beings.
Chapter 5

Surfacing and Extending Perceptions through Interpreting Multicultural Poetry: Moments of Connection, Questioning, Struggle, and Imagination

A challenge of interpreting multicultural poetry arises from its diverse representations of ways of living, relating, and experiencing the world. There is, though, a common element among multicultural poems: the individual artistic and political expression of the human condition shaped by culture. Even if a poem makes unfamiliar experiential references, it gives voice to something that matters to the poet and offers possibilities for connection and imagination. I believe reading and hearing multicultural poetry offers literary experiences with the potential to raise social and environmental awareness, inspire empathetic imagination, and nourish compassion. In this chapter, I relate my students’ and my responses to selected poems by Grace Nichols, Luis Alberto Ambroggio, Ed Vega, Johanna Vega, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Amado Nervo, Taisha Lewis, Fred Voss, Janet Wong, Gary Soto, Eka Budianta, Naomi Shihab Nye, Walter Dean Myers, Ashley Bryan, Harriet Jacobs, Nancy Wood, Nikki Giovanni, and Byrd Baylor. Through our dialectical engagements with these poems, the students and I learn about the world and gain expanded cultural and social awareness as we make meaning and develop critical consciousness.

“Out of Africa” by Grace Nichols

In Virginia’s dialectical notebook, she tells the story of her struggles and insights interpreting and reinterpreting Grace Nichols’ (1989) poem “Out Of Africa” from Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman (p. 30). Virginia details how unfamiliar words initially made it difficult to interpret the poem:
After reading this poem, I am very confused. I think that the author has moved from Africa where he/she was born to the Caribbean to England where she is today. Throughout the poem, Nichols tries to convey emotions and experiences that she had while living in each of these places. However, I don’t really understand what she’s trying to convey. I get a negative vibe throughout the poem. It seems to me that she has not truly enjoyed anywhere that she has lived. There are quite a few words that I don’t know the meanings of. Therefore, I was unsure of some of the pictures she was trying to paint with her language although I could imagine the “high smelling saltfish” quite easily. When she tells of the British man that was running behind someone who had forgotten their umbrella, it made me laugh. I like the poem’s pattern of repetition. It helped the poem flow as I read it.

As Virginia traces her initial response, she sketches the pattern of relocation and intuitively senses “a negative vibe.” With several unfamiliar words, forming mental imagery is a challenge, and she focuses on the one smell that speaks to her experience. Virginia also has enough emotional connection with the poem to enjoy the humor of the forgotten umbrella and the pleasure of the poem’s repetition. In Joelle Taylor’s interview with Grace Nichols, the poet comments about these aspects of playfulness and sound:

Through the use of repetition the poem becomes incantatory, almost like a spell. And against this spell-like background, the familiarity of someone forgetting their umbrella brings us back to the ordinary and sets up a playful juxtaposition. I take great pleasure in the musicality of a poem, as well as the imagery. (http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npdnichols.htm)

In this same interview, Nichols describes the poem “at a personal level” as being “a tongue in cheek” representation of her migration from the Caribbean to England, her home for more than two decades.
Although several words and images are unfamiliar to Virginia, she later makes connections to her prior knowledge, shifting her perspective and allowing her to see the poem in a new light. In her reinterpretations, she draws upon her knowledge of history and extends her perception of the poem from being about an individual to being about slavery and the African diaspora. Virginia writes:

*Further and deeper reflection over this poem has brought me to realize that this poem is not necessarily about the author. Instead, this poem is about the forced migration of a group of people. I have taken a lot of history classes and it finally dawned on me that this was a representation of the slave trade. Africans were uprooted from their homes in Africa and taken to work many sugar plantations in the Caribbean. From there, many were forced to places such as England and America. No wonder I was feeling such negative vibes from the poem after the first time I read it! This poem is so much deeper and more depressing than I first thought. The “maw of hunger” (line 5) of Africa vividly depicts a starving country. Except for the last line of the first stanza, Africa is made out to seem like everyone there is suffering. It is a very stereotypical image of Africa and yet I believe that it is this image that justified the white men who enslaved the African people. “Tired woman in earrings” (line 2) makes me think of the tribal African woman always pictured doing strenuous chores wearing large, traditional earrings. I believe it is the savage image of the African people that allowed the white men to feel superior. The last line of the first stanza gives me a completely different feeling than the rest of the image of Africa. “The first mother”(line 6) is the most positive image of the entire poem. Even though Africa may seem like a difficult place to live to outsiders, it was the first home of the many mistreated slaves. “Mother” is an*
endearing term, and it makes me feel that the slaves that were kidnapped out of their own country miss it like they would their own mother. Next, the Caribbean was also described very stereotypically with the tourists, the hurricanes, the palm trees, and the smell of salt and fish. The last line of this second stanza struck me as well—“the happy creole so-called mentality” (line 12). The Caribbean isn’t as perfect as it is made out to be. The Caribbean’s economy stood on the legs of its slaves at the time. This happy mentality is a façade that is hiding the way the country really was. Finally, England is described very stereotypically with images such as the frost, the tea, the old woman, the “gent,” and the umbrella. This deeper understanding of the poem and its history has made me appreciate it so much more.

For me, Virginia’s metaphor “it finally dawned on me” beautifully and organically describes the “act of consciousness” (Greene, 1978, p. 120) she experiences as she revisits the poem and her notes. This dawning of interpreting the poem as “a representation of the slave trade” leads to further insights and an affirming recognition of the “negative vibe” she had sensed in her earlier engagement with the poem. Virginia’s association of “mother” as an endearing term recalls for me Maya Angelou’s (1975) maternal personification of Africa in her poem “Africa” from Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well to expose the dehumanization of slavery.

As I read “Out of Africa,” I see a series of visual and emotional portraits. Like Virginia, I am especially drawn to the idea of Africa as “the first mother” and appreciate her view that this is “the most positive image of the entire poem.” This “first mother” creation metaphor of the source of being and well-being contrasts with the stereotypical tropical images of the Caribbean and its undercurrent of troubled social relations, as well
as the images of ritual, aging, and death associated with England in the poem. The first time I read it, the closing moment of the “gent” delivering the forgotten umbrella delightfully caught me by surprise. This image feels like a counterpoint to the poem’s seriousness.

“Out of Africa” exemplifies honoring what Albert Einstein terms “the intuitive mind.” Nichols describes creating this poem to have “an interplay of perceptions” as she juxtaposes stereotypical images with “more elusive and less predictable images”; in order to make meaning of these images, according to Nichols, one needs to utilize intuition along with the “inner musical ear” (http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npdnichols.htm).

“Learning English” by Luis Alberto Ambroggio

Sharon, Kathleen, and Scarlett selected Luis Alberto Ambroggio’s “Learning English,” translated from the Spanish by Lori Carlson, for their dialectical notebooks. Originally titled “Communión,” this poem appears in Lori Carlson’s (1994) poetry anthology Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up Latino in the United States (p. 16), which is a group discussion book for our course. Ambroggio’s original Spanish version of the poem, “Aprender el inglés,” also appears in Cool Salsa (p. 17). In the biographical notes, Carlson tells us Ambroggio is from Argentina (p. 119).

For Sharon, Ambroggio’s poem compels her to think about the importance of language’s relationship to culture. In her initial interpretations, Sharon writes:

Language is how we understand and reply to the world. Altering the language you use can alter how you see the world. Moreover, language portrays the values of a culture. In the way Eskimos have so many words for snow, certain words in certain languages depict a certain shade of meaning that might not be present in another
language. If you are a native speaker of this language, it is quite probable that you share the values of your language, and by using another language you lose your ability to communicate these concepts.

Sharon’s insight that using a different language alters how a person views the world highlights cultural influences on language and perception. Her example of Eskimos’ words for snow illustrates George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s (2003) idea in Metaphors We Live By that “conceptual systems of various cultures partly depend on the physical environments they have developed in” (p. 146). As signs constituted by social and cultural meanings, language is infused with cultural values and references to physical experiences; and cultural metaphors are embedded in everyday language, influencing what we perceive as reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 146).

In Sharon’s reinterpretations, she further develops her thoughts about using a different language:

*Although I still appreciate how some languages can convey meaning that another can’t, by trying to explain something in another language you can often give it new meaning, and even come to understand it more because you must approach it from a different perspective much in the same way using a different sign system can help students learn and develop thoughts.*

For Sharon, language impacts perceptions and self-definition, but speaking a second or different language “does not need to mean losing yourself.”

In her reflections about interpreting and reinterpreting “Learning English,” Sharon acknowledges that Ambroggio’s poem makes her think about the importance of language in perceiving the world and the self. She writes:
This poem made me focus on the importance of language in defining yourself and in communication about yourself and the things in your world. Language truly does color the world, and it can change everything. Furthermore, the author edged me into considering how much change really is a part of our lives. Although I do not feel that this theme was prevalent in the author’s intended message, that is the great thing about this poem—it opens you to think and does not lead you in one direction.

Sharon’s metaphor that Ambroggio “edged” her into thinking about ever-present change is, I think, part of the beauty of this poem. He challenges her to think about a tension between life’s fluidity and what is held dear. As Sharon comments in her response paper, “The possibilities with poetry are endless, and that is poetry’s beauty.”

For Kathleen, interpreting the poem shifts from concern with a loss in translation to loss of identity and culture. In her initial interpretations, she thinks of the poem in terms of the speaker’s concern that using a language other than Spanish will change the intended meaning, and she describes the poem as having a “straight-forward message.” Reinterpreting the poem, though, leads her to consider a more profound meaning and awakens her empathetic imagination:

*The person who was learning English not only was afraid of their meanings and messages being misinterpreted, but also their sacred, God-given identity of culture and country going out the door.*

*I can only imagine going to another country and having to learn not only their language but their culture as well. The fear of becoming someone else and losing what they perceive to be themselves must be extremely scary.*
Kathleen says in her reflections that the process of revisiting the poem gave it a new-found depth, and she feels Ambroggio wrote it “from the heart, in sadness and in anger.” In her reading diary entry for Cool Salsa, Kathleen mentions “Learning English” and describes the speaker’s emotion as “someone’s anguish at losing their identity by taking on the English language and American culture.”

Like Kathleen, Scarlett also empathetically imagines the perspective of the speaker. In her initial interpretations, she relates the speaker’s desire to be understood and states that he feels he would not be the same person expressing himself in a language other than Spanish. In her reinterpetations, she considers “a deeper level”:

*On a deeper level, to Ambroggio, Spanish isn’t just words used to make meaning. Spanish to him is part of his soul...his language is a conscious part of life for him....Spanish comes from his heart, and any other language would come from his head. He would think about the right words and make sure they sound right, but they wouldn’t feel right, because it is not what is native to him....*

Scarlett’s insight about Spanish coming from his heart, I think, conveys the speaker’s passion desiring to be understood by “Life” (line 1). In Scarlett’s reflections, she explains that she made a conscious decision to try to empathize with the speaker:

*When I wrote about this poem, I tried to empathize with Ambroggio and put myself in his shoes. What if I were to go to another country and become a minority and not speak the native language? How would I feel if I was asked to put a different name to my feelings and thoughts? It would be hard. I would constantly be digging for the right words, but only settling for the words I knew and my message would consistently be lost.*
Scarlett’s questions, I think, help guide her empathetic imagination engaging with this poem. In her reading diary entry for *Cool Salsa*, Scarlett writes about having experience with Latino culture through growing up in an area with many Latinos and having a best friend who is Latina. For Scarlett, *Cool Salsa*’s poems offer diverse perspectives “where the story tellers are gifted writers who want to share their thoughts, emotions, and histories through the art of poetry.”

For me, “Learning English” conveys the power of language to shape who we are and how we relate to other people. I love how Gloria Anzaldúa (2004) describes this influence metaphorically: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (p. 271). The languages we learn as young children, I believe, are likely to be the ones we trust to express our most deeply felt emotions. As I think about “Learning English,” I am especially drawn to the metaphor for knowing Spanish, “feel it in the blood of your soul” (line 4). In this moment, knowing *is* feeling with no separation between mind, body, emotion, and spirit. Culture and language have an intimate and powerful influence on identity, an aspect of the human condition. I think of a statement that Scarlett uses to conclude her reinterpretations: “We all just want to be understood.”

