VOICES

"All White Americans In The County" and Other Loaded Subjects: Race, Community, and Morality in a Second Grade Classroom

Inda L. Schaenen
St. Louis, Missouri

This teacher research inquiry is a critical discourse analysis of second grade classroom talk about racial identity and dialect difference within the theoretical framework of moral philosophy. Participants in the study, which took place in an urban public district in a Midwestern United States city, included ten African American students and a White writing specialist. Analysis of the themes and patterns of the talk showed that even the simplest language arts lesson, when open to serious questions, will elicit and exercise students' moral functions and positive qualities of character including empathy, conscience, moral reasoning, and altruism. The ramifications of such practices and effects across sociocultural boundaries are explored.

I am a writing enrichment specialist, a teaching artist who embraces the theories and practices offered by the scholarship around New Literacy, which regard literacy as the social practices and conceptions around reading and writing (Gee, 1996; Street, 1984). In particular, I understand thinking, talking, valuing, and feeling as essential to the ways we use language both orally and in print. This means I am always on the lookout, in my role as a teacher-researcher, for those moments when apparently straightforward lessons about language take a turn toward muddier, less neutral subjects that will tap students' feelings and embodiments around particular words, worlds, and identities; lessons which, in other words, engage their personal values, scruples, and attitudes with respect to the subject at hand. Following Neuman (2010), I believe that designing "language-rich and content-rich settings" is one way to ensure that very young students can "acquire the broad array of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that build a foundation for literacy and content learning" (p. 303). What motivates both my teaching and my research is the goal of seeing my students

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optimally prepared for participation in and contribution to our shared world; as well as the hope of improving and sharpening my classroom practice with language in ways that will help accomplish this goal. While I want my students to live good lives and do good things with their lives (and tell them so), I understand that although *I* may know what I mean in this case by the word *good*, it is not always plain—teaching across cultural, racial, and ethnic boundaries—that this usage or sense of *good* is shared. One thing I never take for granted among my students is how we negotiate the meanings of our individual expressions. The terms we use to talk about moral issues are highly unstable. What do we all consider a good way to speak? To act? What is the relationship between speaking, acting, and being (this or that kind of good person)? These are moral questions, and they matter. Therefore, in this paper I pose the following questions: How do moral conversations emerge out of this kind of meaning-centered literacy teaching and learning in the primary grades? How can we recognize and sustain them when they do?

As a literacy researcher, writer, and teacher, I approach questions concerning moral development as somewhat of a grazing generalist in a land densely occupied by expert specialists. I am aware of the long history and enormous content in educational scholarship that takes up the origins, stages, and hierarchies of moral thinking in human beings, studies grounded in psychoanalytic, behaviorist, cognitive/developmental, biological, and sociocultural theory (Berkowitz & Gibbs, 1983; Kurtines & Gewirtz, 1995; Kohlberg, 1976; Nunner-Winker & Sodian, 1988; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990; see also Walker, Hennig, & Krettenauer, 2000, for a review and example of a quantitative study of moral development which examines peer and parent discourse). Recently, scholars have looked at the relationship between moral development and sympathy (Malti, Keller, Gummerum, & Buchmann, 2009) and moral development as revealed through child narrative accounts (Wainryb, Brehl, Matwin, Sokol, & Hammond, 2005). We do not lack theoretical explorations and empirical studies that attempt, across a spectrum of interpretive lenses, to get at the broad sweep of development of the moral aptitudes and practices of young people; nevertheless, there is a pressing call to "bridge psychological models of development with educational practices designed to promote moral or character development" (Berkowitz, in press). This paper represents my effort to do just that.

My interpretive ambition is quite narrow, and situated in a concrete, naturalistic context: a writing workshop located in an inner city public elementary school where (as in so many public schools) the mandated language arts curriculum was scripted, limited, and designed around externally-developed standards and benchmarks. Taking up the ideas suggested by Walker, Hennig, and Krettenauer (2000), I believe that moral development of children is nourished across boundaries of space, time, and theoretical lenses. In other words, I believe that the children who have acquired a moral compass do so by cobbling it together out of their interactions with parents, siblings, peers, teachers, coaches, spiritual leaders, other adults in their community, social and cultural experiences, and the ways that all of these social interactions themselves coalesce around an individual temperament that is itself responsive to a dynamic lifeworld (Husserl, 1970). As a teacher, I take to heart one of the many conclusions drawn about parent/child discourse, namely that "affectively supportive interactions will foster moral development, whereas conflictual ones will interfere" (Walker, Hennig, & Krettenauer, 2000, p. 1034). I find it easy, as a teacher-researcher, to bring findings from quantitative empirical studies which pertain to adult-child and peer discourse into alignment with more qualitative interpretations such as those offered about care and moral education by Nodding (2005) and Dyson (2003). I am mindful of what Berkowitz and Grych (1998) have called the four aspects of moral functioning (empathy, conscience, moral reasoning, and altruism). Most of all,

given the social, political, economic, and cultural context in which my workshop exists, I was especially aware of the need to saturate our time and space with opportunities for students to experience and engage in collaborative, exploratory classroom talk. In this regard, I am also responding to the call from Lee (2010) for studies that "examine how everyday cognition, especially among the Black, the brown, and the poor, can be tapped to support academic learning" (p. 653). Among the many strengths of my students was their ability to form and share moral opinions; because their "regular" school work resisted such dialogue, I routinely made room for it.

