Difficult Histories in an Urban Classroom

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Dedication

For my parents, Jack and Martha.

Abstract

Academic standards for history in all states require students to learn about deeply troubling events, such as war, genocide, and slavery. Drawing on research and theories related to trauma studies and history education, this ethnographic study aims to better understand what happens when teachers and students examine the pain and suffering of others in the shared social place of an urban U.S. history classroom. In order to clarify how such troubling events are co-constructed and experienced in the classroom, I first outline a framework for conceptualizing difficult histories as histories where three interrelated components are present: (a) content centered on traumatic events; (b) a sense of identification between those studying the history and those represented in history; and (c) a moral response to these events.

Analysis revealed that only two of the histories addressed over the course of one semester were co-constructed by the teacher and her students as difficult histories: slavery and Westward Expansion. Yet, even though slavery and Westward Expansion shared the defining characteristics of difficult histories, there were significant differences in how difficulty was constructed in the classroom. Analysis also revealed that the diverse group of students in this study used their understandings of these difficult histories to engage in similar activities, such as finding evidence of how they belong in America, making sense of America, and morally responding to past and present events. In both slavery and Westward Expansion, students relied heavily on their own personal experiences and beliefs to make sense of these histories. Throughout this research, the power of personal beliefs and experiences, especially those related to issues of race and ethnicity, remained crucial to students' historical understanding. They were central to students' participation in co-constructing slavery and Westward Expansion as difficult histories in the classroom and in their own applications of historical knowledge. At times these personal beliefs were vehicles to better understand distant others and at other times, they were barriers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Is the suffering of others also our own? In thinking that it might be, societies expand the circle of we.

-Jeffery Alexander (2004)

Research Problem

We live in a violent world. Whether it is bullying at school or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is difficult to make it through a day without direct or indirect encounters with the cruelty we humans inflict on one another. A common argument for including history education in the school curriculum is that we can progress as individuals, as a nation, as a global community, by learning from past mistakes. Yet the ongoing small and large-scale encounters with violence that shape our daily lives challenge the community of social studies educators to critically analyze what is happening in our classrooms. We must ask ourselves what images of self and other, and what concepts of justice and responsibility, students are constructing as they bear witness to the suffering of others through the study of topics such as war, imperialism, and genocide. Can we, as Jeffery Alexander indicates, learn to identify with others through a better understanding of their suffering? Can the teaching of traumatic histories create opportunities for students to care about those who are different and other than themselves? Or does asking students to examine such violent and oppressive histories have a perversely opposite effect of what a teacher may have wanted – students becoming numb or indifferent to the suffering of others?

Academic standards for history across the country require students to learn about deeply troubling events, such as imperialism, civil wars, global conflicts, genocide, and slavery. While rarely openly discussed, teachers often expect students to respond morally to issues of injustice and suffering in the curriculum. Yet, does this happen? In this dissertation I provide a framework for conceptualizing *difficult histories* as histories whose central events are rooted in the trauma, suffering, and violent oppression of groups of people. Such histories have the power to elicit strong emotional reactions in classrooms for many reasons, one being that there is a moral response engendered when learning about what happened, and another being the depth to which

these events influence students' ideas about personal and group identities. Drawing on research and theories related to trauma studies and sociocultural theories of learning, I examine what classroom discourse reveals about whose histories are experienced as difficult and how this difficulty is constructed in the classroom. This dissertation explores whose suffering is being presented to invoke a moral response, in what ways students are asked to identify with those who are different from themselves, and how students make sense of the suffering of those they study about in history class.

My interest in this topic has developed over the past thirteen years as a result of my work with students and teachers in a variety of educational contexts. Soon after I began teaching social studies I realized that part of my work required that I ask students to examine the suffering of others in order to learn history. In order to help students learn about the past I would show pictures of victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, have students create graphs of the war dead in World War I, read accounts of death by the Guillotine, and watch videos that showed the South African police beating protestors. In the work of teaching and learning history, such topics are business as usual. But the day to day, hour after hour examination of these sufferings was difficult for me, not only because it was painful to think about such issues day in and day out, but because I began to realize that thinking about such issues was especially difficult or troublesome for students who had personally experienced violence and oppression. I was asking students to consider these difficult issues because I believed there were important lessons to be learned from these events in history that were connected to issues of justice. I believed that the knowledge and critical thinking skills that students learned through the process of studying these traumatic events would be empowering. This was not always the case. Student response and learning from such issues was uneven, ranging from genuine interest and care for the subject, to an apathetic acceptance of the past. I engaged in this research project with a desire to learn more about how students construct meaning from the difficult issues they study in school. I believe learning about

the past and the struggles people have encountered can be transformative, and this research is an attempt to better understand this process.

Purpose of Research and Research Questions

In order to make sense of what happens when students are asked to bear witness to the suffering that humans have inflicted upon each other over time, this ethnographic study of a history classroom analyzes what happens in one eleventh grade United States history class when a veteran teacher engaged students in a critical and non-traditional approach to learning about the past that included examinations of traumatic historical events. The following research questions shaped the research and writing of this ethnographic study:

1. What are the characteristics of classroom discourse related to difficult histories and how are these co-constructed by teacher and students?
2. What situated meanings about the past, themselves, and others do students construct when studying difficult histories?
3. How do students enact their understandings of difficult histories?

In the next chapter, I discuss key principles of sociocultural theory in order to provide a theoretical framework for this study. I also review the research in social studies education that informs this research, focusing specifically on sociocultural research into historical understanding that examines the ways that context and identity shape how students make sense of the past. I then address trauma theory in order to expose ways in which it can affect teaching and learning about the past.

Much of the literature regarding historical knowledge and traumatic histories reveal gaps in understanding the process of how students come to make sense of difficult events in the past and in how students use their knowledge of these histories. Therefore in chapter three, I describe the research design and methodology I use to examine what happens in a classroom that

influences how certain histories are constructed as difficult and then how students use what they learn about the these histories to make sense of the their own lives and worlds. I also provide rich descriptions of the school and focal students so the context of the research can be understood.

In chapter four, I examine how slavery and Westward Expansion were co-constructed by the teacher and her students as difficult histories within the shared place of the classroom. Adapting Simone Schweber's (2004) "moral geography" framework, I explore how these two content areas were constructed as difficult histories in the classroom by analyzing the narratives that were constructed around these two histories, which historical actors they had learned and talked about, and in what ways these histories were being represented.

In chapter five, I move outside the classroom to analyze how students' responses in the interviews reveal how they make use of these difficult histories. I analyze how students talk about slavery and Westward Expansion to uncover the multiple ways that students' identities mediated their understanding of these difficult histories. The goal is to better understand how students enacted their understandings through moral response and identification. Central to these actions of moral response and identification are students' identities, which mediate how students engage with the past while simultaneously being shaped by students' interactions with the past. Then finally in the conclusion, I summarize the key findings from the study and discuss areas in need of further research.

This research explores difficult histories and in the process asks students and their teacher to consider complicated and often uncomfortable questions. The participants in this study were generous, honest, and open about their thoughts and reactions. In their openness they reveal the sadness, humor, boredom, anger, and confusion that often accompany learning about the past. I hope that the words and ideas in the following pages provide some better understanding of the lives and experiences of these individuals and in the process, shed some light on the complex process of making sense of difficult histories in the history classroom.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

"*The past does not exist independently from the present*"

(Triouillot, 1995)

Theoretical Framework

In his investigation into historical silences, anthropologist Michel-Rolph Triouillot writes about the complex intersection of culture and power in the process of constructing histories. He encourages people to become more cognizant of the relationship between the past and the present, of the flexible boundaries and overlap between *what we know* about history and *how we come to know* about history. Since this study explores how students come to make sense of difficult histories, it is important to pay attention to both the process of how students are learning about the past in the classroom and to students' historical understandings.

Sociocultural theory. The primary framework that guides my research is a sociocultural theory of knowledge that conceptualizes learning as a social activity (Holland et. al., 1998; Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch, 1991). This approach to research and learning is rooted in the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed and that learning is situated in cultural, historical, and institutional settings. My research focuses specifically on the context of the history classroom, the significance of identity in making sense of the past, and how students use their understandings of history in their self-identifications and moral responses.

Approaching the teaching and learning of history from a sociocultural perspective assumes that historical understanding results from students participating in the social activities of interpreting events, constructing knowledge, and applying what they know about the past to their daily lives (Barton & Levstik, 2004). This approach to learning about the past acknowledges that the complex processes students engage in when navigating and interpreting personal histories, the official histories learned in school, and the information about the past encountered in mainstream culture is not one where the outcome can be predetermined (Epstein, 2000; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Seixas, 2000; VanSledright, 2002; Weinberg et al., 2007). This sociocultural approach

"calls attention to the socially situated nature and the purpose of students' actions – what they do with history – rather than focusing on the knowledge assumed to exist inside their heads or the skills they are believed to possess as individuals" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 7).

Central to sociocultural theory is the understanding that learning is a social activity that takes place through interaction in places that have been theorized as communities of practice (Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1998) or cultural worlds (Holland et al., 1998). Ideally classrooms are envisioned as communities of practice where students work together to achieve a common goal of learning knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, not all classrooms achieve such a unified, functional community as described by Lave and Wenger, and the concept of a cultural world as theorized by Holland et al., then becomes an option for analyzing classroom activities. These cultural worlds, also referred to as figured worlds, encompass the lived and imagined activities and landscapes that give meaning to people's interactions:

> By figured world, then, we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued above others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents…who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state as moved by a specific set of forces. (Holland et al., p. 52).

My research is rooted in this idea that the classroom is a socially constructed space that is deeply influenced by the narratives that shape how students see themselves and their worlds. In conceptualizing the classroom as a unique social place, I draw upon Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995) whose research into classroom discourse conceptualized social place as "a theoretical construct that helps us understand the mutually informing but seemingly exclusive places where teacher and students reside and interact in the classroom" (p. 446). The classroom is the one place where the voices of students and the teacher have the potential to contribute to and

to be influenced by the curriculum. I operationalize this idea of a socially constructed community within the classroom by engaging in a situated analysis of how students' historical understandings are shaped by the contexts, identities, and activities in the social place of the classroom. Drawing from Lave (1996) and Wenger's (1998) idea of communities of practice and Holland et al.'s (1998) conception of cultural worlds, I conceptualize the classroom as a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation, which is shaped and informed by the many cultural worlds that students participate in and bring with them to the classroom. This cultural world of the classroom is made visible in practice through artifacts employed by participants. Stated more simply, as a researcher I am able to see and interpret students' understanding about the past through the activities that take place in the classroom, such as talking about history, and participants' reflections on these activities.

Central to sociolcultural theories of learning is the concept of identity. In this research project, my interest in identity is twofold: the first being how the identities students bring to the classroom shape how they negotiate meanings about the past and, secondly, how the content of history shapes students' identification (or lack thereof) with others. Lave (1996) argues that crafting identities is the fundamental project of social practice. In thinking about the classroom, her assertion, "Who you are becoming shapes crucially and fundamentally what you know," situates identity as central to making sense of how students engage with historical knowledge (p. 157). In a similar vein, Wenger (1998) argues that learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming within the context of our communities (p. 54). Central to this understanding is the idea that identity is constructed through participation, and by recognizing each other's participation we become part of each other. As I consider the history classroom, this leads me to question who is included in the community, and in what ways those present in the classroom and those who are represented in the curriculum are encouraged to engage with each other.

To make sense of the actions and interactions within a community or culture, many sociocultural theorists turn to language, or discourse. James Gee (2005) states that the function of language is to support the performance of social activities and social identities and to support human affiliation within cultures, social groups, and institutions. In order to pull off a way of being in the world (such as being an American), people use language and other stuff - ways of acting interacting, feeling, believing, valuing, using objects - to recognize themselves and others as meaning and meaningful in certain ways. Through discourse, people produce, reproduce, and maintain a way of being. Poststructural theorists conceptualize discourse as a social activity that is constitutive of society (Fairlclough, 2001; Foucault, 1995; Gee, 2005, 2006). From this perspective an important component of discourse is that it constructs objects of knowledge, social subjects, subjectivities, and social relationships. Discourse also reflects these aspects of society, which is why discourse is characterized by reflexivity, or its ability to both reflect and construct reality. This concept of reflexivity is an important factor supporting studying language within the context in which it is used.

Drawing upon Norman Fariclough's (2001) and James Gee's (2005) theories of discourse analysis which conceptualize discourse as social practice means that language can only be understood as being *in* society; language is not, and cannot be, external to the social order. How language is used is socially determined and has social effects. Like Fairclough, I am interested in the role discourse plays in the reproduction of and struggles over relations of power, in this case specifically, in the teaching and learning of history and how such localized struggles over meaning are reflective of broader social issues.

Review of Literature

History education. Debates about the structure, purposes, and methods of history education have been on-going since the 1894 Madison Conference of the Committee of Ten outlined the first official 8-year framework for the study of history for schools (Evans, 2004). I

will not detail the expanse or the nuance of these discussions, but rather will closely examine the current sociocultural research and theory in history education. I begin from the premise that while thinking historically is different from other forms of thinking in the natural and social sciences, I do not believe that historical thinking is the only way to make sense of past events (Booth, 1993; Seixas, 1994). The social studies curriculum in the United States primarily remains fractured into disciplinary courses, which in this case then requires that the research is rooted in a single discipline. Yet it is important to note that creating more interdisciplinary courses in the social studies would still require students to think historically; it would just not be the only approach to an issue or problem that students would be asked to use.

Over the past fifteen years there has been much theorizing, research, and overall trying to make sense of students' historical understanding, also referred to as historical knowledge and historical thinking (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Booth, 1993; Davis, Yeager, & Foster, 2001; Epstein, 2009; Grant, 2001; Levstik & Barton, 2008; Porat, 2004; Seixas, 1993, 1994, 2000; VanSeldright, 2002; Wills, 1996; Wineberg et al., 2007). The National Center for History in the Schools (1996), the creators of the national history standards in U.S. and World History, state:

> The study of history […] rests on knowledge of facts, dates, names, places, events, and ideas. In addition, true historical understanding requires students to engage in historical thinking: to raise questions and to marshal solid evidence in support of their answers; to go beyond the facts presented in their textbooks and examine the historical record for themselves; to consult documents, journals, diaries, artifacts, historic sites, works of art, quantitative data, and other evidence from the past and to do so imaginatively – taking into account the historical context in which these records were created and comparing the multiple points of view of those on the scene at the time. (p. 6)

They then break down historical thinking into five interrelated dimensions: chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, historical research

capabilities, and historical issues analysis and decision-making. While many, including myself, might disagree with breaking historical thinking down to five cognitive skills that are focused on an individual's skills, the standards writers do make very clear that the ability to interpret events from multiple perspectives and sources from within and beyond an historical event is central to the work of doing history. Historians and educators who focus on the sociocultural process of learning history will also emphasize the interpretive nature of historical understanding, yet they also strongly emphasize the shared process of making meaning of the past (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Grant, 2001; Seixas, 1993; VanSledright, 2002) and the importance of making sense of what students do with their understanding of history (Barton & Levstik, 2004). In this section I will review the seminal sociocultural research in social studies education, focusing on the role of context in the social and situated process of making sense of the past, the relationships between identity and historical understanding, and, finally, what students do with their knowledge of history.

Context matters. In her studies of how national context shapes students' perceptions of history, Linda Levstik (2001) explains, "historical thinking is not so much an individual as a social act framed and constrained by elements which are themselves sociocultural constructs. Historical thinking develops in the interactions and tensions between and among thinkers, settings, means (tools), and purposes" (p. 70). Therefore, the situated nature of making sense of the past is shaped by the context in which the past is encountered; and, according to Levstik, context can include the people engaged in discussions, where these discussions are taking place, what resources or tools are being engaged in the discussion, and, finally, the guiding force or goal of the discussion. This section examines research that explores the relationship between the contexts in which students learn about the past and the understandings they construct.

Bruce VanSledright's (2002) experimental intervention research design included teaching a lesson about the Jamestown starving time in a fifth grade classroom in order to explore

how students confront history's interpretive paradox, "the required-but-denied connection between reality and interpretation" (p. 1090). While his research was focused on how students develop the cognitive capacity to think like historians, his findings revealed much about the social process of learning history. As his students went from critiquing evidence to calling an author of an historical document a liar in class discussions, VanSledright's analysis reveals how the process of interpretation necessarily involves communal decision making about what is acceptable knowledge. Students were not interpreting sources in a vacuum, but rather through small group and classroom discussions they were engaged in a process of creating a shared interpretation. Central to his findings was the profound influence peers have on each other as they interpret historical evidence and negotiate what knowledge is acceptable to the group.

John Wills' (1996) ethnography of an enacted curriculum in a middle school reveals the power of classroom discourse, a cultural tool that mediates students' understanding of history, to shape how students apply historical understanding to current events. In his analysis of student interviews, teacher interviews, and observations of three separate classrooms where the students were primarily white, Wills found that the classroom discourse surrounding the study of slavery was rooted in morally assessing the system of slavery. This moral discourse about race and slavery did not prepare students to engage in a political critique of more current racial issues in society and left students struggling to make connections between the issues of race in the past and present. Wills' research reveals that the situated nature of students' historical understanding within a school context is shaped by the language, or discourse, that surrounds the topic of study. It also shows the power of language to not only shape how students see the past, but to shape how students use history to make sense of the present.

In his observation of two U.S. history classrooms, S.G. Grant (2001) analyzed student and teacher interactions, instructional representations of content, and student engagement with ideas in order to better understand the relationship between teachers' practices and students'

understanding of history. This study emphasized how the teacher shapes the context in which students think and discuss history. Grant's analysis revealed that students from one teacher held a limited and shallow sense of history, while the students from the other teacher's classroom "project a more thoughtful and substantive view of history" (p. 103). While he denies a cause and effect relationship between the teachers' instructional practices and student understanding, he does state that the two teachers' instructional practices "figure prominently in explaining the differences across the students' views" (p. 102). This is an important study not only because it details the differences in how teachers teach the same topic, but also because it reveals how these differences play out in students' thinking about a period of history.