**“Translating Grandfather’s House” by Ed Vega**

Ed Vega’s poem “Translating Grandfather’s House” also appears in Lori Carlson’s (1994) poetry anthology *Cool Salsa* (pp. 6-7). Originally written in English, the Spanish translation “Traduciendo la casa de mi abuelo” by Johanna Vega is included in the anthology (pp. 8-9). In the biographical notes, Carlson tells us Ed Vega is of Cuban heritage (p. 119).
A student named Veronica selected “Translating Grandfather’s House” for her dialectical notebook and explores the pressures to conform represented in Ed Vega’s poem. In her initial interpretations, she writes:

*My first impression of the poem was that I was blown away by the imagery. I thought it was interesting how the author was describing a sketch that was drawn, and that sketch allows us to concretize the poem into our own mental picture.*

*I also thought is was interesting how the teacher does not believe that the author’s grandfather actually lived in the house that was drawn….This passage made me think about why it was so much easier for the teacher to accept the sketch of the New York City projects, rather than the clapboard house surrounded by horses.*

*I think that we, as Americans, take the lives we have for granted; we accept the freedoms we have as things that are owed to us. Because of this, we cannot begin to fathom what it would be like to live under oppression, and it is hard for any of us to imagine why someone that had so much in their homeland would trade that to live in the projects of New York City.*

Literary art intertwines with visual art as the details of the sketch inspire Veronica to produce mental imagery. She wonders about the interior world of the teacher, and thinking about the speaker’s circumstances leads her to consider freedoms that many people in the United States take for granted. Her metaphor “we cannot begin to fathom” describes a reader’s difficulties understanding and extending perceptions when life experiences informing a poem are profoundly different from those of the reader. In Veronica’s reinterpretations, she wonders also why the speaker values the teacher’s praise so much that he would go ahead and draw what the other children were drawing.
She describes the speaker as “willing to give in to being standardized and just follow what everyone else was doing, simply because the teacher did not believe the picture was real.” In Veronica’s reflections, she considers the motivation of receiving a teacher’s praise:

_Everyone is drawn to praise as a reinforcer, and children are no exception. It’s no wonder a student that is being left out of the praise would be willing to change their own memories and beliefs about something in order to get that A+ on the chalkboard._

As I read Veronica’s reflections, I wonder if the speaker conformed to the teacher’s expectations because his own sense of identity was shaken by her disbelief. I am reminded of Adrienne Rich’s statement, “When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing” (quoted in Rosaldo, 1993, p. xxi). The line “Crossing her arms she moves on” (line 16) signals the teacher’s disapproval and disengagement; then later the teacher is “Beaming” (line 32) when she grants approval and publicly awards the perfect grade for the drawing she wants to see. Perhaps the speaker feels his emotional survival in the classroom depends on pleasing his teacher, whom he perceives to have the authority and power to give or withhold approval. For me, the repeated phrase “to the green blackboard” (lines 34-35) at the end of the poem feels as though I am hearing the speaker’s inner thoughts as he struggles to process giving up a personal truth in order to receive the teacher’s approval and be a part of the world she describes.

As I read “Translating Grandfather’s House,” I feel sad and angry. The title is ironic as the “translating” becomes an injustice and loss, not an attempt to preserve and
communicate the original. Like Veronica, I am drawn to the imagery, and my experiences with these sensual, lively images heighten my feelings of loss and anger as the speaker sacrifices some of his history and his identity. Ed Vega’s inclusion of the sketch and the drawing in his poem describing an oppressive classroom provides a powerful example of art being inseparable from politics because art has an audience (Hade, 1997; Langer, 1953). In this poem’s context, the teacher is censorious. Her comment about the house being “from / Some Zorro / Movie” (lines 10-12) demeans the truth and value of the speaker’s own experience. She imposes her expectations on this child’s art, and he bends to conform, winning the approval of the teacher but losing part of himself in the process. As I think about this child and other children in similar situations, I hope that authentic self-expression and creativity are ultimately resilient and appreciated.

“A Puerto Rican Girl’s Sentimental Education” by Johanna Vega

Also in Lori Carlson’s (1994) Cool Salsa, Johanna Vega’s “A Puerto Rican Girl’s Sentimental Education” (pp. 12-13) is a poem Veronica selected for her dialectical notebook. Johanna Vega’s translation of the poem into Spanish, “La educación sentimental de una niña puertorriqueña,” appears in the anthology as well (pp. 14-15). In the biographical notes, Carlson tells us Johanna Vega is of Puerto Rican heritage (p. 119).

In her interpretations and reinterpretations, Veronica considers what life might feel like for an ESL student being “stuck in the middle.” In her initial interpretations, she comments that she likes the poem “because it was a retelling of real events,” and she says it is important “to think about the fact that people who do not speak English as their primary language need to have different opportunities to exhibit their understanding and
knowledge in school.” In her reinterpretations, she considers the challenges teachers face working to accommodate ESL students and the struggles the speaker faces in her roles as a student and a daughter:

*I think that working with ESL students to improve their quality of education is an essential part of what teachers do in their classroom, but I also think that school environments make it very difficult for teachers to accommodate these students. In order to change the way things are, we are going to need more funding and more resources, as well as more knowledgeable bilingual teachers to advocate for these children.*

*Not only is Vega being failed educationally, she is also dealing with the issues of what it means to be growing up as a Spanish speaking Latina in the United States. She has to go to school every day knowing that she is not like the other children, and then she goes home to her parents who tell her how important it is to keep her heritage and stay true to who she was. She’s stuck in the middle of trying to conform in order to fit in with her peers and remain herself to please her parents.*

Thinking about the speaker’s home life extends Veronica’s perceptions about what it might be like to experience being bicultural. In her reflections, she writes:

*...I had never really considered the thought that there is also pressure coming from their parents to keep their previous culture alive. I think it would be very hard to grow up with all these contradicting messages telling you to be all these different things, and having to play different roles depending on where you are and whom you are with.*

For Veronica, “A Puerto Rican Girl’s Sentimental Education” opens spaces for empathetic imagining.
For me, part of the power of Johanna Vega’s poem is the adult speaker using her voice to raise social awareness about injustices suffered by a low-income, Latina child. This “sentimental education” is painful as a sophisticated, experienced woman speaks out on behalf of the child she was in an oppressive elementary school. The speaker has hindsight and the power of naming—and of renaming. The oppression in the girl’s elementary school is “Systematic” (line 13), and the child is “caught in the American crossfire” (line 17). The speaker renames the psychiatrist’s reading test “diagnosis” as “Diagnosis: psychedelic, psycholinguistic / genius survives the warring factions / of cultural schizophrenia” (lines: 28-30), again using a war metaphor for the girl’s innocence in a school system psychologically violent for her as a bilingual, bicultural child. Bureaucracy, adherence to the authority of the “official” written record, and teachers’ complicity in this “war” cause the traumatic binding of this gifted girl’s mind as she struggles to find coherence in her life. I believe Johanna Vega’s “A Puerto Rican Girl’s Sentimental Education” raises questions about the human costs of schooling that values standardization and hinders rather than promotes self-actualization.

“The Changeling” by Judith Ortiz Cofer

Veronica also selected Judith Ortíz Cofer’s poem “The Changeling”¹ from Lori Carlson’s (1994) Cool Salsa (p. 36) for her dialectical notebook. Johanna Vega’s translation of the poem into Spanish, “Transformación,” is reprinted in Cool Salsa (p. 37) as well. In the biographical notes, Carlson tells us Cofer has written several books,

For Veronica, “The Changeling” surfaces and extends perceptions of gender roles maintained in a family. In her initial interpretations, she relates a personal connection and then considers broader cultural contexts:

*I actually related to this poem on a personal level because of how hard this little girl is working to try to get attention and acceptance from her father. I thought it was interesting how in Cofer’s experience, as well as my own, the young girl has to become involved in predominantly male activities to spark interactions with her father. It was also interesting to see how Cofer’s father took a very nonchalant attitude towards having a relationship with his daughter, depicted by the daughter being the one that had to step up and initiate the relationship.

....Her mother’s reaction...raised ideas in my mind about what it means to be “proper,” and how our cultural context changes that definition. For example, in America it is okay for women to wear pants and to cut their hair short, while in other cultures these things would be found unacceptable because they are not considered to be characteristically feminine.

Veronica’s metaphors of the girl’s efforts “to spark interactions” and her “being the one that had to step up” suggest the initiative the speaker feels she must take in order to energize and engage this father-daughter relationship. As Veronica revisits her initial interpretations, she explores the speaker’s attitudes towards her parents. She notes,
Interestingly, she does not feel that she is being oppressed by her father, who only pays attention to her when she is dressed like, and talking like, a man. Rather, it is her mother’s fault for forcing her to change back into her invisible self.

As I read Veronica’s thoughts about the poem, I think of bell hooks’ (1989) discussion of sexism in a familial context and possibilities for personal and social change:

Unlike other forms of domination, sexism directly shapes and determines relations of power in our private lives, in familiar social spaces, in the most intimate context—home—and in that most intimate sphere of relations—family. Usually, it is within the family that we witness coercive domination and learn to accept it, whether it be domination of parent over child, or male over female. Even though family relations may be and most often are, informed by acceptance of a politic of domination, they are simultaneously relations of care and connection. It is this convergence of two contradictory impulses—the urge to promote growth and the urge to inhibit growth—that provides a practical setting for feminist critique, resistance, and transformation. (p. 21)

In “The Changeling,” the mother completely suppresses the daughter’s masculine gender performativity (Butler, 1999) to ensure the patriarchal status quo in the family. And as Veronica points out, the daughter feels her mother is oppressive and dominates her, not her father. Veronica also mentions that she finds it difficult to visualize this girl telling stories “of carnage and rivers of blood” (line 15), and she doubts the girl really understands the ideas of the words she is using.

In her reflections, Veronica relates the story of her reading “The Changeling” in terms of gender boundaries and cultural contexts related to gendered behaviors. She describes first noticing the difficulties a daughter can have relating to her father “simply because of the gender boundaries we create.” She continues,

In order for there to be a relationship established, we must first have something in common that we share with the other person. It was interesting to see how Cofer was the one trying to create the common ground for a relationship with her father, rather than
the other way around. This made me think about how common this occurrence might actually be in the world, and also look at the reasons why the work falls on the daughter rather than the father.

I was also shocked by the cultural context gender has associated with it. Not only do we have clear messages being sent about what is stereotypically male and what is stereotypically female, we also have these ideas about how far a person can go before they cross the line of what is proper.

The speaker clearly approaches “the line of what is proper” with her “transformations” (line 22); and her mother preempts crossing the line with the stern forbiddance “from sitting down with them as a man” (line 23). It is the mother who establishes and enforces the “highly regulatory frame” (Butler, 1999, p. 43) of her daughter’s gendered role in the family, and the speaker angrily accepts her mother’s “coercive domination” (hooks, 1989, p. 21).

As I read “The Changeling,” I feel the vibrancy and enthusiasm of the young girl transform into anger and pain. The shift of the opening phrase to the right adds a touch of drama, like a stage entrance, as if the first line of the poem itself reflects the girl’s love for acting. She pours herself into being physically and orally theatrical as she pretends to be “the legendary Ché / of grown-up talk” (lines 11-12); and her “game” (line 3) works to gain the attention of her father “until” (line 20) her mother says it is time for dinner. This moment is a turn in the poem, and the last stanza presents the transformation forced by her mother, antithetical to the one the girl designs and controls. Her brother’s closet is enticing as a place of possibilities and imagination, whereas the kitchen symbolizes the oppressive predictability of being feminine—and “invisible” (line 27)—within the gender
boundaries of her mother’s world. To remain invisible would be detrimental to her growth and well-being. Because she recognizes and names this invisibility, perhaps she will be able to transform her experience into thoughts and actions that honor her talents and nourish her aliveness.

“Solidarity” by Amado Nervo

Scarlett selected Amado Nervo’s “Solidarity,” translated from the Spanish by Lori Carlson, for her dialectical notebook, and Brittany discussed the poem in her response paper about poetry. This poem and its original Spanish version, “Solidaridad,” appear in Lori Carlson’s (1994) Cool Salsa (p. 100). In the biographical notes, Carlson describes Nervo as “a prolific Mexican writer of poetry and prose”; she also tells us that he died in 1919 (p. 122).

For Scarlett, making meaning for “Solidarity” is a struggle. In her initial interpretations, she focuses on the emotions represented in the poem and writes,

Nervo seems to be writing about the happy aspects for being who he is. There is so much joy and excitement throughout this poem. He connects with every image that he writes about, such as larks, waterfalls, and diamonds. They all have certain characteristics that he has taken upon his own.

She also notes that the poem has a “vibrant tone.” In her reinterpretations, she describes the poem as being hopeful and future oriented:

I think that Nervo is writing about freedom and the future….I don’t know what exactly he is writing about, but it seems to be full of hope and enthusiasm. He cries, “We are born!” (line 12), but now I wonder why he feels they were so oppressed before. We learned about Cesar Chavez in school and I could understand if he writes about Chavez’s
work. Liberation seems to be a theme in Hispanic cultures and Nervo writes about how it feels.

