

Unit Three

Intersections of Race, Class and Gender

Anchor Texts for Unit Three:

Andersen, Margaret L., and Patricia Hill Collins. "Why Race, Class, and Gender Still Matter." *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013. 1-15. Print.

hooks, bell. "Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression." *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Cambridge, MA: South End, 2000. 18-33. Print.

Suggested Literary Texts and Films for this Unit:

Toni Cade Bambara, "The Lesson"

Aphra Behn, excerpts from *Oroonoko*

Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

Lucille Clifton, "My Dream About Being White"

Billy Elliot (2000, director: Stephen Daldry)

Rita Dove, "Daystar"

W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Langston Hughes, "I, Too"

Harriet Jacobs, excerpts from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Flannery O'Connor, "The Artificial Nigger"

Arthur Miller, "Death of a Salesman"

William Shakespeare, *Othello*

Alice Walker, "Everyday Use"

Phyllis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" and "To S. M. A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works"

Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Major Writing Assignment:

Research Paper: Taking concepts and texts from the bibliography that merit further attention, students will write an 8-10 page paper that extends those ideas to include material from the third unit (on the intersection of race, class and gender). This paper must include extensive close reading of a text through a critical/theoretical frame and must make a clear, thesis-focused argument. All sources discussed/cited in the final paper must follow MLA style citation.

Sample Daily Response Prompts:

Anderson and Collins (with Flannery O'Connor)

Assignment: Read Flannery O'Connor, "The Artificial Nigger" and "Why Race, Class and Gender Still Matter" by Andersen and Collins and **respond to the following:** take note of a few revealing passages in Anderson and Collins and then, picking the most interesting, use it as a lens through which to read a passage from O'Connor. What do you see through this lens? Why does it matter?

hooks

Assignment: Read excerpts from bell hooks and listen to *Invincible's* "Locusts" (read lyrics [here](#)). Take three passages from hooks and compare the ideas in those passages to specific lyrics from *Invincible*. **Bring your laptops (and earbuds) to class.**

In-Class Lesson Plan Ideas

Anderson and Collins

Writing Concern: Recognizing cognitive dissonance and writing from it.

Lecture: Race and class. Race, racism and its systemic nature.

In-class: With a partner, discuss the connections between the two texts that you made, and have them come up with three questions for you to respond to.

Discussion: Reading race and racism through class in O'Connor. What questions came up? Give us the text/context and questions.

hooks

Lecture: Hip Hop and the mix of high and low culture.

In-class: With a partner, pick a short section (of 20 seconds or less) from *Invincible's* "Locusts" video and respond (on [the class Google Doc](#)) to the following: How does the video work visually with the words to make an argument? How does the argument comment on some concept of race, class and/or gender that we have discussed in class? How does this section of "Locust" connect to part of hooks' piece? Can you make a conceptual connection, as well? (i.e. "They are both talking about _____.")

Sample Major Writing Assignment:

Research Paper

(2000-3000 words)

Taking whatever concepts and texts from Assignment Three that are worth further attention, students will write a final paper that conveys a revised and extended version of those ideas. The end product will be a 6-10 page paper. The student must focus their attention on interpreting a particular poetic or fictional text from class. Thus, there will be discussion of theory and ideas, but the emphasis will be on reading a literary text closely through a particular theoretical lens. All sources discussed/cited in the final paper must be listed at the end in a "Works Cited" page and all citations must be done in MLA style. Creativity, originality of thought, and invigorating style are encouraged, but students should take note that a significant part of the grade on this project will be on the reasoning behind the argument put forward. This paper will count as the final and will thus be turned in during exam time finals week. Students will also post (as our final, required, reading response) a 2-3 page reflection on how the major projects for this class trace your own personal journey through social class and literature.

Sample Student Work

**ETS 181 Research Paper
Student A**

Class and Gender Restrictions in *I Stand Here Ironing*

Syracuse University

ETS 181 Class and Literary Texts

Professor Conrey

May 6, 2015

Class and Gender Restrictions in *I Stand Here Ironing*

Every established society has imposed a set of ideals for both men and women. Gender roles may vary across cultures, but expectations and distinctions in behavior and activities are reinforced from birth through social norms. In the United States, women have historically been expected to be the main caregiver of the family, bearing the responsibility of all domestic and household work. This social norm is embedded into the U.S economic system because historic corporate claims of non-responsibility for household maintenance severed the connection between the paid market work and unpaid domestic work (Acker p.3). Gender divisions in labor not only devalued women's work, it also justified low pay for women, and keeping them in part-time positions, thus limiting their opportunity to climb the economic ladder. In the short story *I Stand Here Ironing*, Tillie Olsen exemplifies how the rooted patterns and practices of subordinating women in society inhibits the ability of a poor working mother to fully meet the needs of her daughter, thus constraining the development of her daughter, limiting her life chances and establishing a cycle of poverty. Patterns and practices of subordination and exclusion in the workplace, and the societal expectations to raise a family, have hindered a women's ability to meet the needs of their family, causing unremitting consequences.

The narrator acknowledges her shortfalls as a mother for Emily, but she also addresses the dismal circumstances she has been placed in as a single mother. The narrator states that she was a nineteen year-old mother in the height of the depression, received little government support, and the father wasn't around to help. She was responsible for raising a child, while also attempting to earn a living wage, which the circumstances didn't support. Despite the increased number of women in the work force gender roles within the home didn't change, " changes in women's roles have not led to greater gender equality, but merely

to women having to organize their time between more activities,” (Peake p.1). This was challenging for the mother in this story, “When she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or looked for work,” (Olsen p.292). When Emily was two years old, the narrator sent her to a nursery school, which the mother initially states she didn’t know was a “parking place for children.” Later, the mother admits that deep down she knew, but it that it didn’t make a difference, “It was the only place there was. It was the only way we could be together, the only way I could hold a job,” (Olsen p.293). A poorly run day care was all the circumstances provided for the mother. It was easier to deny and ignore the problems than accepting the fact that as poor women, she couldn’t change the situation and provide Emily with a better form of educational development.

The mother received low pay and few work opportunities due to the structure of the economic system. Women were expected to be housewives, and employers were able to justify lower-pay and lower positions by questioning their ability to commit to the work when they also had to balance the work at home. The limited work opportunities consistently limited the mother’s ability to fully meet the needs of her child. The mother relocates on not receiving enough money, and eventually having to send Emily to stay with relatives, or otherwise constantly moving and leaving Emily with unaffectionate caregivers.

The mother is laden with excessive responsibility that also affected her ability to provide the attention and emotional development for Emily. As the first child, Emily suffered the most from the social conditions her mother was in, born into a state of crisis where her mother had little work, little money and no help. The mother was too desperate trying to make ends meet to pay attention to Emily, “The old man living in the back once said in his gentle way: ‘you should smile at Emily more when you look at her.’ What was in

my face when I looked at her?" (Olsen p. 293). The mother states that with her other children, she remembered to smile at them, but it was too late for Emily. The mother didn't have the luxury to slow down and pay attention to Emily. When Emily was a child, the mother would leave her home alone, and would rarely go to her when she needed affection after waking from a nightmare (Olsen p. 294). She didn't have time to deal with a child throwing tantrums that are common in children. The mother's demands for Emily, and lack of outward appreciation and love have probably contributed to the various issues that the young woman now endures, such as low achievement, low self-esteem, and distant composure. The fact that the mother couldn't find consistent jobs, and that she also had to raise child, hindered her ability to provide the care and attention necessary for her child's development.