This paper takes up the talk of a second grade lesson that began, neutrally enough, as a lesson on adjectives, and wound up a 40-minute conversation about race, about "talkin white," and about the somewhat blurred and slippery identity my students constructed for me as a person who, they concluded, "must be" both White *and* African American. Did our talk, the writing activity which followed it, and my interpretations of the experience post facto construct and reveal a moral dimension to literacy learning (for my students), and literacy teaching (for me)? If so, what was it like? In addition to addressing these questions, in this paper I hope to demonstrate: (1) how teacher research (action research) as a method of inquiry can direct a teacher to the bone of education, where I believe the moral dimension exists; (2) how critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a stance and array of methods offers a particularly powerful set of tools for teacher researchers; (3) that students from non-dominant communities,[1] when given curricular opportunities to think and talk about big, difficult questions at school, will both disclose the nature of their moral reasoning and feeling, and do so in ways that can and should be situated within the recognizable theoretical landscape of moral philosophy; and (4) that teachers serving in classrooms with children who are culturally or ethnically unlike themselves can and should seek ways to connect the literacy curriculum with the most meaningful moral questions in order to build upon and solidify the moral understandings their students are in the process of cobbling together.

PEOPLE AND PLACES

This paper draws from data collected for a longitudinal case study of the writing workshop I ran between 2005 and 2008 in an urban public elementary school in the Midwestern United States. In order to protect privacy, the school's name and all the students' names have been changed. The student population at Hutsch Elementary was 100% African American. Teachers and administrators, however, were of mixed ethnic and cultural background; about half, including me, would have been considered White. I personally transcribed the transcript I worked with from an audiotape recording of a single lesson. This lesson was part of the enrichment program I taught once a week in the writing workshop and is available upon request. In the interest of space I have not reproduced it whole, but have selectively culled key passages.

The student participants in this study are a fair representation of the Hutsch student population as a whole, and, even more generally, a fair representation of the African American community that resides in the city's northern neighborhoods. These were children who, for the most part, tried to do their school work, tried to pay attention, played when given the chance, sought kindness and understanding among teachers, and felt love and loyalty for the people who cared for them. With the help of family, friends, and adults at school, many had developed positive protective strategies and attitudes of resilience (including pride in their own style and artistry, spiritual sustenance, and critical awareness of historical realities) that led to successful coping with the expectations of school (Spencer & Tinsley, 2008). The student population described here is also a typical subset of the African American public school population of our city. A 2006-2007 study in

this city of 162 children ages 6 to 13 found that these public school children experienced serious psychological effects of community violence and violence in school. The symptoms they reported, including sleep problems, fears, depression, and disordered behavior, were consistent with the symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (Shields, Pierce, & Nadasen, 2009). The talk, texts, and behavior I observed (or heard about from classroom teachers) and offical discipline reports corroborated this finding. Understanding the broader social, cultural context which shapes my students' ideas about community and identity is key to understanding some important connections between these ideas and the moral talk that arose in our classroom.

The dialect spoken by most of my students most of the time was both phonologically and syntactically African American English (AAE) as described and theorized by sociolinguists Rickford (1999), Smitherman (1977), Baugh (1999) and others. There were times, however, when their spoken language would be mainstream American English (MAE) syntactically and AAE phonologically. All of the students in this study aurally understood both AAE and MAE, and many of the students could and did write in MAE. For the most part, my spoken language in class conformed to the morphosyntactic patterns of MAE. I was raised in New York City among a privileged, semiobservant Jewish family that provided me with various enrichment activities valued in that social milieu—thrice-weekly religious school; music lessons; books and a room of my own; sleepaway camp; tickets to plays, ballets, musicals, and operettas; country retreats; travel abroad; and athletic opportunities. Among the many differences between me and my students, the experience of a matriarchal home life (my parents divorced when I was 10 years old) was something I had in common with many of them.

As this is a paper which takes up the ways moral education can arise from literacy learning, I must also reflect upon my motives for remaining engaged in and committed to a community so different from the one in which I was raised, so different from the one in which I was raising my children. What *was* I doing with other people's children? It was not enough, I felt, to genuinely care for my students as Nodding (2005) describes. I was interested at all times in connecting that care to a sense of moral urgency in the day-to-day decision making my students engaged with. Moral thinking was never far from my practice (Dyson, 2003). Coles (1986) raised a version of this question when trying to understand the motives of young White civil rights workers who chose to remain human rights activists in the south long after their peers from the north had gone back home. What pressing need of my own did teaching in an urban school fulfill? Without airing unduly the private matters of my heart and spirit, I can say that I take quite seriously the examples set by Jewish activist/thinkers/writers, people like Abraham Joshua Heschel, Grace Paley, Rabbi Michael Lerner, and others. Although my children were raised in the security of home, education, and financial means, I always believed, and I still do, that it is not enough for my own children to be assured of having their needs met. To paraphrase a slogan that is nonetheless true for being a slogan: until we are all free, none of us are truly free. I entered the urban schools because that is where a regional enrichment program put me; I stayed because I felt (and continue to feel) moral outrage with respect to injustices in education, and because I felt that I could be useful there.

KEY TERMS

Staking out the ways in which I understand and use particular words will be important to the ways in which I interpret classroom discourse.

Race/Racial

Other than to denote a socially constructed category based on various appearance-related features, I wholeheartedly reject the usage of

these words that understands them as signifying a physiological or biological trait or set of traits that can be used to classify human beings below the level of species. In so doing, I recruit the findings of current scientific inquiry in the field of molecular genetic research (Templeton, 2003). There are no subspecies (or races) of humans; we are a remarkably genetically homogeneous life form, with no sharp boundaries marking genetic variation. Chimps may be said to have races; even Ozark lizards have races. But human beings, who began migrating out of (and back into) Africa nearly 2 million years ago, eventually spreading populations (and DNA) through Europe, Asia, through the Pacific Islands, and into the Americas, are simply too recursively mobile to have evolved in "branches." We humans are, however, variable at the level of the individual. Molecular geneticists explain genetic differences by looking at geography, at where people live. Discarding the word *race* as both misunderstood and misused in current common parlance, I will aim for more semantically precise ways of noting cultural and ethnic distinctions.