Scarlett draws upon her knowledge from social studies classes to work to fill the gaps of the speaker’s experiences. In her reflections about interpreting the poem, she names reasons why she finds it difficult to interpret “Solidarity”:

This was a hard poem to write about because he does not tell a story, only what he feels...I tried to think of times when I felt all of those things. I guess it is a hard thing to do because I was never oppressed....After reading it a few times and thinking about my reasoning, I thought about each word he uses and why he might have chosen that particular word....Expressions are so different in every language. It’s difficult to make any story about his words.

Scarlett’s comments suggest that more of a context would help provide a story frame for interpreting the images and signs in the poem. Even though she does not have a narrative to consider, she responds to the text by trying to recall moments of similar feelings in her life. In Scarlett’s story of her reading, the narrative element is crucial to connecting with the poem to create a coherent, meaningful literary experience.

For Brittany, connecting with personal experiences is essential to interpreting poetry. In her response paper, Brittany describes “Solidarity” as “anything but conventionally written” and shares her response to Nervo’s poem:

The format of this piece is uneven. There’s no rhyming, or even very many complete sentences. But none of this matters, because the true essence of poetry is about expressing one’s language, ideas, feelings, and concerns in a way that differs from everyday conversation (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 255)....
Just as poets write their work based on their personal beliefs and feelings, readers use their own personal experiences to make sense of it. For instance, when I read “Solidarity” I envisioned myself as a little girl at summer camp. Another reader might interpret this poem in terms of their concerns for the preservation of the environment.

Whereas Scarlett struggles to understand the poem in terms of possible social, cultural, and historical contexts different from her own, Brittany approaches it fully expecting to draw upon her life experiences to make meaning.

For me, the elation in “Solidarity” feels like a clear, bright sky after a storm. I notice that this poem appears in the “A Promising Future” section concluding Cool Salsa, and I wonder if an event inspired the celebratory hopefulness of this poem. The pattern of exhortations followed by corresponding lines of present progressive verbs suggests sprightliness, and the closing line “We are born!” (line 12) is a culminating declaration of unity. The poem conveys such activated energy, motion, and doing—kinetic energy and radiant energy—as if to say we have aliveness when we are doing what we do best, what we are born to do. The title “Solidarity” has political connotations of collective agency, and the poem celebrates connectedness. As Scarlett observes, “He connects with every image that he writes about, such as larks, waterfalls, and diamonds”—perhaps this feeling of connectedness is the source of the speaker’s joy. I think of Hildegard of Bingen’s assertion, “all things are penetrated with connectedness” (quoted in Fox, 1991, p. 36). The poem’s recognition and celebration of connectedness, I think, is an artistic and political expression of compassion, which Hildegard of Bingen says “is the working out of our connectedness; it is the praxis of interconnectedness” (quoted in Fox, 1991, p. 36).
“Growing Up in the Ghetto” by Taisha Lewis

Nancy selected a poem by Taisha Lewis titled “Growing Up in the Ghetto.” This poem appears in Lydia Omolola Okuturo’s (1999) poetry anthology *Quiet Storm: Voices of Young Black Poets* (pp. 31-32). In the biographical notes, Okuturo tells us Lewis is originally from Brooklyn, New York. When Lewis was fifteen years old attending a boarding school in New Hampshire, she wrote the poem “as a form of solace because she missed her neighborhood” (p. 99).

For Nancy, interpreting this poem shifted from focusing on harsh realities of life in a ghetto to imagining what it might be like to think of the ghetto as home. In her initial interpretations, she writes,

*This poem is sort of harsh because of the talk about guns, drugs, and poverty. However, I feel it is very realistic of how life is in the ghetto. I like how Taisha Lewis says that this kind of life affects the innocent. Many people feel that all people who live in the ghetto are drug dealers and gang members who carry guns....This poem shows me that no matter where you live it is the place where you will feel most comfortable....I like how the poem talks about the pride in the African American community.*

In her reinterpretations, Nancy describes how appreciating the poem’s imagery caused her to think of the ghetto as the girl’s home, as well as evoking a personal connection:

*When I looked back on this poem, I noticed how much I loved the imagery. You could almost picture the guys hanging out on the sidewalk and the girls jumping double Dutch. The ghetto does not seem like that bad a place to live reading the poem this time around. Looking back on this poem also made me think of my own neighborhood. To most it is not a nice place to live, but it is my home. I love the lines, “There’s no place*
like the ghetto / where the people struggle every day / and I can be me!” (lines 32-34). These lines really relate to me because where I live the people also struggle to survive. Many of the people in my town are very hard workers; however, they usually only receive a minimum wage salary.

In Nancy’s reflections, she remarks, “I never imagined having so much in common with a girl who grew up in the ghetto.” The images of daily life “about pleasant things such as hanging out, and going to the corner store before school” remind her of her own childhood, and economic struggles resonate as well. Through “Growing Up in the Ghetto,” the poet and her reader share a connection as people “who love their homeplaces” (Noddings, 2005, p. 67).

As I read “Growing Up in the Ghetto,” I think of a comment Nancy makes in her response paper that exposure to a diversity of poems will help people “gain endless views of the world around them.” For me, the opening line, “There’s no place like the ghetto,” which is the first line of all five stanzas, alludes to L. Frank Baum’s (1900/1982) The Wizard of Oz when Dorothy says, “There’s no place like home.” My first time reading the poem, I immediately thought of Dorothy’s famous sentence, and I felt surprised when I saw “the ghetto.” My own surprise helped me become conscious of a tension between the speaker’s embracing the ghetto and my fear of it. Through Lewis’ descriptions of life in the ghetto acknowledging the struggle and fears yet also celebrating the community, I am able to extend my own perceptions of life in a ghetto and imagine this girl missing her neighborhood.
“Prosperity” by Fred Voss

Wayne selected Fred Voss’ “Prosperity,” which appears in Invocation L.A.: Urban Multicultural Poetry, edited by Michelle Clinton, Sesshu Foster, and Naomi Quiñonez (1989, p. 69). In the contributors’ notes, the editors tell us Voss “has worked in a Hollywood restaurant, a gasket factory, a steel mill and five machine shops” (p. 129).

For Wayne, Voss’ poem affirms his view that capitalism can be harmful to workers. In his initial interpretations, he “was reminded of all the corporate takeovers that happen in the United States” sometimes resulting in job losses, and he notes the poem’s description of the “sweatshop-paced production quotas” (line 12). In his reinterpretations, he notes the irony of the sweatshop description: “Americans speak out against sweatshop like companies in other countries but don’t stop and think about some of the harsh working conditions here in America.” It is in his reflections that he describes the emotion evoked by the poem and further develops his thoughts about the poem’s meanings:

This was a sad poem about the negative effects of business acquisitions. The once optimistic workers soon realized that their company’s increasing profit was of no benefit to them individually. The poem reinforces my beliefs in the dark side to capitalism, which basically makes every option in the business world fair game and leaves many people taken advantage of.

The company grew and it should have benefited the workers, but it only led to more greed and demands.

It also ends on an ironic note. The once jubilant workers realize that their “big, important company” only got big by taking advantage of everyone else.
Wayne’s naming of “more greed and demands” characterizes the actions of the “big company” in its mode of operation: to grow and profit at the expense of the employees’ working conditions and well-being. The initial jubilance of the workers transforms into disillusionment as they experience the company’s true mission of being profitable without regard for human needs.

For me, “Prosperity” is steeped in irony as a poem about big business’ short-sighted hunger for economic prosperity at the cost of human prosperity. The anthology Invocation L.A. is a poetry collection for adults, so this poem stands out with its simplified diction such as “big” and “little,” adjectives that might be used with very young children. The workers initially assume that “big” is good, yet they soon discover the company’s focus on profitability—or its own short-sighted “prosperity”—as management disregards their comfort, safety, and well-being on the job. To be able to sit on a stool, for example, is a bare necessity, so the company’s removing such a modest item shows its hard-heartedness. The workers’ expectation of benevolence makes the company’s greed even more disheartening and invites the reader to sympathize with the exploited workers. This poem raises questions of power and even hope, so ultimately I believe it is a poem using childlike phrasing infused and intermixed with adult understandings to underscore the injustices of profit-driven big businesses.

“Speak Up” by Janet Wong

Kathleen wrote about Janet Wong’s (1994) poem “Speak Up” from her collection of original poems Good Luck Gold and Other Poems (pp. 5-6). In Kathleen’s reading diary, she describes the poems in this book as “very eye-opening” and mentions she selected “Speak Up” for her dialectical notebook because she felt visually drawn to the
Kathleen writes, “Her subtlety and artful way of putting this realistic conversation into a poem is a fantastic way to point out the misconceptions that are held by many, whether they see it or not.”

In her dialectical notebook, Kathleen elaborates on the poem’s potential to raise conscious awareness. She notes in her initial interpretations that the poem’s ending stood out for her and “brought the poem’s message right to the reader.” I find Kathleen’s remark about the poem’s ending particularly interesting because Wong especially values endings and says in an interview, “For me, the ending of a poem is the most important part, and most of my revision focuses on the last two lines” (quoted in Hill and Manna, 2000, p. 218). As Kathleen revisits her initial impressions, she comments, “It is very eye-opening to those who have not experienced Wong’s situation before.” In her reflections, she writes:

My first encounter with the poem was definitely the most intriguing, I suppose, but the message was still loud and clear after each reading and after reviewing my journal entry. I still feel that the poem could have important eye-opening effects on various students who may view races other than “white” to be non-American, or assume they speak the language of their ancestors. By pointing out at the end that both students in the poem were born in America, would hopefully display the equality and common link between them, if it was unfortunately not there before.

For this poem, Kathleen’s looking and looking again exemplifies her cognizance of her own “act of consciousness” engaging with the poem (Berthoff, 1981; Greene 1978). For Kathleen, Wong’s “artful” representation of this conversation as a “visually intriguing
and powerful poem” creates the potential to surface and disrupt assumptions about nationality and language, and to extend perceptions.

Like Kathleen, I am drawn to this poem because of its visual representation of the conversation. The realistic voices are easy for me to hear as Wong shows us the conversation, and the voices sound authentic. The very structure of the poem emphasizes otherness through opposition, and the Asian American speaker holds up a linguistic mirror when she turns the conversation by saying, “Hey, let’s listen to you / for a change” (lines 16-17). I feel as though I am present with the two speakers. As I think of this immediacy, I recall Wong’s reflections about writing poetry for children. Wong, a former student of Myra Cohn Livingston, states, “Poetry encourages the writer to think in terms of moments. Myra Cohn Livingston used to say, ‘Write about one thing, one image, in your poems.’ Poetry can be like photography in this way—aim, focus, click” (quoted in Hill and Manna, 2000, p. 125). Through “Speak Up,” Wong portrays a brief and revealing conversation. In this moment, a dominant culture person’s erroneous assumptions about an Asian American’s nationality, birthplace, and language become visible; and these stereotypical assumptions are ideologies inseparable from issues of politics and power (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 80).

“Money Order” by Janet Wong

Rhonda selected Janet Wong’s (1996) poem “Money Order” for her dialectical notebook. This poem appears in Wong’s collection of original poems titled A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems (p. 20). The book is divided into three parts (Korean Poems, Chinese Poems, American Poems), and “Money Order” appears in the Chinese Poems.
section. Wong tells us her mother is Korean, her father is Chinese, and she was born in Los Angeles.

For Rhonda, “Money Order” compels her to think about immigrants’ struggles in the United States. Initially, she comments that producing mental imagery while reading the poem comes easily for her, and she describes “Money Order” as being “written in a sarcastic manner.” Rhonda also describes memories evoked of a personal connection, as well as a class she took dealing with issues of social class and race:

This reminds me of my own family...my grandparents often tell me stories of their parents’ struggles to make it in the new world and at the same time trying to help their extended family back in the old country.

This reminds me of a social class and race course... we talked about early immigrants and how they are barely making it, but they still send money home because they are making a lot more money than they are over there; it is almost expected that the part of the family who go to America has to help take care of the family back home no matter what their financial situation is.

Immigrants are seen as having the good life to their relatives back in their country of origin, but to most of the American population they are seen as lower/working class.

