Creative Connections: Using Black Cultural Resources to Challenge Constructions of Gender in Life and in Texts

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Rather than being a barrier to literacy achievement, black female language practices, knowledges and understandings can be and have been used advantageously to help black females in their literacy experiences in schools (Richardson, 2002, 698).

Abstract

Recent research indicates that in many college English classrooms, faculties continue to rely on New Critical approaches to teaching literature that focus analysis on the formal qualities of a text (Addington, 2001; Barrow, 2009; Bialostosky, 2006). Teachers using this method rarely invite students to bring their life experiences into their interactions with texts and each other. This leads us to wonder how much is lost when the cultural knowledge students bring into the classroom is rejected because of teaching approaches that do not recognize, as reading reception theorists such as Bleich (1975), Fish (1980), and Rosenblatt (1995) have, that reading is a profoundly social act. In contrast to formal institutions of learning, adult reading groups provide greater opportunities to explore how readers bring their cultural backgrounds to bear on their interaction with texts. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how the members of a Black woman book club drew from shared cultural and linguistic resources to make intertextual connections between a mystery novel, *Buying Time* (Young, 2009), which details the travails of a disbarred lawyer, who is married to a materialistic "gold digging" woman, and iconic Rhythm and Blues (R&B) songs. The following research question guides this study: What cultural and linguistic resources did the participants draw upon during the book discussion and how did this enhance their understanding of the gender issues raised in the text?

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study draws from Intertextuality as a social construction, reading response theory, Critical Race Theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis.

At its most elemental level Intertextuality refers to the connections that can be made among different texts. Building on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, Julia Kristeva (1986), who first coined the term Intertextuality, posited it as "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (p. 37). Since then the meanings applied to Intertextuality have proliferated. In my readings, I have found three basic ways in which Intertextuality is used. The ***first*** focuses on the text to describe how texts borrow from each other in terms of words, concepts, and genres. In this rendering of Intertextuality, it is the author who consciously or unconsciously makes connections. The ***second*** locates Intertextuality in the reader who makes connections between one text and another in order to make meaning of the text. This "cognitive" approach describes a process in which the reader "… generates intertextual links among the textual resources to fit a particular context, borrowing, adapting, appropriating, and transforming texts in her mind…." (Hartman, 2004, p. 353)

For this study, I draw from the work of Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993), who posit a ***third*** approach, one that views Intertextuality as a social construction focused on the reader, not in

isolation, but involved in interactions with other readers and texts. For Bloome and Egan-Robertson the mere juxtaposition of texts is insufficient to characterize these interactions as intertextual. They present two major criteria: First "A juxtaposition must be proposed, be interactionally recognized, be acknowledged, and have social significance" (p. 308). Secondly, a consideration of what Bloome and Egan–Robertson call "entitlement rights" determine the conditions under which Intertextuality can occur.

> Entitlement rights are not distributed uniformly or equitably. Differences in entitlement rights may reflect in situ cultural ideologies for defining social relationships, assigning social status and social identities, defining low- and high-achieving students, and ascribing gender, class, and ethnicity/race. (p. 312)

A social construction perspective of Intertextuality provides a valuable lens in which to view the interactions that occurred during the book club session under study, particularly when in taking up the themes of the text, the participants engaged in a type of reading that in another socio-cultural context, such as the school settings described above, might not have been possible.

An additional perspective on the book discussion is provided by reading response theory to help explain how the participants responded to the text during the book discussion. Rosenblatt (1938) first conceptualized the notion of a reader's transaction with literature by theorizing that readers responded aesthetically to literature and that it was their preconceptions that brought the text to life. Other scholars, such as Iser (1980) and Probst (1988) built on Rosenblatt's work, to explore how a reader's subjectivities radically affect different readers' interpretations of the same texts. These theorists provided invaluable insights into a reader's individual responses. In terms of this study, they help us see how an aesthetic stance allows readers to identify with characters and to make connections with texts that can lead them to arrive at new understandings of themselves. However, the ideas expounded provided less illumination into how the social context in which the reading occurs affects the reader's response. Bleich (1975) and Fish (1980) attempted to address this issue by introducing the concept of the interpretive community. They hypothesized that readers are guided by the discourse of their communities. This shift in emphasis from the individual reader to a recognition of the importance of the social context in which reading occurs presents possibilities for understanding how different communities might impact the readers' interpretations of the text.