The narrator discreetly reveals how social restrictions on women gaining class standing hinders the development of their children, and limits the child's life chances. The low class of the mother limited Emily's life chances by forcing Emily to handle more responsibilities, the inequalities of the educational system, and the lack of funds. Because the mother needed to work, Emily was forced to take on household responsibilities, "I was working, there were four smaller ones now, and there was not time for her. She had to help be a mother, and housekeeper and shopper," (Olsen p. 296). Emily had to put caring for family before her studies, which quickly limited her time to do homework and stay ahead in school. Emily's class situation didn't provide her the luxury to focus on her educational development. Furthermore the nature of U.S society limited the mother's knowledge and ability to support Emily's development, by limiting the knowledge the mother could provide. According to Acker, capitalism relies on the subordination of women to the household, where white men, unburdened by the demands of caring for a household, could earn wealth,

which women, as wives and daughters, benefited indirectly from (Acker p.2). While this system allowed for white men to be economically successful, it didn't support or enable women to be providers and supporters which has had detrimental consequences, "An uneducated woman trained to dependence with no resources in herself, must make a failure of any position in life," (Stanton p.3). The mother, doesn't intentionally ignore or Emily's development, she simply wasn't aware the impact it would have as an inexperienced mother. Emily was labeled as an over conscientious "slow learner", was always behind and absent too often. The mother admitted she let her be absent, because she was already home, because she wasn't working anyway. By keeping her from a learning environment, and also demanding Emily to take on household responsibilities, which kept her from her studies, it was inevitable that Emily would fall behind in school.

The mother's class standing also further limits Emily's academic achievement simply because of the nature of the educational system. The mother states that in school Emily was, "not glib or quick in a world where glibness and quickness were easily confused with ability to learn," (Olsen p.295). The educational system is structured to benefit and work for upper and middle class children and families, "educators expect her (the mother), to take on a pattern of concerted cultivation where she actively monitors and intervenes in her child's schooling," (Lareau p.547). According to this study, the education system in the U.S requires parents to have the knowledge and skills that encourage the development of their child. Lower class, and low-educated mothers don't have the time or knowledge to provide this commitment, resulting in lower academic achievement for lower-class children.

Finally, the development of Emily's knowledge and skills were limited by the mother's ability to provide the financial support. Emily had a talent for comedic performing, she even won first place in a school show. However the mother didn't rejoice at

this achievement, “ Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity,” (Olsen p.297). Emily had a talent, but it would remain imprisoned and not utilized, and the world will never hear of her talents because that would cost money. The mother not only didn’t have the money to fund the development of Emily’s talent, she also didn’t have the connections and time that a higher class standing would have provided her, the mother even asked herself “but without money or knowing how, what does one do?” (Olsen 297). In this way, the mother’s low-class standing restricted the opportunity for Emily to develop her talent, and succeed.

Emily is a reflection of the narrator, representing the continuing legacy of poverty and lack of opportunity that plaques low-class women attempting to earn a living and raise a family. Gender and class restrictions limited the mother’s ability to provide Emily with the attention and educational development necessary to move up the economic ladder. Emily is nineteen years old, the same age her mother was she had her, and both of them face great and similar challenges. The narrator was facing single mother-hood during the great depression, unprepared, and Emily is similarly entering adulthood unprepared and dependent. The first line of the narrative suggests that the person speaking to Emily’s mother is attempting to help Emily through her current situation. Both characters lives could have been different if the mother had received support when she needed it. The narrator addresses her personal shortfalls as a mother, “ She was a child of anxious, not proud love...I was a young mother, a distracted mother. My wisdom came too late,” (d). However, she doesn’t hesitate to place blame on the circumstances, where her personal resources were limited and could only go so far. The mother realizes e her actions are responsible for some of Emily’s troubles, but also knows that as a single mother, she had limited options, “ We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth...She has much to her and

probably little will come of it. She is a child off her age, of depression, of war, of fear,” (298). Class and gender restrictions prevented the mother from giving Emily educational development that would have provided more opportunities for her. Therefore, the class and gender restrictions that mother encountered are passed down to Emily, whose knowledge and talents similarly remain underdeveloped and restricted in practice. The story ends with the mother wishing that Emily will someday believe that is more than a dress “helpless before the iron.” The mother hopes whomever she is speaking to will help Emily to transcend her mistakes and limitations as a poor single mother, rather than submit to a similar life of poverty, fear and dependence.

Tillie Olsen’s short story *I Stand Here Ironing* reveals the challenges, fears and grim realities that poor women face in society. Through the words of a young poor mother, Olsen illustrates the restrictions gender has on economic opportunity, and the impact class and gender restrictions have on a child’s opportunity to be self-sufficient, thus contributing to a cycle of subordination and poverty. Gender restrictions in the work place forced the mother into part-time, low-waged jobs that restricted her ability to provide Emily with proper daycare, and eventually forcing her to send Emily away when she wasn’t earning enough. Balancing labor work and domestic work prevented the mother from providing emotional support and attention to Emily as a child. Class restrictions further hindered Emily’s knowledge and skills development by restricting the time she could spend on schoolwork due to house responsibilities, and restricting the connections and financial support needed to develop her talents. Emily and her mother’s short-falls showed how gender and class inequalities limit the ability of a woman to rise above the circumstances they are born in, forcing them to forever be dependent on either a man or the state for support. Historic patterns of segregation continue to recreate gender and racial inequalities because

employers continue to select workers based on gender. These practices have weakened a woman's position in the market, forcing them into part-time and unskilled jobs, "activities that reinforce the ideology of domesticity and that can serve to reinforce rather than undermine traditional divisions of labor within the family," (Peake p.1). Olsen sensitively portrays the challenges gender and class restrictions have on single mothers, and reveals that gender and class inequality does affect the future opportunities a child has to transcend the circumstances they are born into.

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Major Assignment 3

ETS 181

4/18/16

Society as a whole has its own class structures, with its textbook pyramids of different social classes from the elite to the working class. What gets less attention is the class structure that exists within the individual classes, or what could even be considered a sort of sub-culture. A particular sub-culture to pay attention to is the female population. When watching *The Help*, it is fairly clear that there is a sub-culture in Jackson, Mississippi that revolves around the lives of the women and children. In the movie all the main characters are women; men in the movie make very few, brief appearances, and play no major role in the film. Because of this you get to see clearly the way that the women in the film interact with each other, especially between the different social classes of women. For this argument I'd like to focus particularly on the relationship between the white high class women in their clique of the social elite, and the working class black women who are their maids.

This film takes place in the 1960's which is historically a key time period for women's equality and for the civil rights movement. Within this subculture of women in this town, you see a critical time for the rights of the women as an entire subculture, and within this subculture the rights of black women, who are at the bottom of all social totem poles are black, women, and a part of the working class. Bell Hooks has written about this very conflict, in *Where We Stand: Class Matters* in her chapter *Feminism and Class Power*. What Bell Hooks' idea that I'd like to focus on is about the continued oppression of the lower and working class women by the upper class women as they gain social equality with their male counterparts, and then leave the rest of

the women in other classes to fend for themselves. I'd particularly like to focus on Skeeter, a 23-year-old, white, educated, upper class woman, and the relationship she has with the working class black maids that work for the upper class women of Jackson.