On the other hand, in spite of the general misunderstanding constructed and sustained around the word *race*, I understand the word as having a denotative and connotative history, and do not mean to suggest that it does not. I will continue to call the blunt fact of the social problem that we call racism *racism*. I will take up the definition of racism offered by Spears (1999), who defines racism as a set of "behaviors which indirectly or directly support the inequality of racial hierarchy" (p. 21). I also accept the concept of "racialized identities" as used in critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McLaren, 1998). Although the historical and historiographical constructions around race and racism are far beyond the scope of this paper, I am interested in the work of scholars whose accounts unfix and destabilize the meanings that have been attached to these words over time (Greer, Mignolo, & Quilligan, 2007, pp. 1-15, 188-202).

Black/White

Although I will be using these words as descriptors of appearance and apparent ethnicity, I must also declare them to be semiotically, semantically, and orthographically problematic. Human beings do not come in White or Black like patent leather purses or Mary Janes. From time to time I called attention to this problem in class, when as a class we were discussing the relationship among skin color, ethnicity, and identity. I would hold a piece of copy machine paper next to my arm and ask a student if the paper was the same color as my arm. The answer was always no. On the other hand, there is surely is a *we* that accepts (a capitalized version of) White and Black as validly connoting something about who *we* are. Although his father was White, Frederick Douglass was enslaved and Black. President Obama is Black (even though his mother was White and his "blackness" was called into question by some people). Oprah is Black. Hillary Clinton is White. In this sense, I am White, even though my skin in winter is more or less the color of a popsicle stick, and only a shade lighter than the lightest-skinned student I taught, and there was once a time when Jewish people in America (like people from Ireland, Italy, and other immigrant populations) were not considered to be White.

Scholars who draw upon critical race theory and the field of White Studies have a great deal to say about why "White" (with a capital W) must be conceptualized as a marked ethnicity just as Black (with a capital B), Latino or any other ethnic descriptor (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Marx, 2008; McIntyre, 1997; Sleeter, 1993; Solórzano, 2001). For an especially rich discussion of the construction and explication of the meanings of whiteness, see McLaren (1998, pp. 280-290). I am keenly aware of the call for teachers to put race and ethnicity (including their own) on the table for classroom discussion (Christensen, 2000, 2009; Howard, 1999; Landsman, 2009; Landsman & Lewis, 2006); in practice, I do. In this paper, I will use the conventional terms "White" and

"Black" as racial descriptors to mean what readers generally accept them to mean, but I do so with sharp reservations.

Moral Discourse

By moral discourse, I mean conversation about what is normatively right and wrong with respect to behavior, actions, and intentions. I also mean conversation about *why* particular behaviors, actions and intentions are deemed right or wrong. With younger children, following the early work of Kohlberg (1968), I have found that such talk can arise when we least expect it, is in fact nearly always fairly close to the surface of any talk, and does not differ all that much with respect to subject from the biggest questions posed by philosophers of moral behavior, who ask "how we ought to conduct ourselves if we wish to act with the demands of morality" (Szabo, Siegel, & Cahn, 2008, p. 71). Specifically, it seems to me that moral talk also typically draws upon the language of logical thinking signaled and recognizable by words like *if, then, because*, and *so*. Moral talk can disclose empathy, altruism, and an active conscience (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998). Theoretically, I situate moral talk within the concept of what James Paul Gee has been for many years calling "Big D discourses," which he defines as "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles...by specific groups of people" (Gee, 1996, p. viii). Analysis of classroom moral discourse also helps disclose the apparently stable cultural models my students bear in mind, the assumptions and theories (the stories they tell themselves about how the world *is*) which help them make meaning out of their experiences and lifeworld (Husserl, 1970).

ANALYTIC PROCEDURES

As an episode in the life of *Writing to Connect*, the class I have chosen to transcribe is both telling and typical. The students and I were simply going about our business—a planned lesson on using and recognizing adjectives in sentences—when I realized that we were sliding into a conversation having to do with race, language, culture, and feelings. How did I know? Because the adjectives that someone wanted to use to describe me were *light* and *white*. These words made a few of his classmates uncomfortable, because these classmates felt that saying that someone was White was a hurtful thing to do, an insult. Sensing the approach of a meaningful conversation, I got out my small, handheld tape recorder and pressed RECORD.

The transcript for this analysis is 17 pages long. Elsewhere, I have written about the specifically racial meanings and interpretations of the talk (Schaenen, 2010). Here, I approach the same piece of classroom discourse within a framework of moral pedagogy. To prepare to do so, I began a summary table (see Appendix A) that outlined three important strands in Western moral philosophy: utilitarian, deontological, and virtue ethics.[2] In order to determine the rightness or wrongness of behavior, utilitarian philosophers look at outcomes and consequences. They render moral verdicts by deciding whether or not a deed has made possible the greatest good for the greatest number of people. By contrast, deontological philosophers are interested in intentions. They look into the reasons an act is performed (or not), and conclude that an act is morally right if the motive behind it was well-meaning. Finally, those who think in terms of virtue ethics take up the character of the person acting. The virtuous person, such scholars argue, is one who regularly and consistently acts in the right way at the right time in the right place (Szabo, Siegel, & Cahn, 2008).

With these concepts in mind, I read the transcript several times. Each time, I looked for moments in which my students and I wrestled—through our language and behavior—with questions of *ought* and *ought not*, of right and wrong. When I found such moments, I coded them according to the type of moral phi-

losophy that seemed to me exemplified, and made analytical notes on the transcript as ideas came to me. Next, I entered particular exemplars in the summary table.