Unlike Grant (2001), Peter Seixas'(1993) research revealed very little correspondence between what was taught in history class and students' ideas about history. In this case, which included classroom observations and student interviews, the classroom setting was found to be less critical in influencing students' historical thinking than their family and home communities were . These contexts outside the school significantly influence how students engage and make sense of the past. Seixas argues, as do many others (Barton, 2001; Barton & Levstik; Epstein, 2000, 2001, 2009; Wineburg et al., 2007), that greater integration of the different histories from the multiple sites outside of the school where students engage with history could lead to meaningful and powerful discussions about the sources of dissonance, often rooted in cultural and ethnic differences, between these different sites of students' historical encounters.

Much like Seixas (1993), Barton and Levstik (1998) acknowledge the multiple contexts where students experience the past and refer to *vernacular* and *official* histories to describe differences in historical accounts that students encounter in their home communities and in more official settings, such as school. Their research into middle school students' conceptions of historical significance showed that students learned official histories in school and more personal histories at home, and that the home, or vernacular, histories sometimes embellished school

history and other times conflicted with their experiences in school. Pointing out many troubling aspects of leaving such conflicting accounts unexamined and that neither history was a comprehensive framework for making sense of the past, they also envision the classroom as a space where vernacular and official histories are in conversation.

In their study of how historical consciousness develops, Sam Wineburg, Susan Mosborg, Dan Porat, and Ariel Duncan (2007) look more closely at the multiple sites where students interact with history in their lives. In multiple interviews over two years with students from three schools and their parents, as well as school observations and teacher interviews, Wineburg et al. explore the complex process of how students develop what turns out to be very similar narratives of the Vietnam War. The researchers conclude that students are very knowledgeable about the past mostly due to the strong influence of the cultural curriculum - the ways the information from TV, radio, and the internet permeate into their thinking about the past. Students from different ethnic, class, and national backgrounds who attended different schools used many of the same details relating to the Vietnam memorial and the anti-war movement to narrate similar histories of the War. Much like Seixas (1993), this group of researchers calls on teachers to improve history education by bringing students' knowledge from outside the school into the classroom. Yet, the difference is that while Seixas noted the differences among students' designation of significance pertaining to historical understanding, Windeburg et al.'s research reveals that students within the same national context develop similar narratives about an historical event.

Keith Barton and Linda Levstik have done a significant amount of work examining the sociococultural process of making sense of the past, much of which has focused on the cultural tools that mediate students' historical understanding in different national contexts. A large segment of their work focuses on making sense of the complex process of how national contexts shape students' use of cultural tools, such as narratives, to make sense of the past (Barton, 2001a, 2001b; Barton & Levstik, 1999, 2004; Levstik, 2001). Their work has found significant

differences in how students in different countries think about the nature and purposes of learning about the past (Barton, 2001b), and develop perspective taking skills (Levstik, 2001). Barton's (2001a) research revealed that American students experienced history in school, at home, and in the media via a narrative of progress while Northern Irish students encountered history from a more analytic framework. Barton goes on to explain that differences in access and how students use cultural tools, such as narratives, to make sense of the past should be understood as products of historical and political developments within a national context. Curricula and textbooks are reflective and constitutive of national values because there are economic and political forces that work to ensure that students encounter a particular image of the nation that supports the status quo (Apple, 2001; Barton, 2001a; Symcox, 2002).

This section revealed the need to pay close attention to context in conducting research on how students make sense of the past. Context is complex and encompasses multiple spaces, such as the classroom, the school, families, and nations. And within these multiple and overlapping contexts, the ways that cultural tools, such as discourse and narratives, are used and manipulated strongly influence how students make sense of the past. The next section will discuss the research that analyzes the equally complex relationship between identity and historical understanding.

History and identity. One of the many motivating rationales for teaching history in the schools is to foster a sense of a shared identity rooted in the struggles and successes of the nation. And while the research cited in the previous section does reveal the power of the national context to shape a shared narrative of the national story, there is also a growing body of research that explores the different ways that students' identities mediate what they know about the past and what they do with this knowledge.

Terrie Epstein has conducted a substantial and meaningful program of research examining the different ways that black and white students in the United States make sense of their national history (Epstein 1998, 2000, 2001, 2009). Over time she consistently has found that

black and white students interpret U.S. history differently. In her 2000 and 2001 analyses of interviews and classroom observations of fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders, she found significant racial group differences in explanations of slavery. The white students saw it as black servitude while black students described it in terms of white abuse of black bodies. She also found that whites only talked about blacks during slavery and civil rights, whereas blacks talked about black experiences throughout history. The black students in her study noted that black experiences in history were only included when they related to white people's experiences.

In her book, *Interpreting National History: Race, Identity, and Pedagogy in Classrooms and Communities* (2009), Epstein again researched multiple age groups, schools, classrooms, and in this study, families. Again she reveals consistent and substantial differences in the ways white and black students make sense of the history they learn in school. She reports that even though the teachers' pedagogies do influence how students explain individual historic events and people, they had little influence on students' interpretive frameworks of the past. For example, unlike their white classmates, African American students continued to construct race relations in terms of violence and conflict and described rights as more exclusionary than inclusive even when teachers taught about racial cooperation and progressive expansion of rights. The home communities of black and white students were also very different in how they discussed history. White families generally espoused a national narrative constituting a positive and progressive view of American society, whereas black families openly discussed systemic racism, racial violence, and the denial of rights. While the white families' histories were more reflective of school history, the black families provided their children with an alternate framework for thinking about U.S. history and American society. Epstein's research provides an understanding of how official histories - those histories taught in school - can be discredited by alternate frameworks that are not included in the classroom discussions of national history.

In a study of high achieving urban Latino students' understanding of U.S. history, Stevan Terzian and Elizabeth Anne Yeager (2007) found strong similarities between the Cuban American students in their study and the white students in Epsteins's (2009) study regarding how they assigned historical significance. The students in their study, all in Advanced Placement U.S. history, believed in American exceptionalism, varied little from the official narrative of national progress, and viewed racism and inequality as aberrations rather than patterns of national policy. In making sense of this phenomenon, the authors looked to research in Latino political behavior, which revealed that Cuban Americans, unlike Puerto Ricans, more strongly identified as white than as minority. Terzian and Yeager reflected that in the context of this particular school and neighborhood, the Spanish-speaking students were part of an ethnic and linguistic majority which provided further reason for the students to not identify as ethnic minorities. This reveals the complexity of research examining issues of identity, calling into question how common identifying terms like minority and Latino are complicated by the context in which people live their lives.

Dan Porat's (2004) research in Israel examined the role students' ethnic and religious identities play in remembering accounts of historic events that they read in a history textbook. His participants were eleven students who identified themselves as ethnically from Middle Eastern, European, or mixed heritage and as Orthodox Jews, secular, reform, or traditional Jews who attended three different schools that reflected their religious affiliations. Drawing on textual analysis, data collected from written prompts and interviews with the students as well as interviews with their parents, Porat found that a crucial difference in students' historical understanding comes from the variations in the prior knowledge that students bring to texts when they read. Referring to this knowledge as social memory, he found that social memory differed among ethnic groups in the same country. He also revealed that the textbook accounts of an event read in school had little influence on students' understanding of an event when the students'

social memory countered what was said in the text. He argues that some level of emotional appropriation, some connection, is necessary for students to remember an event over time. Porat's (2004) and Epstein's (2009) research reveals that textbooks and teachers' pedagogies, as they are currently encountered by students, do very little to challenge the interpretive frameworks that students learn at home and bring to school.

Using historical knowledge. As the research above demonstrates, students' identities do play a powerful role in how they make sense of history. Identity is also a crucial concept in understanding what students do with their knowledge of history. In their sociocultural framework for thinking about history education, Barton and Levstik (2004) argue that one of the four specific actions students are expected to perform when they learn history is to *identify*: "They are asked to embrace connections between themselves and the people and events of the past. This is one of the most common uses of history…" (Barton & Levstik 2004, p. 7). They describe three types of identification that students engage in: identification with personal or family histories, identification with stories of the nation's origin and development, and identifying current public events with the past. In terms of personal identification, students use the nation's history to shape a community that they are proud to belong to: "Students used history to establish 'who we are' not only by providing a community of identification, but by positioning that community as a uniquely powerful and morally superior one" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 57). Barton and Levstik (2004) argue that the stories conveyed in United States history textbooks and curricula promote national identification through a consistent emphasis on the nation's founding people, events, and documents. The pedagogy of history teachers also encourages identification, in that students are asked from an early age to participate in re-enactments of significant events and national heroes, and through teachers' use of the first person plural pronouns (*we* fought, *our* country) as they teach about these national events in history. And students *do* identify with the nation: "Students in the United States, like their teachers, associate themselves with the people and events of the

national past even when they do not approve of them" (Barton & Levstik 2004, p. 51). Barton and Levstik (2004) articulate that identification is beneficial because it encourages people to feel a sense of connection, of community, with larger social groups. Yet, they also point out some of the dangers that can result from such identification, primarily that the image of the nation presented in schools often excludes many social groups or presents the nation as superior to other nations or social groups.

Another issue of interest among social studies researchers is how historical understanding is used to foster a moral response among students. In her book *Habits of Mind*, Melinda Fine (1995) examines how students use historical understanding of the Holocaust to develop moral thinking and become socially responsible citizens. Fine's research reveals the conflicts and tensions that arise among students and the teacher when difficult moral issues are brought into public classroom discussions. One of the central tensions that arises in the classroom is between valuing multiple perspectives and silencing unpopular perspectives. Fine argues that this is not unique to a particular classroom or curriculum, but that this form of discourse regarding plurality and unity has been central throughout U.S. history. Fine goes on to argue that value laden debates are embedded in the content and that attempting to separate content from the moral issues embedded in them leaves students unprepared to grapple with complex moral issues that confront them in their public lives.

Simone Schweber (2004) also examines the role of morality in history classrooms in her research into the teaching of the Holocaust in California classrooms. Her observation and analysis of how four different teachers planned and enacted their Holocaust curricula revealed, much like Fine (1995), that regardless of the teacher's formal curriculum and classroom practice, there are always complex moral lessons embedded in teaching this event. Teachers, whether planning to or not, are imparting moral lessons in their teaching about the past, and students are inevitably drawing moral lessons from history.

Barton and Levstik (2004) argue that, even though teachers are reluctant to directly teach morality, they do expect that students will celebrate the good and condemn the bad that they encounter in their study of the past. They argue that there are three areas of moral response that are rooted in developing conceptions of right and wrong: remembrance, justice, and admiration. In their articulation of why remembrance is an important aspect of teaching and learning about the past, Barton and Levstik argue that recognizing the suffering of others is an important aspect of reconciliation. Their research reveals that in Northern Ireland, students made strong connections between suffering and historical significance, meaning that the more people suffered, the more significance they allocated to that historical event. Barton and Levstik found this to be reflective of the British and Irish cultures more broadly, which place a great deal of importance on remembering how people who came before them suffered. Barton and Levstik contrast this with American culture, which seems to place greater significance on individual character and achievement. American teachers expressed little interest in teaching about the injustices that occurred in U.S. history: "Although they were aware that injustices had happened in the past, they were terrified of what they might unleash by speaking about them in the present, and in response, they chose silence" (p.95). The two instances of great suffering that seem to focus on remembrance in curricula in the United States are the Holocaust and American slavery, both of which can be taught in ways that provide little challenge to the dominant narrative of American progress. While remembrance is central to other national approaches to teaching and learning history, its role in U.S. history classrooms is less significant.

Fairness and justice are also central to Barton and Levstik's (2004) conception of moral response. They argue that in order for students to engage in debates about issues of justice or fairness in a democratic society, they need to be able to move beyond their own socially, culturally, and historically situated perspectives of fairness toward a more inclusive vision of justice (p. 99). Barton and Levstik (2004) also argue that students need more experience learning

about the intersections of historic injustice and more contemporary concerns. In her work examining the relationship between perspective taking and the national narrative with students in New Zealand, Levstik (2001) found that issues of race and ethnicity complicated how students viewed issues of fairness. While all groups of students agreed that women's suffrage was significant to the nation because it reflected an expansion of equity and fairness, not all groups agreed that issues of Maori land rights were significant to the nation as a whole, but rather were only significant to the Maori. Levstik (2001) also points out that students were more comfortable taking on multiple perspectives when it applied to distant others, such as in learning about the Holocaust. Yet, when asked to take on differing perspectives about more local issues, such as land rights, students struggled to distance themselves from their current perspectives to understand the complexity of an historical event. She argues, "neither students' willingness to look beyond their own position, nor their curiosity about the lives of other people in other places and times necessarily prepare them to deal with perspective taking in their own nation. We know very little about making that imaginative leap, especially in relation to historically rooted and persistent social problems" (Levstik, 2001, p. 90).

While Barton and Levstik (2004) propose that developing a moral response among students is necessary to foster the abilities to remember, condemn, and admire, I would add to this list the ability to develop a sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others. This is necessary in a democracy in that merely judging or remembering the lives and actions of others does not put us in relationship with them. It is only when we are in relationship with others that we can begin to feel a sense of responsibility, a need to care for others. This understanding of moral education is reflective of Nel Noddings' (1984, 2001, 2004) ethic of care. Noddings envisions the classroom as a place where the study of atrocities can foster understanding and compassion for others that may somehow prevent future horrors. She consistently encourages educators to place caring and relationship at the center of all educational practice. Noddings assumes that a deeper

understanding of the other, of engaging in caring relationships with the suffering and experiences of others through a more inclusive study of people and the world, is necessary to inhibit the desire or ability to engage in violence. If social studies education aims to develop a moral response that includes a shared sense of responsibility for people both within and beyond our temporal and geographical borders, then it could be called transformative in its purpose.

Difficult histories. Asking students in a social studies classroom to explore the direct and ongoing effects of oppression, violence, and trauma on individuals and societies is difficult and often unpopular. Yet, covering content that includes issues related to oppression, violence, and trauma is common. The difference between these two statements is crucial to this study, so let me provide an example to illustrate. Most United States history teachers will cover the topic of slavery. It is common for students to learn about the Fugitive Slave Law, the Missouri Compromise, the cultural and economic differences between the North and South. It is common for students to learn that slavery was wrong and that it ended with the Civil War. But it is less common for educators to push students to look more deeply into the experiences that defined a slave society. This second approach requires students to consider both the suffering and the cruelty of others. A teacher who takes this approach might ask students to examine the lived experiences of slaveholders and slaves by reading primary source documents such as slave narratives; or to examine the tools of oppression, such as whips, chains and branding irons; or they might analyze bills of sale and etchings of the business of slave markets. The difference between these two approaches is, on one level, an issue of content coverage. But the differences in the social activities that take place in these two classrooms are significant. This research is interested in better understanding what happens when the social activity of the classroom is focused on learning about and from (Britzman, 2000) some of the more traumatic and difficult issues in U.S. history.

Difficult and controversial topics, such as racism, are traditionally not addressed in social studies classrooms for a variety of reasons, ranging from the discomfort such issues may cause because they challenge shared cultural beliefs and silences, to the fear of administrative reprisal (Evans et al., 1999; Ochoa-Becker, 2007). Asking students to consider how policies of violence and oppression, such as slavery, shape the society they live in raises many sensitive issues and questions related to ethics and identity. Asking students to consider such difficult issues is similar to Deborah Britzman's (1991) description of unpopular narratives:

> The unpopular disorganizes questions of morality, of civility, and of subjectivity. It can grate on the nerves or expose what might have been repressed. In any case, unpopular things call into question what is taken as already settled. It sets loose unanticipated and rebellious meanings that throw into question our very agency. (p. 64)

Here, according to Britzman, what constitutes the unpopular is directly related to issues of identity (subjectivity) and morality. The direct connection between how students see themselves and how they understand the world works is knocked off balance when learning such difficult issues.

In their examination of why certain topics are considered "taboo" in social studies curricula, Evans et al. (1999) also address this concept of the unpopular and how it is affected by how closely it touches students' lives:

> The greater the distance in space and time from the individual lives of students, the greater the focus in the curriculum and the less chance of emotional involvement or controversy. The converse also seems to be true: The closer to students' lives, the more meaningful, the more likely the topic is to be taboo. Areas of conflicting belief often reflect contested terrain supported by deeply embedded cultural values. Thus, the teaching of history and social science topics seemingly disconnected from students' lives may serve as a way for the culture to address social issues obliquely, avoiding the

confrontation and turmoil that might result from the direct examination of social issues and creating layers of comfort for teachers, students, and administrators as well as those in positions of power in the larger society. (p.221)

Britzman's (1991) and Evans et al.'s (1999) analyses reveal that difficulty is not solely located in the content or issue itself, but is experienced in the affect – the turmoil or emotional response - that the content brings out. In terms of classrooms, this emotional response can result from how closely students identify with the content being covered, or the activities that students are asked to engage in as they consider the content.