In the film the main character, Skeeter, faces a great deal of pressure from the housewives of Jackson, her mother, and her significant other to follow a certain path that they all believe is acceptable. In the 1960's, the typical life that women lived involved getting married in her early twenties and starting a family, then dedicating her life to tending to the home, the children, and her husband. Women ended up spending on average more hours per week tending to domestic affairs than the average men spent at a full time job. (Tavaana) Skeeter seems to be the only one out of the women that she is friends with, if you can call it friends that finished college. Skeeter is often viewed as an outcast by other women in the film, but in the film she is actually referred to by Jolene, one of the housewives, as "Long-Haul Skeeter", and says she didn't think Skeeter would ever leave Ole Miss, to which Skeeter reminds her it takes four years to actually graduate. (00:10:30)

At another point in the film, Skeeter is on a double date that Hilly, yet another housewife, set up for them to go on. Her date asks her what she does with her time, and she tells him about the domestic maintenance column that she writes for *The Jackson Journal*, explaining that it is a stepping stone on her path to becoming a writer. Her date, who hadn't been much of a charmer before this point in the date either, suggests that she is just writing the column on housekeeping as a part of a devious plan to become an expert on housekeeping and land the perfect husband. He even throws in the line, "Isn't that what all you girls from Ole Miss major in ... Professional husband hunting?". (01:03:00) While Skeeter's date was wrong about assuming Skeeter wasn't

trying to be a serious writer but trying to ‘land the perfect husband’, he wasn’t far off from the truth about most of the other women in Jackson.

Back to the conversation between “Long-Haul Skeeter” and Jolene, when looking at how men perceive women in Jackson, Mississippi through Skeeter’s date’s assumptions, you can gather that most women in this time and place really do just go to college to find husbands, and then drop out. This leads many of them to become housewives, and that’s what is considered normal. This then makes Skeeter an outcast for going to the full four years of college and trying to get a serious job as a writer. Skeeter is an outcast in her group of women in Jackson, but also by pursuing a real job after college as a woman, she is also an outcast in her field.

During the 1960’s, which is when *The Help* is based off of, women were not welcome in the workforce in almost all fields. Women who worked during this time period were mostly employed as teachers, nurses, or secretaries; all very clerical positions. Skeeter is a bright, driven, and educated woman, but the best job that she was able to get out of college was writing an anonymous column in a small paper writing about housekeeping. In the only scene where you see the office for The Jackson Journal, the only other woman that you see in the office is the secretary. The rest of the employees, including the head of the newspaper, were men. The two women who worked for the journal were the cleaning column writer, and the secretary, so in this sense Skeeter is also an outcast where she works. The irony in that being that she is an outcast among the other women because she has an education and a job, but she is also an outcast in her profession because she is a woman. No matter what situation Skeeter is in, she seems to be the outcast in the group.

When people find out that Skeeter is secretly writing her first major piece on the lives and experiences of black maids in her town, trying to raise awareness of the injustices done to them, she is socially exiled for that as well. At a social event, Hilly confronts Skeeter in private after finding that she is reading articles and proposed legislation for equal rights to blacks. In Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960's it's frowned upon very harshly to basically not be flat out racist. Hilly warns Skeeter that "believe it or not, there are real racists in this town" and she would be in serious trouble if people knew that she was taking any interest in civil rights movements (01:13:00). Similarly, Skeeter's boyfriend Stuart broke up with Skeeter once the book came out and she told him that she was the anonymous author. Stuart said that she was 'selfish' for 'stirring up trouble' when 'things around here are fine' (01:58:00).

While it could be interpreted as Skeeter helping the working class black maids get justice and using her book as a way to help out the civil rights movement at a first glance, Skeeter's book is actually more about her than it is about the maids. First of all, Skeeter wants to become a serious writer, which is difficult enough for men to become a successful in, and Skeeter already has the disadvantage of being a woman in a time period where women were so discouraged to be a part of the workforce in general. Skeeter is obviously in a position where she needs to make moves in her career, big moves that are strategic and that will help her advance. When Skeeter is on the phone with her publisher, they talk about how the civil rights movement is really starting to pick up, and is getting a lot of attention. At the end of their conversation, the publisher tells her that the only way that this will get published is if Skeeter gets more maids, and if she writes it and writes it fast, "before this whole civil rights thing blows over" (01:07:00). For Skeeter, this book is a really great move for her career as a writer, so her intentions are called into question. Is

Skeeter writing this book as a civil rights activist, or is she doing it as a new writer looking for a way to make a name for herself in the field?

While Skeeter might not have hurtful intentions, this book is clearly more beneficial for Skeeter than it is for the maids that are putting their jobs and their lives on the line to help Skeeter on her road to success. Skeeter on the other hand, got her first book published by exploiting the tales of these maids, and got enough attention from the book that she got a job offer from Harper and Row in New York as a writer. What Skeeter wanted was to break gender discrimination in the work place by obtaining a job as a writer, and to be a successful writer; and she got what she wanted. Now Skeeter was a working woman in the 1960's, and a working woman with power in her field, instead of just a teacher or receptionist like most working women were in this time period. The maids however didn't reap the same benefits from the book as Skeeter, in fact some of them encountered quite drastic negative consequences for helping Skeeter.

One of the most tragic cases of Skeeters damage to the maids is from Abileen, the first maid to help Skeeter, and who was arguably the only reason Skeeter was able to write the book at all. Abileen was a maid for one of the women in Hilly's clique of housewives that follow her around and do as she says. Hilly knew from a detail in the book that the stories were about Jackson, Mississippi and that one of her former maids was part of the group of maids that helped Skeeter write the book. After that she was able to connect it back to Abileen as one of the other conspirators for the book, and knew that she could get back at Abileen through her friend Elizabeth, that was the woman Abileen worked for. Hilly lied and said that Abileen had stolen some silver from a set of silverware that she let Elizabeth borrow. Hilly fires Abileen, and tells

her that she is going to call the cops and report the alleged robbery. Elizabeth went along with it in order to please Hilly, and when Hilly was alone with Abileen, she told her "I can't send you to jail for what you wrote, but I can send you for being a thief". Not only will Abileen be arrested and put in jail for helping Skeeter write the book, but even if she gets out of jail, or doesn't go, with an allegation of theft against her matched with Hilly's hatred towards Abileen, Abileen will never be able to get a job in Jackson again. So as Skeeter moves on with her life as a successful female author in New York City, Abileen and the other maids are stuck with the aftermath of the book in Jackson.

As you can see, when you look at the storyline through this lens it seems more like Skeeter is exploiting the civil rights movement and the lives and tales told by these maids to further her own career, with little to no worries about how this effects the maids. As far as Skeeter seems to be concerned, she went from being a female aspiring artist working a belittling job and treated with little seriousness about her potential as a writer, to being a published successful author within a year or so of graduating from Ole Miss. Now Skeeter has a good job and is working towards the feminist movement of equal rights, which at this time in history was predominantly based on gender discrimination in the workforce. As a female respected author she is moving towards being part of the workforce and being able to provide for herself, which is a personal level approach towards equal right as men. Her gains are large for herself, but still as far as the maids that helped her get to where she is goes, Skeeter is doing no good for them, and has left them with no help out of the awful situation that they are in, and that she has profited from exploiting.