Drawing upon her prior knowledge to interpret this poem, Rhonda describes the tensions among social and economic realities, expectations, and perceptions that contribute to the hardships suffered by immigrants struggling to make a living. In her reinterpretations, she says “this poem makes a very powerful statement about immigrant life” and concludes,
I think that this poem is important because it reveals to the reader how these people struggle to save money for the rest of the family and all they do with it is buy a color TV, rather than use it for something useful.

For Rhonda, “Money Order” stimulates her imagination through imagery and situation as it opens spaces for moments of connection with her experiences with family and in class. In this context, the color TV becomes symbolic of the recipients’ choosing a luxury item that stimulates materialistic desires rather than utilizing relatives’ hard-earned money for genuine nourishment or other basic necessities.

For me, writing a dialectical notebook entry for “Money Order” helps me slow down and notice nuances of sound and structure that contribute to meaning. Starting with the pronoun “We,” for example, sets the stage for oppositions of *us* and *them, here* and *there*. The *t* sound in “salt” and the long *i* sound in “rice” of the opening line echo in the following line “night after night after night,” and these repeated sounds reinforce a feeling of monotony and sameness in what Rhonda terms “the same low budget meal day after day.” I notice the pattern of “to” starting three consecutive lines in the first stanza, twice as an infinitive and then a preposition, as well as the alliteration of the *s* in “save” and “send” (lines 3 and 4) that also links the infinitives. These elements combine to contribute to a feeling of inevitability. As I look and listen again, I notice that the pronoun shift from “We” to “I” at the end of the first stanza provides a structural balance that suggests the speaker’s questioning of the family’s ongoing sacrifice for cousins not personally known. The description “some money” (line 3) in the first stanza becomes “our money” (line 7) in the second stanza conveying the speaker’s attachment to the money sent and then spent “to buy” (line 9) the TV. Also, the contrast between the frugal
fish and rice dinner at the beginning and the luxurious “steak and potatoes” (line 12) dinner consumed by “rich Americans” (line 11) portrayed on TV causes me to imagine the speaker feels disappointment and resentment. These details work together to create the “sarcastic manner” Rhonda mentions in her interpretations. Through the voice of this speaker, Wong invites her reader to imagine and consider the stress immigrant families might feel sending hardearned money to distant relatives.

“I Joyce’s Beauty Salon” by Janet Wong

Rhonda also selected Janet Wong’s (1996) poem “Joyce’s Beauty Salon” from the Korean Poems section of A Suitcase of Seaweed (p. 10). For Rhonda, this poem offers a moment of connection as it reminds her of her own relationship with her mother, and it offers a representation of Korean women.

Rhonda’s initial interpretations focus on the thoughts and emotions she experiences because of the daughter’s narrative about her mother’s role in the community. She writes,

...It made me think about my mother and all she does for people as the mother in this poem gives these unhappy women a moment of happiness during a stressful day. I could feel the emotion of pride radiating from the writing of the child for the mother. Even though the poem is short I feel that it really conveys the emotion that the daughter feels for her mother. As I read the poem all of the things that my mother has done for everyone in her life came flying through my head and the poem really evoked my emotions toward my mother, and this made the poem almost personal and sentimental. Wong’s distilled representation of this daughter’s feelings of pride for her mother inspires Rhonda to remember and appreciate her mother’s kindnesses. Rhonda’s metaphors
interpreting this poem are vibrant with energy. She describes the pride as “radiating,”
which to me suggests warmth, light, and love. Memories are “flying” too as she
experiences the poem on a personal level.

As Rhonda revisits the poem and her interpretations, she considers the
multicultural context for exploring mother and daughter relations. Rhonda writes,

*After reading this poem a couple of times and letting the ideas sink into my head,*

*I realized the connectedness of a family and cultural theme. The poem reveals to the*
*reader a lot about Korean women and even introduces a little Korean language, “Pum*
*Ajima.”...*

For Rhonda, this poem invites her to consider the “experiences and emotions” of mother
and daughter relations in a culture different from her own and to have a personal
connection experientially and emotionally. Wong’s representation of the daughter’s
feelings as she describes her mother’s daily work helping these women find joy resonates
with possibilities for evoking unique connections, and for considering individual
expressions of the human condition shaped by culture.

For me, “Joyce’s Beauty Salon” is a metaphor for transformations. Opening with
“They call my mother / the perm lady...” signals that the speaker’s mother is reputed for
her perms. In the community of this salon, women who arrive angered by family
problems and frustrated by their hair leave with a renewed and refreshed sense of self—
and feeling less burdened—through her expertise. I wonder what daily life is like for
these Korean women, and I imagine they share their problems with one another in the
sanctuary of the salon. I also think again of Myra Cohn Livingston’s influence on
Wong’s poetic craft and aesthetics. Wong comments, “Myra trained me to be especially
aware of poems that look at ordinary things in a fresh way, poems that change the way I look at some small thing forever” (quoted in Hill and Manna, 2000, p. 225). Through the eyes and voice of the speaker, routine perms become nourishment for hope and well-being.

“Ode to Family Photographs” by Gary Soto

Amy selected Gary Soto’s (1992) “Ode to Family Photographs” for her dialectical notebook. This poem is from his collection of original poems Neighborhood Odes (p. 63) celebrating experiences of daily life growing up Mexican American in Fresno, California. For Amy, interpreting this poem initially raises questions about what can be considered poetry and then evolves into appreciating the ode’s “realistic and honest” representations.

In her initial interpretations, Amy focuses on the conversational tone of Soto’s poem. She describes the speaker as a child—a girl or a boy—talking about each picture and providing “personal tidbits” that might not have been evident otherwise. She notices the italicized lines and feels they are more poetic than the other lines of the speaker’s narrative:

I would never have considered a piece written about this topic or written as a normal conversation would be considered poetry. I’m not fully convinced that a poem like this should be considered poetry. Maybe my view is too limited. But the poetics beyond the few italicized lines are beyond me.

In her response paper about poetry, Amy describes disliking poetry because of how it was taught in school as something to be dissected, so she recognizes that her stance regarding poetry is somewhat influenced by negative experiences. When she revisits “Ode to
Family Photographs,” she experiments with different ways of reading it to learn more about her response to the poem.

In her reinterpretations, she expands her impressions of the speaker as well as how compositional form can influence interpretive possibilities. She writes:

*If you take out the lines in the poem that are written in italics and put them together, they could make a whole separate poem all on their own that describe Mama’s picture taking. And, we find out that although she was not much of a photographer, Mama still captured the joy and fun that her family experienced together.*

*…the point of view that the poem takes does not necessarily have to be from a child’s perspective. It could be read by anyone and applied to their life, even in a moment of reflection and memories.*

*The four stanzas made up of only two lines caught my attention after looking back on the poem. It seems that the two pictures are being compared and paralleled for the reader to interpret in their own way or for their own benefit.*

Amy’s revisiting of the poem and her thoughts about it shift her experience to one of imagining a multitude of connections and interpretations through exploring voice and structure.

As she reflects on her interpretations and reinterpretations, she relates how the poem’s realism brings the characters alive for her. She elaborates on how her own thoughts and feelings paying attention to the poem’s tone and sound affect her experience reading it:

*As I read this poem, I thought that it sounded just like something that I might say as I showed someone pictures of my family on a vacation. This made me really enjoy and*
appreciate the poem so much more. The language, the flow and the thought process is so realistic and honest, it struck me.

Although we cannot see the pictures that are being described, we can gather a lot about this family from what they are doing in each picture and how the poet speaks about their Mama. I almost felt as though I knew these people...

I love Amy’s description of elements that make this poem authentic. Her comment, “we can gather a lot about this family…,” points to the signs provided by the poet to be interpreted by his readers. The minimal details create spaces for the reader’s impressions of the family to develop through listening to the conversational tone of the speaker’s voice.

For me, “Ode to Family Photographs” invites readers to think about art as moments of connection. The mother’s difficulties with timing, framing, and focusing photographs become endearing; and the turn in the poem, “But we had fun when Mamá picked up the camera” (line 17), places the emphasis on the family’s enjoyment of her faulty but loving efforts. She is an artist as a creator of camera moments that bring humor and affection to her family’s life together. An image that stands out for me is “a trash can chained to a gate” (line 6). At first, I felt surprised by this image because it is so mundane and, I thought, unworthy of being photographed or included in a poem. Through looking again, I realize this particular unexpected image prevents me from “[settling] into complacency” (Russell, 1998, p. 39); I come to appreciate how it contributes to the poem’s urban realism and helps keep the ode from becoming sentimental. The speaker’s address to the reader, “Can you see? I have candy in my mouth” (line 20) draws me close to the characters to share in the speaker’s delight
remembering a moment of fun in a family photo. The mother, I believe, artfully uplifts human hearts.

“Family Portrait” by Eka Budianta

Ginger selected Eka Budianta’s poem “Family Portrait,” translated by E. U. Kratz, from Naomi Shihab Nye’s (1992) poetry anthology This Same Sky: Poems from around the World (p. 91). In the Introduction, Nye explains that she decided to include poems from poets born in countries other than the United States in order to share “many other vantage points” (p. xiii). She also tells us in the Notes on Contributors that Budianta is from Indonesia and has been an employee of the BBC in London (p. 189).

For Ginger, “Family Portrait” causes her to think about the quality of life and opportunities she enjoys in the United States. In her initial interpretations, she comments about having been unfamiliar with the word “coolie” and notes,

I think this poem gives personalities to the many faces of immigrants that are seen working on construction sites in America—people who have left their family behind in order to help make a better life for them.

It is sad how such a situation is so common for many families; it is even stated in the poem: “That is common, sir, common. Very common” (line 9).

In her reinterceptions, she says that the speaker’s situation reminds her of people she has worked with who immigrated to the U. S. to earn money for their families, and they speak of missing their homelands and relatives. Ginger relates the story of her reading (Chambers, 1996, p. 22) in her reflections about interpreting “Family Portrait”:

At first, the message of this poem was hard to understand. However, once I looked more closely at the words, I discovered what the voice of the poem was trying to
say. It is very common for people from other countries to have to leave their homes and their families in order for their families to live somewhat comfortable lives. My main realization of reading and analyzing this poem is how much we take for granted here in America, where many opportunities lie right at our doorstep.

Ginger had included several quotations from the poem in her initial interpretations, as well as the dictionary definition of “cooler” as a means to focus her meaning making. As she reinterprets the poem, she thinks more about the speaker’s feelings of longing and recalls people she has known with similar circumstances. I think Ginger’s comment about discovering “what the voice of the poem was trying to say” expresses that this poem gives voice to the many individuals who must be apart from their families and homes to survive economically. Her “main realization” is her response to the underlying question, “What do I think about all this?” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 124), and she gains more conscious appreciation of the quality of life she knows in the United States.

For me, “Family Portrait” conveys a powerful sense of mission and spiritual connection. The speaker opens with telling the story of being like Jojon and Salka as he names their hardships and realities. Immediately I feel his empathy for and connection with men who, like himself, must pursue employment far from home. In the second stanza, he addresses the listener formally as “sir” in a line Ginger quotes, “That is common, sir, common. Very common” (line 9). In this moment, I feel he must tell his story to this man who perhaps is not aware of the reality contract laborers endure and to let him know how pervasive this situation is. Then the tone of the poem shifts in the third stanza when the speaker uses the second person to addresses his wife when he says, “You and the children live quietly in the village” (line 18). I feel the poem becomes tender and
comforting like a lullaby, and I am moved by his spiritual connection with his family as he desires peace for them and remembrance in their prayers.

“Blood” by Naomi Shihab Nye

May selected Naomi Shihab Nye’s (2002) poem “Blood” from her collection of original poems *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (pp. 136-137). In the Introduction (written in December 2001), Nye tells us about her experiences growing up Arab American. She has lived in and visited the Middle East, and she became close to her Palestinian grandmother, who lived to be 106 years old. Nye’s hope for *19 Varieties of Gazelle* is that these poems of her life will help nourish hope for and belief in peace (p. xviii). “Blood” also appears in two of Nye’s collections of original poems for adults, *Words under the Words: Selected Poems* (1995) and *Yellow Glove* (1986).

For May, “Blood” compels her to think about the Middle East in a more personal way. In her initial interpretations, she notes that the speaker looks up to the father, but the father himself is “at a loss” to give advice. May asks,

*What classifies you as something, a person, a culture?*

She also notes the line “…headlines clot in my blood” (line 18) and the repeated phrase “true Arab.” As May reinterprets the poem, she elaborates on the speaker’s feelings of “confusion” and being “lost” as she raises other questions, such as,

*What can you do? How can you help? How should you feel?*

In her reflections, May elaborates on how this poem gives her food for thought beyond news reports. She writes,

*I have heard so many stories and have seen so many reports on the news about the Middle East and the violence that goes on there. I have thought so many things and*
questioned why; I can’t imagine what someone from that culture or background must feel. I look up to my father. I take all his advice and guidance, so I related to listening to the poet in that way and the feeling of being lost when he can’t give me the answers. I read more into the descriptions the second time around such as “dangles a toy truck” (line 19). I imagined this little boy in this mess of violence and chaos. That touched me. He says “to plead with the air” (line 29) like he has no one to help him; he is lost and is calling for answers, like a prayer.