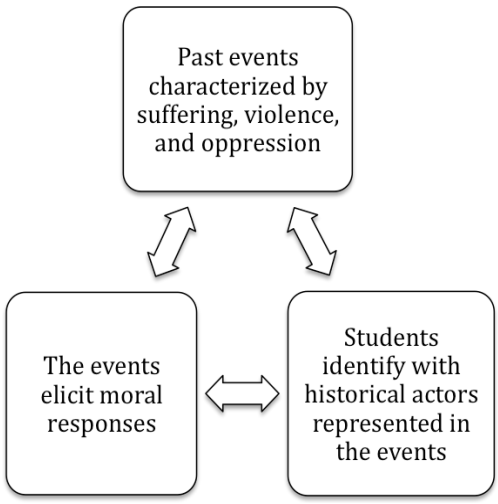

Figure 1: Difficult Histories

In my research I have made a conscience decision to use the term "difficult" as opposed to the terms *controversial*, *unpopular*, *taboo*, or *traumatic* when discussing events and issues in history that create a level of discomfort in the classroom. In conceptualizing "difficult histories" there are three interrelated components that I assume are present: (a) content centered on traumatic events, which includes a focus on the interrelated topics of suffering, violence, and

oppression; (b) a sense of identification between those studying the history and those represented; and (c) a moral response to these events. My use of this term difficult histories springs from Deborah Britzman's (1998, 2000) concept of difficult knowledge. As she theorizes about the teaching and learning associated with the *Diary of Anne Frank*, Britzman (1998, 2000) discusses the idea of difficult knowledge, which is deeply intertwined with psychoanalytic theories of learning traced back to Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud. Although she never directly defines the concept, she does provide some ideas about what it includes, such as: "knowledge of the other's suffering" (2000, p.43), "stories that disturb one's sense of cohesiveness" (2000, p. 43), and "studying the experiences and the traumatic residuals of genocide, ethnic hatred, aggression, forms of state-sanctioned – and hence legal – social violence" (1998, p.117). I invoke Britzman with the term difficult histories because I am drawing from her careful attention to the ways that learning about trauma, suffering, and oppression troubles both teachers and students.

Trauma theories. Like Britzman (1998, 2000), I am interested in how issues of trauma and suffering shape teaching and learning about the past. Many trauma specialists in education and the humanities look to Sigmund Freud to better understand suffering and trauma, and the roots of trauma are traced to his early 20th century writings about psychoanalysis. More recently, Cathy Caruth's (1995) work regarding trauma and literature is also based in psychoanalysis and maintains that a unique quality of trauma is that the traumatic event cannot be fully experienced at the moment, but "only belatedly in the repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (p. 6). In this sense trauma is a repeated suffering of an event that cannot be fully experienced, and there is always a gap that carries the force of the event at the expense of simple knowledge and memory (p.6). According to Caruth, the subject is unable to possess knowledge of the experience; rather it is the ongoing remembering and forgetting of the event that possesses the subject. Such an unclaimed experience exists outside of historical boundaries as it is experienced as an ongoing leaving and returning to the site of the experience.

Ernst Van Alphen (1999) examines the discursive construction of experience and refers to trauma as "failed experience" in that trauma is an experience that has not come about. Much like Caruth (1995), he explains that "the cause of trauma is precisely the impossibility of experiencing, and subsequently memorizing, an event" (Van Alphen, 1999, p. 26). Yet, the inability to experience is not the result of the interaction between the individual and an event, but rather the inability to experience an event is the result of language's inability to provide the terms and positions in which a subject can experience an event. The inability to share, to represent the event, is the result of a discursive vacuum which does not allow the event to be known and therefore truly experienced.

Other recent trauma theorists have expanded the scope of trauma studies from examining how trauma affects individuals to the role trauma plays in the collective. In *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*, Arthur Neal (2005) distinguishes between personal trauma and national trauma. He describes personal trauma as the result of an unexpected, painful, radical, shocking event that results in an abrupt change in a subject's social relationships, as well as feelings of being damaged and permanently changed. The psychiatric element of personal trauma leads to a crisis of meaning that requires a restructuring of self-identity in order to adapt to the changes. Collective trauma, on the other hand, is experienced by an entire group of people and comes about when the institutional foundations of society are challenged. The collective loses its sense of living in a predictable and stable society. Neal claims that ignoring the collective traumatic experience is not a reasonable option, and "when the event is dismissed from consciousness, it resurfaces in feelings of anxiety and despair" (p.4). The collective usually engages in "repair work" to find new ways of binding people together and creating a sense of stability. Neal argues that the collective nature of these experiences is central to a group's ability to develop a sense of shared identity:

> The traumas of the past become ingrained in collective memories and provide reference points to draw upon when the need arises. Hearing or reading about an event does not have the same implications as experiencing an event directly. However, as parts of the social heritage, events from the past become selectively embedded in collective memory. (p.7)

While Neal does not elaborate extensively on the process of how collective traumas become embedded in collective memory, he does discuss the roles the media, commemorations, and popular culture play in the collective experiencing and remembering of traumatic events. Neal writes from a position that assumes an existing collectivity that experiences a traumatic event equally. His list of national traumas that have shaped the American identity, such as the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, Watergate, and 9/11, raises questions about how equally and collectively such events were experienced and remembered by all Americans.

Taking yet another look at how trauma affects the collective, cultural trauma theorists address the social construction of trauma. In his chapter "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Jeffery Alexander's (2004) definition of cultural trauma is similar to Neal's collective trauma, but makes an important distinction between a group actually experiencing a shattering event and *feeling* as if they have been subjected to a horrendous event. For example, a person living in New Mexico when Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese did not directly experience the trauma of an attack, but rather through the discourse and imagery that immediately followed the event, this person begins to feel traumatized by the Japanese attack. This distinction between directly experiencing and feeling as if the trauma had been experienced reveals the cultural trauma theorists' emphasis on the construction of a shared experience of trauma rather than an intrinsic experience that is inherent in an encounter with an event. Trauma is not something that exists naturally; rather it is constructed by society. The trauma does not exist in an event, but rather in the sense that people come to make of the event:

"Whether or not the structures of meaning are destabilized and shocked is not the result of the event but the effect of a sociocultural process," writes Alexander. "It is the result of an exercise of human agency, of the successful imposition of a new system of cultural classification. This cultural process is deeply affected by power structures and by the contingent skills of reflexive social agents" (p. 10).

There is some overlap between Alexander's (2004) and Van Alphen's (1999) understandings of trauma. Van Alphen argues that the sociocultural tool of language shapes what can be experienced, and Alexander, while not naming language as the tool for the construction of a shared meaning of a traumatic event, does locate the experiencing of trauma in the context in which an event takes place or is remembered rather than in the event itself. Alexander outlines a complex process, shaped by those with access to power, through which traumatic meaning is socially constructed and remembered as a result of a horrendous event. A unique characteristic of Alexander's discussion of trauma that is absent from other discussions is the power a group has to claim responsibility for and/or solidarity with people's suffering: "It is by constructing cultural traumas that social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but 'take on board' some significant responsibility for it" (p. 1). Alexander conceives of trauma as a possible site for building understanding and solidarity among diverse groups of people. If this is what teachers hope to accomplish in the classroom, how can it be done?

Teaching difficult histories. The Holocaust is one of the few historical events studied in schools where it is commonly accepted (and often expected) to thoughtfully consider the suffering of others (Fine, 1995; Schweber, 2004; Totten, 2002). Extensive theorizing and research has been done to document why the Holocaust should be studied as well as how to best teach such a difficult and complex traumatic event. These issues are not agreed upon among Holocaust educators and there are a variety of approaches and rationales for teaching this extreme historical

event. One of the most common reasons given for bringing testimonies of trauma and suffering into the classroom is that an examination of this difficult history will be accompanied by powerful moral lessons (Fine, 1995; Schweber, 2004). In her book about teaching the Holocaust, *Habits of Mind: Struggle Over Values in American Classrooms*, Melinda Fine (1995) documents quite clearly the political battles that can ensue, locally and nationally, when public school curricula engage students in critical moral education. Yet, she argues that if part of our responsibility as teachers is to foster students' ability to morally respond to people and events, then we must somehow find ways to incorporate moral response into academic learning. Asking students to learn from the suffering of others is not about dictating moral lessons; rather, it is about presenting students with reasons for envisioning themselves as moral or ethical agents in the world. The hope in putting students in dialogue with testimonies and witness to trauma is that an affective, authentic learning experience will expand how students view themselves and their relationships with and responsibilities to others.

There are also very real dangers that arise in the classroom when inviting students to bear witness to difficult histories. It is difficult to plan for what students will experience and learn from encountering the pain of others, as encounters with trauma are often unpredictable. Learning from suffering entails witnessing testimonies of people's experiences with trauma. In discussing why students should learn from the painful experiences of Anne Frank, Deborah Britzman (2000) explains that it is

> …to become attentive to profound suffering and social injustices in their own time; to begin to understand the structures that sustain aggression and hatred; and to consider how the very questions of vulnerability, despair, and profound loss must become central to our own conceptualization of who we each are, not just in terms of reading the diary as a text but also in allowing the diary to invoke the interest in the work of becoming an ethical subject. (p. 29)

This idea of *invoking the interest in the work of becoming an ethical subject* is often central to why a teacher would ask her or his students to expose themselves to trying to truly understand the pain of others. Andrew McKnight (2004) also invokes the question of how, as teachers of traumatic events, we can move students from emotional response to critical analysis and to the "emotional desire to unpack the social meaning of texts, assume appropriate responsibility, and propagate more universal expressions of human freedom through their actions" (p. 334).

There are also educators who teach difficult histories to be transformative, which means providing an opportunity for moving from response to action. Shoshana Felman (1992) openly describes an example of her teaching of a college level class focusing on testimonies from Holocaust survivors and the existential crisis that ensued among her students as a result of their engagement with the testimonial evidence of severe suffering. While she was initially quite surprised and troubled by their response to encounters with testimonies of trauma, she came to realize that

> if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has not truly taught: it has perhaps passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which the students or the audience – the recipients – can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but that no one could recognize, and that no one could therefore truly *learn, read,* or *put to use*. (Felman, 1992, p. 53).

Here the aim of learning from, not just about, trauma is central to the classroom experience and it is this dialogue or relationship with those who have suffered, via their testimonies, which creates an opportunity for students to be shocked and possibly moved to action by what they learn.

Despite the dangers involved in shocking students with testimony of the violence and suffering we humans are capable of inflicting upon one another, Dominick LaCapra (2001)

argues that "opening oneself to empathetic unsettlement is…a desirable affective dimension of inquiry which compliments and supplements empirical research and analysis" (p.78). What is crucial in LaCapra's work on writing, history, and trauma is his combined focus on inquiry, analysis, and the affective dimension of studying the past. We study the pain of others not just to be affected by their suffering, or merely to document facts and details about what happened; but rather to be transformed in the pursuit of meaningful questions regarding what it means to be human and to live together in this world. In taking an inquiry approach to teaching and learning about traumatic events, the moral response stance becomes a process of questioning and seeking understanding that leads to action rather than a doling out of judgment and decrees about what is right and wrong behavior.

Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert (1997) address the intertwined ethical and epistemological responsibilities that come with teaching and learning from testimonies of traumatic experiences. They argue it is necessary that those who submit to learning from testimony should consign themselves as "apprentices to the provisions of testimony." This concept of being an apprentice to testimony means, "…one submits oneself to learn the limits of oneself and in doing so bares oneself to a wounding, a trauma inflicted by the other's story" (Simon & Eppert, 1997, p.179). Like Felman (1992) and LaCapra (2001), Simon and Eppert argue that learning from testimonies of trauma can only happen when the student is affected by what he or she encounters in the representation of another's experience. These scholars also agree that there is no preset or utopian lesson to be learned from this unsettlement, from the encounter with another's suffering. But, rather, as LaCapra (2001) tells us "…empathetic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit" (p. 41). Again here, developing the skill of moral response by witnessing trauma and suffering does not mean being able to fit a person's experience into an existing narrative of what is right and wrong,

or how the pain leads to progress. The goal is rather to be in relationship with someone who suffered, to be moved by their experience, and to respond to their experience by truly hearing and responding to what they are sharing.

As a sociocultural activity, learning about the past happens in relation with others and often meanings constructed from witnessing testimonies of trauma are shaped by the discourse that students engage with in the social studies classroom. Simon and Eppert (1997) discuss the necessity of creating communities of memory that support the study of and response to testimonies of suffering:

> An ethical practice of witnessing includes the obligation to bear witness – to re-testify, to somehow convey what one has heard and thinks important to remember. Communities of memory are locations in which such obligations can be worked out. More specifically, they are productive spaces in which to name, distribute, produce, and practice expressive resources that enable a witnessing which establishes living memories. (p. 187)

According to this, classrooms have the potential to be transformative spaces where moral response and action are supported and encouraged when they are envisioned and structured as communities of memory.

Central to this investigation into difficult histories are these ideas of community and relationship. As the sociocultural research into historical understanding shows, issues of identity and context deeply affect how students make sense of what they learn in history classes and what they do with what they learn. Yet, how does the discourse of a high school history classroom position students to be in relationship with those who have suffered in the past? In what ways do students' identities shape how they position themselves in relationship to the distant suffering of others? And, finally, what does this imply for how students see themselves and others as members of local communities – such as the school and classroom – and more abstract communities – such as the American community?

Chapter 3: Methodology

The Research Setting

School: Springs High School
Classroom: Room Number 341, 11th Grade U.S. History, 5th Hour
Teacher: Melissa Lang

The school. The site for this study is Springs High, a large, urban comprehensive high school in the Midwest. The school itself is a large brick building located in a middle class neighborhood with tree lined streets and well-kept single family homes. There is a track and football field with bleachers adjacent to the school that creates the image of an idyllic high school setting. Yet this ideal image is interrupted on a regular basis by the presence of a city police car parked either directly in front of the main doors, or just across the street. In the 2008-09 school year, when this research took place, Springs High was one of seven traditional, public senior high schools in this urban district and had an enrollment of 1,125 students. In recent years the school had become known for serving low income and immigrant students; the state's statistics reveal that 80% of the student population qualified for free and reduced priced lunch and over 41% were classified as English language learners. The largest immigrant population in the school was Somali, with significant increases in the Latino population in recent years. While these increases reflect the demographic changes in the city, the school is more ethnically diverse than the city overall. School data reports that the student population was 45.3% Black, 15% White, 27% Latino, 9.1 % Asian, and 3.4% Native American, whereas the city demographics are described in the 2000 Census as 65% White, 18 % Black, 8% Latino, 6% Asian, 2% Native American (2000 Census).

Springs High has multiple academic options for its students who come from all areas of the district and even those outside. The school's website detailed its program offerings: "[Springs] High School serves students and families with several Programs of Study, AVID, Advanced Placement Courses, English Language support, Post Secondary options, and is an International Baccalaureate Diploma Program candidate school" (MPS, 2009). Students who

participated in this study took advantage of all these programs, as well as the Health Careers, Digital Media, and the Auto and Construction Programs. Despite multiple academic options and supports, student achievement as measured by the state was low and the school was not meeting Annual Yearly Progress, a measure of success under the No Child Left Behind legislation. The school-wide reading proficiency was 44%, while the math proficiency rate was 13%.

The descriptions of Springs High by those who teach, learn, and spend their days together within its walls reflect the diversity of opportunity, achievement, and population. In talking about the school early in the year, Ms. Lang, a teacher at Springs High for over 10 years, said, "that is the beauty of [Springs High] – they are the friendliest students" (Class Transcript 9/5/08). She later discussed how her school compares to others in terms of student achievement: "there is talk throughout the school that failure rates have never been as high as they are this year. Then you talk to teachers who have come from other buildings in the district and they say it is no different, it's a district problem. You know, people say it's happening in other school districts too" (Lang, Interview 2).

Springs High students describe the school in a variety of ways, both positive and negative. Estella, a Mexican American student who plans to study graphic design in college, talks of her love for the school and teachers. She specifically discusses how the variety of academic programs makes it a better learning environment than her middle school. Luis, a junior from Ecuador, describes Springs High as "an OK school" and talks about the auto program as a program that he has a strong connection to and that he sees as a key characteristic that differentiates Springs from other schools. Salifou, a recent immigrant from Togo, says, "I think [Springs] is a very diverse school. It's got a lot of students from parts of the world which I think is one of the best qualities of the school" (Salifou, Interview 1). Diana, a college bound African American senior who is involved in sports, says:

> I love this school, I mean I like it. It's really, I know it's really diverse and I like most of the teachers (laughs). […] I just wish we had a lot more spirit; you know school spirit in doing stuff. I have school spirit but the school itself does not have school spirit (laughing). So I wish we had more school spirit. But other than that I think we are a good school. I just, I don't know -we are kinda poor though (laughs). […] It would just be nice to have more things that other schools have. (Diana, Interview 1).

Intermingled with talk of teachers, learning, and school spirit is talk about violence. Javier, a Mexican American student who plans to join the Marines after high school, talks about the school as a violent place: "lately it's been dangerous. […] People getting shot not even a block from here. And a lot of fights. A lot of people coming from other schools to start fights over here" (Javier, Interview 1). Diana also describes the violence that surrounds the school. She is adamant in her clarification that the violence takes place outside of school, on the property, but outside the school building.

> Like with the shooting with, um, there was a shooting and then there was a stabbing and then, like, I think two of our students have got killed since I have been here and that's sad for everybody. But I don't think that's, it wasn't within our school. I mean every school has fights and stuff but…, [Springs] is not as bad as everybody makes it seem. It is more, I don't know, it's more friendly." (Diana, Interview 1).

Despite its idyllic appearance, location in a middle class neighborhood, and apparent celebration of diversity, Springs is troubled by many of the problems that affect large urban schools: high poverty rates, low test scores, and violence.

The classroom. This study focuses on Ms. Lang's 5th hour United States history class. Springs High runs on a six period schedule and this class started after lunch and ran from approximately 1:05 – 1:55 on a daily basis. I observed this one classroom everyday for the entire fall semester. Choosing to be in the classroom for one semester was both a practical and

functional decision. It was practical in that it allowed me to collect data, analyze it, and write in a timely manner in order to complete my dissertation. It was also functional to the research itself in that the semester is a natural stopping point in the year where many changes in the classroom take place in terms of scheduling. While this was my thinking before entering the classroom in the fall, I soon learned that at Springs High student schedules and teacher schedules change often, which significantly affect the characteristics of the classroom. At the start of the school year there were 45 students enrolled in the class due to unexpected over-enrollment in the school. After hiring a new social studies teacher in October and rearranging teacher and student schedules, the classroom enrollment was lowered to 32 by November. This number was not fixed; fluctuations in enrollment continued throughout the semester. While the enrollment numbers in Ms. Lang's 5th hour class were quite large, they did not reflect the number of actual students who were in the classroom each day. Attendance in the class was very low, with the semester average of 24 students attending each class.