Once you are able to think about the seriousness of the ramifications that Skeeters actions have on the maids, and the way that she handles their struggle once she has gotten what she needs from them, then you are able to see Skeeter in the way that Bell Hooks suggests is how class relates to gender. Bell Hooks states that “It had not been politically correct, when feminist movement began, to exploit another woman ... to tend your children and clean your house so that you might become “liberated” and work outside the home. As the movement progressed and women gained greater class power, these practices became acceptable.” Behold, exactly what the housewives and upper class women did to the working class women in the film. Skeeter exploited the stories of maids, Hilly has her maid to take care of the domestic life while she focuses on networking and writing her sanitation initiative, Skeeters mother even fires a maid for disrupting a dinner celebrating her appointment of the Daughters of America State Regent. While these women were climbing ladders and becoming successful, the maids that represent a large part, if not all, of the working class women were forced to work long hours, for unfair wages.

The oppression that the upper class women put on the working class women is in some ways, the upper class women’s way of reasserting their dominance and their superiority over the maids. If the working class women were able to gain the same access to jobs and social class as the upper class women were, then the upper class women would have to compete to hold their class standing. In reality, the working class women are hard, reliable workers that would be grateful to hold any of the positions that the upper class women are able to hold, and with equal rights and equal access to education and opportunities, the working class women would easily out compete the upper class women. That would be of course, if the existing social structure didn’t exist. Since it does however, the upper class white women with class power are able to keep their inferior working class sisters oppressed.

In this way, Skeeter actually is hurting the maids who helped her write the book, while they are lifting her up in the feminist movement. While Skeeter may not be hiring maids to take care of her non-existent children, she does live with her mother who has several colored domestic staff members working for her, and she is socially stratifying the maids even further. The exploitation of the stories that these women share with Skeeter aggravates all the white women, who are the employers of the working class. Because the maids shared their stories and spoke negatively about these women, many of them lose their jobs or face resistance in return. If the maids didn't talk about the issue, it would have no chance at getting resolved, but since they do talk about it they lose their jobs, and the upper class women hire maids that will tolerate the bad treatment and oppression. Either way, the issue doesn't get far off the ground, and the women who helped Skeeter are worse off now than when they started.

In actuality, the maids told very good detailed descriptions of the encounters that they faced as working class maids for upper class women, and Skeeter's writing probably had less to do with the popularity of the book than the actual content of the book did. These maids could've written the book on their own, got all the money from sales and quit their jobs to write about their experiences. It was the 1960's and the civil rights movement was really starting to pick up, so these women could've hopped on the bandwagon like Skeeter did and they could've made a better life for themselves. Instead Skeeter comes in and asks to write it herself, because she knows that her career would benefit from it, and she makes the working class black women even more outcasts than they were to start with.

What seemed like an act of selfless activism actually is more an act of keeping the working class oppressed so that the upper class can fully reap the benefits of feminist

movements. This goes along with the theory of Bell Hooks feminism and the idea that in order for women to have successful lives outside the home, they must keep working class women in the household to tend to their families and other domestic affairs. The film accurately represents the ideas of feminism in the 1960's and really calls into question the underlying intentions of many women who claim to support feminism.

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Professor Sean Conrey

ETS 181

April 18th, 2016

The Foxfire Book; Students Breaking Societal Expectations

“Hog dressing; log cabin building; mountain crafts and foods; planting by the signs; snake lore, hunting tales, faith healing; moonshining, and other affairs of plain living” The cover of *The Foxfire Book* by Eliot Wigginton’s high school students uses these words as its descriptor. At first glance it gives its reader a very specific impression; this book is not for the wealthy. In his introduction, Wigginton allows his audience the knowledge of the story behind what led him to point his students in the direction of creating a magazine such as *The Foxfire Book*. After graduating from Cornell with a degree in English and a masters in teaching, he made his way down to Georgia to enlighten those he considered to be less than he. His venture was proven in vain when eventually his class’ tactics in tomfoolery brought him to the realization that he was no better at teaching than they were at learning and maybe they needed to find some kind of middle ground. “I am not sure what the magic formula is or whether I have it pegged yet, but it involves a chemistry that allows us to believe we may have worth after all.” (Wigginton 10) Wigginton gave his students the opportunity to succeed in a way they never could before; they now, using nothing but their own lives and resources, had a story to tell that made them feel important and thus set the trajectory for their impending achievement despite whatever class or rank in society they originally had.

“The contents of this book need little introduction; they stand on their own as helpful instructions and enjoyable reading. But what is not immediately apparent is that the material

here was collected and put together almost entirely by high school students. And that makes the book a little special – for me at least, since they were kids I was supposed to be teaching.”

(Wigginton 9) *The Foxfire Book* begins with an introduction from its creator, Eliot Wigginton.

Wigginton explains that in 1966 he graduated from Cornell with a degree in English and a masters in teaching and set out to impart wisdom on the high school students of Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School in Georgia, right smack in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains. After coming to the sad realization that his students had no interest in learning, especially from him, Wigginton sought out other methods to light the fire of passion for English that he had always felt. “English, in its simplest definition, is communication – reaching out and touching people with words, sounds, and visual images.” (Wigginton 13) Would he do it by reminding them he was their superior? A force to be reckoned with? Wigginton himself did not seem to know and only through hindsight thanks God that it was with a kinder and more creative method that he opened doors of opportunity for his students. “It frightens me to think how close I came to making another stupid mistake. First, I had bored them unmercifully. Now I was about to impose a welcome punishment. Two weeks out of that class would have been more pleasure than pain.” (Wigginton 10)

There is a managerial tactic used, even today, to implore anyone’s employees to work that much harder; always tell them what they are doing correctly before explaining or berating them for doing something wrong. “Someone says, ‘You’ve done well,’ and we hunger to make that happen again and again.” (Wigginton 10) Slamming these kids with an iron fist would not work. It was obvious to Wigginton, as it should have been, that they could deal with someone giving them a bad grade or even paddling them. When he finally understood that what these kids needed more than anything was not a stern talking to, but was someone who believed in them

and let them know they were smart and worthy, Wigginton's students finally proved the potential he knew they had all along even if they did not always believe that themselves.

"It's the same old story. The answer to student boredom and restlessness (manifested in everything from paper airplanes to dope) maybe – just maybe – is not stricter penalties, innumerable suspensions, and bathroom monitors. How many schools (mine included) have dealt with those students that still have fire and spirit, *not* by channeling that fire in constructive, creative directions, but by pouring water on the very flames that could make them great? And it's not *necessarily* that the rules are wrong. It's the arrogant way we tend to enforce them. Until we can *inspire* rather than babysit, we're in big trouble."

(Wigginton 14)

From the moment Wigginton suggested they "throw away the text and start a magazine" (Wigginton 10), his students were hooked. The whole project spiraled from something the kids did in class into a way for their lives to flourish in all sorts of directions. Conversations with family members became stories for the magazine and closer bonds between relatives and peers alike. "So they went home and talked – really talked – to their own relatives, some of them for the first time. From those conversations came superstitions, old home remedies, weather signs, a story about a hog hunt, a taped interview with the retired sheriff about the time the local bank was robbed – and directions for planting by the signs. It was looking good." (Wigginton 11) Because of this school project these kids got to learn things about their own culture that maybe they never knew before and they got to spend precious quality time with their family members. Quality time that they maybe never even knew they wanted and needed to begin with.

"In the process, these grandchildren (and we) gain an invaluable, unique knowledge about their own roots, heritage, and culture. Suddenly they discover their families –

previously people to be ignored in the face of the seventies – as pre-television, pre-automobile, pre-flight individuals who endured and survived the incredible task of total self-sufficiency, and came out of it all with a perspective on ourselves as a country that we are not likely to see again. They have something to tell us about self-reliance, human interdependence, and the human spirit that we would do well to listen to.” (Wigginton 13)

Wigginton touched every aspect of these kids’ lives and gave them not only a new perspective on things maybe they thought they previously hated, but he also allowed for them to have things only those with a higher class rank and more money would have.