As I read May’s reflections about news reports, I think of Nye’s statement, “We need poetry for nourishment and for noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name” (2002, p. xvi). I also think of May’s response paper about poetry in which she describes beginning to appreciate poetry as one who did not read much poetry or enjoy it as a child. One reason poetry is becoming more meaningful for her is because of the descriptive language. She writes in her response paper, “Great poems use lots of description where you can just imagine yourself in the situation or with the object being described.” For May, the speaker’s relationship with the father strikes a chord that helps her bring her own experience to interpreting the poem. The image of the truck, too, evokes a caring for this boy that moves her emotionally as she revisits the poem and looks more closely at the descriptions. May’s closing reflections about the emotions of the speaker, whom she perceives to be masculine, describe the poem’s representation of reaching out for guidance on a spiritual plane.

For me, “Blood” compassionately expresses longing for peace in the Middle East. The poem’s title refers not only to the speaker’s bloodline of heritage but also to the
metaphor May quotes in her initial interpretations: “…headlines clot in my blood” (line 18). The speaker explores and names her own identity as she relates details about what it means to be a “true Arab,” and the Palestinian boy who has lost his home presents an emotionally real example of an innocent person harmed by the violence of fighting. The father’s feeling overwhelmed by the news also helps readers who do not have Middle Eastern heritage sympathetically imagine what it might be like for him to hear news reports of violence there. For me, the speaker’s metaphorical question, “Where can the crying heart graze?” (line 31), is especially powerful as an expression of the pain and lack of solace a compassionate heart experiences when there is so much pain and loss caused by human conflict. The questions the speaker asks in “Blood,” I believe, engage people’s minds, hearts, and spirits to search for individual and collective ways to bring healing into a world with strife.

“Mary Ann Robinson, 30” by Walter Dean Myers

Madison selected Walter Dean Myers’ (2004) poem “Mary Ann Robinson, 30 Nurse, Harlem Hospital” from his collection of original poems Here in Harlem: Poems in Many Voices (p. 56). Here in Harlem has received several awards, including winner of the 2005 Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award and an honor from The Lion and the Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry. Madison’s approach to writing dialectical notebook entries is to circle and underline significant images and phrases and to write notes to the left and right of the poem. She then writes a narrative of her interpretations and a paragraph of reflections. I mention these details because in her response paper about poetry, she says she “never had a pleasant experience with poetry” going through school. She also remarks, “[teachers] should have let us respond with our
feelings and thoughts about the poem. Isn’t that what poetry is supposed to do? Evoke different thoughts and feelings?” Madison takes this awareness and crafts her own approach to the dialectical notebook to consider and express her thoughts and feelings in considerable depth. In her response to “Mary Ann Robinson,” she finds Myers’ representation of the nurse’s voice to be authentic and writes, “…he really seemed to capture the very essence, thought and emotion of an actual nurse who has experienced so much. I truly believed that this poem had been written from her point of view.”

Madison’s narrative responding to Myers’ poem relates how the authentic voice provokes thought and evokes her empathetic imagination for hospital patients and for medical professionals. She writes,

*The poem...both amazes me and bothers me simultaneously....The entire tone of the poem is that of sadness and loneliness. At first [lines 2-4 make] me think of an emergency room and the constant flow of frightened patients who are putting their lives in the hands of people they don’t even know. I have so much respect for people in the medical profession to be able to work under such pressure and emotional stress day in and day out....Myers’ choice of phrasing “…threatening to disappear beyond the edge of the universe....the night of miracles and casual dying” (lines 10-14) is very powerful and emotional for me. I experience a horrible feeling of forgotten souls—suffering alone and just waiting for the relief of death or hopefully recovery. I don’t like the phrase, “casual dying” (line14). It makes it seem like just another occurrence, something as common as taking a walk in the park. Myers’ words are very powerful.*

*The fist thing that caught my attention in this poem is the sixth line: “Yellow walls.” These two simple words have an entire line to themselves which consequently*
assigns a very powerful connotation. It gives me a feeling of an atmosphere that is very disconnected and emotionally cut off. I can imagine a cold, dingy, emotionless hospital room, bare and strange to its occupants.

The ending of the poem shares a glimpse of life and happiness....There is youth in this world living and experiencing their lives and adults going through their monotonous daily motions without a second thought, while the sick and elderly are wasting away all alone within cold, fading walls.

A constant theme in this poem is the clock. It made me really think that time flies by so quickly and every moment is precious. This poem was extremely thought provoking for me.

Madison’s interpretations include moments of synthesis (e.g., the theme of transitoriness) and analysis (e.g., responding to the phrase “casual dying”) as she focuses on moments that evoke thoughts and feelings. She does not relate any personal experiences about hospitals, but she enters the world Myers creates through his imagination and representation of the life of Mary Ann Robinson. Through observing the patterns in the poem and paying attention to her emotional responses to specific images and phrases, Madison notices contrasts of health and sickness that inspire empathetic imagination for people in hospitals, as well as a heightened awareness of the unstoppable passage of time inherent in human experiences of temporal being.

In Madison’s reflections about interpreting the poem, she shares her reflections inspired by “Mary Ann Robinson.” She writes,

This is a really emotional poem that made me stop and think about life. I realized that there are so many lonely people suffering or dying in hospitals right now, even as I
write this reflection….It made me reflect on the precious moments and even the tiny insignificant moments in my everyday life that I take for granted.

In Madison’s reflections, I see a double vision of sorts. Through her connection with the nurse in Myers’ poem, she imagines moments in hospitals concurrent with her experience engaging with the poem. Her closing reflective comment describes, I think, the sweetness of life that becomes so dear when awareness of vulnerability and mortality enters consciousness.

For me, Myers’ poem is a portrait of human vulnerability in the context a nurse’s perspective in Harlem. The imagery of eyes in the first line immediately grabs my sensory and emotional attention and draws me into the intensity of life and death situations. I notice the juxtapositions between recovery of health and loss of life that convey a humbling sense of how sometimes survival or death become matters of time and circumstance, miracles, or insuperable physical realities. Like Madison, I feel disturbed by the phrase “casual dying,” perhaps because it names so well an everyday reality that frightens me. Although the Harlem setting is not familiar to me, I have experience with hospitals as one who has visited patients. I can imagine the “not quite yellow wall” (line 23) that permeates the consciousness of Mary Ann as she and the reader observe and interpret the metaphorical and literal details of life cycles, whether full or incomplete.

“The Artist” by Ashley Bryan

Rhonda selected Ashley Bryan’s (1992) poem “The Artist” from his collection of original poems and paintings in Sing to the Sun (np), which won the 1993 Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award. Born in New York City, Bryan has lived in Europe, currently
lives in Maine, and travels widely. For Rhonda, interpreting “The Artist” is a process of going “deeper” into the poem.

In Rhonda’s response to the poem, she considers the speaker’s creativity as a means to heal pain and sadness. In her initial interpretations, she notes the passion presented in the first stanza, the idea of desiring “to keep something forever,” and an overall feeling of hope. She writes,

*I felt that [the section about transformation] was very powerful and really made me sink deeper and deeper into the idea and feeling of the poem.*

*The poem left me with a feeling of hope...the man who paints has found what gets him through the rough portions of life and gives hope for the reader that there is a lot out there to help them get from day to day.*

In her reinterpretations, she details her thought process as she absorbs the poem and its accompanying picture:

*After reading this poem over and over again, I started to see deeper into the poem. The part of the poem where the man paints things that are hurtful or difficult I began to think of things that the man must face in his life that he needs to paint to help him deal with it. Ideas of family problems and social problems really started to pop up. I started to then focus on the social problems. The author of the poem was born in New York City, but did a lot of traveling in Europe and Africa. His travels to Africa are what inspired a lot of his work. The picture that accompanies the poem is done with an African feel and it really helps to give the poem more depth. Because the author is from New York City a lot of social issues with race are probably issues that he has had to face like the man in the poem. This poem is very touching because it shows that everyone has*
problems, and the beauty is in the way each person deals with their pain and makes it from day to day.

Rhonda’s process of looking “deeper” into the poem is one of sympathetically imagining the life of the speaker and the poet. Ultimately the poem inspires her to appreciate the creativity and resourcefulness of people as they survive and recover from painful experiences in life.

For me, “The Artist” represents nourishing and expressing one’s being through creating art. I feel drawn to the comparison of the man to a child because I believe artistic imagination comes from the passion, the energy, and the heartfelt believing that children open to wonder, awe, and miracles can feel. The stanza about transforming sorrow through painting, for me, is especially powerful. I learn from this poem that to create something authentic and therefore unique—something that comes from body, mind, emotion, and spirit—is potentially transformative as a healing act of agency and an expression of hope. I love Rhonda’s interpretation, “…the beauty is in the way each person deals with their pain and makes it from day to day.” Her mention of beauty intrigues me, because I believe beauty is healing; and I recall Matthew Fox’s (1991) statement, “All works of healing are works of making beauty, and all beauty heals” (p. 49). The last two lines, “This is how he lives / This is what he does” (lines 20-21), offer a simple directness and confident rhythm about the speaker’s approach to life, his pattern of being. For him, making art and living life are inseparable, and this poem recognizes and celebrates his creative spirit and agency.
“and sometimes i hear this song in my head” by Harriet Jacobs

Hazel selected Harriet Jacobs’ poem “and sometimes i hear this song in my head,” which appears in Naomi Shihab Nye’s (1999) poetry anthology *What Have You Lost?* (pp. 26-27). Nye’s anthology, which won the 2000 Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, is a group discussion book for the course. In the Notes on the Contributors, Nye tells us Jacobs is a writer living in Los Angeles (p. 179).

Hazel, like Madison, crafts an approach to writing dialectical notebook entries that helps her engage with the poems. In her response paper about poetry, Hazel recalls being a child “who absolutely did not like poetry.” She recently discovered, though, the expressive power of writing poetry and recalls, “One evening I just sat down with some heavy thoughts on my mind and started writing….I didn’t know I was capable of writing something like this…” Hazel’s approach to writing dialectical notebook entries is to write notes on either side of a copy of the poem, and then write a response that blends narrative and poetic forms.

For Hazel, “and sometimes i hear this song in my head” evokes thoughts about music and the human spirit. In her response to Jacobs’ poem, Hazel elaborates on her notes, including “Music soothes the soul. It is a reminder of what was and what could be,” and draws upon them to represent her interpretations:

*As I was reading this poem I realized that
music is a freedom,
an expression,
a passion
that cannot be extinguished by any authority.
No one can tell you not to sing. No one can steal your voice box or erase your memory of past rhythms, songs, chants. Music soothes the soul, and provides a way of escape. For this poet discussing these enslaved people, music was a way of survival...
Music can soothe the madness*
and help rise above the strife.

Music can also be in mourning,
a sigh,
or a prayer.

In some instances the slave owners tried to enslave people to the point of jarring their music from their memory.

There is no hope,
no need for prayer,
no reason to sing.

But one last inch of freedom
is the songs they sing,
Live to,
Live by.

And that cannot be taken away.

Hazel translates and interprets the poem’s ideas and images into her own creative representation. Her metaphor of “one last inch of freedom,” for example, I think conveys the power of song to help oppressed people keep hope alive. Hazel writes in her notes, “Song is the only hope, and those voices cannot be silenced.”

For me, Jacobs’ bringing together of poetry and music in “and sometimes I hear this song in my head” is an exploration of consciousness and a celebration of solidarity. I immediately notice that the poem starts “we have always heard music” and echoes later “we always been a music / people” (lines 8-9) to emphasize a collective ancestral history of valuing music. I think of Coleman Barks, who translates and provides commentary for poetry by the Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi, who lived from 1207 to 1273. In Barks’ (2003) Preface for Rumi: The Book of Love, he writes, “Poems and music are two great mysteries of human consciousness” (p. xx). Part of that mystery, I believe, is remembering, or “finding our way back” (line 11) to that metaphorical centeredness, which I interpret to be love. I think of the ancient Andean-Amazonian idea of “returning to the heart” because “what we learn is remembered in our heart” (Vasquez, 2005, p. 10).
Hazel’s interpretation that music “is a reminder of what was and what could be” means to me that remembering or connecting with the “heartspace” (line 23) is at the center of poetry’s and music’s ability to nourish the human spirit and open spaces for creating a healthier future.