Students in Ms. Lang's 5th Hour U.S. History Class in November 2008	
Number of boys	22
Number of girls	10
Number of students born outside the U.S.	8
Number of special education students	4

Percentage of Asian students	13%
Percentage of Black students	38%
Percentage of Latino students	25%
Percentage of White students	22%

With such variation in both enrollment and attendance, it is difficult to state the exact demographics of the classroom. The numbers listed above in the chart are a snapshot of the classroom enrollment in November. At this point in the year there were 22 boys and 10 girls in the class. Eight of the students were born outside the United States and four students were classified as Special Education.

The students who did attend class struggled to focus and learn. There was a significant amount of socializing and other seemingly off-task behaviors. One student described her classmates as "obnoxious, loud, um very entertaining in a way cuz you can be easily distracted just watching them and then you would laugh like the whole entire class." She also describes the relationship between the behavior and learning: "I like the stuff that we learn, it's just that I don't really get to learn it that well because there are so many people, like, talking and they're, like, acting really immature" (Estella, Interview 2). By the end of the semester the class average G.P.A. was 34%.

Research participants

The teacher. When choosing the participating class for this study, I first looked for a skilled, veteran teacher. Since my purpose was to study a classroom where participants in a non-specialized history class engage in an examination of difficult histories, I identified a teacher who included these histories in her curriculum. And since the focus of my analysis is language, I wanted to work with a teacher who actively engaged students in discussion in her classroom. I identified Ms. Lang through a search process where I communicated with professional colleagues at the university and in local secondary schools throughout the Spring of 2008 to identify teachers who met the criteria for participation in this study. The criteria I used for locating the setting via the identification of a teacher were that the teacher should:

- teach about difficult histories in his/her classroom (whether or not the teacher identifies them as such)
- be identified by colleagues as an effective and engaging teacher
- have more than five years teaching experience
- profess taking a critical approach to teaching history

It was difficult to find teachers who both fit this description and were willing to have a researcher in their classroom everyday for a semester. Ms. Lang expressed an interest in participating in the study to me. I spoke with her at length about her teaching and the research project and, having known Ms. Lang from previous work in professional development at the school, there was a level of understanding and trust between us that enabled her to take the risk of having me in her classroom for a semester.

Ms. Lang is a young fifty-year-old white woman who had been teaching social studies at Springs High for ten years. She was born, raised, and earned her bachelors degree in North Dakota. She had majored in social work and made the decision later in life to pursue her teaching certification in social studies. Springs High was the only school she had taught at and her only son recently graduated from there. She was known by many in the school to be a very good teacher who took a non-traditional approach to teaching history, meaning she did not rely on the textbook and engaged students in class discussion on a regular basis. Throughout her teaching career, Ms. Lang was actively involved in professional development to improve her practice. She was prepared to, and did, teach Advanced Placement U.S. History, AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination – a study skills program), Sheltered Instruction for Social Studies (an approach to teaching content area courses to English language learners), and in 2008-2009 she was also engaged in district sponsored professional development around the goals for the Institute for Learning (a capacity building program focused on student learning based out of the University of Pittsburg) and was preparing to begin teaching the International Baccalaureate curriculum. Her

professional development reveals that she was well versed in the current best practices in teaching social studies, and was prepared to teach both highly engaged and functioning students as well as students who struggled with low English academic literacy.

When the 2008-09 school year began Ms. Lang was teaching two sections of U.S. History, one section of Advanced Placement U.S. History, one section of AVID, and one section of Sheltered World History. Within the school she was also a member of the school leadership committee and the Sheltered Instruction professional development group. As a result of the unexpected over-enrollment, a new social studies teacher was hired in October after which Ms. Lang no longer taught the A.P. class, but rather had three mainstream U.S. history classes, the AVID class, and the Sheltered World History class.

Ms. Lang structured her teaching in all classes around in her overarching goal of getting students to think critically. She often stated that she thought it was more important that students develop the higher order thinking skills necessary to be critically aware citizens than it was for them to know the facts and dates of history. She enacted that belief in her classroom by engaging students in in-depth studies of particular events or time periods in history rather than briefly coving large amounts of content that provide a big overview understanding of history. Her methods of teaching were rooted in the analysis of multiple perspectives and sources so that students were able to think critically about events. Among colleagues and students she is known for her signature activity, the Socratic Seminar, where students sit in a circle and discuss the meanings and implications of specific historical documents.

The students had a wide range of perspectives regarding Ms. Lang. Some argued that she was a “hard” teacher, while others thought she needed to be “stricter.” From Salifou’s perspective: “She challenges you to write, to discuss. I just don’t like to think that hard. None of my friends want to work cuz they think it is too hard and they don't want to think” (Salifou, Interview 2). And Diana’s view of her classroom:

> I know Ms. Lang gets irritated. They're juniors but they are very immature. And in my other classes we don't play around like that, we have to get our work done because they are more hard classes, like AP and college prep classes and stuff like that, but it is way different [in Ms. Lang's class]. With the students, I don't think it's Ms. Lang at all. I think she needs to be more strict on them, but I don't, she can't control nobody's behavior. (Diana, Interview 2)

These two students' observations speak of defining characteristics of Ms. Lang's classroom in the fall semester of the 2008-2009 school year: high academic expectations coupled with disengaged students.

The focal students. The research design for this study included identifying focus students who could provide deeper insight into how students were making sense of the histories they were learning in the classroom. My goal was to select a group of academically engaged students that was gender balanced and reflected the academic, ethnic, and racial diversity of the classroom, and from the first day of school I was in the process of determining which students in Ms. Lang's class would meet this goal. Determining this group was complicated by the fact that midway through September the decision was made to create a new section of U.S. History and to move students out of the 5th hour class into the new section. The decisions about which students to move and the actual change did not occur until mid October. Determining the focal student group was further complicated by irregular and low attendance by many students. By the end of October, I chose seven class members to be the focal students: four boys and three girls. One of the focal students, Bret, was transferred out of the class in November; therefore he is not included as a focal student. While the six focal students in this report do provide significant insight into what was happening in the classroom, they are not considered to be representative of the whole class, as this group was significantly more engaged in classroom activities than the rest of the

students. The voices of students who, for one reason or another, did not engage in the activity of the classroom or come to class are not represented in among these focal students.

Focal Students in Ms. Lang's U.S. History Class				
Name	**Gender**	**Grade**	**Ethnicity (Nationality)**	**Home language**
Salifou	Male	11	African (Togolese)	Ewe
Javier	Male	11	Latino (Mexican)	Spanish
Luis	Male	11	Latino (Ecuadorian)	Spanish
~~Bret~~	~~Male~~	~~11~~	~~White (American)~~	~~English~~
Jade	Female	12	African American	English
Diana	Female	12	African American	English
Estella	Female	11	Latina (American)	Spanish

Salifou. Salifou moved with his family from Togo to the United States when he was 12 years old. He was a fun-loving young man who enjoyed talking about sports and listening to music. He did not have any close friends in the class, but was well liked by most and was often one of the students talking and socializing when there was work to be done. Despite his socializing tendencies, he had the reputation among his peers as being one of the good students in the class. While he was not shy, he did not often participate in class discussions because they made him uncomfortable. This discomfort did not apply to all levels of participation; despite his accent and middling English skills he was always eager to read out loud. Overall his level of engagement in class activities was erratic, but his attendance was good. When he talked about his work in the class and the expectations of him by his family and the school, it was clear that he struggled to makes sense of the different approaches to teaching and learning history in his home

country and here at Springs High. When Salifou spoke of the future he spoke of wanting to improve his grades, of going to college, and of making his family proud.

Javier. Javier was a natural born leader who exuded confidence and an interest in people and the world. And while he regularly contributed to class discussions, he did not fit the image of a good student. He was interested in learning, in engaging with the ideas in the class, but he was not interested in doing the work to succeed in school. He never carried a backpack and usually entered class without any books, or sometimes with a single notebook. He proclaimed that world history was his favorite subject, and was particularly interested in the Roman Empire. He seemed to get along with all the students in the class, but he was particularly close with Luis and another Latino student, Manny. These three boys shared a common social life outside of class, which to Javier and Manny clearly took precedence over what was happening in Ms. Lang's classroom. There were two times when Javier and Manny came to class with bloody knuckles, the result of fights during the lunch hour that other students seemed unaware of. When Javier talked about the future, he talked of joining the Marines, fighting for a cause, and maybe going to college someday. With little warning, in mid-January, Javier and his family moved back to Mexico, a decision that he was not happy about.

Luis. Luis moved to the United States from Ecuador when he was in the fourth grade. He was a small, friendly young man who attended class regularly, contributed to class discussions, and turned in his work. He spoke with a strong Spanish accent, but his English skills were better than others in the class. He was good friends with Manny and Javier and they often came into class together speaking in Spanish, yet Luis never came to class with bloody knuckles like the other two did. While he was quiet, he had a strong character. He was a more serious student than Manny or Javier, a quality his friends respected and used to their benefit as they regularly copied his work. Luis worked easily with most people in the class and was considered by many to be a good student. When Ms. Lang spoke of times when she felt successful in the classroom, she

mentioned Luis and his consistent engagement and interest in the content. Luis was in the Auto Program at Springs High, which he enjoyed, and when he talked about the future he spoke of working in an auto shop and owning his own business some day.

Jade. Jade was an outgoing, athletic, intelligent young woman; an outspoken student whose voice was one of loudest and strongest in classroom discussions. She was a senior and was in Ms. Lang's class because she failed the U.S. history class she took with another teacher at Springs High the previous year. In an assertive manner, she would openly chastise students in the class who were not doing their work and remind them that they needed to pass this class in order to graduate. Being successful in school was a priority for Jade and she demonstrated this by doing her work and advocating for herself when it came to grading. She was often passionately and critically engaged in what was being addressed in class, often sharing her own opinions and knowledge about a subject. Many in the class respected her contributions, but others were slightly intimidated and sometimes annoyed by the dominance of her voice in discussions. She often missed a class for a variety of reasons, many of which related to her active involvement in athletics and other school activities as well as the college application process. When Jade talked about the future she spoke of fulfilling a dream inspired by her late brother: getting an athletic scholarship and going to college.

Diana. Diana was a young lady with a large presence. She was very tall – over six feet – well dressed, full of life, and quick to laugh. Like Jade she was a senior who had not passed U.S. history the previous year, but this year she was one of the social and academic leaders in the classroom. She and Jade were close friends, and even though she was older than the other students, she socialized easily with everyone in the class. She participated frequently, often carrying and directing discussions with her questions and comments. U.S. history was Diana's favorite class and she claimed to find the work easy. Whereas Jade could sometimes seem slightly aggressive when talking in class, Diana usually had a smile and a laugh to accompany her

contributions. When she spoke about the future she was unsure of what she wanted to be, but talked of going to college and by January had applied to local four-year and two-year colleges.

Estella. Estella was a Mexican American girl who described herself as "random". She dressed in colorful, artsy outfits usually involving striped and checked patterns, and always had her hair in pigtails with ribbons. Her attendance was consistently good, but her level of participation and engagement in the class varied based on her interest and mood. She was easily distracted by other students' antics and horseplay, but when she was interested in a topic she could be focused. She liked to participate in discussions and while her voice was not as strong as Jade or Diana's, she was one of the more vocal students in the class. She sat next to Javier for most of the year and they had a sibling-like relationship. Her best friend in the class was Linh, a Chinese girl who spoke very little English, yet they greeted each other with enthusiastic hugs at the start of each class. Estella was very artistic, often doodled in her notebook and on papers, and when she spoke of the future she talked about going to college to become a graphic artist.

Data Collection and Sources

In conducting this research I gathered data from multiple sources directly related to the classroom in order to provide for the variety of perspectives that constructed the culture of the classroom. As this is an interpretive study, the goal of gathering multiple perspectives was not to reveal the truth about this classroom. Rather the multiple perspectives evident in the data support the viability of my description and analysis of the classroom. The variety of sources and methods of collecting data was "a way to get to the finding…by seeing or hearing multiple *instances* of it from different *sources* by using different *methods* and squaring the finding with others it needs to be squared with" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 267). The multiplicity of sources and voices in the data challenged and complicated my own view of the classroom and made for a more plausible interpretation of texts, actions, discussions, and silences.

I collected data for this project over the course of the fall semester of the 2008-09 school year. I began my observations of Ms. Lang's 5th hour class on the second day of school, September 3, and stopped on the last day of the semester, January 22. I observed this class on a daily basis, even when there was a substitute teacher. There were five classes I did not attend due to scheduling conflicts, yet I was able to speak with the teacher to get information about what content was covered and an overview of what had happened in these classes. Each class session I attended was digitally recorded on two audio recorders. An outline of what was recorded was made for each day. Key discussions related to issues of identity, the community, and difficult issues were transcribed. I took field notes during the classes on my laptop most days; on days where I was working with students in their groups I would write up field notes after class. In my field notes I wrote about what happened in the classroom: descriptions of activities, students, and the teacher, notes from conversations I had with students, Ms. Lang, group work conversations, and even full class discussions. I journaled on a weekly basis in order to reflect on patterns, general themes, and overall impressions from the class over the course of the week and between weeks. Throughout the semester I also collected all readings, handouts, assessments, and assignments that were used in the classroom.

I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each focal student and the teacher, each of which lasted between 20-50 minutes (see Appendices B and C). I conducted the interviews with Ms. Lang in her classroom during her combined lunch/preparation period. The first teacher interview took place within the first month of school and the second in the last week of the semester. I interviewed students in the school media center during school hours. The first student interviews were conducted in mid-November and the second in mid-January. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Researcher's Role. As a white woman who has taught in urban and rural areas where being white classified me as a minority, I am very comfortable working in diverse contexts. As I

embarked on this research I couldn't help but question my ability to really understand and to accurately represent what it would be like to learn about U.S. history from a perspective other than as a white person. In order to get as close to the students' experience as possible, I wanted to be in the classroom on a daily basis so that I could develop an emic, or insider's, view of what was happening there. My goal was to observe what happened throughout the normal course of a typical urban history classroom, to be able to describe in detail the ways that students engaged with, or disengaged from, events and ideas related to difficult histories. I did not want my presence in the classroom to alter what was taught or significantly influence how students engaged with the content and ideas that Ms. Lang taught. Yet, my presence could not be separated from the day-to-day activities the classroom, thereby influencing both Ms. Lang and the students. For example, on days when Ms. Lang was frustrated with how things were going she would apologize to me, saying that she hoped that my research was not being "ruined" by the problems coming up in the class. And while after the first couple of days students seem to have forgotten about the audio recorders in the room, there were times when students would call attention to the fact that what their friends were saying was being recorded. Such incidents reveal how my presence as a researcher merely recording the activities in the room, without even interacting with individuals or the process of teaching and learning, was affecting what happened in the classroom.

As a *participant* observer, my presence in the classroom extended beyond taking notes about what others were doing. Everyday I interacted with the teacher before class, usually listening to Ms. Lang talk about her day and her plan for the class session. In order to protect her authority over the curriculum, I tried to avoid any type of critical engagement with her planning or reflections on the class. When I began the project I intended to remain removed from discussions about what and how to teach, but as I was a former teacher and had worked with Ms. Lang in a professional development capacity in the past, we naturally fell into discussions about

her curriculum. In the first months of the semester I was diligent at keeping my suggestions and opinions about this at bay, trying rather to just be a supportive ear for Ms. Lang's talking through ideas about her teaching and the class. By the end of the semester, after witnessing many of the struggles that both she and the students encountered in the classroom, I found it more difficult to not speak up. If I was seeing problems in the classroom related to the curriculum, and as a professional educator had sound suggestions about how improvements could be made, why should I stay quiet? Part of me wanted to tell Ms. Lang about where students were struggling, wanted to suggest other ways of organizing student work and assignments. But I was a researcher; I did not believe it was my place to suggest improvements or to assess the teaching and learning as it was taking place. My role was to pay attention to what was happening, to think about what was happening and why. As a researcher, my criticisms would come later, in my writing. But as time passed, this seemed more and more wrong to me. It seemed that it was not in the best interest of the students or Ms. Lang for me to be quietly assessing and critiquing the class and not speaking up to address problems. Who benefitted from me holding my judgment until I could privately, with no affect on the classroom, critique the teaching and learning I observed on a daily basis? I also worried that if I was openly critical of what was happening in the classroom at this stage of the project, Ms. Lang might have asked me to leave. So, I kept quiet for mainly selfish reasons, to protect my research. Yet, as I continued to see students and Ms. Lang struggling though the class, I questioned the assumptions I was making about the role of the researcher, the purpose of the research, and the design of the project. Like Patti Lather (1991), I began to think about "going beyond the need for more and better data" and about how to "consciously use our research to help participants understand and change their situations" (p. 57). When talking with Ms. Lang, I began to share my observations, opinions and suggestions related to student work and activities. Ms Lang was not offended by my suggestions and she did not always incorporate them into her planning. But, there were traces of our discussions in some her

lessons, especially the last unit of the first semester: a timeline activity related to the causes of the Civil War.