To conduct critical discourse analysis (CDA) is to slow down time and pay close attention to a particular discursive moment (or extended moment) of interest. An analytic approach that dates as a field from the early 1990s, CDA brings together work in social theory and linguistics, and conjoins these fields in mutually informative ways (Rogers, 2004). CDA is a set of methods that attempts to connect fine-grained linguistic analyses with broader social forces. Practitioners across a range of disciplines use CDA to describe, interpret, and explain the ways in which discourse constructs (and is constructed by) the social world, as well as the ways in which discourse represents (and is represented by) the social world. When practiced in a manner suggested by Fairclough (1995), CDA can take up language and multimodal expression highly systematically, looking at utterances and actions in terms of their genre (way of interacting), discourse (way of representing), and style (way of being). Say, for example, Person A is walking down a crowded street. Person B, her friend, recognizes her from 10 feet away and calls out: "Hey, there!" That utterance, "hey, there," can be interpreted in terms of its genre, its discourse, and its style. Its genre, or way of interacting, is that of the salutation, greeting, or interpersonal engagement initiation. Its discourse, or way of representing, might be described as casual and friendly, but also respectful of privacy (since a proper name was not used in public). Its style, or way of being, is in this case quite close to its way of representing: Person B is expressing herself as a person willing to break through a crowd in order to initiate contact with her friend, Person A. The usefulness of the Fairclough heuristic is especially evident if one imagines two different people: Person A' and Person B' on the same street. The utterance is the same, but Person A' is a thief who has just stolen a watch from the Cartier shop. Person B' is a plain-clothes security officer. Person B' has called out "Hey, there!" to Person A'. Now the genre is that of the command, or alert. The way of representing might be described as hostile, curt, and no-nonsense. And as for a way of being, Person B' is conveying (through the imperative tone and hasty chasing movement entailed by the utterance) his identity as a man of authority. This is a simple example of critical discourse analysis practiced at its most formal level in order to bridge fine-grained linguistic analysis to broader social circumstances. CDA may also be practiced as a stance, a way of positioning oneself with respect to the data at hand and the social purpose for which it is being analyzed. In this case, my analytic purpose was to open my own eyes and ears as a teacher researcher to the qualities, themes, and patterns of moral discourse *post facto*. As I began to interpret our discourse through the lens of moral philosophy, I noticed aspects to our conversation I had not seen before, and developed a new appreciation for the ways my students engaged with our talk not only affectively, but also with respect to critical thinking and the logical construction of moral positions.

INTERPRETATIONS

Throughout the discussion, my students' and my shifting ideas about racial identity, belonging, appearance, behavior, and speech are all evident. Our talk is straightforward, but the subject is confusing and slippery to all of us. We talked through and around an initial question I posed: Why exactly did my students worry that calling me White would "get them in trouble," hurt my feelings, or both? From my students' responses, I came to understand that, from their perspective, an African American calling another African American White was tantamount to asserting that the target person (the person called White) did not belong in the in-group with other African American people. For the name-calling to be particularly or potentially offensive, the label (White) had to

be applied by an African American to another African American. From here we moved to other questions: What if I self-identified as White? Would being called White not be an insult? In general, what did the shade of my skin (or anyone's skin, for that matter) have to do with identity and social belonging? What did the shade of a person's skin have to do with the way a person spoke, or was assumed to speak? Looking back and attempting to sort through the muddle, I might frame the talk as a collaborative attempt to answer the following questions. What happens when racial categories (labels) fail to account for feelings, relationships, and experiences that confound the categories? What happens to the concept of race when a White teacher and African American students try to talk about it? As a group, we were struggling to define and describe five sets of identities, or ways of being: (1) ways of using the adjective *white* (calling someone White); (2) ways of being White; (3) ways of using the adjective *Black* (calling someone Black and/or African American); (4) ways of being Black (and/or African American); and (5) ways of living out racial reconciliation (thinking of an individual's racial identity as multiple or hybrid). At times, these "ways of being" overlapped; at other times, they are imagined as distinct.[3]

What initially leads us into moral talk is the fact that I have heard Niya say that calling someone White is an insult. "Why is this an insult?," I asked. Brianna said:

> When people tell that other people that they're White,
> it's kind of like me saying that they don't belong here,
> and that they, like, need to move out of, like, leave America. (lines 18-20)

This response suggests that Brianna is fully capable of seeing through the surface meaning of the act of calling-someone-White to the deeper intention (entering into the deontological perspective) that motivates such an act. The person who calls someone White, she says, is trying to (*intending* to) make the other person feel excluded, left out, and unwelcome. For this reason, it is an insult. The question is: is hurling an insult morally wrong?

A classmate of hers, Derron, picked up Brianna's line of reasoning and moved from looking at intentions to reflecting upon consequences:

> Because White people they be, they don't belong here because
> Because it's not like White people in our country
> That belong in the county with the other White people....
> So that, uh, if we say they White they might get mad and tell the teacher
> And then they might call they mother and say ... and then my mama,
> Somebody might come up here and say, "Why you call me White?" (lines 28-37)

Derron's argument begins like Brianna's: White people do not live here with us (who are African American). They belong in the county with other White people. Therefore, calling an African American person White is tantamount to saying they do not belong with their own in-group of African Americans. But Derron looks beyond the embedded meaning of calling-someone-White to the consequences of making such an utterance. Calling someone White, he says, might make them mad and cause them to seek adult intervention from a teacher or parent. Derron expresses his opinion here by adapting the structure of his sentences and the forms of his verbs in order to construct a series of hypothetical *if-then* scenarios.