“Rock Drawings” by Nancy Wood

Jane selected Nancy Wood’s (1998) poem “Rock Drawings” from her collection of original poems Sacred Fire (p. 14). In the Preface for the book, “The Old Man’s Tale,” Wood tells the story of the spirit of the Old Man who provided the Sacred Fire to the Pueblos of New Mexico. In the 1500s when Spanish conquistadors took the Pueblos’ land, sold entire families as slaves in Mexico City, and forced other Pueblos to labor for their oppressors, it was the Old Man who “saw everything…remembered everything” and told his story (p. 3). Wood tells us he was watching again in 1680 during the Pueblos’ revolt against the Spaniards, and he “lighted the way when the Spaniards returned and began to make peace” (p. 3). Through the purification of ancient custom, the Old Man provided knowledge to selected ones such as Corn Planter, Storyteller, and Pot Maker, and “sent them into the hearts of their old villages, where they remain to the present day” (p. 3).

For Jane, interpreting “Rock Drawings” extends her perceptions about how pictures etched in stone can be meaningful and significant. In her dialectical notebook entry, Jane focuses on the layers of meaning represented in the etchings. She initially considers the qualities of messages recorded through these drawings and notes,

*The etchings were so that they could remember certain things and something that they put their hearts into and meant very much.*
Also, these pictures are to be looked at very carefully because they tell a lot about the inner thoughts and feelings of the people rather than just the outside.

They feel as though the pictures in the rocks truly represent who they are and that they keep the secrets and history of their times.

As I read Jane’s interpretations, I notice especially her emphasis on the emotions involved in these drawings as they represent the truths known by the people who created them. Jane’s comments about “the inner thoughts and feelings” as well as “the secrets and history of their times” suggest to me stories through signs as sacred, because these etchings come from hearts and minds of the people as they represent their experiences and knowledge. As Jane revisits her impressions, she thinks about American Indians being “forced off their land when immigrants came over” and views the etchings as providing “a place to keep their history alive.”

In Jane’s reflections, she tells the story about how her initial impression of the poem as informational evolved into an appreciation of the Pueblo Indians’ inner lives recorded in the pictures. She writes,

With the “Rock Drawings” poem, I originally just read and thought that it was talking about the fact that the Native Americans drew pictures in stone. I came to see that these teachings were very meaningful and were put there to share with people in the future their life and culture. Unfortunately, Native Americans were driven off their land and didn’t speak the same language, so they could not share with the new people their culture and their history. These etchings are very important and show much emotion and the inner thoughts and feelings of these people as well as many different aspects of their
culture. I never realized until this poem how important pictures etched in stone could be and how much could be learned from them.

I see in Jane’s reflections a surfacing and extending of her perceptions as she moves from a factual orientation to one concerned with inner lives and culture. Through telling her story of reading (Chambers, 1996, p. 22), Jane reflects on her experience engaging with and interpreting the poem and becomes more cognizant of her “act of consciousness” (Greene, 1978, p. 120).

For me, reading “Rock Drawings” is an experience of slowing down to accept the speaker’s invitation to “Look…carefully” (line 8). I would not have thought to make such a strong, passionate connection between rocks and stories from the heart as the speaker describes, “If we had not placed our hearts inside the rock, / we would have bled to death” (lines 3-4). As I read the second stanza, I feel as though the speaker is guiding my gaze, helping me begin to look at each image named. These images raise questions and mysteries for me as I imagine stories of creation, wisdom, and courage. Most of all, this poem stimulates my appreciation of mysteries in the ancient knowledge of a people and in poetry. I think of Naomi Shihab Nye’s (2000) remarks about poetry and mystery in her Introduction to her poetry anthology *Salting the Ocean: 100 Poems by Young Poets*:

> Poems sometimes invite a spectrum of interpretations that help extend us as readers, thinkers, and speakers. We may like a poem without understanding everything about it. People have spent way too much time trying to ‘explain’ poetry when it has always been the most intuitive, suggestive genre. Do we explain music every time we listen to it? Mystery remains part of many poems, as well it should, since it remains part of our lives no matter who or where we are. (p. xii)
While I do not know the lore of this culture as I attempt to make connections with the poem’s messages, I appreciate that I am reading something sacred and beautiful. This poem brings me into the mystery of ancient wisdom and opens my heart to wonder.

“Knoxville, Tennessee” by Nikki Giovanni

Stacy, Helen, and Emma each selected Nikki Giovanni’s poem “Knoxville, Tennessee.” This poem appears Giovanni’s (1973) collection of original poems Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People (p. 15), as well as Donald Hall’s (1999) anthology The Oxford Illustrated Book of American Children’s Poems (p. 83), which is a group discussion book for the course. For these students, Giovanni’s poem inspires making personal connections, imagining another person’s life, and appreciating place.

For Stacy, the sensual imagery of “Knoxville, Tennessee” evokes childhood memories of summer and vegetable gardening. In her initial interpretations, she notes responses such as “sunny” and “picnics on a blanket with family.” As she revisits her first responses, she details the vivid imagery she experiences:

> When reading this poem, you automatically picture summer. You feel the warmth of the sun. You find yourself revisiting memories of your past summers in your head. You hear church bells, as you run around in your bare feet. You picture yourself outside having a picnic with your family, eating food hand picked from the garden. Afterwards you taste the dripping ice-cream from the cone and then go to bed in your warm cozy covers. You feel like you are a part of the poem with the description. You feel the presence of all the things described in the poem.

There is an immediacy to Stacy’s engagement with the poem as she offers a sensual tour of her mental imagery inviting her reader to experience similar feelings and memories.
As Stacy reflects about interpreting the poem, she describes being “instantly drawn into this poem” and recalls especially her first attempt at planting a vegetable garden when she was eight years old.

For Helen, engaging with “Knoxville, Tennessee” is an experience of having a window into another person’s life. In her initial interpretations, she notes patterns in the poem, such as the list of fresh foods and descriptions of summer activities. She also observes, “The poem appears to be one big run-on sentence.” As she revisits her notes and the poem, she notices that the lack of punctuation leads her to think that pausing at the end of each line is a good way to read it. In her reflections, she relates her experience writing a dialectical notebook entry for this poem. While she does not feel the poem has a “deeper meaning” beyond the speaker’s enjoyment of summer in Knoxville, she recognizes that for her interpreting the poem is an experience of imagining the speaker’s life. She writes,

*Doing the dialectical notebook gave me the opportunity to take a look into someone else’s life. It showed me a side of Knoxville, Tennessee that only a person who has been there would know. By slowing down and really looking into the poem, I came to appreciate a town other than the one I grew up in.*

The poem’s form and Helen’s “slowing down and really looking into the poem” enable her to focus on the details that create a sense of place meaningful to the speaker. As Helen says in her response paper about poetry, reading poetry “can be a time to take a closer look at someone else’s thoughts or ideas and to really see into the eyes of a poet.” Although Giovanni’s poem does not evoke personal connections for Helen as it does for Stacy, the poem opens Helen’s appreciation for an unfamiliar town.
For Emma, who writes notes on a copy of the poem and then responds with a detailed narrative, “Knoxville, Tennessee” evokes childhood memories, as well as experiences concretizing. In her response, she writes,

_Reading “Knoxville, Tennessee” brought back some of my own memories. When Nikki Giovanni states “you can eat fresh corn” (line 3), it reminded me of my grandpa’s farm and his many fields of corn that we used to pick and eat. Then, Giovanni says “homemade ice-cream” (line 11), which reminded me of the old days when my family used to make homemade ice-cream at my grandparents’ house…_

_Giovanni’s descriptive language use allowed me to picture so many of her ideas. For instance, “go barefooted” (line 20) made my feet feel cold from the cool grass and hurt because of sticks or stones hiding in the grass. Additionally, although Giovanni never stated being warm until the end, the first lines “I always like summer/ best” made me feel like the sun was shining on me, and I could feel the rays hitting my skin all throughout the poem._

_I think “Knoxville, Tennessee” is a great poem because I related so much to it; in fact, Giovanni did not offer too many details perhaps in hopes of allowing the reader to fill in the gaps from their own life and relate to it better….because of the title, “Knoxville, Tennessee,” Giovanni offered a definite sense of place. So I was able to link the activities that were occurring to the place, giving me a better perspective._

Emma, like Stacy, experiences moments of personal connections and sensual responses to the poem’s imagery. Emma’s insight about the poet’s minimal approach to descriptive details, I think, describes how Giovanni’s use of concentrated language creates possibilities for readers to draw upon their own experiences as they make meaning.
For me, “Knoxville, Tennessee” celebrates simple pleasures in the sensuality and rhythm of summer. The line breaks cause me to slow down and think about each nourishing food and experience named. I love the feelings of abundance, warmth, and well-being through this child’s voice. The use of “you” in the next-to-last line invites a reader to feel the warmth along with the speaker, and I enjoy soaking in a sense of gratitude and appreciation of the summer garden, as well as the nourishment of community and family relationships.

**The Desert Is Theirs by Byrd Baylor**

Hillary selected Byrd Baylor’s (1975) single-poem book *The Desert Is Theirs*, which is a Caldecott Honor picture book illustrated by Peter Parnall (np). For Hillary, this poem inspires her to think about the importance of place. It also serves as a catalyst for surfacing and extending her perceptions of a desert environment.

In Hillary’s interpretations and reinterpretations, she notices several patterns that suggest meanings and connections. She writes about “how each animal fits into the desert and why they like to live there,” respect for the land, and patience. Oftentimes her initial notes contain quotations from the poem, and she responds to them as she revisits her notes. For example, Hillary initially includes the lines, “They wouldn’t leave / even for rivers / or flowers / or bending grass. / They’d miss / the sand too much. / They’d miss / the sun,” and later responds,

*In a way I can relate to this because I couldn’t imagine leaving this area of PA. I would miss the mountains and all this area has to offer. As much as I dislike the cold, I would miss not having snow.*
Hillary’s moment of personal connection reminds me of a story she tells in her response paper about helping a young relative become enthusiastic about writing poetry. She states, “All one has to do to motivate someone is to find a way to relate it to them.”

Hillary’s pedagogical idea, I think, has the potential to engage learners through emphasizing individuals’ experiences and interests. Although she is responding to a poem about the desert, she connects to the idea of loving one’s homeplace as being integral to happiness and flourishing (Noddings, 2005, p. 67).

In her reflections, Hillary shares her understandings of The Desert Is Theirs, as well as her realizations. She writes,

*This poem...discusses the highlights of the desert and the animals who live there. It discusses their love for the desert and how they wouldn’t want to leave the desert. I realized what benefits the desert may carry. I realized how beautiful the desert can be rather than a dry, hot, colorless place.*

Although she does not detail the desert’s “benefits” in her reflections, she lists “shelter, supplies, and medicine” in her notes. I am intrigued by her choice of the word “carry” because, for me, it suggests a personification of the desert as shouldering responsibility or caring. Hillary also discovers through Baylor’s poem the beauty nourished by the desert’s ecosystem.

I am drawn to Baylor’s poem because of the beauty and reverence I experience engaging with its sounds and images. The emphasis on respecting the earth shared by all flora and fauna is an important antidote to the shopping mall culture and mindset of dominating land so prevalent in the United States. I appreciate David Orr’s (1992)
description of themes of place in terms of educational practice. He writes about the 

challenge of teaching in a culture disconnected from a holistic relationship with nature:

Place is nebulous to educators because to a great extent we are a displaced 
people for whom our immediate places are no longer sources of food, water, 
livelihood, energy, materials, friends, recreation, or sacred inspiration. We are, as 
Raymond Dasmann once noted, ‘biosphere people,’ supplied with all these and 
more from places around the world that are largely unknown to us, as are those to 
which we consign our toxic and radioactive wastes, garbage, sewage, and 
industrial trash. We consume a great deal of time and energy going somewhere 
else…Our lives are lived amidst the architectural expressions of displacement: the 
shopping mall, apartment, neon strip, freeway, glass office tower, and 
homogenized development—none of which encourage much sense of rootedness, 
responsibility, and belonging. (pp. 126-127)

The drawing power of *The Desert Is Theirs*, for me, is the reverence in that “sense of 
rootedness” I feel when I slow down to imagine the desert-time moments the speaker 
describes. Planting “happier corn” and growing delicious squash, for example, by 
singing them “slow songs” makes me crave simplicity and unstructured time. Like 
Hillary, I also notice a pattern of patience, and much of the joy I feel engaging with the 
poem is imagining the abundant beauty in the desert “when the time comes / to 
celebrate.”