With regard to the students, my goal was to build a friendly rapport with them through daily interactions. I wanted to be a resource for them, someone they could ask questions of when doing their work, but yet, not a teacher who told them what to do, assessed their work, or disciplined them. I wanted them to feel comfortable having me listen in on their discussions about their work and asking them questions about their opinions and reflections about what they were learning and doing. This role was also more complicated than I originally anticipated. As a former teacher it was difficult for me to hear students swearing, see them copying work, and to sit in on groups that only wanted to socialize. I felt irresponsible sitting next to students who were actively disengaged from their assignments and not calling them out on it. I cared for the students, just as Mattesen and Lincoln (2009) argued that an educational researcher in the classroom often takes on the role of a teacher in that she cares for her students. I did not want to eliminate this care, or a sense of responsibility to the students, but I realized that my responsibility was inherently different from the teacher. I understood that I was responsible for protecting them as research participants, and officially much less responsible for their learning. Therefore, I tried to take on a "responsible adult in the classroom" role where I was not disciplining them or grading their work as a teacher does, but rather was a source of encouragement about staying on task and doing the work. When students asked me about issues related to grading I was clear that Ms. Lang was the teacher and I did not have any input on that. Yet, when I was sitting next to students who were not doing their work, I would ask if they needed help and made it clear that I was available as a resource if they wanted assistance. When I sat in on group discussion or work sessions, the students would naturally look to me as a source of information. I tried to avoid this role by being the one who asked questions rather than the one who answered questions.

Data Analysis. I read and reread all transcripts, outlines, classroom documents, weekly journals, and field notes, analyzing them for recurring themes and patterns related to topics which could be considered difficult due to the type of violence and suffering addressed, the presence of student identification with historical actors, and student reactions and reflections about the topics. Analysis revealed that slavery (which was covered twice - during early the Early Colonial Period and the Civil War) and Westward Expansion were the two topics that could be described as difficult histories. Assigned readings and classroom activities related to both topics required students to consider a variety of historical subjects' encounters with traumatic events. Student response in the classroom and in interviews revealed that students identified with historical subjects and responded emotionally to the events studied. And student response in the classroom and in interviews revealed moral questioning and engagement with the events under investigation.

Then, to make sense of how difficulty was constructed within the classroom, I adapted Simone Schweber's (2004) moral geography of the Holocaust to my study – which meant mapping the data related to slavery and Westward Expansion onto her framework. I chose to use this particular framework because, as Schweber states, "rather than conveying random or fragmented messages, these constructions of the subject matter marked consistent and meaningful patterns that influenced student understanding" (p. 155). Her framework consists of three continua that provide insight into how a difficult history, in her case the Holocaust, is represented in the classroom. The three continua in her framework are emplotment, historical actors, and representations of history. While Schweber focuses specifically on the way the teacher maps out the moral geography of the Holocaust, I consider the moral geography of difficult histories to be a co-construction between the teacher and students. Therefore, rather than only looking at what the teacher included and said I also take student response and contributions into account. Emplotment entails the narrative – is the story as explored in the classroom tragic or redemptive, unique or

universal? The narrative of historical events can reveal the ways in which the narrated story of history conveys a moral lesson. The images of historical actors questions if the people are individualized or collectively represented, normalized or exoticized, personalized or abstracted. Does the portrayal of these historical actors allow students to see themselves in these positions? Who are students identifying with in this history? Representations of history focuses on the degree to which events are perceived as contingent or inevitable. The moral weight here is located in the implications for human agency amid larger forces.

The purpose of mapping out these histories using Schweber's moral geography framework is to see how certain histories are constructed as difficult, as histories that students identify with and that engender a moral response. Through this process I reveal who students are being asked to identify with and in what ways they are making connections with those who can only be described as Other due to their temporal distance.

I then closely analyzed students' responses during the interviews to uncover ways that students' identities mediated their understanding of difficult histories and to better understand how they morally responded to and identified with both slavery and Westward Expansion. I read and reread the transcripts, coding student responses according to identification, moral response, and representations of history. I narrowed identification into two categories: *belonging* and *America*. *Belonging* captured how students located themselves within America's difficult histories and *America* captured how students made sense of the United States when they reflected on these difficult histories. Close analysis and coding of interview transcripts led me to pinpoint key texts that revealed the complex ways in which students' discourses provide insight into how they make sense of the suffering of others.

In my analysis of students' responses in the interviews, I paid close attention to the language they used to talk about themselves, difficult histories, and America. My analysis, while not strictly discourse analysis, does draw on James Gee's (2005) method of discourse analysis.

Gee argues that the primary function of language is "to support the performance of social activities and social identities and to support human affiliation within cultures, social groups and institutions" (p. 1). I focus on how students talk about slavery and Westward Expansion in order to uncover how students demonstrate their understanding of history in two ways: how students' identities both shape and are shaped by their understandings of slavery and Westward Expansion, and how students morally respond to these two difficult histories. The goal is develop what Gee refers to as a "situated viewpoint on meaning" which is grounded in actual practices and experiences (p. 53). Central to the process of developing a situated viewpoint is paying attention to the reflexivity of language, which focuses on the complex way in which language reflects and constructs the situations in which it is used. Gee lays out seven components (or building tasks) of situations:

1. **Significance:** how and what different things mean – the sorts of meaning and significance they are given – is a component of any situation
2. **Activities**: some activity or set of activities is a component of any situation
3. **Identities**: any situation involves identities as a component, the identities that the people involved in the situation are enacting and recognizing as significant
4. **Relationships:** any situation involves relationships as a component, the relationships that the people involved enact and contract with each other and recognize as operative and consequential
5. **Politics** (the distribution of social goods): any situation involves social good and views on their distribution as a component
6. **Connections**: in any situation things are connected or disconnected, relevant to or irrelevant to each other, in certain ways

7. **Sign systems and knowledge**: in any situation, one or more sign systems and various ways of knowing are operative, oriented to, and valued or disvalued in certain ways (p. 97-101)

While Gee articulates seven building tasks, my analysis focuses specifically on only five: activities, significance, identities, sign systems (ways of knowing), and connections, because these are central to better understanding the relationship between identity and how students are making sense of difficult histories. I analyzed students' responses using these five components in order to understand students' historical understandings of slavery and Westward Expansion. The activities I focused on were students' moral responses to these difficult histories and how students used their historical knowledge to identify with America. Significance was central to my analysis primarily in examining the level of importance students gave to slavery and Westward Expansion in U.S. history and in their own lives. I looked for how students made connections between these two difficult histories in America's past and the America they experienced on a daily basis. I analyzed students' language to see how their identities mediated their understanding of slavery and Westward Expansion as well as to find evidence of how engaging with these histories were shaping how they viewed themselves. And finally, I focused on ways of knowing when I analyzed how students conceptualized history and valued historical knowledge.

The initial analysis of the moral geography of slavery and Westward Expansion reveals the ways in which the difficult histories are constructed through the activities of the classroom. The more detailed analysis of students responses in the interviews reveals the intricate ways in which students' identities shape historical understanding as well as how students apply their historical understanding through identifying with groups and responding morally to issues of suffering and oppression.

Chapter 4: Difficult Histories in Room 341

In this chapter I analyze how Ms. Lang and her students co-created slavery and Westward Expansion as difficult histories in the social place of the classroom. As detailed in Chapter 2, I conceptualize "difficult histories" as histories where three interrelated components are preset: (a) content centered on traumatic events, which includes a focus on the interrelated topics of suffering, violence, and oppression; (b) a sense of identification between those studying the history and those represented in history that invokes an emotional response; and (c) an ethical dissonance between what students learn about the past and their current worldview. Initial analysis of the data revealed that slavery and Westward Expansion were the two topics addressed over the course of the semester that could be classified as difficult histories. I came to this conclusion by analyzing the curriculum, classroom conversations, and students' interview responses. Assigned readings and classroom activities related to these two topics required students to consider a variety of historical subjects' encounters with traumatic events and students' responses in the classroom, and interviews revealed that many identified with historical subjects and responded emotionally to the events studied. Students' responses in classroom discussions and in interviews also revealed moral questioning and engagement with the events under investigation.

Using Simone Schweber's (2004) "moral geography" framework, I analyze how these two content areas were constructed as difficult histories in the classroom by analyzing the narratives that were constructed around these two histories, which historical actors they had learned and talked about, and in what ways history was being represented. In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which the students and the teacher constructed narratives of slavery and Westward Expansion as difficult histories within the space of the classroom. Expanding on Schweber's (2004) framework, I consider the nature of difficult histories to be a co-construction between the teacher and students. Therefore, rather than only looking at the way the teacher mapped out the

histories of slavery and Westward Expansion through the selection of texts, assignments, and her own voice in the classroom, I also take student responses and contributions to classroom discussions into account.

In describing how difficulty is constructed in the classroom, I first provide an analysis of how Ms. Lang approached the content as she had the most power to shape classroom discussions through her selections of reading and viewing materials as well as through setting class work and assessments. I then analyze students' voices in the social place of the classroom in order to reveal the diverse ways in which students accepted, questioned, ignored, or resisted Ms. Lang's narrative of the history and representation of historical actors. In conceptualizing social place, I draw upon Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson (1995) whose research into classroom scripts and counterscripts conceptualized social place as "a theoretical construct that helps us understand the mutually informing but seemingly exclusive places where teacher and students reside and interact in the classroom" (p. 446). While clearly there are multiple places where the teacher and students encounter and think about these histories, in this chapter I focus on the discourse of the social place of the classroom because it is the one place where all voices have the potential to contribute to and to be influenced by the moral geography of the classroom.

Ms. Lang's classroom was unique. The curriculum she implemented was entirely her own; it did not resemble the district's detailed curriculum plan nor was it similar to other sections of U.S. history taught by other teachers at Springs High. When discussing how she planned for the year, she minimized the importance of the district curriculum because it asked teachers to cover too much. Ms. Lang explained that her decision-making about what to teach was deeply influenced by the diversity of her students and her desire to have them feel a connection to the nation's past:. "I think because if you look at my classroom I really have to focus on the diversity, the different groups of people that formed [and] made the story of this country and the different ideas and perspectives. So that is what I hope to focus on, differing perspectives, view points"

(Ms. Lang, Interview #1). Due to complicated working relationships and disagreements about how to teach social studies, there was little collaboration among history teachers at Springs High in their planning. Therefore, the lessons, readings, assignments, and assessments students encountered in Ms. Lang's classroom were unique – unlike any other in the school and district. While Ms. Lang did not have a curriculum guide or scope and sequence document for her U.S. history class, the following chart, which I created after examining course documents and observing classroom activities, shows the main topics she addressed and the central assignments from the semester.

Ms. Lang's U.S. History Curriculum Fall 2008-09	
Major Topics/ Issues	Significant Assignments/ Assessments
☐ Columbus ☐ Slavery in North/slave trade ☐ Election issues ☐ The Great Depression/ Economic Crisis ☐ Workers rights/ Cesar Chavez ☐ Westward Expansion ☐ Causes of the Civil War	☐ Compare/contrast two accounts of Columbus ☐ Slavery museum exhibit ☐ Socratic Seminars (Slavery, Preamble to Constitution, Black Hawk's speech) ☐ Committing to nonviolence essay ☐ Unbiased summary of Westward Expansion ☐ Causes of the Civil War timeline

Slavery in Room 341

The topic of slavery was central to two units in the fall 2008 semester in Ms. Lang's U.S. History course. The first unit was entitled "Slavery in the North" which began in the first month of school and lasted three weeks. The idea for this unit came from a curriculum unit from The

Choices for the 21st Century Education Program (2005), a social studies policy curriculum created out of Brown University, but was heavily supplemented by many other readings of Ms. Lang's choosing. The second unit was "Causes of the Civil War" which began during the 17th week of the semester and lasted two weeks. In this unit, more than any other, Ms. Lang required students to use *The Americans* (Danzer, 2000) textbook as a source of information. Again Ms. Lang provided supplementary primary and secondary source materials. Throughout the semester there were a total of 28 instructional days that addressed issues related to slavery out of the 85 instructional days allocated to the first semester.

Narrative.

Ms. Lang. The narrative of an historical subject provides a structure for students to understand a group of events that occurred in the past by plotting the events within a particular type of story – such as a tragedy, a farce, a romance (White, 1987). It is necessary to consider narrative when determining the difficulty of a subject because the historical events under consideration could be told through, or plotted onto, a variety of narrative structures, each of which provides a different structure for making sense of the story. Barton and Levstik (2004) argue that the dominant narrative in U.S. history classrooms is one that tells a story of a nation consistently progressing and expanding in freedoms.

While Ms. Lang addressed slavery in two different units – "Slavery in the North" and the "Causes of the Civil War" - the overall storyline that Ms. Lang presented to the class was that there are untold stories about slavery that need to be exposed in order to understand racism and its role in America, past and present. The perspectives she presented revealed that slavery is a story unique to America that is more tragic than redemptive because through slavery she taught about race as an ongoing problem that was created by white people who enslaved black people and then created a legal system that supported the ongoing oppression of black people. This is not a story of sad events that happened in the past and that are no longer relevant in a more progressive

America. Rather, she structured the story of slavery as a violent, tragic prequel to the ongoing problem of racism in America. This was evident on the day that she introduced the unit about "Slavery in the North":

> When we started this class I told you guys that I really make an effort to teach things that you maybe have never heard about before. I don't want to teach the stories of history that everybody knows about. I want to go in depth and look at more of the unknown story of this country and I think that when we think about slavery […] we think of the South. Cotton fields were mentioned, the plantations of the south, and we need to get to the root of how slavery started in this country because it totally affects our world today. And that is another thing I want to do in this class is always make connections to today and even in this presidential election, race is an issue. We are going to uncover those things but we need to get back to where it started and some think, *oh – it just was in the South that there was slavery*. But what we're going to learn is that there were slaves in the North when this country was first born. (Transcript 9/11/08)

From this statement we can see that Ms. Lang was purposefully challenging the commonly held view of slavery in America as being limited to the South. She wanted students to see the past differently than they had before, to see slavery as central to understanding America's history and to understanding issues students experienced in their own lives. Her narrative reveals an understanding that slavery was more pervasive than students imagined and that its effects were and continue to be wide reaching.

Yet her pushing students to see slavery as an institution that existed beyond the American southern states did not extend to pushing them to see slavery as an international phenomenon. Throughout the semester, Ms. Lang presented and discussed slavery as an American issue, an American event. While the trans-Atlantic slave trade was a focus of readings and an assessment, the other countries involved were presented as places where slaves came from or were traded;

there was no discussion of slavery being an experience that was common throughout North and South America or of other past and present experiences of slavery.

While not encouraging students to consider the experiences of slaves beyond the nation's borders, Ms. Lang's narrative of slavery as an American story did encourage students to understand slavery as relevant to the lives of people today. This can be seen in a side story she shared during a full class reading about the international slave trade. In discussing the reading, she took a moment to tell a story about a show she had watched on public television over the summer. She explained how a woman and her family had traced their ancestry and found that they were descendants of international slave traders and that their family had personally benefitted from what Ms Lang referred to as "the buying and selling of human beings":

> They traced their family roots and they went back to Africa to where their ancestors had gone to pick up slaves and bring them back to America. They looked at how many they had sold and how much money they made. It was really, really hard for these people to accept their history, that they were part of this. And when they were all done, they went through a lot of emotions going through it, but when they were all done they had to sit around and talk about how much they got from that. All of them were highly educated, went to really, really good universities, had really good jobs, all because of the money their ancestors had made selling human beings. (Transcript 9/11/08)

The class's silence as she told this brief story revealed their interest in what she was saying. The story did not lead into a discussion about this family, their experiences, or generalizations about how others benefitted; rather, Ms. Lang transitioned into an on-going discussion about how to take Cornell notes from the reading the class was doing together. Sharing this story is another way Ms. Lang made this connection between America's slave past and its current social and economic conditions explicit. In addition to telling her students that she wanted to look at things

differently, she also brought in examples that demonstrated the different viewpoints she alluded to at the beginning of the unit.

Ms. Lang also exposed students to the violence that accompanied the slave trade and slavery. The readings and films she assigned detailed the cruelty that slave traders and owners inflicted upon slaves. Some of the more painful images and stories about the violence of slavery were found in the recounting of the Middle Passage. After providing an overview of the horrible conditions slaves endured in the journey across the Atlantic, the Choices for the 21st Century Education Program's (2005) detailed the events that occurred on the slave ship the *Sally* in 1765:

> In all, he purchased 196 slaves, nine of whom he had sold to other traders on the coast, and twenty of whom had died. At least one slave, a woman, had hanged herself. The death toll continued after the *Sally* left the coast. On the eighth day out, the slaves rose in rebellion. Hopkins and the crew suppressed the uprising by firing on the slaves, killing eight and wounding several others. (p. 8)

The violence was not only described as part of the slave trade, but also as part of the day-to-day lives of slaves. The *Africans in America* (Bagwell & Bellows, 2000) films that were shown provided gruesome photographic evidence and first-hand accounts of the violence that was required to enforce and maintain a slave society. Pictures of the ripped and torn skin on the backs of slaves were evidence of the whippings slaves endured. And the detailed account of the selling of the Butler Plantation slaves exposed the tearing apart of families that occurred when a slave owner was in financial trouble. Throughout the units on slavery, Ms. Lang's narrative of America's history of slavery exposed students to the violence of slavery and encouraged students to make connections between this brutal history and current economic and social conditions.

Students. The story line of slavery as being an ongoing story of violence and racism that is strongly connected to current issues and events in America was embraced by some students and rejected by others. On the first day of the "Slavery in the North" unit, Ms. Lang asked students to

individually write down in their notebooks what they thought of when they heard the word slavery. After a couple of minutes she led the class in sharing and discussing their preconceived conceptions of slavery. Diana, an African American senior in the class, was the first to speak. She said, "Black people, Native Americans, and Jews." Ms. Lang did not respond vocally but wrote what was said on the board and encouraged more students to share. Words were randomly shouted out: "working hard," "sad," "cruel," "Lincoln," while Ms. Lang wrote them all on the board.

This exchange provides some insight into how the similarities and differences between Ms. Lang and the students' narratives of slavery played out in the classroom. Some students, like Diana, saw American chattel slavery as connected and related to the suffering and oppression that others (Native Americans and Jews) in America and other nations experienced. While this is not something that Ms. Lang spent time addressing, it was a connection made by students in this class discussion and others. For example, on the third day of school, after reading for homework a passage from Howard Zinn's (2003) *People's History of the United States* that addressed Columbus' violent encounters with the Arawak people of Hispaniola, Diana and Jade had a personal side conversation before class started.