> *If* we say they White ... [then] they *might* get mad and tell ... *then* they *might* call they mother ... *then* somebody *might* come up here. [italics added to show structure of argument and shift in modals]

If we pay close attention to the words Derron uses to connect his thoughts, we can see how the concepts are logically connected. In what we might term the deontological premise of his argument, he uses the word *because* three times to convey the cause-and-effect nature of the relationship between racial identity, com-

munity, and the occupation of space (city versus county). Once it is clear what a person is intending by calling-someone-White, Derron makes a rhetorical move into what we might term the utilitarian portion of his argument, indicated by the word *so*. So, he says, a person called White might get mad, thereby inviting all the consequences of getting mad (telling a teacher, telling mama, causing someone to come to school and investigate) which follow: an alarming array of outcomes, in the face of which anyone could probably see (even though Derron did not spell it out) that calling someone White is not a good thing to do.

Intending to summarize the responses of these two students, who approached but did not finally render a moral verdict on the subject, I said:

> So what I'm hearing is, the reason it hurts people's feelings is because
> You're basically saying to them, "You don't belong here. You're not one of us. You belong with other people who are not like us." Is that fair to say?
> (lines 38-44)

Nearly everyone replied in chorus: "No!!" This choral response surprised me. I had been attempting merely to summarize the words of Derron and Brianna, and expected an affirmation (a "*yes*") that my summary was indeed accurate. Hearing the "*no*," it seemed to me now that what the class as a whole understood me to be asking was only the final piece of my question, "Is it fair to say that someone doesn't belong in the group?" Eager to display their sense of fairness, my students responded with their choral, resounding "*No*!" What they meant was: no, it is *not* fair to say that someone does not belong in a group. In this conversational turn, we had moved into moral talk on the question of calling-someone-White and rendered a group verdict, the logic behind which goes something like this: A person who is African American and lives in the African American community is where he/she belongs. Therefore, calling them White is saying that they do not belong with other African Americans, and this will make them mad because they know that this is what you mean. It is not fair to say this to African American people, may have serious consequences for everyone involved, and therefore *ought not to be said.* And that is why using the adjective White to describe me, their teacher, was wrong (along with the fact that it might hurt my feelings); their verdict was a manifestation of empathy on my students' part.

Once we had established this argument, I wondered if it was possible to split the hair of the argument to make room for the fact that I did not perceive myself to be African American, and would therefore not have my feelings hurt by being called White, or, specifically, having the adjective *White* applied to me. After all, I *was* White! But the students still had more to say about the intentions behind and consequences of calling someone White. Niya, who had very light brown skin, spoke mainstream American English, and had been called White before, said it was "mean," that it made her feel like the name-callers were identifying her with the White people who did terrible things to Black people during slavery days and the Civil War.

> So that's why I don't like when people call me White because it feels like
> I'm one of them. But I don't like that. (lines 70-72)

Niya's comment reveals a second aspect to the morally questionable act of calling someone White. If the person-called-White self-identifies as African American, he or she is being told they are outsiders who do not belong with the in-group. If the person-called-White self-identifies as White, they are being told that they are part of a group who has done unconscionable things over the course of history, which can, by association, make them feel bad. On account of these consequences, which included her hurt own feelings, Niya used deontological reasoning to conclude that people ought not, under any circumstances, to call other people White. Other students agreed, citing their own hurt or sad feelings when

someone called them a name such as fat, or ugly. Here the wrong action was broadened to include hurling any kind of label or descriptor at another person. Ever on the lookout to link the conversation to the literacy lesson plan we had begun class with, at this point I reminded the students that what we were discussing here were "mean adjectives," describing words that could hurt people's feelings.

Midway through the lesson, for reasons having to do with the overarching inquiry I was conducting into dialect diversity and style shifting, I nudged the conversation from the topic of "appearing White" to "talking White," a phrase I knew my students used with negative connotations. I wanted to hear how my students sorted through the complicated ideas we had been entertaining for many weeks around racial identity, appearance, and speech. As she had earlier in the lesson, Brianna took the lead in verbalizing what, upon analysis and reflection, seems to me an extremely sophisticated interpretation. Brianna had explained that she knew what "talkin White" sounded like, because her mother talked White when she spoke with "business people" on the phone. She added that she herself once witnessed a classmate calling Niya White, and at the time was moved to defend and support her friend:

> And then I had said ... she not like White
> White White White White
> but she a little but White and she a little bit of caramel,
> and I try to tell her [Niya] don't, it don't matter what they say you are
> it only matter <u>what</u> you are.
> It's ... you don't' have to trip offa them
> because you, you, you don't know, they might,
> you might have more stuff than them,
> you might have prettier clothes than them,
> you might have more money than them....
> You don't know what they might, what they might have
> So, 'cause some people say it just because they jealous
> and they wanna make you mad. (lines 189-208)

I would paraphrase Brianna's argument as follows: Niya is not completely, totally White (those five repetitions of the adjective *White* are a poetic stand-in for an emphatic adverb), but rather a light brown (caramel). But in any case, even if she *is* White, it doesn't matter (*shouldn't* matter). Because, for all kinds of hypothetical reasons having to do with other people, reasons Niya is unaware of but which Brianna offers with six repetitions of the word *might*, what people *say* you are may not represent what you *actually* are. For reasons of their own, including jealousy, other people might harbor the intention of hurting your feelings and be seeking the outcome of accomplishing this however they can. Therefore (Brianna uses a conclusive *so* to convey the telos of her reasoning) Niya should just be herself and not react or let herself feel hurt.