“**Solitude**” by Nancy Wood

Tracy Jeanne, Julia, and Donna selected Nancy Wood’s (1993) poem “Solitude” 
from her collection of original poems *Spirit Walker* (p. 51), which won the 1994 Lee 
Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award. In the Preface, Wood relates her experiences as a white 
woman coming to know the beliefs and values of the Taos Pueblo Indians. She shares 
that after years of observation, her perceptions slowly started to change, leading 
ultimately to a change in her way of life (p. 7). She writes:

What did it take to become ‘in tune’ with Indian beliefs far removed from 
my Judeo-Christian background? Learning to listen, for one thing; letting go of
old, worn-out cultural ideas, for another. Solitude was necessary if I was ever to learn anything, so I retreated to the mountains for long periods of time. (p. 7)

Wood also tells us that her teacher Red Willow Dancing would say, “Loneliness is part of the lesson” (p. 7). In varying ways, the idea of solitude draws Tracy Jeanne, Julia, and Donna to take time with this poem and reflect on its meanings.

For Tracy Jeanne, Wood’s poem is a guide. In her initial interpretations, she describes the poem as a gift for those seeking wholeness:

_This poem expresses courage, determination, and powerful spiritual faith in the unknown. It made me excited to embrace the life ahead of me...Wood’s lyrics have helped me to step back and say “why worry about something you will miss?” This author clearly has a unique wisdom and outlook on life. This poem most certainly is for anyone who wants to hear the rhythms of the world a little more clearly...I like to think of it as a rare gift to share with those who need to slow down, to listen, and to heal._

As I read Tracy Jeanne’s initial interpretations, I notice her mention of “embrace,” echoing Wood’s two opening lines, “Do not be afraid to embrace the arms / of loneliness.” To embrace, I believe, implies a choice of the heart. I notice also that she refers to the poem’s “lyrics” as a means to describe its musicality. In Tracy Jeanne’s reinterpretations, she articulates the ways this poem makes a difference in her life:

_Coming back to reflect on this poem once again, I have decided it is by far my favorite poem of all poems. It truly speaks to me in so many ways. This poem causes me to really think about what matters most in my life and in living in general. It multiculturaly embraces all walks of life. This poem has inspired me to purchase the book. I feel it will be a great way for me to reflect or even meditate after a difficult day or at the beginning of a new one....Her words express such wisdom and clarity, each_
stanza of poetic description weaves all intricate connections of the fabric of life! That is how I see this poem as a guide to appreciating, living, and loving life! I am extremely grateful of the emotions Wood has shared in her writings. Wood’s words bring me back to “spiritual reality.”

What strikes me most about Tracy Jeanne’s reinterpretations is her heartfelt connection with this poem and the book. I love the way she describes her hope that it will help her move through life with an increased conscious awareness of “spiritual reality.”

For Julia, “Solitude” also stands out as a particularly meaningful and inspiring poem. In her initial interpretations, she describes the poem as offering a hopefulness about the unknown:

*Being at ease with oneself and to live in the here and now is definitely a central theme in “Solitude.” Wood gives the reader a gleam of hope in the unknown.  

Lines that cause this interpretation are “Learn to be at home with yourself / without a hand to hold” (lines 6-7) or “Do not be afraid to embrace the arms / of loneliness” (lines 1-2). These lines truly capture the poem’s message and give the reader a warm, comforted feeling from the initial reading of the poem.  

This poem caused me to recollect myself and to realize that a short poem can really put things into perspective. I was overcome with such an easy, peaceful feeling. I thought it so fitting that it comes from a book titled *Spirit Walker*. Wood’s poems, such as “Solitude,” really have an eerie, haunting, yet spirit-filled meaning and feeling.  

Julia’s interpretations blend her thoughts and emotions as she engages with the poem and experiences being “overcome with such an easy, peaceful feeling.” And the meaning, she points out, is “spirit-filled” as she describes a somewhat strange or mysterious quality to
the tone. As Julia revisits the poem and her notes, she focuses on the term “solitude” and shares how this poem offers insights into her own way of living:

When I kept rereading this inspirational poem, I found it to be quite ironic that the poem had such a solemn title, but that the poem had such a comforting, hopeful way about it. The impression it leaves on the reader is so different than the initial reading of the title.

I felt that out of all the poems I have chosen, I connected with this one the most. We live in an extremely fast-paced world in which no one can be alone or be with themselves. I love the fact that a short, powerful poem can make me realize that when I’m not on instant messenger or on my cell phone it is okay!! Being alone is okay!

Both Julia and Tracy Jeanne interpret the poem as one that inspires thoughtfulness and hope about choosing patterns of living that nourish a sense of well-being.

For Donna, “Solitude” offers a refreshing perspective on finding inner peace. In her initial interpretations, she writes,

Initially, I just love the comfortable tone of “Solitude.” It creates a peace within its readers. I initially want to break from my hectic schedule. I am constantly stressed out, so this was nice to read. I love the way Nancy Wood leaves terms like “Happiness” and “Love” separate from the rest of the sentence below. It gives more emphasis to the actual word. You can pause and really comprehend the soothing tone.

Donna’s description of pausing to focus on words naming concepts, for me, exemplifies the poem’s meditative quality that invites slowing down and connecting with the “spiritual reality” Tracy Jeanne mentions. Donna says that the poem “creates a peace within its readers” as it offers an alternative to living according to a fast-paced, stressful
schedule. In her reinterpretations, Donna considers a larger contemporary cultural context in which busy lives with little space for being alone with oneself is the norm:

*After analyzing “Solitude” I realize how perfect it is for our time period. For a time period that is constantly distracting and interacting, a poem like this counteracts it. We all need to take a step back from the rat race and enjoy being in isolation. Nowadays being alone is perceived as wrong or depressing rather than peaceful. Maybe this is why there are so many emotional and psychological problems evident in the world today.*

As I read Donna’s reinterpretations, I cannot help but think of the proliferation of cellular phones changing social interactions and behaviors. She refers to “Solitude” as a poem that “counteracts” the distractions and expectations of a technology oriented culture. And, like Tracy Jeanne and Julia, Donna connects with the poem as an authentic voice offering inspirational truths.

For me, “Solitude” shapes my mind and nourishes my spirit. I believe it is a poem about acquiring “the quiet heart” (Wood, 1993, p. 8) that is a realization of the interconnectedness I hope someday to understand. The speaker’s experience of “isolation / with only the stars for friends” (lines 8-9) paints a profound moment of aloneness on the earth. I am intrigued that isolation can bring such deep, comforting interconnectedness. I recall Wood’s statement in the Preface for *Spirit Walker* about her experiences internalizing the ways of the Taos Pueblo Indians: “my consciousness expanded” (p. 7). The image of the circle in “the circle of your dreams” (line 19) makes me think of the cycle of life, and I interpret “Wisdom” (line 18) completing this circle as a metaphor for expanded consciousness. “Solitude,” I believe, is about holistic growth through a willingness to slow down and listen to the meanings one’s heart finds.
Engaging with Multicultural Poetry: “Powers of Critical Consciousness”

As the students and I engage with these multicultural poems as interpreters writing dialectically, we participate in a learning environment supportive of the development of critical consciousness. Ann Berthoff (1990) writes about the “powers of critical consciousness” when keeping interpretation central: “Writing dialectically encourages, it requires, conscientization, the critical consciousness of oneself as meaning maker” (p. 124). In our writings responding to the poems and telling stories of our readings as we make meaning (Chambers, 1996, p. 22), moments of connection, questioning, struggle, and imagination are integral to our experiences of conscientization as readers with agency.

Moments of connection illuminate and energize interpretations. As Brittany says in her response paper, “Just as poets write their work based on their personal beliefs and feelings, readers use their own personal experiences to make sense of it.” Following John Dewey (1938/1997), I believe there is an “organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 25). Personal connections—such as Brittany’s envisioning herself “as a little girl at summer camp” when reading Amado Nervo’s “Solidarity”; Rhonda’s thinking about her mother as she interprets Janet Wong’s “Joyce’s Beauty Salon”; Stacy’s and Emma’s childhood memories evoked by Nikki Giovanni’s “Knoxville, Tennessee”; Tracy Jeanne’s heartfelt connection with Nancy Wood’s “Solitude” as a poem that helps her return to “spiritual reality”; and Julia’s connecting with “Solitude” the most of the poems she selected because she appreciates its affirmation of taking time to be alone—are all moments of being cognizant about “an act of consciousness” (Greene, 1978, p. 120) in engaging with a multicultural poem.
Questioning engages the curiosity and thought necessary for making meaning and developing critical consciousness. As the students and I respond to the diverse voices and ambiguities of multicultural poetry asking ourselves, “What do I think about all this?” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 124), we “keep the questions open and alive” (Greene, 1978, p. 175). Questions, I believe, are the seeds of curiosity, and our questions help us learn and have agency as readers. It is through our questions that we experience reading as “a hermeneutic enterprise” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 108), discover insights and mysteries, and stimulate imagination. In my response to Nancy Wood’s “Rock Drawings,” for example, I recognize that I do not know lore informing the images the speaker names, and my questions about them lead me to embrace mysteries and imagine stories of creation, wisdom, and courage. And Scarlett, for example, consciously chooses to empathize with the speaker of Luis Alberto Ambroggio’s “Learning English,” by asking, “What if I were to go to another country and become a minority and not speak the native language? How would I feel if I was asked to put a different name to my feelings and thoughts?” Scarlett’s questions help guide her empathetic imagination engaging with Ambroggio’s poem. Honoring our questions, I believe, is integral to conscientization, learning, the growth of critical consciousness, and agency.

Teaching and learning about multicultural poetry as art inseparable from politics necessarily involves struggle (Hade, 1997). Virginia, for example, has difficulties interpreting Grace Nichols’ “Out of Africa” because she does not understand some of the words and images. Nevertheless, she has an intuitive feeling about the poem that her reinterpretations affirm when she considers it in terms of the African diaspora. Veronica writes about Ed Vega’s “Translating Grandfather’s House” and realizes that her life as a
U. S. citizen gives her freedoms she takes as givens that make it difficult to “begin to fathom what it would be like to live under oppression.” And Scarlett, for example, struggles to make meaning for Amado Nervo’s “Solidarity” as “he does not tell a story, only what he feels.” She searches her experience, though, to try to connect with the poem: “I tried to think of times when I felt all of those things. I guess it is a hard thing to do because I was never oppressed.” I am reminded of Cecilia Espinosa and Karen Moore’s (2000) statement:

We want our students to be awakened by poetry in such a way that their thoughts and feelings are given body and shape by its power….As teachers we know that the struggle starts with us, that children won’t take poetry as something indispensable unless we do. (pp. 75-76)

To own that interpreting a poem is difficult because the experience informing it is different or profoundly different from one’s own is a beginning that opens spaces for surfacing and extending perceptions. Such struggles create possibilities for developing social and environmental awareness, as well as critical consciousness.

Inspiring imagination, I believe, is one of multicultural poetry’s greatest benefits in shaping people’s minds and nourishing the spirit. In Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School, Georgia Heard (1999) shares that she uses a quote from Einstein as a reminder to live life with curiosity, passion, and a heart kept open: “Imagination is more important than knowledge” (quoted in Heard, 1999, p. 2).