Diana: That is so bogus what Columbus did.

Jade: Yeah, he is bogus.

Diana: Yeah.

Jade: He started stabbing them and stuff with swords, and then he made them *slaves*.

(Transcript 9/4/08)

These two African American girls were primarily interested in the issue of slavery; they empathized with the slaves and condemned Columbus for his actions. While Ms. Lang used the reading to emphasize that there is often more to the histories students have learned than what they read in textbooks, these two students were focused on the topic of slavery. Later during that same

class when Ms. Lang asked the students what they found interesting about the reading, Jade raised her hand and said, “How he treated the slaves.” Ms. Lang did not ask Jade to expand, but went on to hear what others found interesting. Here we see that while Ms. Lang’s narrative of slavery was as a unique, American experience, some students vocalized their ideas that slavery and the suffering they connected to it were shared by many.

Though these two students did not share Ms. Lang’s focus on slavery as solely an American experience, they, and many others, accepted her framing the story of slavery as an issue that continues to affect American life today. While Ms. Lang did not ask Diana to explain why she connected slavery to Native Americans and Jews, she did take the time to encourage a full class discussion just a few moments later when an unidentified boy’s voice spoke the word “nigger,” which was followed by some laughter. Ms. Lang tried to figure out who said the word while affirming the statement with “that’s really important.” There was more laughter, but no one owned up to saying the word. Ms. Lang took the opportunity to openly address the controversial word by saying, “So – no seriously you guys – why wouldn’t you think of that word when you hear slavery?” Here she is explicitly asking students about the connections between America’s past and present that are evident in the use of the word “nigger.” Javier, a Mexican student, was the first student to respond to Ms. Lang’s request for a discussion of the controversial word:

> Ms. Lang: So, no seriously you guys, why wouldn’t you think of that word when you hear slavery?
>
> Javier: That’s what they called the slaves.
>
> Ms. Lang: Exactly. So why wouldn’t you think of the word, right?
>
> Javier: Because people are offended by it.
>
> Ms. Lang: People feel offended by it.
>
> Javier: It makes them want to fight.
>
> Ms. Lang: Should I write it up here [on the board]?

Diana: I think you should. It is important. (Transcript 9/11/08)

As Ms. Lang wrote the word on the board, some students objected to her spelling. One voice called out and corrected her: "That's Niger." Another student spelled it out to make sure she wrote it correctly: "N-i-g-g-e-r." Ms. Lang continued to prompt students to share why they thought of this word when asked about slavery and why they laughed when it was said.

Ms. Lang: Does it make you feel uncomfortable, the word?

Female voice: No.

Carolina: It depends.

Harmony: Maybe, if other people, if everybody saying it when they just hanging around, like you know, they just saying it.

Diana: You wouldn't feel comfortable if somebody who was Caucasian called me a nigger.

Ms. Lang: Thank you; that is what I wanted to get to. Is it ok for everybody to use the word?

Chorus of students: No!

Ms. Lang: Only certain people can use it.

Diana: To me, to me, it's not… I don't think anybody should use the word basically. Not even black people. Why would you call somebody nigger like the Caucasian used to call you back in the day when you were forced to do something?

Ms. Lang: Because you're associating it with slavery?

Diana: Yeah.

Ms. Lang: Ok, anybody else want to comment on that?

(murmurs)

Ms. Lang: Any other thoughts?

Javier: Lynching.

Ms. Lang: Ok, we'll move on. (Transcript 9/11/08)

As she moved on, Ms. Lang wrote Javier's word, "lynching," on the board as well as the next word, "rape," which was volunteered by Jade. These words, "rape" and "lynching," as well as Javier's earlier reference to wanting to fight, reveal the connections students made between slavery, race, and violence. While Ms. Lang did not engage in discussions about these acts of violence, she did write them on the board.

A week later a similar discussion took place regarding the word "honky." The class was reading about how enslaved people viewed slavery and Ms. Lang was emphasizing that black people did not accept how many white people viewed them. Then a girl's voice said something unintelligible.

Ms. Lang: What? What was that?

Girl's voice: Nothing, I didn't say anything!

Ronnie: She said the sound that a horn makes, like…

Girl: Shut up!

Ms. Lang: So we are getting into some words back there?

Ronnie: Ok.

Ms. Lang: Some hard, difficult words?

Ronnie: What she said is, what she meant is, no offence you know, I'm just gonna say it.

Diana: She just said she never knew what honky meant.

Ms. Lang: And yet it is a word you've heard right?

Chorus: yes.

Ronnie: I wonder, where it…

Ms. Lang: That is a good question. Where did that word come from?

Ronnie: I don't know.

Carolina: From down south. (Transcript 9/17/08)

The conversation continued and Ms. Lang instructed Alex, a white boy, to look the word up because he was sitting near the dictionaries. Ms. Lang went back to discussing ways that slaves resisted their enslavement and there was no resolution to the meaning of the word.

Many students in the class were engaged in these discussions about the controversial words – racial slurs – that emerged in class discussions and connected slavery to their lived experiences. Students even made their own connections between racial slurs and violence. Yet there were some students who did not want to hear what Ms. Lang and the contributing students had to say about slavery. Bret and Alex were two white boys who did not demonstrate an interest in this topic. They often sat with friends and joked rather than doing the assigned work. After the emotional discussion (above) where the racial slurs of "honky" and "cracker" were openly discussed, both boys approached Ms. Lang after class and asked to be transferred out of her class.

Bret: I want to get out of this class.

Ms. Lang: Why?

Bret: Cuz I don't like the subject.

Ms. Lang: Gee, you have to take U.S. History to graduate.

Alex: Are there any other classes?

Ms. Lang: Yeah. Go take it from Mr. Schmidt.

Bret: Yeah, that dude is way better.

Alex: Yeah.

Ms. Lang: Ok.

Alex: Cuz I can't take all this white cracker, non-nigger

Bret: Honky shit.

Ms. Lang: Sorry to hear that boys. (Transcript 9/17/08)

The boys continued to disparage the class and black students as they walked out of the class. These boys openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the tone and direction of the class as well

as with Ms. Lang – but only after class to Ms. Lang. Apparently they did not feel that these were ideas they could openly share during class discussions, even though Ms. Lang demonstrated openness to discussing controversial issues. Their reaction to racist words being openly discussed during a history lesson on slavery reveals their disinclination to see the story of slavery as one that should be connected to the lives of students today.

Ms. Lang was not interested in discussing these boys' feelings about the class or where they were coming from; she did not engage the boys in discussion about their request to be transferred out of the class. She responded with sarcasm and did little to challenge their attitude. She expressed her shock to me, but not to the boys themselves. Even though Alex's mother called an assistant principal to complain, there was no move from Ms. Lang or the administration to remove the boys from class (or to reprimand them for their behavior). Both boys remained in the class, quiet and disgruntled until November when Bret was allowed to transfer to another history class after he complained further about the class. Through the rest of the semester Alex remained a disengaged and angry presence in the classroom.

After the confrontation after class, these boys' resistance to Ms. Lang was revealed in silences, incomplete work, and non-participation. As a result, their voices were not a part of the public classroom discourse nor were they captured in this study; the only clues to their thoughts were found in their body language, doodling, and off-topic side conversations. Of the four other white boys in the class, only two regularly attended class. One never stopped making jokes and rarely associated with Alex, and the other, a close friend of Alex's, appeared focused on graduating and so he did some work, but rarely contributed to discussions and seemed to share Alex's anger as they sat together and talked during class. The lack of engagement and resistance (either through silence or humor) from the white boys in the class reveals their persistent and felt resistance to Ms. Lang's approach to explicit teaching about race and specifically to her presenting slavery and racism as significant issues in American history and current events. They

seemed unable to engage and navigate the emotional and difficult narrative of slavery that had implications for how others saw them and possibly for how they saw themselves.

The consensus in the class to tell the story of slavery as a tragic, violent prequel to ongoing racial problems in America clearly troubled and upset these boys. While attempting to escape this story line, their actions appeared to validate Ms. Lang's and many other students' narrative. The voices that dominated this U.S. history class saw race as an ongoing problem that was created by white people who enslaved black people and then created a legal system that supported the ongoing oppression of black people. In this story line, whites played the role of the powerful oppressors and blacks took on the role of the victims or justified resistors to oppression. One reason why these white boys may have so angrily resisted this narrative of slavery and race relations in America is that it did not reflect their lived experiences of being white. Bret and Alex were a minority in a school that had historically been predominantly white and middle class; these were working class boys who were attending a school where black, Latino, and Asian students now outnumbered whites. These boys did not hold positions of power; they did not even feel that they could speak up and share their opinions about history in a discussion-based class. Their anger appears to be the result of encountering a history that positioned them as the powerful oppressors when their lived experience was more akin to a silenced, disempowered minority.

Images of historical actors

Ms. Lang. As noted above, the story line that structures the history of slavery has significant implications for possible roles for historical actors to play in the story. Since Ms. Lang's story line was shaped by violence, the historical actors she presented to the class could easily be cast as perpetrators, bystanders, resisters, and victims. It was also important to Ms. Lang for students to see the complexity of lived experiences in history. She tried to achieve this by presenting a wide array of historical accounts of people's experiences that created a variety of

images of the people who lived at the time rather than an image of a singular, collective experience.

The resources Ms. Lang brought to the classroom provided a diverse range of historical actors in both of her units on slavery. Many of the resources she brought to the classroom required students to engage with the personal stories of slaves, those who owned them, and those who fought for their freedom. She triedd to make it clear that there were no universally shared white or black experiences, or universal slave and master experiences. Rather, she used multiple sources to reveal a variety of experiences representative of how life in America was shaped by slavery. She provided many written primary and secondary source accounts that illuminated multiple perspectives: accounts of a slave's capture in Africa, images and experiences from the Middle Passage from the perspective of slaves and the ships' crews and captains, the owners of slave ships, slave masters, slave families, multiple experiences of slaves, Quakers, indentured servants, and freed slaves. Beyond written sources, she showed episodes of the PBS series *Africans in America* (Bagwell & Bellows, 2000) that provided rich descriptions and visual images, from primary and secondary sources, of the diversity of experiences in America during slavery. In both units, slaves were portrayed as suffering great injustices, from their capture in Africa, the Middle Passage, and their lives in America. Yet, she also included accounts of freed slaves, slaves who were artisans in the North, and free Blacks who advocated for abolition. Whites were portrayed as the perpetrators of extreme injustices and violence, as benefitting from the suffering of others, yet also as indentured servants who suffered their own injustices and as abolitionists who fought against slavery. Ms. Lang's use of such a variety of sources reflects her active pursuit of engaging students in thinking and making sense of the diverse ways that slavery was experienced throughout the country, not just in the South.

While there was attention given to many perspectives and experiences, the sources Ms. Lang used did give significant attention to the suffering and oppression of slaves. In mid-

September, Ms. Lang had the class read out loud and take Cornell notes together. The reading, "Part II: Slavery and Abolitionism in New England" (Choices for the 21st Century Education Program, 2005), discussed the images whites had of slaves and enslaved people had of slavery. As students read out loud, Ms. Lang would pause, pose questions, check for understanding, and push students' thinking about what was being read. The questions Ms. Lang asked and the notes she took reflect what she wanted students to know about slaves and slavery. In this example Jade has just read out loud from a section that differentiates white indentured servants, Native Americans, and slaves:

> Ms. Lang: Ok, that continues on with a definition of slaves and what their status was under the law. So they were not really people – what were they?
>
> Javier: Possessions.
>
> Ms. Lang: Possessions. [*Writes notes*] And they are possessions that can be taxed, whereas indentured servants couldn't be. That's the distinction; they weren't considered possessions. (Transcript 9/17/08)

Here we can see Ms. Lang's focus on the way in which laws differentiated the labor of whites and blacks and clarified that the black slave experience was unique among other forms of labor or servitude. Later in the reading, Ms. Lang led a discussion about the experiences of slaves:

> Ms. Lang: Do you guys believe, do you think all slaves were whipped?
>
> Diana: No, no, not all slaves. A majority of them were whipped and or beaten or, you know.
>
> Jade: Raped.
>
> Diana: Raped, tortured, suffering of some kind.
>
> Ms. Lang: Ok, ok. Because as our reading said, not all white people thought that black people were lazy, stupid, disobedient, right?
>
> Diana: Yeah.

> Ms. Lang: So there's, we have kind of some different perspectives on black people at this time, the same way we have different perspectives when we look back on what slavery was. (Transcript 9/17/08)

Here Ms. Lang made it clear that while slavery was unique in relation to other forms of labor and servitude, not all slave experiences were the same. Ms. Lang also made this point in relation to the slave-owning experience; while it was a unique position to hold, there was not a universal experience of slave ownership.

There was space in Ms. Lang's curriculum for students to see that there were many different experiences for slaves and blacks that were not slaves. And while whites were portrayed as the group of people who oppressed blacks and owned slaves, there were also opportunities for students to see that whites were also abolitionists or servants. It is important to note that Ms. Lang did not create assignments that asked students to empathize with slaves. Her focus was more on presenting multiple perspectives and asking students to consider them to see the complexity of life at that time. Yet, as we see in students' voices and contributions, issues of identification with historical actors is an important characteristic of their experiences learning about the past.

Students. It was difficult to make sense of who students considered important historical actors in the history of slavery for a variety of reasons. Low literacy skills and lack of engagement were key issues that limited many students' abilities to access the information that Ms. Lang brought to them. Many students were unable to read the challenging and often long primary sources that detailed the lived experiences of people with first-hand knowledge of slavery. When Ms. Lang showed *Africans in America* (Bagwell & Bellows, 2000), my field notes reveal: "Kids passing notes (3), texting (4), paying attention (9), sleeping (4)" (MS field notes 9/18/08). Other field notes, written during the time students were working on creating museum exhibits to share what is important to remember about the slave trade, state, "it is very difficult to have conversations with the students about the content of their work. Almost all the conversation

is around getting the work done, how to get it done, what to do… there is very little interest in talking about the actual slave trade or the experience of slaves" (Field notes 10/1/08).

When students were engaged and able to access the information, there were a variety of historical actors who captured the students' interest and attention. Jade and Diana, who were eager to discuss the injustices that slaves, especially the women, endured, often dominated class discussions. Diana seemed to follow Ms. Lang's thinking about there being multiple perspectives and experiences, though she was primarily interested in the activities of black women such as Phyllis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs. She was also aware of the violence connected to slavery. In the discussion about the slaves being whipped which was addressed in the previous section, Diana and Jade both contributed other forms of violence slaves experienced – rape and torture - which reveals their perception of blacks as victims of white violence. More than Diana, Jade tended to focus on and universalize a white, slave owning experience. In trying to make sense of the role of Christianity in supporting slavery, Jade said, " I thought that back then white people thought they were God. […] Like they thought, *Oh, I am the one that's going to be doing this. I make all the rules*. I think that back in the day they thought they were God and that we were the servant or *these are my disciples* and stuff like that." (Transcript 9/17/08) Here we see Jade grouping whites together as one monolithic, oppressive group experience. Jade identifies as both African American and bi-racial and here with her use of the word "we" she shows how she more strongly identifies with the slaves and the slave experience. Her comments also reveal how she distances herself from any connection with the white experience.

During the same read aloud and note-taking class that was discussed in the previous section, where it was mentioned that whites viewed slaves as lazy, Jade was arguing her interpretation that it was the whites who were weak to depend on slaves. Yet Manny, a Latino student, voiced a different opinion.

Manny: Doesn't that make them smart?

Ms. Lang: Make who smart?
Manny: The owners.
Ms. Lang: The owners?
Manny: Because they have people working for them. (Transcript 9/17/08)

Here we have an example of a student who was not accepting a classmate's interpretation of how historical actors should be positioned. Unlike Jade, Manny was not identifying with the slaves, but rather was trying to understand the slave owners' perspective. Throughout the semester, Manny made comments that revealed that he saw slavery as an issue between black and white Americans that he did not personally identify with. He once asked me, in a friendly way, if my ancestors owned slaves and later, in relation to the election of Barack Obama, he commented that "that is what you [meaning white people] get for bringing over the slaves" (Field notes 9/30/08, 11/5/08). With Manny we see a student who implicated others within the story of slavery and America, but saw himself as beyond identification with the groups associated with slavery. He did not see it as *his* history and did not appear to identify with those who suffered, but he did want to understand the position of those in power. Despite his inability to authentically engage in the study of America's slave past, his perceptions of America today and his attempts to make sense of the past, as evident in his question to me and his comment on the election, were deeply shaped by issues of race and power.

There was also evidence that one of the African American boys in the class, Ronnie, did not find any of the historical actors associated with slavery significant. Ronnie did not attend class on a regular basis during the first semester, and when he was present he was very social, making jokes and not taking the work very seriously. Yet, when he was interested in a topic, he often made very insightful and intelligent comments. In December he was not interested in a lesson Ms. Lang was teaching about the Mexican American War. He disrespectfully asked, "Do you honestly think we have to know about the Mexican American War?" (Transcript 12/17/08) Then after Ms. Lang explained why the war was an important event to study, he continued his complaining by asking, "When are we going to learn about black history in here?" After Ms.

Lang explained that they had, he pushed her, "When are we going to go in depth?" (Transcript 12/17/08). Considering that much of the first month of school focused on slavery, it seems that either he had forgotten what he learned about slavery, or that he did not consider the in-depth unit examining slavery in the North as black history. Both of these options reveal a lack of significance being placed by Ronnie on the role of slavery in his conception of black history. In January, when students were going over answers to an in-class assignment about the causes and effects of the Civil War –which addressed issues of slavery- Ronnie shouted out,

Ronnie: Are we going to talk about Emmett Till in here?

