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Cultural Capital—Now You See It, Now You Don't: Using Race to Unpack Systemic Class Differences

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3   Jack Sullivan, "False Start," *Commonwealth: Politics, Ideas and Civic Life in Massachusetts*, Fall Issue, October 19, 2010.

4   Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: Free Press, 1970).

5   See Howard Bryant, *Shut Out: A Story of Race and Baseball in Boston* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

Teaching Notes

Cultural Capital—Now You See It, Now You Don't: Using Race to Unpack Systemic Class Differences

By Leslie Martin

I teach a cross-cultural education course that asks students to look at racial, ethnic, class, and gender inequality in systemic, structural ways. We explore how inequalities affect students and their schooling experiences. My students at the University of Mary Washington, a small public university in Virginia, are a mix of working and middle class, and about half are recent college graduates while the other half are 10-20 years post-BA. The majority of students are white; a quarter are African American or Latina. Almost all are women. My students are either current teachers seeking Master's degrees, or are beginning a teaching career. They tend to be strongly rooted in individualistic, applied understandings of teacher education. They want to take each student as an individual, and want each teacher preparation course to provide strategies to use in classroom situations. Most semesters feel a bit like an arm wrestling match as our goals clash against each other.

This clash plays itself out in discussions of cultural capital. They read Annette Lareau's *Home Advantage*, about social class, cultural capital, and parental involvement in schooling. Students readily see how resources (time, money, familiarity with assignments) shape how parents approach children's schooling. Many see Lareau's point that social classes differ in orientation to work and school, and that this shapes understandings of appropriate parental involvement. However, when looking for applied "takeaways" from the book, students often ask: "How can we get all parents to participate more? How can we show working-class parents what they should do?" They lose the analytical perspective, and suggest that working-class parents are wrong not to participate in school the middle-class way.

To try to encourage a systemic analysis, one that might remove "blame" for cultural differences from working-class parents, we discuss African American Vernacular English (AAVE). We discuss AAVE as a legitimate dialect of the United States, not laziness or slang. We examine AAVE as a form of cultural capital—one not valued by mainstream U.S. institutions, like schools—but cultural capital nonetheless. I then have either angry students (feeling that I am validating "improper" English) or students who accept that AAVE is an element of culture. Because AAVE raises the issue of race, recognized as a salient divide in society and as legitimately tied to culture, students are more prepared to see it in broader social terms.

I belabor this point: AAVE is not wrong, just different. We explore strategies that allow teachers to respect the languages and dialects that students come

to the classroom with, while helping them acquire skills in standard English for success in high-stakes testing and more. I then say: working-class parents' approach to school involvement is not wrong, just different. To improve school outcomes for working-class students, rather than asking all families to adopt middle-class norms, we could identify skills and behaviors that best prepare students for school success. We should not judge students or families for the cultural capital they have; it is not inherently good or bad, just valued or not valued by our systems.

My students are more willing to take a systemic, structural, and cultural view of race/ethnic differences than of class differences. This is likely because Americans spend so little time talking about class as real and meaningful, and about class differences as anything other than barriers to be overcome.

Feed vs. Little Brother: The Same, Only Different

By Jennifer M. Miskec

Selecting books to teach in a college level young adult literature class is always a negotiation. Required reading should be race, class, and gender equitable; represent the old and the new; and engender the kinds of critical, analytical discussions appropriate for a literature class. With this balance in mind, even smart, interesting pieces of young adult literature can miss the cut semester after semester. This was the case for me with Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother*, a teen-populated nod to Orwell's *1984*.

The content and style of *Little Brother* would fit perfectly in a class like mine.

It is a science fiction novel about a young man coming of age in a technologically saturated, panoptic society that no longer protects—or trusts—autonomy and individualism. The more the young man recognizes the control technology has on everything from emotions and opinions to life and death, the more he fights the system that works to confine him. The more he fights, the more he becomes disillusioned: Is it too late? Are we too invested in technology to think for ourselves? At its core, Doctorow's novel attends to the ways in which society itself creates the complicated narratives surrounding teens and it asks citizens to be more critical of and thoughtful about the world around them. Through the novel's implicit warning, the imagined reader—the savvy Generation Y'er, raised to accept technology as a natural part of life—is invited to re-evaluate the current moment through the framework of the protagonist's world.

But while these issues are important to include, I already have a go-to novel that does all of these things: M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, a science fiction novel about a young man coming of age in a technologically saturated, panoptic society that no longer protects . . . you get the picture.

At first glance, the two books serve too similar ends to both be included in one class. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized just how different the two books are. In *Ideology and the Children's Book*, Peter Hollindale notes that in all texts there exist—sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory—surface and passive ideologies. Surface ideologies are the values and ideas that the author has attended to that the reader is supposed to understand (plot, theme, and lessons, for example). The passive ideologies are equally present, but are left unex-