For me, imagination requires a willingness to be open to new perspectives and to take “cognitive risks” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 100). I think of Donna’s response paper as she discusses poetry’s ambiguous nature, “It encourages students to view life through a different perspective. Thus it’s the ultimate challenge for all learners.” Dialectical writing supports stimulating the imagination. I recall Ann Berthoff’s (1990) assertion
that dialectical writing “helps reclaim imagination” through representing meanings and representing them anew:

The dialectical notebook—the double entry journal—encourages those habits of mind most needed by writers: the ability to look and look again; to question answers and to formulate new questions which will lead to new answers; to tolerate ambiguity; to take cognitive risks, if you like the concept Jeanne Bamberger deploys; to know one’s knowledge, as Coleridge put it. Above all, this kind of notebook enables students to discover the power of language itself and thereby the power of their own minds. Keeping a dialectical notebook helps reclaim imagination, which is so often debased by those who think of it as a fantasy generator, without realizing that it is the forming power of mind, ‘the prime agent of all human perception.’ (pp. 100-101)

Interpretations are expressions of human consciousness, and revisiting interpretations deepens understandings and allows spaces for new questions and insights that extend perceptions and arouse imagination. Kathleen’s and Scarlett’s empathetic imagining of the speaker’s thoughts and feelings in Luis Alberto Ambrogetti’s “Learning English”; Veronica’s thoughts about what it might be like to experience being bicultural as she interprets Johanna Vega’s “A Puerto Rican Girl’s Sentimental Education”; Madison’s empathetic thoughts about patients and medical professionals as she responds to Walter Dean Myers’ “Mary Ann Robinson, 30”; Rhonda’s sympathetic imagining evoked by Ashley Bryan’s “The Artist”; Helen’s looking “into someone else’s life” through interpreting Nikki Giovanni’s “Knoxville, Tennessee”—all of these encounters with multicultural poetry are stories of imaginations engaged by literary art. Multicultural poetry’s possibilities of inspiring imagination, human connections, and fresh ways of visioning honor our abilities to interpret with our whole beings.
Chapter 6

Learning and Teaching for the Future

I believe education is inherently concerned with the future, or as John Dewey (1938/1997) says, an “educator…is concerned to have a long look ahead” (p. 75). My hope is that if multicultural poetry is central to a literature curriculum that engages future teachers’ thinking, values their emotions and experiences, stimulates their imaginations, and expands their sociocultural contexts, they will take this knowledge and consciousness with them into their future classrooms. In this chapter, I relate reflections from two students’ dialectical notebook entries, one about Georgia Douglas Johnson’s “Common Dust,” and the other about Nancy Wood’s “Our Children.” I include these two students’ reflections among the conclusions in this story of my teaching and learning about multicultural poetry because both discuss multicultural poems with an orientation toward the future. In this chapter I also revisit my journey of growth and compassion and share my original poem “Transformations” as a representation of my teaching, learning, and growing. The final section presents concluding reflections about my experiences as a teacher and researcher hoping to change the cycle of multicultural poetry in education from being marginalized to being recognized and included as a necessity in shaping the minds and nourishing the spirits of young people.

“Common Dust” by Georgia Douglas Johnson

Peter wrote about “Common Dust” by Georgia Douglas Johnson, who lived from 1886 to 1966. This poem appears in a collection of Johnson’s poetry, plays, short stories, and other writings titled The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson, with an

For Peter, interpreting “Common Dust” raises issues of politics and agency. In his initial interpretations, he notes, “She tries to make you question the way things are.” As he revisits the poem, he describes it as “a good way to treat the subject of inequality.” His reflections further develop his response to this poem, as well as multicultural poetry in general:

...The entire poem was pretty much a question that no one could really answer. Rhetorical questions are powerful ways to make a point, and with such a clear cut question, she makes her point very clear.

...She is trying to say that we all started as equals, and will one day return to the same state, so isn’t it unnatural for us to be divided now?

With all the multicultural poetry I have selected, politics of race and power play into all of them. This shows where the priorities of their work lie. More so than in traditional white poetry, this poetry was writing to effect change. As a child I believed that everything was right with the world, but I later realized that I believed that since everything was right with me. This kind of poetry shows the world that things do need changing, and we should do something to change them.

I find Peter’s reflections about “Common Dust” and other multicultural poems he has read to be heartening as he so openly discusses his observations about politics in poetry and the potential for multicultural poetry to raise social awareness and spark change for social justice.
Multicultural poetry offers opportunities to broaden horizons and experience literary expressions of humanity by people from diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts. As I read Peter’s thoughts about multicultural poetry as “writing to effect change,” I recall Wayne’s readings of images and signs of loss of innocence and war’s dehumanizing loss of life in Eugenio Alberto Cano Correa’s poem “My Memories of the Nicaraguan Revolution,” as well as Wayne’s reflections about the “sad and powerful feeling” of Cano Correa’s poem that makes it “a great example as to why reading multicultural poems is good for people”; Rhonda’s metaphorical naming of the poems in Eve Merriam’s *The Inner City Mother Goose* as “a gateway for people to realize the issues that many people face every day”; Alice’s reflections responding to Eve Merriam’s “Little Jack Horner” that minority children must have literature to which they can relate; and Kathleen’s description of poems by Eve Merriam and Janet Wong as “eye-opening.”

Multicultural poetry is essential to a literature curriculum for a democratic, pluralistic society as it presents diverse individual voices, and as it creates possibilities for readers to surface and extend perceptions, as well as experience empathetic imagination.

“*Our Children*” by Nancy Wood

Donna, who selected Nancy Wood’s poem “Solitude” for her dialectical notebook, wrote about Wood’s (1993) “Our Children” from *Spirit Walker: Poems* (p. 19). For Donna, the poem initially offers a feeling of tranquility, and she remarks, “The lack of punctuation keeps it smooth to the reader’s tongue. The poem moves like a spirit…” As she revisits the poem, she becomes forward looking and thinks of herself as a mother and a teacher: “I will eventually have to watch my own children and students blossom into their own identity. I will have to ‘let go’ to both as well.”
In Donna’s reflections, she elaborates on her reinterpretations as she considers her thoughts and feelings responding to the poem. She writes:

While I read “Our Children,” I was overflowing with emotions. I felt proud because I know I will be both a mother and a teacher, so this had direct relation to my life. I was saddened by the end because I’m going to have to let go eventually. It’s just a sad process, although it’s incredibly worth it. I love the feelings of excitement I am overwhelmed with as I read “Our Children.” It justifies that I’m in the right major, as well as a destined mother. I love this poem so much that I’m going to make sure it’s hanging in my classroom someday.

For me, Donna’s heartfelt response is vibrant with energy and agency. The poem resonates for her personally and professionally, and she wants to make “Our Children” a part of her future students’ classroom.

**Transformations: A Journey of Growth and Compassion Revisited**

Something I love deeply about teaching and researching is the growth I experience through my work with future teachers. As I reflect on ways I have been changing through my learning and teaching, I believe that I continue to grow in my own maturing authenticity, and I feel that multicultural poetry expands my thinking in a way that engages me holistically and honors my intuitive mind as it broadens my heart and nourishes my spirit. I wrote the following poem as a way to represent my journey of growth and compassion at this moment in my teaching and learning:
Transformations

a letting go,
a deepening trust
in you
in me
that if we keep looking,
listening, feeling,
like a tender leaf opens, reaches,
believes
we will have the light and water
and spirit
to grow
to be
to hope

—January 2007

Concluding Reflections

As author and educator Derrick Jensen (2004) reminds us, Albert Einstein remarked that “the significant problems of the world cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness at which they were created” (p. 326). In order for education to help people make a positive difference in the world, educators need to remember and honor what Einstein calls “the intuitive mind,” and poetry is a genre well suited to exercise the intuitive mind through its connotative expression, emotive power, and nourishment for the senses and spirit. I embrace Paulo Freire’s (1998b) and Louise Rosenblatt’s (1980) recognition that cognition and the emotional self are connected, and multicultural poetry—with its diverse possibilities for encouraging aesthetic readings and raising social awareness—is, as Donald Graves (1992) would say, “for thinking and feeling” (p. 171). From the standpoint of curriculum, multicultural poetry—with its diverse individual voices, its distilled representations inviting aesthetic responses, and the inherent ambiguities of poetry itself—has the potential to be transformative as it offers
possibilities for human connection, imagination, and compassion. Georgia Heard (1998) describes “the transformational power of poetry” as “the power to feed the heart and senses” (p. xvi). It is through this kind of nourishment that conscious awareness can grow and compassion can flourish.

A focus on interpretation is vital to a pedagogy for shaping the mind and nourishing the spirit. Such a focus emphasizes a reader’s agency, and reading with an understanding of language in term of signs as social and cultural constructions is foundational in reading literature and the world critically and consciously as makers of meaning (Berthoff, 1990; Hade, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994). As Daniel Hade (1997) asserts,

If we view reading not as comprehending existing messages, but interpreting certain signs with which we have a relationship that includes experience, culture and value, we can see readers as becoming more powerful interpreters of their reading and of their world. (p. 240)

In terms of making meaning and developing critical consciousness, it is empowering to approach interpretation with a means for making thinking visible that helps students realize “the power of their own minds” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 100). Revisiting, reforming, and deepening interpretations through dialectical writing, for example, facilitates engagements with multicultural poetry that develop awareness of bringing one’s own consciousness to making meaning (Berthoff, 1990; Greene 1978). In the students’ and my writings responding to the poems and telling stories of our readings (Chambers 1996, p. 22), we make meaning, and we exercise our “powers of critical consciousness” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 124) as we interpret with our senses, thoughts, and feelings. We also encourage intuition, which Nel Noddings and Paul Shore (1984) describe as being “in a deep and poetic sense, the eyes, ears, and fingers of the soul” (p. 202).
In conjunction with a focus on interpretation that recognizes a reader’s “act of consciousness” (Greene, 1978, p. 120) is the necessity for recognizing that art and politics are inseparable (Hade, 1997; Langer, 1953; Taxel, 1991). To discuss literary qualities removed from a context of social and political issues is to operate as though teaching is “neutral,” which has the potential to maintain a dominant culture status quo not seeking to effect changes for social and environmental justice. To teach and learn about multicultural poetry as art inseparable from politics necessarily involves struggle (Hade, 1997), but such struggle creates possibilities for developing social and environmental awareness as interpreters with consciencization and agency.

A major benefit of teaching and learning about multicultural poetry emphasizing interpretation and the development of critical consciousness is the potential to stimulate the imagination. I love Matthew Fox’s (1991) statement, “Awakening the imagination enlarges the heart and stretches it” (p. 73), and I believe that experiences of empathetic imagination create opportunities for compassion. Louise Rosenblatt’s (1938/1995) description of active engagement with literature outlines ways developing imagination can extend a reader’s perceptions:

When there is active participation in literature—the reader living through, reflecting on, and criticizing his own responses to the text—there will be many kinds of benefits…[including] the development of the imagination: the ability to escape from the limitations of time and place and environment, the capacity to envisage alternatives in ways of life and in moral and social choices, the sensitivity to thought and feeling and needs of other personalities. (p. 276)

Engaging with multicultural poetry as interpreters writing dialectically and therefore with consciencization (Berthoff, 1990, p. 124) is a powerful means to stimulate or “reclaim imagination” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 100) in shaping the mind and nourishing the spirit. Poet and writer Georgia Heard (1999) finds guidance in Albert Einstein’s wisdom:
“Imagination is more important that knowledge” (quoted in Heard, 1999, p. 2). In the students’ and my responses to multicultural poetry, I think especially of our moments of empathetic imagination as we remain open to new perspectives and take “cognitive risks” (Berthoff, 1990, p. 100). I believe empathetic imagination is vital to the development of compassion that can help people work toward solutions for “the significant problems of the world” (Einstein quoted in Jensen, 2004, p. 326).

Multicultural poetry has the potential to contribute to students’ growth through cross-curricular connections. Incorporating poetry into curricula can be, to borrow Paulo Freire’s (1998b) terms, a means to “dare so as never to dichotomize cognition and emotion” (p. 3). While I believe multicultural poetry could provide enriching cross-curricular connections for a variety of curricula, it is particularly well suited for connections with social studies. In my work with students, a pattern emerged as they revisited uses of rhyme and rhythm in contexts of poetry and verse as voices for social justice. Cindy, for example, interpreted Eloise Greenfield’s (1978) poem “Harriet Tubman” and experienced a transformation of her intellectual appreciation of Harriet Tubman’s role in history to an empathetic response of imagining Tubman’s emotions. Cindy writes, “This poem can open up into a deeper and more detailed history lesson about slavery.” Catherine, who interpreted J. Patrick Lewis’ (2000) “Harriet Tubman Speaks,” responds to signs and imagery that inspire in her a sympathetic connection with Lewis’ distilled imaginative representation of Tubman’s story. Reading and interpreting multicultural poetry can make stories such as Tubman’s more memorable than facts through opportunities “for thinking and feeling” (Graves, 1992, p. 171), and something
else happens as well—a slowing down occurs. Donald Graves (1992) writes, “The pace changes when you introduce poetry into social studies….Poetry takes time” (p. 160).

The slowing down of looking and looking again (Berthoff, 1981, p. 46) to engage with multicultural poetry is at the heart of a holistic pedagogy for developing critical consciousness. Moments of connection, questioning, struggle, and imagination interpreting multicultural poetry require time and focused attention to come into being. Looking and looking again—being conscious of our own thinking and reflections (Berthoff, 1981, 1990; Greene, 1978) as social beings—is the process of developing critical consciousness that surfaces and extends perceptions, and opens spaces for curiosity, insights, imagination, growth, and compassion to inspire individual and collective efforts for a more humane, peaceful, and just future.
Bibliography


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