The students finally had control of something. They were not being told what to do by their parents or their teacher. They were working together to create something for their own good and for the entertainment of others. Wigginton allowed for them to choose every aspect right down to the name. “The name? Each student submitted three choices. Duplications were eliminated, a master list was mimeographed and passed out, the obviously unworkable ones were dropped, and the kids voted from among those left. They chose ‘foxfire,’ a tiny organism that glows in the dark and is frequently seen in the shaded coves of these mountains.” (Wigginton 11) The name itself is rather beautiful. An organism that is small and often overlooked but when the sun goes down it glows in the shadows. Foxfire is a lot like these students – when given the right conditions, these students will glow and make their presence known on a world that, otherwise, might have thought they were invisible.

When Wigginton says they had no help, he completely meant they had no help.

“And money? The school could provide no support at all. Any financial obligations would be my problem – not theirs. Looking back, I can see what a blessing in disguise

that was. It meant the magazine had to sell, and that literally forced us to emphasize folklore rather than poetry, for magazines devoted to verse almost never survive for very long on the market. It also meant the kids had to find the money for that first issue themselves, and that made them more determined to see the magazine go than anything I could have said.” (Wigginton 11-12)

Before these students had this project they did not have anything motivating them to work hard. They were living mediocre lives filled with nothing but waiting. Waiting for class to be over. Waiting for the school year to end. Waiting to be told what to do. Waiting for a purpose. Wigginton gave them one and then sat back as they took control of their own lives for the first time, something that only those who grew up with money or with status would ever experience. Because Wigginton used his own resources for these kids they found the motivation within themselves to keep the spirit of *The Foxfire Book* alive and well. It was their determination, the determination that Wigginton inspired, that made *The Foxfire Book* so unbelievably successful.

“Now, in Rabun Gap, there exists a magazine that has subscribers in all fifty states and a dozen foreign countries. It has been written about in magazines like *Saturday Review*, *New Republic*, *National Geographic*, *School Bulletin*, *Scholastic Scope*, and *Whole Earth Catalogue*. It has received two grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, one of them for \$10,000. But most important, it is run by high school students – students who are going on to college knowing that they can be forces for constructive change; knowing that they can *act* responsibly and effectively rather than always being *acted upon*.”
(Wigginton 12)

Instead of always allowing things to happen to them and instead of always being someone’s subordinate, Wigginton just cultivated a room full of creators and future bosses. These kids did

not grow up in a world where leaving their respective classes was something people did. Most of their parents did not attend college and it is not uncommon for the jobs to be labor fueled, like coal mining. (Sokol) By allowing the kids to have this magazine, Wigginton gave them the chance to go to college and create better lives for themselves. They can change the course of their lives because of this learning opportunity.

In conclusion, Eliot Wigginton gave his students the opportunity to succeed in a way they never could before; they now, solely because of his belief in them and creative teaching skills, could set the trajectory for their impending achievement despite whatever class or rank in society they originally had. At the beginning of his introduction he starts by explaining that he started teaching to impart his love of the English language and the works that it has created on the young minds at Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School in Georgia, right at the center of the Appalachian trail. He says they call it “God’s country”. (Wigginton 9) Despite his enthusiasm, the kids did not want to learn and spent the majority of their time proving that in a multitude of ways that Wigginton found not only disrespectful but also completely disheartening. It was when he thought of the idea of creating *The Foxfire Book* with the children that they finally found their passion for creation and knowledge. Because Eliot Wigginton believed in them enough to give them control of something that could actually impact their lives, these students overlooked the stereotypes and societal expectations of their time. Many of their parents did not make it to college or even graduate high school for that matter and stuck to labor fueled jobs, like Appalachia’s high coal business. By giving them an outlet and some self-esteem, Wigginton allowed the wheels in these kids’ heads to start turning and to better their lives. They became closer to their families by questioning their childhoods for stories for *The Foxfire Book* and also created lifelong bonds. There were an immense amount of benefits to the creation of this

magazine that the kids saw for years to come. Their lives were made better by this one school project strictly because this teacher gave them the motivation to believe in themselves and believe that they deserved better, something that only people who started out with money were usually told.

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Project 3

ETS 181

Blues is a musical form that originated in the deep south in the early 19th century. Derived from the Anglo-Saxon word for melancholia, blues is a style of expression that “asks its listeners to confront their joys, sorrows, and mortality” (Pennycook 2). Without a background in classical musical education, Black Americans cultivated their own individual styles, unique to their cultural experiences in the US. Blues’ historical ties to the Black American community reflect the racial atmosphere in the United States. *You See Me Laughing*: the last of the hill country bluesmen is a 2002 documentary about the Mississippi blues gives us a tool by which we can analyse class and power in relation to race and provides us an understanding of how these ideas defined its form, lyrics, and cultural impact of blues in the United States.

Max Weber defines power as the ability of a being to realise his will, especially when faced opposition. In the context of Weber’s definition, Blues can be discussed as an expression of power for the black community. The musician’s ability to realise their will and overcome the structural inequality that limited their exposure to musical education was in conflict with the social order in the early 19th century America. “DuBois argued that to be truly authentic, the study of social inequality must incorporate race, skin color, and the historical relations between Europeans and non-whites,” therefore in a society dominated by unequal race relations, the hegemony of class; upheld by a governing body that used physical compulsion and uniform subjugation to establish a structure that in its eyes “fairly” distributes power to those who “deserve” it, effectively denies blues validation as a contemporary musical form (Allen 1).

In his poem, "The Weary Blues", Langston Hughes describes blues "coming from a black man's soul" which inevitably attributes the validation of blues as a contemporary musical form to the empathy we feel and how it is negotiated with us through the lyrics and sound quality. "Blues asks its listeners to confront their joys, their sorrows, their mortality, [and]... the audience must believe that the troubles or joys are true-life stories" (Pennycook 2). Originating from the musical practises of the slaves, the call and response structure of the lyrics and form and blues creates a relationship between the audience and the musician. This relationship is based on the tension between our emotion and allows the musician to asks the listener to recognise the subjugation of the black American people. The most direct example of this negotiation can be heard in Billie Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" written by Abel Meropol. The lyrics create for us an experience that places the audience at the scene of a lynching. The empathy we feel, negotiated through the anticipation of each line of the three verses, the imagery of "bulging eyes and the twisted mouth", and the call and response between the singer and the musical instruments, forcing us to come to terms that lynching is a reality for the black American population.

Religion, in general, has influenced the black culture in ways which draw power from the sense of comfort and community. The difference between ideologies of white religion, where you can be absolved of sin was reinforced by your class superiority, whereas black religion recognised that sin is part of human nature and rather than look to absolution from sin they looked towards themselves and god to moderate their behavior and "challenged religions' collaboration with imperialism" (Ross 1). This defined the structure of blues on a metaphorical scale where their use of the tritone fundamentally changed the sound quality of the song to

reflect the subjugation of the white overclass. Blues revolves around the tritone, an interval consisting of three consecutive whole steps, which was referred to “devil in music” until the late 18th century (Tritone 1). The adoption of this interval into blues notes challenged the hegemony of white religion and the power structure that it conveyed in terms of class superiority and sinless grace on earth was challenged with the fact that “ a lot of people serve the devil, but they always call the lord” in the first publication of black American music (You See Me Laughin’ 38:56). Blues, however, did not rely on the tonal quality to distinguish itself from the westernized norm, blues relied on the tension between the lyrics and the sound to portray the full meaning of its message.