While Fish (1980) and Bleich (1975) did not investigate the role of race in a reader's reception of texts, feminist scholars working in the field of reader response have developed a body of scholarship examining the role of gender in a reader's interpretation of texts (Fetterly, 1978; Schweickart & Flynn, 2004). In contrast, there remains relatively little work on how Black women's race and gender might intersect to impact their reading of texts in ways that might differ from both Black men and White women.

In response to the gaps presented by reading response theory (which one?), I incorporated a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective. CRT's analysis of race as a construct and its investigation into how gender and other identities intersect (Bell, 1993; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Crenshaw, 2004; De Cuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1995) is partially based on Postmodernist conceptions of identity, which challenge the notion of a unitary identity, whether gender, racial, or otherwise. A Postmodernist perspective views identities as fragmented (Best & Kellner, 1997); thus, what it means to be Black or female entails divergent interpretations, and the meanings are constantly shifting.

A major tenant of CRT is that race is a social construct that provides a justification for the inequitable allocation of wealth and power. African-American identity can thus be seen as arising not from some essential biological attribute but from the fact that it is imposed for the purposes of exploitation. Yet, it is also an identity that is claimed (Omi & Winant, 1994). The imposition of a fictive category and the history that has accompanied it, that of slavery, segregation, and discrimination, have led to a historical perspective that incorporates cultural and social ways of being, leading many African Americans, such as the participants in this study, to lay claim to a cultural legacy that binds them into a community.

Finally, this study is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to illuminate our understanding of the wider societal implications embedded in talk (Fairclough, 1995). By exploring "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (Van Dijk, 2003, p. 364), a CDA approach helped me explore how talk was used by the participants, during the discussion of *Buying Time,* to resist sexist viewpoints in the wider society. In particular, I am influenced by the perspective of key African-American female discourse analysts (Foster, 1995; Majors, 2004; Smitherman, (1997, 2000). Smitherman (2000) whose analysis of Black-discourse style while not specified as CDA, investigates the social and cultural contexts that inform African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) and draws our attention to the "rhetorical style and communication patterns" that typify Black English (p. 15). Smitherman (1997) argues that "black talk is… simultaneously a mechanism for learning about life and the world and a vehicle for achieving group approval and recognition (p. 80). Additionally, Foster (1995) and Majors (2004) have produced important work that explores the ways in which African-American women challenge dominant ideologies by deliberately utilizing a Black-discourse style to construct meaning and negotiate identity.

Methodology and site

The current study was developed from a qualitative dissertation case study based on a year of participant observation, field notes, and transcripts from audio-recorded book club sessions. The book club is a chapter of a book club organization called Go On Girl! (GOG). During the time that I was researching the book club (20011-2012), it met once a month on Saturday afternoons. The books read were selected by GOG's Book Committee with each chapter of the organization reading the same book in the same month. During the year I conducted the research, the book club meetings, which mostly took place in the participants' homes, tended to last between 4 and 5 hours, with members rotating hosting duties.

GOG was founded in 1991 in New York City by three female colleagues who worked in the same establishment. Their informal discussions during work about the books they were reading led to a desire to continue the conversations they were having on a more formalized basis. GOG expanded after1992, when others seeking to join the original group were encouraged to create their own chapters in order to keep the groups to a manageable size. GOG experienced a boost in membership in 1995 after an article featured in the September issue of *Essence* magazine, a lifestyle publication targeted to black women, led to over 300 women writing to the organization in order to gain information about becoming members. Today GOG has a website (www.goongirl.org) that provides extensive information on the organization, including its events, reading list, governance, and an email contact for members of the press and those who wish to become members. GOG became incorporated into a non-profit organization in 1995 and currently has over 300 members in 30 chapters in cities across the country.

There is no limit to how many chapters can exist in a city or state, and the chapter that is the subject of this study is one of eight chapters. Eight of the 13 participants in this study were between the ages of 45 and 54. Five were between the ages of 55 and 64. Two were retired. All worked or had worked in white-collar jobs. Twelve had degrees. Professions ranged from education, medicine, publishing, media, public relations, and human resources.

Data analysis

The excerpted discussion was analyzed utilizing a Constant Comparative Analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which the discussion was coded for themes related to the participants' attitudes towards race and gender. In addition, I conducted an interpretive reading strategies analysis predicated on Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith's (1995) coding scheme to interpret and to code the transcript. This was achieved by categorizing and coding different types of reading interactions, such as summarizing, evaluating the text, or making intertextual connections. Finally, I conducted a discourse analysis (1996; Smitherman, 1977, 2000) as a methodological tool to investigate how the participants used the discussion to explore gender issues.