With respect to the moral framework I have been applying here, I see all three approaches in Brianna's language and thinking: the deontological, the utilitarian, and virtue ethics. Her insightful, well-imagined description of all the possible reasons that people might be calling Niya White out of jealousy demonstrates an empathic awareness of the intentions of others, and how those intentions play out in potentially hurtful ways (i.e., "they wanna make you mad"). Her focus on the outcome of the social interaction reveals a utilitarian inclination: in suggesting that her friend rise above the name-calling because it is merely a token for other resentments, Brianna seems to be establishing a route toward higher understanding, a better way for Niya. And finally, with respect to virtue ethics, Brianna suggests that the best way for Niya to cope with the insult of being called White is to remember to stay centered in herself, her own (apparently stable) character (i.e., "it don't matter what they say you are, it's only matter <u>what</u> you are. It's, you don't have to trip offa them..."). Even without words like *ought*, *should*, *right*, and *wrong*—the lexical indicators that moral discourse is underway—Brianna expresses a strongly argued conviction that since Niya cannot read all the motives and intentions of others, she must simply stick

to her own sense of self, and find the virtue in doing so.

Another student, Johnetta, took up moral discourse later on in the discussion. I had asked the class if I was White and everyone chorused a loud "No!" Johnetta said:

> I wanted to say no you're not White
> *because* I know how
> I know how it feels to be called White
> *because* some people call me Black
> *so, so* I know how it feels in the inside but
> something it it just
> it just don't, it just don't feel good. But as
> you call other people White
> you *shouldn't* call them White
> you *should* give respect and love. (lines 514-527, italics added for emphasis)

Like Niya, Johnetta uses her own experience as a victim of name-calling to empathically ground her moral verdict on describing someone as White. Because being called Black has given her pain, Johnetta has reached the conclusion that racial labels are all bad. The outcome or effect of engaging in any kind of labeling around race is the kind of speech-act which can cause someone else pain; from a utilitarian perspective, it is unacceptable. Therefore, this argument runs, one *should not* do it. Indeed, Johnetta argues further that one *should* act actively (*prosocially*, in the argot of moral development scholars) to "give respect and love," a phrase I have a hunch she has picked up in other contexts such as at home or at church.

An especially interesting and stimulating ethical puzzler emerged when I said that it did not bother or insult me if someone called me White: "It's just the way I am," I said. "I can't help it, so it doesn't really hurt my feelings." Everyone started talking at once and it took a few moments to return the class to taking turns to speak. I called on Brianna, whose impromptu reasoning was challenged to bring her ethics, ideas, and positive feelings about me into harmony with what I had said:

> Ms. Schaenen, you is, you is, you is, you is not White
> see because if you was, if you was, if you was White, you White!
> So why would that be a, if it's not a problem with you,
> why should it be a problem with us?...
> You like the way that you is, you is,
> that it don't matter how they think you is,
> Some people say, ((IN A PRETEND SCORNFUL VOICE))
> you White, you don't belong here, go back where you from.
> ((END OF PRETEND VOICE)) That's not right.
> Because you White and you still a African American. (lines 549-568)

As she had when describing how she supported Niya, Brianna turned to empathy and virtue ethics in order to guide my response to being called White. What other people said about me, how they described me, and what that description meant about belonging or not belonging: none of this mattered. It's what I *was* that mattered: my character mattered. And what I was *should not* be a problem for anyone. Moreover, it was *not right* for people to link my skin color to an identity as a nonbelonger. Brianna's speech is saturated in a sense of moral judgment in the making.

A few more turns were required for me to establish that Brianna understood me to be both White *and* African American. In order for me *not* to be insulted by being called White, I had to be White, or at least "light-skinned." And in order to be part of her community and "stay in St. Louis where you're supposed to go," I had to be African American. To bring home her point, Brianna added, "Because I think, I don't think just Black people African American.... People don't understand if you White you still gone [sic] be African American automatically." This line ended the taped part of the discussion, but the transcript notes that a general commotion of talk erupted in the class. After the discussion, I asked the students to write three sentences which used adjectives to describe themselves, and found that, on the whole, the students' compositions revealed highly positive self-regard in descriptions that took up ethnic/cultural, temperamental, and

physical characteristics, including skin color. (These sentences can be found in Appendix B.)

PULLING BACK OUT

In summary, I will note first that literacy education, particularly practices that draw upon the theories developed in the field of New Literacy/Literacies over the last quarter century, certainly offers an appropriate and fruitful opportunity for moral discourse between teachers and students, even with students as young as second graders. Practices and conceptions around reading and writing that are grounded in social interaction and value talk and thought will lead easily to moral matters. Social interactions always entail arrangements and distributions of power, goods, prestige, and other qualities valued by people. Where such arrangements and distributions are talked about openly, moral judgments are made manifest. Furthermore, moral discourse will arise when teachers actively, affectively, and positively engage students to think about right and wrong, and look for opportunities throughout the literacy curriculum to do so. I am not speaking here of deliberately planned, teacher-initiated lessons intended to draw students into moral discourse, such as follow-up discussions about "good" or "bad" characters in stories or highly morally charged scenarios in social studies. The conversation described in this paper emerged out of a simple lesson on adjectives. I had no intention of "going moral" that day, and certainly no plan to discuss the rightness and wrongness of calling someone White. However, I did not shy away from the subject once I heard the conversational turn and registered a single student's very real discomfort. Our moral discourse was student-initiated and teacher nurtured. In retrospect, I suppose I was displaying a particular kind of teacher courage to notice and respond to the moral discourse generated by my students in the moments I have been describing.[4] (And incidentally, we ended up doing the planned activity—circling all the adjectives in a literary passage—at our next hour.)

Second, I will return to the second large question I began with: How can we recognize and sustain moral talk when it does arise? In real time, the classroom encounter I have interpreted here happened in a blur of excitement and engagement. As it was happening, I was thinking mostly about race and language (and classroom management), not so much about moral discourse. In retrospect, however, with the insights a fine-grained post hoc analysis allows, it seems to me that moral talk in situ can be recognized by two primary signs. One is the focus and attention of the class. When the discussion took a turn toward the morally meaningful, students listened closely to one another and to me. The very young students I described here, over the course of the hour, held themselves in a hushed state as they listened to each other and to me, or fairly leaped out of their seats with eagerness to share an experience or an idea. Both extremes of embodied engagement showed me that what we were doing mattered to them. We were all highly and acutely attuned to each other's feelings, underscoring the empathic dimension of reckoning with moral questions.