While varying between minor and major keys and utilizing the blues notes as a form of separation and classification the relatability and storey making of the lyrics created a simultaneous contrast that resonated in the hearts and minds of the common man. Regardless of race, the tension created with these notes between minor melodies and upbeat lyrics and rhythm or vice versa created a paradox that was previously unheard of. The unique expression of the everyday struggle of; what it means to be a black American, what it means to be free yet confined under jim crow, and how class confinement through blatant terrorism and violent oppression, insured your future. The realised form of resistance in this emerging culture created a liberation through the arts which mirrored the will of the people to form a communal identity through a medium that could only have originated under the hands of the oppressed in context or the racial class ideologies in a religious community.

The stories that we are confronted with are based on the relationship of race and class of the black American community. The intention behind this relationship is not for the purpose of

pity, but for social validation, meaning that it's a way for the community to recognise its own struggle from their own perspective. The bond created by this social experience attempts to break away from the dual consciousness created by the systematic subjugation of the black population. Schumpeter provides us with an explanation of the capitalist process by which it decreases the value of class lives through universal hostility to its own social order. He states that "capitalism creates a frame of mind which, after destroying the moral authority of other institution, targets its own self" and the lack of defence for its evils is a reflection on our morality. Therefore, by confronting race and class in terms of blues we can begin to understand that the system designed for blacks in America created an environment where discussion of these topics and addressing the white oppressors bear a high personal cost. Thus, blues evolved to be a discussion of personal experience and the effects of hegemonic oppression which did not put the blame on to the white audience but allowed them to recognise the social inequality for themselves. However, for the black audience, blues provided a sense of comfort and community.

Inherently "the record industry ... is based on the exploitation of others" however by allowing the recognition of the black American struggle, blues offered a relief from the oppression and cruelty of the system the black community was forced into regardless of the monetary benefit for the artist (You See Me Laughin 48:48). Blues musicians became reliant on the way social honor is distributed in a community alongside wealth distribution and access to goods and services, therefore, creating status groups based on the imbalance of power. Social strata of, class, status, and race, define the economic and social order forming a relationship that is codependent through their intersectionality. The dual nature of stratification allows the unique constituents, class, status, and race, to have their own niche independent from each other that are

reinforced by social action flowing from class interest and shared experience among collective experience of black Americans. Weber suggests that the inequalities of the system perpetuates class antagonism but fails to address power and class reversion in times of revolution and extreme social discord and how a lack of power becomes the people's greatest strength in unity.

The racialized discrepancy between class and power in 'You See Me Laughin'' is evident in the social and physical environment the blues musicians were surrounded by. Power is complicated by social honor and prestige alongside economic position of the individual. It is reliant on the way social honor is distributed in a community alongside wealth distribution and access to goods and services, therefore, creating status groups based on the imbalance of power. The unequal division of wealth is portrayed by the musicians surroundings and the social honor and prestige that we would expect from a white musician of equal standing. Weber suggests that the inequalities of the capitalist system perpetuate class antagonism. We cannot consciously deny that race was used as a visual cue to subjugate these people to an environment where class antagonism resulted in an effort to keep black Americans in a subservient position. The physical effects of these systems defined the living situations for the blues musicians, the type of performance opportunities that were available, and their interaction with labels and music producers. The power and social honor gained from the position of a blues musician in the African American community did not reflect the escalation in class nor the monetary benefits from their occupation.

The previously discussed elevation in power attained from self-taught musical practices did allow the black Americans access to the spotlight. However, class differences on stage and off stage were evident when comparing the two environments in terms of material wealth and the

perception of wealth based on the viewpoint of the audience. When a blues musician is on stage he is elevated, both physically and socially. He is presented in clothes and garments that do not reflect the wealth and power of his individual being, but rather presents himself as expectations dictate. It is inherently the labels responsibility to provide the perception of elevated class and power on stage, however, when the musicians return home, though they are still the same person, they no longer hold the same class or power. Though we feel the class and power manifest itself based on the artist's race, the environment we perceive the artist realises a different power context for the viewer. The duality of this power context manifests in our society in a form where black artists are used as a model minority suggesting that there is less racial disparity, racial inequality, and reduced discrimination based on the stage appearance. The reality though significantly differs when the artist steps off the stage. It is a reality in which the disparity in power is so severe that often times the artists became famous when they are re-discovered post mortem.

Class and power in relation to race moderates the empathy we are feeling is being negotiated through blues is supported by the structure, lyrics, and racial atmosphere of its origin. Because of the racial conflict in the United States, blues .Blues is not created to elicit pity, blues is inherently a social experience for others via its storytelling and atmosphere. The way we listen to the music allows us to relate and recognise that the struggles we may be facing are not unique to our individual self, therefore, normalizing the experience of hardship. Rather than a complaint about injustice or hardship blues becomes a way for the community to bond in recognition of the social experience. The power that black Americans were allowed to explore during the civil rights era birthed blues and a culture that was uniquely belonged to the African American

community. It wasn't a move to fight back against the music at the time but rather a move to recognise the validity of the black American experience in a greater social setting where blues musicians told us about what the black experience is, as opposed to blaming the oppressor for his sins. Perhaps like Martin Luther King wrote in his letters from a Birmingham Jail that "the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice" shows us that the presence of tension in blues appeals to the white moderate through justice by letting him experience the order of negative peace through the shoes of a black man. The absence of tension in music is a classical sin, thus by providing us we a medium that capitalizes on this tension, between what is right and wrong, conflicting ideology of white and black religion, lyrical and musical structure that addressed a struggle relatable to each underclass, entertains the idea that we might prefer a positive peace in the presence of justice regardless of class, power, or race.

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ETS 181 Research Paper Student B

Dissecting Race and Class in “The Lesson”

The broad topics of race and class have been examined across various disciplines. In literature, fictional tales have depicted the intersection of the two, while theoretical texts propose insight into the issues by attempting to unfold the nuanced nature of both topics. Toni Cade Bambara intertwines race and class in “The Lesson”, where a group of black children led by pedagogical figure Ms. Moore go on a field trip to FAO Schwartz. This excursion is not for entertainment purposes, but rather an attempt to expose the unevenness in lifestyle that is contingent upon both race and class. In a similar manner, bell hooks analyzes the connection between location, race, and class through her personal experiences and observations explained in “Real Estate Racism”. Together, these texts produce the idea that Sylvia (of “The Lesson”) seems to be frustrated over the disparities in lifestyles between blacks and whites, but if her character is analyzed using bell hooks’ white supremacist notion of location being less racialized and more so divided according to social class, it then seems Sylvia’s anger stems out of a newfound sense of class/status inferiority.