In the following excerpt the participants had been discussing the mystery novel, *Buying Time* by Pamela Young (2009). It is set in Los Angeles, where Waverly, a disbarred lawyer, resorts to a legally and morally questionable career brokering life insurance deals, for which he receives large fees. A focus of attention in this excerpt is Waverly's wife, a woman the participants characterized as a "gold digger", whose major concern was maintaining a lifestyle her husband could no longer afford.

Table 1:

1 **June**: I used- there was this song when I first got out school, "Ain't Nothing Going On
2 But the Rent." I felt, I was so offended by this song, and I am like, we are not. Know
3 what I know now, I would have been one gold digger.
(Group Laughter)
4 June: I came up in the 60's and 70's I knew that we are in this together. We are all
5 equal.
(Group Laughter)
6 June: Chile please, no! I would've been one gold digger.
(Group laughter)
7 Speaker: But don't you think you are better because=
8 June: =No!
(Group Laughter)
9 Carrie: I went out with this guy one summer and he was like, I could take you to
10 ((inaudible)) I was like, you know, I was like.
11 Speaker: Take you where?
12 Carrie: All these things he could buy me, that he could get me, this that and the
13 other. Yeah, but I'm like hmmh. I could've got him to pay a bill.
(Group Laughter)
14 Carrie: Pay a bill. You could like give me some money to go take a class, you know,
15 because now I am realizing the inequities, you know. When I was young it was just
16 like, oh I'm going to get a job and make this, yeah. Men still get paid more than
17 women.
18 Speaker: Yes.
19 June: My mother really kind of, she said, you know, she really kind of pushed into,
20 you don't let them do anything for-. In her mind, like, if a man starts doing something
21 for you, he wants something. He expects that you are part of him or he could start
22 treating you ways that you don't want to be treated.
23 Bambi: My mother used to always say "Listen to this song now." and it would be
24 Candi Staton
(Group Laughter)
25 Bambi: "Young Hearts Run Free." She'd say, "You listnin?"
(Group Laughter)
26 Bambi: You listnin?
27 Speaker: (singing) Don't be a fool when love really don't love you.
(Group Laughter)
28 Carrie: (singing)
29 Bambi: You Listnin?

In line 1, June makes an intertextual reference by evoking the memory of a popular R&B song, *Ain't Nothing Going on But the Ren*t, that was a hit for singer Gwen Guthrie in 1986. June tells the women that at the time, she was offended by the song. Its message of materialism and espousal of relationships between men and women based on financial transactions ran counter to the ethos of equality between men and women that she encountered and supported in the seventies. However, in Lines 2-3, she suggests that she feels she was naïve, and if she had the wisdom then that she has now, she would, like the woman in the song, base her relationships on a man's ability to take care of her financially. When she says, "Know what I know now, I would've been one gold digger," the women respond with laughter, and June maintains her position, even when one of the women in line 7 seems to begin to ask her whether she didn't think she had benefited from her original stance that men and women should treat each other as equals.

This theme is taken up by Carrie, who speaks about a boyfriend she had when she was younger, who would offer to buy her material goods. Carrie reappraises her refusal and wonders in lines 13-17 whether she would have been better off allowing the man to buy her the things she now recognizes as important, for example, paying a bill or her fees for a class. She notes that there are still pay inequities that put women at a disadvantage. June then tells the group in lines 19-22 that her mother had raised her not to take anything from a man because she would be beholden to him, which would result in abusive treatment. In line 23, a second intertextual reference is made by Bambi when she brings up the name of another song that was popular in the 1970s, *Young Hearts Run Free*, (1976) by Candi Staton, which advises young women not to let their hearts rule their heads. The suggestion from the song is that women should be wise and not allow themselves to get entangled in exploitative relationships because of notions of romantic love.

Findings

The message the women seem to be conveying in this section of the discussion reveals a tension between the concept of the savvy woman symbolized by the "gold digger" and the naïve self-reflected in Carrie's recollections of her youth. At first glance, this message might appear contradictory. June's advocacy of male/female relationships based on financial gain, along with Carrie's regret for not benefiting financially from previous relationships, is countered by June herself in lines 19-22 when she tells the group without a hint of irony that her mother had warned her not to take anything from a man in order to avoid becoming dependent and under his control.