The second indication that moral discourse was underway was the use of particular words, lexical markers of moral and logical reasoning: *ought* and *should*, for example, are but two words repeated throughout the hour that told me my students were engaged in moral thinking. Obviously, when students declare that some behavior is "not right," a class is on a moral plane. But, as I have noted above, other words suggest that a student is constructing an argument or a hypothesis, building a moral case. *If-then* sentences, and clauses that begin with *because*, and *so* also indicate that the student is trying to fit ideas into a coherent argument. No matter what the discussion seems to be about, a teacher can be on the lookout for the linguistic patterns across the curriculum which indicate the presence of the logical reasoning behind all moral claims.

Once moral discourse is underway, sustaining it, it seems to me, is a matter of not turning phony, of sticking with a question as long as you do not understand the answers offered, of pushing for clarity in the responses students give. Authenticity matters all the time in education; it especially matters when talking about right and wrong (Palmer, 1998). I was not afraid of a conversation that seemed to grope and elude a clear conclusion. I could not have anticipated how students were going to reply to some of the questions I posed. I had no idea what they would say, which is what made the interaction genuine for us all. As a group actively engaged in transactive discussion, we were collectively and collaboratively stretching toward understanding (Berkowitz, Althof, Turner, & Bloch, 2008).

Another way of sustaining the moral discourse, and transferring it into another aspect of literacy, would have been to invite the students to write even more about some of the things we had been talking about or to think about ways we might bring the insights we had been generating about racial identity and labeling into a classroom or school-wide resolution or agenda that we might all act upon. For the second graders in this study, that would have been beyond their ability to do right away, but we might have recorded their ideas and then transcribed them onto paper to read and revise after-the-fact. Older students, of course, could follow talking with writing and action. For older students, too, a third way to sustain moral discourse and build it into the literacy curriculum would be to follow the unscripted discussion with an attempt to work out on paper a few logic models for the arguments they had made individually and as a class. What were the key rhetorical features of the claims? How were they structured? Did the premises have to be asserted in a particular order? Of course, teaching the composition of arguments in a variety of forms is part of secondary language arts curricula. I am suggesting that using (and reflecting upon) authentic moral discourse among primary grade students as raw material for argument composition might offer us a way into these lessons at an earlier point, as well as steer even quotidian, seemingly undramatic lessons into the kinds of transactive discussions that add to the ever-under-construction moral consciousnesses of students.

SO WHAT?

It has been my experience that attempts to introduce or address moral universals in schools where teachers and students are from various cultural or ethnic backgrounds can lead to ethical trouble. Setting aside the worrisome lack of opportunities to broach or take up tender subjects in schools where mandated, scripted curricula preclude "natural" conversation, teachers can be wary of offending students, or of exposing their own personal convictions in the classroom. Furthermore, the way human beings use language, the varying assumptions we all have about the ways our words carry meaning, complicate our social interactions. Even if a teacher does initiate or nurture moral discourse, arriving at a consensus about matters of right and wrong takes time and patience (and may not ever happen at all). The classroom talk described in this paper is a fair representation of the kinds of transactive discussion which, I believe, allows students and teachers alike to practice the deliberate unpacking of words and meanings for their mutual benefit and understanding. Doing so sets students up to be the kind of people who know how to communicate within and across boundaries of culture and ethnicity. For all I know (and I wish I *did* know), my students went home that day and got to talking with family members about how to talk about someone's being White, Black, something in between (or both). If nothing else, our talk that day showed my students that there was at least one White person in their school lives who was not afraid to talk about race. Pushing through apparently stable meanings of words we all normally take for granted helped us all, I believe, take labels a little less for granted. The

experience furthered (and deepened) our individual and collective moral development.

It seems to me that this paper has demonstrated how teacher research (action research) as a method of inquiry can drive to the bone of teacher/student interactions where the moral dimension of all learning exists. But teacher research is a highly local form of inquiry design. Future studies of individual classrooms, those similar to and different from the context I have described here, are therefore always warranted in order to compare and contrast the patterns and themes found in one context with those found in another. And while teacher research can be designed in many different ways depending on the teacher's questions, it seems to me that critical discourse analysis as a stance and array of methods offers a particularly powerful set of tools for teacher researchers willing to tape, transcribe, review, analyze, and draw conclusions from the lifeworld of their own classrooms. The next time I am in a classroom with the opportunity to broach matters of racial identity and labeling, for example, I will be a little more savvy and sensitive about the possible semantic pitfalls. In addition to having disclosed the qualities of the moral insights my students have, this particular form of inquiry will have improved my teaching practice.

Moreover, the stance offered by critical discourse analysis is an especially powerful one for White teachers serving in classrooms with children from nondominant communities, where assumptions and ideologies about language and literacies held by teacher and students may be, at least here and there, at odds. In such classrooms, teachers can and should seek ways to connect the literacy curriculum with the moral questions most meaningful to their students. Especially in today's reformist and conformist climate, where a hierarchy of literacies can seem and feel permanent and rigid, teachers and students should be able to entertain questions about whose ways with words and values are most privileged, whose *ought* to be privileged, in what context, and why. Even the simplest language arts lesson, when open to serious questions, will elicit and exercise students' moral functions and positive qualities of character, including empathy, conscience, moral reasoning, and altruism. Without daring to identify a single universal truth about morality, or to impose upon developing minds and consciences a moral framework from without, classroom talk about right and wrong can nevertheless ring true.