The two main locations of “The Lesson” are Sylvia and Ms. Moore’s home neighborhood in Harlem, and the fancy toy store FAO Schwartz located around Fifth Avenue. Although both in New York, these places exhibit major differences amongst the races of residents as well as the social class of those who live in these respective areas. When describing each place, Bambara succinctly includes a mention of race. In the midst of conveying the scene of Sylvia’s home neighborhood, where “you couldn’t halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddam gas mask”, Bambara boldly recognizes new resident Ms. Moore, and labels her “black as hell” (661). Thus, a link can seemingly be formed between place and race; blacks live in unpleasant and undesirable areas. In contrast to the neighborhoods of Harlem, the environment of FAO Schwartz is much more attractive. From the perspective of Sylvia, the reader is informed how on Fifth Avenue “everybody dressed up in stockings” and there is “one lady in fur coat, hot as it as” (662). In addition to establishing a higher

class setting by conveying the types of clothing associated with the rich that are worn by people of the area, Bambara nods to race through a simple thought of Sylvia's; "White folks crazy" (662). Again, there seems to be an obvious connection between place and race, now evidenced by the overwhelmingly amount of whites bustling about Fifth Avenue.

After making this seemingly sound but actually superficial observation, the reader can then connect the idea of racialized place to the anger Sylvia expresses while on the field trip. While away from their home neighborhood, the children are exposed to "\$1,000 sailboats" and "\$480 paper weights" before eventually deciding that, "people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven"(665). Such observations, where whites and non-Harlem residents lead more expensive and extravagant lives, constitute the lessons Ms. Moore intended to teach by taking the field trip, but they also unsettle Sylvia. After Ms. Moore encourages the children to share their thoughts and pushes them for further insight, Sylvia refuses to participate in the learning process and personally notices how "something weird is goin on, I can feel it in my chest" (665). The message Sylvia receives is akin to others (whites) being "better" than her because a socially accepted race allows whites to live in more perfect places- a realization that ultimately frustrates her and prompts her to declare "ain't nobody gonna beat me at nothing"(665). The invisible victory Sylvia feels disadvantaged against seems to be a life where one is wealthy enough to purchase entertainment valued at the cumulative cost of basic necessities of an entire family. Sylvia is aware of her inability to live in such a way where money is surplus and desired material objects are plentiful. These lessons appear to convey the drastic differences in lifestyles between blacks and whites, with Harlem and FAO Schwartz acting as harbors of racialized standards of living. However, this apparent relation is challenged and complicated in "Real Estate Racism", where hooks raises an understanding of class, not race, potentially serving as the underlying foundation of why place is ostensibly segregated.

In "Real Estate Racism" hooks argues that most white people think, "discrimination is really about class rather than race" (134). Hooks supports this assumed logic by noting that whites describe themselves as allegedly concerned with protecting property values, a preoccupation that consequently

perpetuates (real estate) racism (135). If the goal of protecting property values is accepted, place can still be seen as racialized, but it becomes overwhelmingly divided according to social class. Upper class neighborhoods will only accept residents of high social esteem so that the prestige or status of the neighborhood does not fall on the basis of undesirable residents (deemed undesirable by a lower class standing). This socially constructed rule, in hooks' view, also factors in race since when comparing two neighborhoods- one black and the other white-the properties in the black neighborhood have lower market values compared to equal properties of whites (135). However, hooks' main point is that the white supremacist perspective of real estate racism is that geographic and housing discrimination has less to do with race and is largely determined by social class. This way of thinking about race, class, and place, serves as a new lens to analyze Sylvia's frustration through and can reveal her unwanted feelings of social inferiority.

Bambara's mentioning of race throughout "The Lesson" seems less significant when using hooks' white supremacist lens, by which differences in social class and their respective impact on place become more accentuated. Sylvia unconsciously conducts a small-scale comparison of social class when examining products at the toy store and relating them to items of her own. For example, she analyzes a price tag that reads "handcrafted sailboat of fiberglass at one thousand one hundred ninety-five dollars" and then contemplates how the sailboat she has "costs me about fifty cents" (663). Since class esteem is often marked economically, the massive inequality between the prices of the toys alludes to the socially assigned worth of each class, and their respective origins. Sylvia's revelation of her sailboat costing fifty cents relays a disadvantaged socio-economic background, one where there is no extravagance of wealth to shop for or purchase luxury toy items, and such class status can be traced back to her home in Harlem. Thus, there now is a connection between place and social class, with Harlem representing the poor and working class since its children own fifty-cent sailboats as opposed to thousand dollar boats. Additionally, a connection can be crafted between social status and the atmosphere of FAO Schwartz. The prices of the goods sold at the toy store indicate that those who shopping there, as well as those who occupy the surrounding area, have a

highly favorable socio-economic standing since they have the means to purchase items beyond the fundamentals and can even spend large sums of money on such unneeded materials. So, FAO Schwartz is an upper-class location because an ability to freely spend money (which requires an availability and excess of the resource) is evidenced by the expensive nature of the store-which typically results in an unaffordability for most.

These connections rely on elements of hooks' argument in "Real Estate Racism" for validity. The entry of Ms. Moore's class into the upper league toy store emerges as a type of displacement. The students on the trip likely would never normally shop in the store, and may even be intimidated and repelled from the overwhelming aura of high social status that emanates from the people walking around Fifth Avenue as well as the daunting numerical value of items in the store. FAO Schwartz can be deemed a socially segregated place because of these proposed effects; people of lower class backgrounds have no means to utilize the store. Thus, hooks' idea of "protecting value" is highlighted through location; FAO Schwartz can only be on Fifth Avenue because people who can afford the toys (thanks to a higher socioeconomic background) live in the area, and placing the store in Harlem is perceived as a mistake since inhabitants are presumed to occupy low-socioeconomic statuses and could not manage the prices of the store. If positioned in Harlem, the store would be "devalued" in that it could go out of business if no residents shop there, or it would be forced to lower its prices-signifying a drop in social prestige-to accommodate the monetary limits of locals. The outrageousness of thousand dollar toys is preserved through the store's geographic position in an upper class area, essentially protecting its ability to exist. Therefore, hooks' notion of white supremacists protecting property values can be used to argue that the placement of FAO Schwartz on Fifth Avenue is an attempt to preserve value since inhabitants of the surrounding area are of high social class, consequently molding the concept of segregation on the basis of class status.

The aforementioned observations help create a bond between place and class, and such a suggestion provides a new tool to examine Sylvia's frustration with. Supplementing Sylvia's previously mentioned uneasiness following the field trip is the raw anger she exhibits while Ms. Moore and

Sugar converse. Sugar has deciphered meaning from the educational outing, specifically in regards to economic inequality. She voices her thoughts, saying, "...equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don't it?" all the while Sylvia is "standing on her foot so she don't continue" (665). The implications of Sugar's observations, whereas most members of the Ms. Moore's class are socially and economically inferior to the people of Fifth Avenue, infuriate Sylvia. It now seems applicable that her frustration stems from a sense class inferiority that has developed after Sugar links place and social class, where as before it seemed a mere lesser lifestyle and racialized places disturbed Sylvia. Thus, Sylvia now views Harlem as an impoverished scene rather than just a predominantly black area, and FAO Schwartz is not just a spot for "crazy white folks", but a place that draws in people of higher social and economic classes.

The network of race, class, and place is clarified by bell hooks in "Real Estate Racism" and provides a new perspective to analyze Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" with. When reading "The Lesson", the reader can make a simple surface observation how the story associates white people with a grander affluence than black people, and support of this idea is the momentous prices of the toy store that only wealthy whites can afford. The reader can then conclude that this apparent racial inequality is what eventually upsets Sylvia. However, using a fresh point of view from bell hooks, specifically the white supremacist thinking where real estate racism occurs only to protect property values, the depth of nuance in "The Lesson" is uncovered. Hooks' insight assists in the formation of a handcuff between social class and place, which consequently alters the nature of Sylvia's perceived fury. Race becomes a secondary issue, while social prestige, esteem, and status become the forefront causes of the inferiority Sylvia and other members of the class feel after visiting FAO Schwartz where they acknowledged their lack of belonging and their inability to voluntarily and/or comfortably shop there. Thus, evident in Bambara's "The Lesson" is an apparent frustration over the connections between race and fanciful lifestyles, but truly represents anger over of a newly discovered and highly personal sentiment of class inferiority, produced by a recently discovered link between location and social and individual esteem.