As I participated in the discussion (I did not speak, but I certainly joined in the laughter and later transcribed it) I struggled to find words to characterize June's participation. Instinctively, I knew she was conveying a certain truth through humour. However, when I turned to the literature on discourse in African-American communities, I could find no description of the discourse feature she had utilized. A few years later, I was discussing the excerpt with an African-American friend and told her how frustrating it was not to be able to have a theoretical name for the 'riffing' (talking through stream-of-consciousness thinking) June had been engaged in. My friend smiled and said, "That's exactly what she was doing. She was riffing!"

Those familiar with jazz know that a riff is a repeated musical phrase that anchors and dominates a song. A second definition offered by the Merriam Webster Dictionary calls it "A rapid energetic often improvised verbal outpouring; especially one that is part of a comic performance" (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/riff.) In this context, it is possible to see June's interactions as a riff that humorously conveyed the tensions, contradictions, and alternate perspectives encapsulated by her's and the participants' perception of the "gold digger." To gain an understanding of the exchanges that occurred during this part of the book discussion, it is important to recognize the performative function of such a communication style and how it functions as a "teaching and socializing force" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 79).

It is no accident that the means by which the women communicated messages about gender were channeled through these iconic R&B songs introduced in line 1 by June and Line 23 by Bambi in her reference to the song *Young Hearts Run Free*. In fact, as Smitherman (2000) has noted, many African-American proverbs have become reincarnated as the title of songs, such as *Still Waters Run Deep*, by Aretha Franklin and *Smiling Faces Sometimes Tell Lies*, by Undisputed Truth. Smitherman has further pointed out that such proverbs (such as?- to become victims of romantic hearts?) are used by Black mothers to pass on important lessons to their children (p.218). Bambi's mother can thus be seen as using a song to pass on crucial information to her daughter about male/female relationships, and Bambi, in turn, is reminding the women of this important lesson.

Discussion

It is important to note that in referencing R&B songs the participants were drawing from the Blues, an African- American musical form that has a tradition of hard-living blues women, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Through their songs, these women gave voice to the desires and values

that many African-American women place on strength and independence in women (Beauboeuf-lafontant, 2009; Collins, 2000; McDonald, 2007). Being blues women, their interpretation of independence would likely not be to everyone's taste. A strong woman in the blues women's terms might be a woman who would use and abuse a man instead of allowing him to use her. Thus, while the participants may not have been expressing literal support for the "gold digger" mentality, it is likely that they share a refusal, along with the blues women, to become the victims of romantic love, as Bambi's reference to *Young Hearts Run Free* demonstrates.

In recognition of this, Angela Davis (1998) noted:

> The blues women openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love relationships. Refusing, in the blues tradition of raw realism, to romanticize romantic relationships, they instead exposed the stereotype and explored the contradictions of these relationships. By so doing, they redefined women's "place." They formed and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings (p. 41).

Of course, another explanation for why June took on the persona of the "gold digger" through her riff, could be that she was simply having fun. This interpretation is supported by reading response theory, (which ones?) which views such affective responses as the reader seeking escape by living vicariously through a character (Appleyard, 1991; Bleich, 1975; Holland, 1975; Radway, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1995). To do so does not require complete identification on the part of the reader, but her transaction with the text allows her to go beyond her own experiences to enter into the lives of a character that triggers the sorts of insights that allow her to empathize (Rosenblatt, 1995). In fact, this perspective and the one afforded by the discourse analysis I conducted are not mutually exclusive but rather work in tandem to explain how and why the women reacted as they did in this part of the discussion.

In drawing upon their shared cultural and linguistic resources, the participants engaged in a transaction with the text that allowed them to go beyond their own experiences to enter into the lives of an "unsympathetic" female character (Rosenblatt, 1995). Following the criteria established by Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) discussed earlier, the women's intertextual engagement was recognized, acknowledged, authorized, and was socially significant. This is clearly demonstrated by the laugh of recognition and of encouragement that accompanied June's evocation of *Ain't Nothing Going on But the Rent* and the fact that it inspired Carrie to continue the theme through her personal revelation and Bambi to make a second intertextual reference through her evocation of *Young Hearts Run Free*. In addition, by employing intertextual references the participants were "constructing texts as cultural worlds" (Galda & Beach, 2001, p. 67). In effect, they went beyond interpreting the actions of the characters they encountered, to framing these actions within the existing ideologies in which the characters and their actions occurred. This is demonstrated by the ways in which the participants framed their discussion of the "gold digger" in *Buying Time* in terms that contextualized her behaviour as part of a continuing system of gender inequality.