NOTES

1. I use this term following Gutiérrez (2006), for whom nondominant refers "to students who have been historically marginalized in educational processes in the United States, to capture the collective historical circumstances of these students and account for issues of power relations in schools and other institutions."
2. I wish to thank Nathan B. Gusdorf for providing guidance and insight in the field of moral philosophy.
3. I thank my colleague Rob Good for his in-depth and insightful reading of the transcript, one that expanded my view of the big picture.
4. I am grateful to Marvin Berkowitz for pointing out that sometimes a teacher must draw upon a surge of courage in order to seize upon the teachable moment.

APPENDIX A
Summary Table

	Utilitatarian	*Deontological*	*Virtue Ethics*
Seminal Theorist	John Stuart Mill 19th century	Immanuel Kant 18th century	Aristotle Circa 350 BCE
Locus of analysis	Outcomes	Intentions/Motives	The character of the actor
An act or behavior is right if ...	... it results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people	... the intentions of the actor are well-meaning	... the actor is virtuous, that is, acts in the right way, time, and place, for the right reasons consistently
Example from Student Discourse	"If we say they White, they might get mad and tell the teacher ..."	"When people tell that other people that they're White, it's kind of like me saying that they don't belong here ..."	"It don't matter what they say you are, it only matter what you are."

APPENDIX B
Written Self-Descriptions Using Adjectives

Johnetta

1. I am a nice African American wong [young] woman. I am Black and I am proud of myself.
2. I am fat and I know I am but in my heart I don't care if I am fat. Some people make me chase them because they call me very bad words.
3. I like to play with my best friends at home and have good times with them and my family and have little bits |?| I say

Marquez

I have black hair. I am tall. I am a Black. I pick it because I have black hair. I picked it because I am tall. I pick it because I am an American kid because I am Black.

Lemarius

1. I am brown.
2. I am from St. Louis.
3. I am a America boy.

Brianna

First I am a African American I love myself. I am in the second grade. I am Brianna [she wrote her middle and last names in full]. I am the tallest in my classroom. I am light brown. That's who I am and I love my family.

Second I like to play with my best friends named Niya and Danielle. I like playing rope with my friends. I like people that do not talk about me.

Last I love all my teachers. I love my hole family.

Darron

A striped shirt

A black clock

I holds the world

African American

Appendix continues on next page.

APPENDIX B CONTINUED
Written Self-Descriptions Using Adjectives

Darron

Bricks

Buildings

I have a blue shirt

I have silver pants

I have black shoes on

I am brave.

I have a striped shirt at home.

I have a black clock.

The earth holds the world.

I am a American.

I love bricks because

T'Anna

I am Black, I sing, and I bild leavs house. [a house out of leaves?] I am goofy I am silly I am pretty. I am kind I am funny I am smart. I am thankful I am African American I am brave I am goodful I can swim.

Derron

I am Derron. I am light. And I got short hair. I am Africa American. I pick these three because I have all those adjectives on my skin. I'm kinda White. [Below the text he drew a picture of a boy with sunglasses on and a necklace with a medallion on it; and also a car.]

Niya

I am a African American from Rochester New York and St. Louis Moissory. I am crazy colors of the world. I am a person who writes and reads.

LaKisha

I chose these because there true about me and my teacher told me half of the words and my mom told me all of them both of them are my favorite teacher and mom. [On the back is a drawing of two smiling females, one flying a kite, in a park with a tree, grass and flowers, and clouds.]

Alexis

I am carmal.

I am funny.

I am LaKisha.

I am smart.

I am goodful.

I am African American.

I am kind.

I am thankful.

I am brave.

Of the 10 students, all but 2 used the adjective "African American" to describe themselves. One of the students who did not, Marquez, wrote that he was "an American kid because I'm Black," recalling a comment made by Brianna early in the discussion when we were talking about the connections between being Black and part of the community of Americans. Like Marquez, Lamarius also called himself "a America boy."

Interestingly, nine of the 10 students also included a word or two describing their actual skin color. Four students used the word "Black:" Johnetta, LaKisha, T'Anna, and Marquez. Lamarius called himself "brown." Brianna called herself "light brown." Re-voicing Brianna's description of Niya from the discussion, Alexis called herself "caramel." Derron, who had called me "light and White," called himself "light," and "kinda White." Derron seemed to conceive of the descriptors as concrete attributes, writing, "I have all these adjectives on my skin." Perhaps what he meant was that he had chosen to focus on words that applied to skin. Niya, having narrated the complications of her heritage as a light-skinned person who was part Chinese, poetically declared herself to be "the crazy colors of the world." Only Darron used no color words to describe himself. My sense was that our discussion had rattled him somewhat; perhaps telling his story, or my prompting him to tell his story, had left him as confused as it had me.

By including both a cultural reference (African American) and a color adjective (or two), my students collectively and individually called attention to a distinction between cultural identity and physical appearance. This idea seemed to grow right out of the conclusion of our class discussion, which had determined that although I was White, I was also African American.

With respect to identity construction in language, I am also struck by the confidence and positive feelings of self-worth that emerge from these descriptions. Even Johnetta, who says she knows she is fat, also writes that "in my heart I don't care." She is resisting the idea of being judged on a physical characteristic, just as Brianna had proudly resisted being deemed ugly on account of having what she called duck lips, just as I said I didn't care if people called me White, since I couldn't "help my skin." I am representing the adjectives in the texts above when I say that these students see themselves as kind, proud, tall, thankful, goodful, smart, funny, goofy, brave, and sweet. Furthermore, it pleases me to see that LaKisha has connected me with her mother in the learning of the words she has written: "My teacher told me half of the words and my mom told me all of them both of them are my favorite teacher and mom."

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