Diana: I love learning about Emmett Till. Well, I don't love it, but…

Ronnie: Yeah, it's a good story. (Transcript 1/12/09)

It appears that Ronnie had conceptualized black history as the Civil Rights Movement. He did not express interest in talking about or learning about slavery and the many people who suffered or resisted oppression at that point in America's past. But it is not the suffering that seemed to be repelling his interest because Emmett Till suffered. Ronnie identified Emmett Till (a person not mentioned in this U.S. history class previously) as a significant actor in black history, while not remembering any of the historical actors who were studied during the three-week unit on slavery.

While Ms. Lang provided a multitude of opportunities for the whole class to engage with a diverse range of personal and emotional accounts of individuals who lived during, suffered through, supported, or resisted slavery, there were many barriers to students' seeing the complexity of lived experiences during slavery. There were students, such as Alex and Ronnie, whose resistance to a story line that positioned whites as violent oppressors and blacks as victims resulted in a resistance to engage in the activity of the classroom. There were students, like Manny, who had the skills to do the work but made little effort to engage and did not feel a connection with the history peopled with those which they did not ethnically identify. There were also students who could not read many of the materials required to bear witness to the variety of

experiences related to the system of slavery and as a result did not participate in discussions or other work related to the same topic. And then there were students, like Diana, who had the interest and the skill to engage in the work of the classroom, to engage with the complexity of slavery in America, and whose engagement shaped the classroom discourse and understanding of slavery.

This uneven level of engagement, interest, and skill level limited Ms. Lang's ability to provide the lessons she intended to about variety of historical actors that shaped the history of slavery. Central to this inability to establish a shared understanding in the classroom about the people whose lives shaped and were shaped by slavery are issues of identity and how students came to (or failed to) identify with the historical actors they encountered in the classroom. More about how students' identities mediated their understanding of history will be addressed in chapter five.

Representations of history

Ms. Lang. How history is represented reveals the degree to which events are perceived as inevitable or contingent and has significant implications for conceptions of human agency amid larger forces. Ms. Lang was very conscious of how she represented history to her students and often asked students to consider how historical interpretations are socially constructed. As she strove to develop critical thinking skills among her students, she consistently asked them to consider whose voices were included and excluded from the stories being told and why that might be, and who had the power to make such decisions. She also focused on the concept of historiography, or how history is constructed. She gave assignments that provided opportunities for students to see the variety of perspectives that historians themselves brought to their work of constructing historical accounts.

In the first unit on slavery, Ms. Lang was focusing on the "terrible transformation" in Virginia where colonial America went from accepting that white and black indentured servants

could gain their freedom and buy land, to a political and economic system that relied on chattel slavery. Both Ms. Lang and the *Africans in America* (Bagwell & Bellows, 2000) film represented the transformation as one where people made changes in the law which led to a system of white supremacy that institutionalized racism for hundreds of years. Slavery did not just exist; people brought it into existence and supported it with their laws.

> Ms. Lang: And the movie is going to show us at what point we see this distinction between white indentured servants and slaves. […] And as we continue our study of this, we are going to find that this, the ability to own slaves, being able to own slaves, was going to be protected under our Constitution because our Constitution when it is written is going to say that people have the right to own property and so if you put slaves in a category as property instead of human people, then you have the right to own them. (Transcript 9/17/08)

Ms. Lang represented the history of slavery in America as the result of the decisions people made to categorize slaves as property rather than humans. This decision had consequences, one of which, as Ms. Lang emphasized, was systemic racism. After watching the movie, Ms. Lang had students read primary sources to find evidence of how racism had become institutionalized.

> Ms. Lang: What you need to find out when you read her [Elizabeth Sprigs'] letter, is how can you find evidence that this idea of slavery that we saw in the video, how it happened one law at a time, how it has become such a part of our society, it's like rooted in society at the time, it is part of the country, of the colonies at that time. Does that make sense? So how can you find that in her letter? That slavery and racism is, has really taken hold in the colonies?
>
> Javier: Well racism was around before slavery started, that's why slavery started because they were racist against the blacks. They thought blacks were inferior; they were like oh they are under us so let's take 'em.

Ms Lang: And then it is just perpetuated through slavery right? If you establish slavery in society then the racism just continues because you have set up this system of slavery. Right?

Javier: Yes. (Transcript 9/25/08)

Ms. Lang supported Javier's assertion that racism had to exist in order for slavery to even take hold, yet she pushed students to see that the changes in society – such as laws- ensure that the racism will continue.

Ms. Lang also addressed the social construction of history; she worked to help students see that people with biases constructed the accounts of slavery that they encountered. In a statement that Ms. Lang made that was discussed earlier - "So there's, we have kind of some different perspectives on black people at this time, the same way we have different perspectives when we look back on what slavery was" – we can see the she was trying to help students see that a historian's identity or position affects how he or she interprets the past. This examination of how history is constructed was an ongoing project in Ms. Lang's class that was inter-woven throughout all units of study. In January as the students were studying the causes of the Civil War, Ms. Lang showed a different episode of *Africans in America* (Bagwell & Bellows, 2000) that focused on the lived experiences of slaves, slave owners, and abolitionists. She gave the class a disclaimer before starting the film:

> We will get a picture of what life was like for the slaves. But we need to be aware as we are watching this film that this is – there is a bias in this film. And I think when we think about slavery we automatically think every slave was mistreated by their master. […] Not every slave experience was the same. Some slaves were treated very well by their masters, but this film is going to show you from the perspective of the abuse and punishment and mistreatment. That is the perspective you are going to see in this film. (Transcript 1/08/09)

Throughout the units on slavery, Ms. Lang worked to help students see that the events of the past were decisions made by individuals and groups that had ramifications for those who lived at the time and for future generations. She also tried to help students see that the accounts of the past that they encounter in books and films are also the result of decisions people have made to create images of the past.

Students. The students struggled to see that slavery and racism were not inevitable; to most students these issues seemed more like natural developments than social constructions. Early in the first unit on slavery, when she asked students to make sense of why whites would say God was punishing black slaves, Ms. Lang was trying to get students to see how this argument was created to justify their actions. Yet Jade and Carolina's responses reveal the preconceptions students had that racism was practically a natural occurrence.

> Ms. Lang: So we have some people thinking that this was punishment, that they were slaves because they were being punished by God. […] Why, if you were a white person back then and you owned slaves, why would you say that?
>
> Jade: Because that is just the way things were back then.
>
> Carolina: They were raised thinking like that.
>
> Jade: They're going to put God on their side no matter what.
>
> Javier: They want to make black people look evil.
>
> Ms. Lang: They want to make the black people look evil.
>
> Javier: They want to put the blame on the black people.
>
> Carolina: Bring them down.
>
> Ms. Lang: So they're not, um, God looks down on them, God doesn't accept them as human beings?
>
> Carolina: Well, people will think that.
>
> Ms. Lang: They *want* people to think that. Why do they *want* people to think that?

Javier: Because they don't want to be seen as evil. (Transcript 9/17/08)

By the end of this discussion, the words "to make" and "to put" reveal a movement in the students' responses to the original question. They have moved from the argument that racism was just natural to a more complex understanding that people with power were acting to shape the discourse to ensure that their actions would be protected and that the slaves would be viewed in a particular way.

Diana also questioned if there could have been alternate possible realities for what happened with slavery. In a discussion about an episode of *Africans in America* (Bagwell & Bellows, 2000) that told the history of the black abolitionist David Walker and how his writings led lawmakers to criminalize teaching slaves to read and write, Diana pondered how it could have been different.

Diana: And if they all had like, just think, like if they would have learned, you know. If all of them would have learned to how to read and write and they read this book, or they read any other thing about abol…

Ms. Lang: Abolishing

Diana: Yeah abolishing and then like all of them like, kinda, went on strike or did something like that. What could they [the slave owners] do? Could they kill them?

Ms. Lang: Exactly.

Diana: But they'll lose more money that way. So what could they do? They would have to let them go. (Transcript 1/8/09)

Here Diana demonstrated her understanding that the course of history was not inevitable, but rather a series of decisions people in power made to maintain their positions of wealth and power.

Students' contributions to class revealed a range of understanding about how historians represent the past. In a discussion very early in the year about a set of primary sources they read that provided a variety of perspectives from people who experienced slavery, one girl said,

"There are millions of stories like these ones. It wouldn't matter if these stories weren't told […] The details don't really matter, just the main idea" (Field notes 9/26/08). This student dismissed the activities and lives of individuals in the process of writing history; she was more interested in the main points. This reveals a lack of understanding that someone needed to decide what the main points are and that making those decisions is complex and mediated by who and when such points are made.

Manny, on the other hand, had heard what Ms. Lang had said about how historians' biases, values, and perspectives affect how they interpret the past. Early in October when the students were working on designing a museum exhibit that showed what they learned about slavery, I had a conversation with Manny and Luis about the poster they were making. My field notes summarize part of the discussion:

> We looked at and talked about the picture where the white sailors are standing with whips and the slaves look like they are jumping. The caption says that the sailors would whip them and make them dance for entertainment. I made the comment that that seems cruel. [Manny] said that is what we can say now, but who knows what people were thinking at that time – it might have been ok. (Field notes 10/2/08)

Manny said this as a bit of joke, trying to see how I would respond. He revealed that he was aware that things were different in the past and that as he learns about the past he has to question the judgments that he and those who write history make. Yet he was also trying to see how I would respond to his finding a justification for violence – possibly trying to see how far he could take the idea that there are differences between people and the past and people now.

Students' understanding of how the past came to be is uneven. Students like Javier demonstrated movement from seeing the racism connected to slavery as the ways things naturally were in the past to seeing that racism at that time was socially constructed through people's actions and decisions. Diana's reflection on the criminalization of literacy among slaves revealed

an understanding that the events of the past were not inevitable; there were alternate possible realities. Even Manny's comments on the relativity of cruelty show how students grappled with what history is and how it is constructed.

The difficulty with slavery in Room 341. In examining the difficulty of slavery as constructed by the teacher and her students, it becomes clear that while the social place of the classroom was shared, the experience of making sense of slavery was not. The variety of voices, interests, perspectives, and academic skills that the students brought to the classroom limited the possibilities for a shared understanding or discourse that the teacher was working to create. In Ms. Lang's classroom there was a general agreement that the history of slavery was more tragic than redemptive, and that the reverberations from the violence and oppression central to America's slave past continued to affect the lives and experiences of Americans today. Some students expanded upon this and talked about the story of American slavery as part of a larger story of oppression that has affected many different groups of people, both in America and in other countries. Others resisted participating in a classroom where the history of the nation was rooted in issues of race and power that were traced from current events back to the events of colonial and Antebellum America.

In Ms. Lang's classroom the story of American slavery was populated by whites that held positions of economic and political power in society and acted, at times, violently to maintain their power. There were also whites that worked to end slavery and create opportunities for greater equality. The black slaves were portrayed as suffering, enduring, and resisting. There were also free blacks that were abolitionists, writers, and artisans. Yet the narrative of slavery as the prequel to race problems in America placed greater emphasis on the whites as oppressors and blacks as victims. And finally, in her representation of history, Ms. Lang aimed to shine light on the power of people to shape their lives by consistently focusing on past events not as inevitabilities, but rather as the culmination of actions and decisions of the people who lived at

that time. Ms. Lang also aimed to enable students to see that people whose individual and socio-historic biases shaped their interpretations of past events socially constructed the histories they encounter in their lives. While this was a lesson that students could understand, it had the dangerous outcome of students questioning if there could be shared understandings or conceptions of history.

Westward Expansion in Room 341

In Ms. Lang's classroom, slavery and Westward Expansion shared the defining characteristics of difficult histories, yet there were significant differences between how the histories were constructed. This raises questions as to why two difficult histories from America's past would be constructed differently within the same classroom. Ms. Lang addressed Westward Expansion throughout the month of December, with 15 out of 85 instructional days devoted to the topic. Ms. Lang began discussions about Westward Expansion after completing a series of less conventional lessons that examined economic and social injustices, such as Cesar Chavez's workers rights movement and the then-current financial crisis. Ms. Lang spoke of "getting back" to the history curriculum with the Westward Expansion unit.

Westward Expansion included the examination of Manifest Destiny, some of the different groups that moved west, their encounters with Native Americans, and the Mexican American War. By December, Ms. Lang was significantly frustrated with students' lack of interest and effort in their work as well as their persistent poor performances. As a result she decided to conduct fewer full class discussions and assign more seatwork, often involving reading and answering questions and watching films. In this unit, Ms. Lang relied more on *The Americans* (Danzer, 2000) history textbook than in previous units. She had students read from the text and used worksheets that were created by the textbook company. These readings and assignments were supplemented with outside primary sources, two films - *The West: Empire along the trails* (Martin, 1998), and *The U.S. Mexican War: Neighbors and strangers* (Burns & Ives, 2001) – and

resources from Teachable Moments, a website for educators run by the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility.

Narrative

Ms. Lang. Unlike slavery, Ms Lang's narrative of Westward Expansion was often ambiguous and contradictory. At times she plotted the history as part of the story of America's natural growth and progress and at others as a tragic and violent story of colonization. As a result, the history of Westward Expansion was structured in a way that made it more controversial than slavery. Ms. Lang's narrative of slavery was of a tragic and violent prequel to ongoing race problems in America, one that people look back on with indignation. Westward Expansion, on the other hand, was more controversial in that violent events were central to the storyline, but it was unclear if the process of expansion could be judged as wrong.

In her narrative of Westward Expansion, Ms. Lang made uneven connections between the past and the present. Ms. Lang's story of the relationship between Americans and Native Americans was violent, shaped by issues of race and citizenship, and seemed to have little relevance to people today. Whereas, more like slavery, Ms. Lang presented the story of the relationship between the United States and Mexico as ongoing, contentious, and shaped by issues of race and citizenship.

The Westward Expansion unit began with a discussion of the term "manifest destiny." Ms. Lang had students look at a map as she talked about the Louisiana Purchase; then she asked them to discuss their ideas about destiny, which she followed with this question : "So if you are living in the civilized world at this time, on the East Coast of the United States, why would you want to pick up and move west?" (Transcript 12/1/08). With this question and with her word choice of "civilized world," Ms. Lang plotted the story of Westward Expansion as one of the spread of civilization to uncivilized lands. The students were familiar with this storyline and provided a variety of reasons to answer her question before reading out loud a section from the

textbook with a primary source about a woman settler and another section entitled "The Frontier Lures Settlers." Ms. Lang summarized some of the main points from the reading and the class discussion by stating:

> A lot of people just went for a new opportunity, to find gold, to start a new life. But the bigger idea of manifest destiny is that if people are going to move west, they are going to bring their culture with them. Ok? We are going into an uncivilized land that needs to be civilized. Meaning we are going to bring democracy, a form of government that the country is founded on, we are going to bring religion, education, all of those things are going to come along with this movement west. (Transcript 12/1/08)

Here Ms. Lang summarized and added onto the textbook's approach to manifest destiny but did not provide a critique of this perspective. With her consistent use of the pronoun "we," she positioned herself and others as complicit in this movement. Who she meant to include in this "we" is unclear. Is it the students she was talking to? Or some generalized, national "we"? This narrative of the Americans spreading culture and democracy as they moved west did not go unchallenged. An alternate narrative to this history was presented and expressed by students as well as by other readings and videos that Ms. Lang incorporated into the unit.

Readings, such as excerpts from Black Hawk's (1832) *Surrender Speech* and Jose Maria Sanchez's "A Trip to Texas," provided a view of America's expansion into the West as cruel, deceitful, and lacking in civility. Sanchez describes the North Americans settling in Texas as heavy drinkers who are "lazy people of vicious character." Black Hawk states, "The white men are bad school-masters; they carry false looks, and deal in false actions; they smile in the face of the poor Indian to cheat him." These two readings were not incidental, side readings. Students were given class time to read the documents and to answer questions about them. Ms. Lang structured a full class length Socratic Seminar around discussing Black Hawk's speech. These

two readings challenge the original narrative of the Americans bringing civilization to the uncivilized world.

When discussing the history of the relationship between Americans and Native Americans, Ms. Lang seldom made connections to current issues and events in America. This was not the case in her discussions about the relationship between Mexico and America. Before showing the film *The U.S. Mexican War: Neighbors and Strangers* (Martin, 1998), Ms. Lang asked students to consider the title of the film: "How are they neighbors?" and "How are we strangers?" She then shared her own interpretation of the title: "You have something in common but you don't, you don't really know each other. We have a border in common with Mexico, but we don't really know the people…" (Outline 12/11/08). Even in her word choices we can see Ms. Lang made the connections between the past and present: by using the phrases "You have" "We have," Ms. Lang included the students and herself in the history of the U.S. Mexican War. The film itself even describes the war as "a wound that has yet to heal" (Martin, 1998). And while Ms. Lang did not address the controversial history of the treaties the United States government made with multiple Native American nations, she did ask students about the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the War with Mexico: "Do you think America is following this treaty?" Here again Ms. Lang used the present tense to invite students to consider the connections between America's history with Mexico and its current relationship (Outline 12/17/08).

Ms. Lang's storyline for Westward Expansion was ambiguous and at times contradictory. She was uneven in making connections between the past and present depending on whether she was addressing the issues related to Native Americans or Mexicans. Another discrepancy was that she spoke of Americans bringing civilization to the West while simultaneously presenting images of Americans as violent, brutish, and deceitful. While Ms. Lang did not explicitly address these discrepancies, these were issues that students openly grappled with in the classroom.

Students. In this unit, students' voices made strong contributions to the narrative of America's expansion into the West. There were students who saw America's expansion as a violent invasion and others who seemed to see as it a natural progression of America's growth. On the first day of the unit, which was described in the section above, Estella's and Javier's voices were strongly woven into Ms. Lang's discussion of Manifest Destiny. Estella began her comments with a response to Ms. Lang's question about what they thought of destiny.