Concluding thoughts

This study's findings build on literacy research (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994) that suggests that students in formal institutions of learning would benefit from pedagogical approaches that provide them with spaces in which their cultural knowledge is valorized and where they are able to construct meaning in ways that are empowering. Several African-American scholars such as Michele Foster (2002) and Carol Lee (1993) have pointed to the important role that African-American discourse styles can play in the classroom. Foster's study of African-American teachers, women whose class status mirrors those of the women in this study, describes how they have successfully utilized African-American call and response to communicate and engage, with African-American students in K-12 and higher education. Furthermore, Carol Lee (1993) has produced

important work that has influenced teacher training by creating pedagogy that recognizes the significant role that African-American discourse can play in allowing African-American secondary students entry points into texts. Yet African-American discourse styles continue to be undervalued. Referring to African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), Majors (2004) states, "AAVE along with other language varieties that are not dominant in world academies, is demonized as incapable of propelling intellectual reasoning" (p. 184). In such a situation, the question as to what extent schools can become places that authorize students to bring their culture to bear on their understandings of texts, as the women in this study did, has yet to be answered.

Table 2: Transcription conventions.

Transcription Key Symbols	Explanation
( )	Vocal noises
!	Animated tone
?	Rising tone/question
[ ]	Overlapping Speech
__	Underline for stressed words
=	No pause between words
(( ))	Researcher's comment

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Appendix A

Ain't Nothing Going On But The Rent by Gwen Guthrie (Abreviated Version)

Bill collectors at my door
What can you do for me
No romance without finance
No romance without finance

Boy, nothin' in life is free
That's why I'm askin' you what can you do for me
I've got responsibilities
So I'm lookin' for a man whose got money in his hands

'Cause nothin' from nothin' leaves nothin'
You got to have somethin' if you wanna be with me
Oh, life is too serious, love's too mysterious
A fly girl like me needs security

'Cause ain't nothin' goin' on but the rent
You got to have a J-O-B if you wanna be with me
Ain't nothin' goin' on but the rent
You got to have a J-O-B if you wanna be with me

No romance without finance
I said no romance without finance

Boy, you're silky ways are sweet
But you're only wastin' time if your pockets are empty
I've got lots of love to give
But I will have to avoid you if you're unemployed

'Cause nothin' from nothin' leaves nothin'
You got to have somethin' if you wanna be with me
'Cause life is too serious, love's too mysterious
A fly girl like me needs security

'Cause ain't nothin' goin' on but the rent
You got to have a J-O-B if you wanna be with me
Ain't nothin' goin' on but the rent
You got to have a J-O-B if you wanna be with me

No romance without finance
I said no romance without finance
No romance without finance
I said no romance without finance

Oh, you look good to me

Your silky words are sweet
But your pockets sure look empty

Ain't nothin' goin' on but the rent
I'm lookin' for a man to put some money in my hands

Appendix B

Young Hearts Run Free by Candi Staton

What's the sense in sharing
This one and only life
Endin' up just another lost and lonely wife
You'll count up the years
And they will be filled with tears
Love only breaks up, to start over again
You'll get the babies, but you won't have your man
While he is busy loving every woman that he can, uh-huh
Say I'm gonna leave a hundred times a day
It's easier said than done
When you just can't break away
(when you just can't break away)

[Chorus:]
Oh, young hearts run free
Never be hung up
Hung up like my man and me
My man and me
Ooooh, young hearts, to yourself be true
Don't be no fool when love really don't love you
Don't love you

It's high time now just one crack at life
Who wants to live in, in trouble and strife
My mind must be free
To learn all I can about me, uh-hmm

I'm gonna love me, for the rest of my days
Encourage the babies every time they say
Self preservation is what's really going on today
Say I'm gonna turn loose a thousand times a day
But how can I turn loose
When I just can't break away
(when I just can't break away)

Oh, young hearts run free
They'll never be hung up
Hung up like my man and me
You and me
Ooooh, young hearts, to yourself be true
Don't be no fool when love really don't love you
Don't love you