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ETS 181 Research Paper
Student C

April 22, 2015

Professor Conrey

The Misunderstandings That Lead to Social Stratification

Social stratification stems from racial misunderstandings. In Flannery O'Connor's *The Artificial Nigger*, Mr. Head takes his grandson, Nelson, into the city for the first time. The experiences of Mr. Head and Nelson in city opens the readers eyes to the serious racial inequalities that are present at every corner. As Mr. Head and Nelson travel through the city and get lost the story explains that the lack of knowledge, understanding, value, and opportunity creates a gap between white elitists and lower class African Americans.

"The Artificial Nigger" exhibits how racial misunderstandings stemmed from a lack of opportunity and knowledge lead to stratification in the city atmosphere. It is obvious that throughout society's history different positions carry prestige. This is due to industrial capitalism. Industrial capitalism is run by "white males, with a gender- and race-segregated labor force, laced with wage inequalities" (Acker 125). Through these different positions, rewards come. This rewarding allows for unequal rights as the authors explain, "if the rights and perquisites of different positions in a society must be unequal, then the society must be stratified" (Moore 15). In order for a society to function, it is important to distribute its members into social positions so that they can perform the tasks that they are assigned to well. In "The Artificial Nigger", the fact that blacks are not as good due to the color of their skin seems to be the problem, yet the issue stems because

blacks are not given the same amount of opportunity as white people because of social stratification. The social stratification is necessary so that there are jobs for everyone to make society function properly. Obviously some jobs will not be as challenging as others, so the employees are paid accordingly. "The rewards and their distribution...give rise to stratification" (Moore 15). Thus, it is only natural that the city livers in "The Artificial Nigger" live in "unpainted [houses]..the wood in them looked rotten" (O'Connor 9).

Nelson notices that there is a direct correlation between a run down part of the city and the race of those who inhabit it. Joan Acker would describe the reason for this is a result of "industrial capitalism [emerging] in the United States" (Acker 125). The lack of opportunity given to the city livers, who are mostly African American, prohibits them from making a better salary. Thus, their lack of opportunity allows them to be seen as "lower" citizens on the stratification scale. The capitalist system is run by white males, it is hard for those of a different race, or gender, to obtain a well paying job. Thus, in *The Artificial Nigger* it makes sense that the African American people live in run down parts of society because their race inhibits them from obtaining positions of higher pay.

This lack of opportunity is similar to the lack of knowledge that other groups have about each other therefore creating more prejudices among the different classes and races.

It seems as though the racial differences are stemming from simply the different colors of skin, when the racial differences in "The Artificial Nigger" are actually stemming from a lack of knowledge about the other race. Mr. Head does not know any African Americans. So, he is quick to make negative assumptions about the lives and morals of African Americans. As Nelson and Mr. Head walk through the streets of the city and observe the run down houses, it is clear that Mr. Head is not impressed by the

lives of African Americans. As the two characters become lost they consequently become frustrated with each other as Mr. Head makes a dig at Nelson by saying that “[a]nybody wants to be from this nigger heaven can be from it!” (O’Connor 9). Mr. Head’s negative view on African Americans is so outward that it is the only knowledge Nelson knows of the different culture. Nelson is young, so he picks up Mr. Head’s thoughts and Mr. Head’s view on African Americans directly affects Nelson. When Nelson sees his very first African American man on the train walk down the aisle, Nelson “hated [the black man] with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also, he understood now why his grandfather disliked them” (O’Connor 6). The African American on the train did nothing but walk by, and Nelson feels a sense of hate for him. Mr. Head, hates African Americans, so does his grandson Nelson because that is all Nelson knows. Thus, that is why the problem of stratification, especially in the terms of race, will almost always thrive in America because people learn and take lead from the elites, just as Nelson takes after Mr. Head in judging the black man on the train.

The creation of the gap between white elitists and lower class African Americans is very important in social stratification. In *The Artificial Nigger* it seems as though African Americans do not associate themselves with white people because they choose not to. However, examining the issue of race and stratification further, African Americans cannot live in tandem due to the exclusivity of the white race, also known as the elites in this case. In *The Power Elite* the elites “form a more or less compact social and psychological entity; they have become self-conscious members of a social class. People are either accepted into this class or they are not, and there is a qualitative split, rather than merely a numerical scale, separating them from those

who are not elite” (Mills 91). The separation of the elites and those who are not elite is clear in *The Artificial Nigger*. The first sign of this separation of the two classes is seen in the setting of the story as Mr. Head explains to Nelson that he has never seen black people before. Mr. Head states that “[t]here hasn’t been a nigger in this country since we run that one out twelve years ago and that was before you were born” (O’Connor 3). Mr. Head makes it clear that the gap between him and Nelson and the African Americans is so large that they do not even live in the same area as them thus making the white people feel and appear to be elite. The social gap between the elites and the non-elites creates cognitive dissonance that will prevent equality among the different races. Cognitive dissonance is clear when Mr. Head was showing Nelson the kitchen on the train. The social gap here was very clear as African American workers told Mr. Head that “passengers are NOT allowed in the kitchen” (O’Connor 6). Mr. Head replied by saying “there’s good reason for that...because cockroaches would run the passengers out!” (O’Connor 6). In response to Mr. Head, all of the white passengers “laughed and...Nelson felt a sudden keen pride in him” (O’Connor 6). The stratification gap was made clear when all of the other white passengers laughed along with Mr. Head as he made fun of the kitchen where the African Americans work. This securitization of African Americans that took place on the train was a prime example of how the gap between different classes is so large, not only physically, but mentally as well.

The lack of understanding of African Americans is prevalent in *The Artificial Nigger*. Mr. Head is unaware of how African Americans live their life as he explains the setting in which he grew up as not having “a nigger in this country since [they

ran] that one out twelve years ago” (O’Connor 3). What seems to be simple ignorance actually is a serious issue of a lack of understanding that leads to further judgments. If Mr. Head were to suspend his judgments about race and focus on understanding the different experiences of different groups rather than studying individuals and what they look like. In order to become less judgmental Mr. Head should understand the culture of African Americans. “[C]ulture is traditionally defined as the ‘total way of life’ of a group of people” (Collins 10). Mr. Head shows Nelson the culture of the city, where the lower end of the scale live by telling Nelson to “Squat down... and stick your head in [the sewer]” (O’Connor 8). As Mr. Head shows Nelson the sewer he is showing him the image that the city is as dirty and unworthy as a sewer therefore creating the gap that divides different levels of stratification. Because Mr. Head does not respect the culture of African Americans and the city, he creates prejudices about it. What seems to be about Mr. Head showing Nelson a simple sewer is actually about showing Nelson the value of the culture and people that inhabit the sewer. The lack of respect Mr. Head shows Nelson that he feels as though the culture of the city and people who inhabit it are worthless, just as the waste is in the sewer. In terms of stratification, one can see that the lack of understanding of culture further widens the gap between different races.

Required Texts for Unit Three