> Estella: Kind of like a utopia, yeah. Only like, in his […] in Andrew Jackson's eyes it was more like whites having more power, whites being like, having like, having the United States being doubled. Like ultimately all white.
>
> Ms. Lang: Why is that going to be a problem as they are expanding west? Who are they going to encounter?
>
> Estella: Native Americans, Mexicans, different cultures.
>
> Unidentified boy: Koreans! Puerto Ricans! (laughter)
>
> Ms. Lang: And what you're saying [Estella] is that the ideal Manifest Destiny is that we will create a white society. Why? What is wrong with the Native Americans?
>
> Javier: They're savages!
>
> (Laughter)
>
> Ms. Lang: Savages.
>
> Javier: According to them! According to them!
>
> Peter: What the hell is a savage?
>
> Ms. Lang: Do you want to explain? Peter needs to know what a savage is.
>
> Javier: It is a person who has no manners, um doesn't care what basically … (can't hear)
>
> Ms. Lang: shhhhhh!!
>
> Javier: They might wear clothes, but raggedy clothes. Look like bums.
>
> Peter: Oh, Ok.

Ms. Lang: Are they educated?

Javier: They are not educated. They don't speak the language that you speak.

Ms. Lang: Savages. Uncivilized. You think they fit into the Manifest Destiny?

Javier: Nope.

Estella: They don't fit into the Manifest Destiny that we're referring to…

Ms. Lang: Ok. So what do you think is going to happen to those savages?

Javier: They are either going to be educated, made part of the system,

(Peter: Be killed!)

Javier: or erased off the system.

(Miguel: Prison.)

Ms. Lang: Be part of the system or be erased out of the system. I like that.

Javier: I got that out of *The Matrix*, I think.

Ms. Lang: So what do you think manifest means? Destiny is something that is meant to be. It is something that is supposed to happen.

(Transcript 12/1/08)

This full class discussion, which was initiated by Ms. Lang, became a venue for students plotting their understanding of America's story of expansion rather than agreeing with Ms. Lang's. Estella and Javier, both of Mexican descent, shared a perception of American expansion as that of whites taking over the continent and its original inhabitants. Ms. Lang did not challenge this but rather provided prompting questions for them to continue explaining how they understood this history. Javier's defensive reaction to his own use of the word "savage" revealed that he was aware of the colonial story that Ms. Lang invoked earlier with her use of the terms "civilized" and "uncivilized," yet did not want to be implicated in agreeing with such a narrative. Estella and Javier were publically offering a strong critique of a story that glorifies Westward Expansion.

Some students were joking or not participating, but no one was challenging the way they were telling the story.

A week and a half later during the Black Hawk Socratic Seminar, there was a disagreement among students over Black Hawk's surrender[1]. Students were sitting in a circle discussing the text. (During her Socratic Seminars, Ms. Lang arranged chairs in a circle and told students who wanted to participate to sit in the circle. Those who did not want to participate sat in the desks and chairs scattered outside the circle. On the day of this - the third - seminar of the semester, class began with 12 students sitting in the circle and 12 sitting outside.) Joseph, an African American student who rarely spoke to anyone in class and rarely participated in class discussions, sat on the inside of the circle and contributed a very sophisticated and thoughtful analysis and defense of what Black Hawk was saying in his defiant speech. Ronnie, on the other hand, began to question why Black Hawk was being defiant.

> Ronnie: Well, he was captured, right, so I figure, you know, if you're caught, you should just give up. What is the point of still being defiant, you know?
>
> Joseph: He's showing he's not no bitch.
>
> (laughter)
>
> Ms. Lang: Why do you say that?
>
> Joseph: If he didn't get caught, he would still be fighting. He would still be fighting, he'd probably kick them all the way to the gallows.
>
> Ronnie: That's like saying if you fight somebody, one-on-one, you lose a fight, and you still say, I won it! Everybody else say you lost.
>
> Joseph: Let's say somebody walks up, smacks your girl, beats you up, takes your house, kicks your family out, now what? *Oh I'm sorry?*

[1] Black Hawk, a Sauk Chief, gave his surrender speech in1832 after he was captured in a battle the Sauk eventually lost to the U.S. 6th Infantry.

Later Billy, one of the white boys, contributed to the discussion, much like Ronnie by questioning Black Hawk's defiance.

> Billy: Why didn't he try to negotiate?
>
> Joseph: Why would you?!
>
> Billy: All his people are getting killed, they took their land, why fight back? Try to negotiate with them.
>
> Peter: You can't get lives back though.
>
> Billy: They were obviously losing; why not try to negotiate?
>
> Estella: That's *their* stuff!
>
> Billy: They're not getting it back though!
>
> Estella: They started negotiating before the war, they didn't agree, so they started the war, they didn't agree on each others' terms, they *tried* to negotiate.
>
> (Transcript 12/10/08)

In this discussion many of the students' interpretations were made public. This discussion, as evidenced by students' use of the pronouns "they" and "their," represented more than just how students perceived of Black Hawk; it became a discussion about the relationship between white Americans and the Native Americans. Ronnie and Billy did not understand the Native American's defiance of America's power and expansion. To them such resistance was foolish and not worthy of respect or even real consideration. Others, like Estella and Joseph, appreciated and championed their resistance and wanted to discuss the violence and hypocrisy that they seemed to believe represented America's encroachment into the lands and lives of others.

These students clearly disagreed about the storyline. One group, as represented by Ronnie and Billy, saw America's expansion as inevitable, as progress, and therefore those that interfered with progress were not to be taken seriously. The other group, represented by Estella and Joseph, saw American expansion as a violation of its own values, as doing more harm than good. There

was no closure, reconciliation, or final word on these competing viewpoints in the seminar; the behavior of students both in and outside the circle eventually became so disruptive and off-task that Ms. Lang steered the conversation into a discussion of students' inability to engage in "accountable talk" about history.

While in this seminar Joseph made a generalized comparison between the experiences of Native Americans and cruel treatment that students might encounter in their own lives, there were no connections made between the historical relationship between Native Americans and the United States. Much like with Ms. Lang's narrative, it was almost as if there is no continued relationship to address and make sense of. Toward the end of the Westward Expansion unit, Ronnie questioned Ms. Lang about the importance of studying the U.S. Mexican War; some students groaned, as if this was not an acceptable question. Ms. Lang responded by citing the importance of understanding history to be able to make sense of the current relationship. During that same class, after watching a film about the War, Ms. Lang brought the issue up again.

> Ms. Lang: So why is this important today?
>
> […]
>
> Javier: Immigration.
>
> Ms. Lang: What about immigration?
>
> Javier: There are not a lot of jobs over there in Mexico. People come over here, but the United States creates more barriers for them. And the United States had taken its land, if the Mexicans still had it they wouldn't need to travel, because all the, uh, places like California, they would have had wealth, they would have more space; they wouldn't need to travel. (Outline 12/17/08)

Here we can see how Javier's narrative of Westward Expansion included a strong connection between the history of Westward Expansion and his own lived experience of emigrating from

Mexico to Minnesota. Other students made the same connections while watching the film *Empire Along the Trail*.

> Carleton: You hear about nowadays, how like Mexicans are trying to cross our border and back. And then [before the U.S. Mexican War] we were trying to cross theirs.
>
> Estella: You know how the Mexicans are crossing illegally to the United States now? Back then, the Americans tried to cross into Mexico! (Transcript 12/11/08)

Students were able to make the connections between past and present, see how times had changed things, and share their observations with the class.

Multiple storylines about Westward Expansion co-existed in Ms. Lang's classroom. Ms. Lang began the unit by plotting the history as part and parcel of the nation's progress, of civilized Americans exploring and bringing their culture to the uncivilized world. Some students' contributions to class discussion, such as Estella's and Joseph's, revealed their resistance to this narrative. As the unit developed, a combined effort by Ms. Lang and the students complicated her original storyline. Ms. Lang did this through the resources she required students to read and view, while students' contributions to class discussions revealed their resistance to the original storyline. With the combined contributions of Ms. Lang and the students, the story began to reveal a more violent and ugly storyline of hypocrisy and greed. Some students in the class, such as Ronnie, agreed with the original narrative, while others, such as Javier, consistently resisted the original story and aligned themselves with the revised narrative. Within the social place of the classroom, students were able to share their different interpretations of the story of America's expansion into the West, yet there was no space to discuss where these disagreements were coming from, why they might exist, or what the implications of this might be.

Historical actors

Ms. Lang. Ms. Lang provided a much smaller and less diverse cast of historical actors in the Westward Expansion unit than she did in the units that addressed slavery. There were only a

handful of primary source readings to detail the lived experiences of those involved in America's expansion into the West: a woman settler, Black Hawk, President James Polk, and a Mexican government employee named Jose Maria Sanchez. The textbook spoke of the travels and experiences of the settlers, Native Americans, and Mormons and the films provided first- and second- hand accounts from the perspectives of Mexicans, Native Americans, and American settlers; politicians, missionaries, and military officials. And while the films that Ms. Lang presented did provide rich descriptions of a variety of experiences, she seldom stopped the films to emphasize or expand upon the ideas and voices presented to ensure that students were engaged in the ideas presented. In this unit, her focus was more on the perceptions of and by groups of people rather than on the lived experiences of individuals. With such a limited cast of individual characters, it was almost as though the groups themselves became the historical actors: Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans. With such little emphasis on the diversity of perspectives, it became much easier for Ms. Lang and the students to universalize, or essentialize, the experiences of what were very diverse groups of people. A dangerous component of this essentializing of historical actors was that the violence that became central to the interactions between the groups was discussed primarily as an issue of race or ethnicity.

The essentialization of experiences began with Ms. Lang's use of the terms "civilized" and "uncivilized" – condensing the variety of experiences into two general categories. In this framing of experience that separated the people living in the East from those living in the West, the Native Americans and Mexicans were considered within the "uncivilized" world, those who lived in the West, and the Americans from the East were considered "civilized." Another example of how broad categorizations were used to generalize experiences can be seen in how Ms. Lang and the students used the words "white" and "American" interchangeably. This is evident in a discussion reviewing what students knew about Black Hawk:

Ms. Lang: Who wins the war?

Carleton: The Americans.

Estella: The whites.

Ms. Lang: The whites, the Americans.

(Transcript 12/9/08)

In this instance, rather than challenging Estella's conflation of whites and Americans, Ms. Lang accepted and repeated what she said, lending her power as the teacher to the idea that whites and Americans are words that could be used synonymously.

Ms. Lang's presentation of historical actors in this unit is less complex and more controversial than in the slavery units. Her word choices combined with her ambiguous narrative create a very limited cast of characters in the history of Westward Expansion. There were civilized people, also known as the white people or the Americans, and then there were the uncivilized people, otherwise known as the Native Americans and the Mexicans. This depiction of historical actors is deeply problematic, primarily because the two groups are portrayed in continual opposition and violent conflict. In this context there are far fewer opportunities to see the complexity of experience that shaped this difficult history and far easier to simplify the history into a conflict between whites and non-whites. This raises many problems related to issues of identity and identification, which can be seen in how the students responded to and engaged in this history.

Students. Students generally took two approaches in their discussions of these historical actors: the first was to characterize white Americans as rightfully moving west into the "uncivilized" territories of the Native Americans and Mexicans; the second was to strongly question the character and actions of the so-called "civilized" white Americans as they moved westward and dominated the groups who lived there. Ms. Lang introduced the unit by positioning the Americans as pursuing their destiny; as a civilizing force moving into the wilderness. Some students actively challenged the characterization of the white Americans as civilized people

bringing light into the darkness of the West. The excerpts below from the Socratic Seminar about Black Hawk's surrender speech, in which Black Hawk condemns the actions of the "white man," reveal some of the resistance students expressed to such characterizations:

> Ms. Lang: Okay, anybody want to share? What did you like about the speech? What point did he make that was meaningful to you?
>
> […]
>
> Estella: (reading directly from the text) *An Indian who was as bad as a white man, could not live in our nation, he would be put to death and be eaten up by the wolves.*
>
> Peter: What?
> Estella: They would be like, put to death, pretty much by wolves if they acted like that.
>
> […]
>
> Ms. Lang: So why do you think he puts that in his speech? He's surrendering.
>
> Estella: To make the white Americans who are reading this feel guilty about what they're doing.
>
> Ms. Lang: What do you think? We don't know the reaction of the white people. Do you think it would've worked? Do you think he would've added guilt?
>
> Peter: They wouldn't care; they don't care about other people except for whites.
>
> (Transcript 12/10/08)

The language in Black Hawk's text condemns the way the white Americans treated his people and other Native Americans. Here Peter, a Hmong American, and Estella, a Mexican American, were drawn to his harsh critique and appeared to empathize with his anger and frustration. In this discussion, Estella clarified that she was talking about white Americans; she did not conflate these two groups. But, to both Estella and Peter, the white Americans remained an essentialized group who should have felt guilty for the actions of the government but did not. Both students

used a mix of the past and present tense, indicating that the harsh judgments of the actions and emotions of white Americans were not limited to history.

Manny was also very judgmental of America's interactions with the Native Americans and Mexico. While working with a partner on examining historical representations of the U.S. Mexican War over time, Manny said to me: "America is so messed up. First you take it from the Indian people and now the Mexicans" (Transcript 12/16/08). Again, since Manny was talking to me using the term "you," I assume he was conflating white with America. Here again, much like he did in the study of slavery, Manny, an American whose parents were immigrants from Guatemala, was distancing himself from the historical actors being studied. There is no evidence that he was identifying with any of the actors, but rather judging America for its mistreatment of others.

Some students were more accepting of the descriptions of the Native Americans and Mexicans as somehow inferior to the Americans. This was evident in the Socratic Seminar, as Bill and Ronnie supported America's expansion into the West and questioned why the Native Americans resisted. There were other students who seemed to have mixed thoughts about how to conceptualize these historical actors, which was evident with Peter. In the Socratic Seminar, Peter agreed with Black Hawk's perception of white Americans as cruel and unjust in their relations with the Native Americans. Yet, this image of Americans as cruel did not seem to negate their image as civilized. The next day the characterization of Mexicans and Native Americans as "uncivilized" or "savage" was also challenged in the film *The US Mexican War: Neighbors and Strangers,* which described the ancient and long-standing Mexican culture as a highly civilized society with cities, universities, and hospitals. As the movie was describing this and showing images of Mexico City, Ms. Lang stopped the film to allow time for students to take notes. She then questioned their understanding of colonialism, which led Peter to question Mexico's civilization: "If Spain was still in control, would Mexico have been better?" and then, "The

hospitals and stuff, weren't those because of Spain?" (Field notes, 12/11/08). Here Peter was struggling to accept information that depicts Mexico and Mexicans as civilized, as on-par with American civilization. It is impossible to say if this image of Mexico as uncivilized that Peter brought to this conversation developed in Ms. Lang's class or from many other images of Mexico he encountered in his life outside of the classroom, but it wasn't until 11 days into the unit that Peter was encouraged to reconsider this image of Mexico and the Mexican people. And when he was confronted with expert voices and images that spoke of Mexico as civilized, he questioned this possibility.

Representations of History

Ms. Lang. One reason why Ms. Lang's narrative of Westward Expansion may have been contradictory is because the focal point of the unit was once again on helping students to understand the constructed nature of historical knowledge. In the section of the unit that delved into the Mexican American War, Ms. Lang created activities for students to help them see the ways in which the assumptions people in the past held shaped the way they interpreted events they encountered. She also worked to get students to see the ways in which the socio-historic and political contexts in which historians wrote about the past deeply shaped their biases and how they wrote about past events. These complex ideas were simplified to show that the Americans and Mexicans understood the events that were happening leading up to and during the war in very different ways and, subsequently, historians portrayed the past is vastly differently ways.

The day after the Socratic Seminar, Ms. Lang talked with students about what assumptions were and how important assumptions are to understanding people's actions. She led a read-aloud and discussion of a worksheet created by the textbook publishers. The worksheet was an "analyzing assumptions" skill builder and included an excerpt from an editorial in the *New York Herald* from May, 1848, supporting the United States' annexation of the Yucatan. With

a close focus on the language used, Ms. Lang guided students to seeing how assumptions can be seen in the writing.

> Ms. Lang: What do you think the author is assuming in this writing, about the United States?
>
> Luis: That they are like, more powerful than Mexico.
>
> Ms. Lang: There you go, Ok? Does the author come out and say that? Does the author say America is more powerful that Mexico so America should take over Mexico?
>
> Students: No.
>
> […]
>
> Ms. Lang: What is the assumption the author is making about Mexico then?
>
> Luis: Mexico lays at the feet of the United States.
>
> Ms. Lang: And what does he mean when he says that?
>
> Estella: That they are lower than the United States.
>
> (Transcript 12/11/08)

As the conversation continued she asked students to consider if biases or facts were the basis for these assumptions. She argued that facts were not central to the assumptions but rather values and perspectives: "It is important to understand those beliefs and values and perspectives at that time to understand this war. To set the stage for this war" (Outline 12/11/08). In this full-class discussion, we can see how Ms. Lang was encouraging students to pay attention to how the subtle uses of language can reveal assumptions and values that writers bring to their work.

The rest of this handout included an excerpt from President Polk's speech to Congress about the war as well as a map that showed the lands Mexico ceded to America. While this assignment encouraged students to be critical thinkers when reading primary source documents, all the documents were created by Americans. In the film *The U.S. Mexican War: Neighbors and Strangers*, on the other hand, historians from both Mexico and the United States discussed their

perspectives on the war and referred to events and primary sources that were created from both perspectives. The following day, Ms. Lang led the class in a discussion about the different ways that the historians talked about War.

Ms. Lang: In Polk's speech, who did he say started the War with Mexico?

Luis: Mexico.

Ms. Lang: In the video, the Mexican historians, who did they say started the War with Mexico?

A few voices: The Americans.

Ms. Lang: So this is a very controversial event in American history. Like a lot of events, especially when we are talking about wars. And there are a lot of different interpretations about who started the war…

(Transcript 12/16/08)

In order to emphasize the importance of understanding the role of bias and perspective-taking in the writing of history, Ms. Lang assessed student understanding of the war with Mexico by having them write a fact-based summary of the war. She was very clear with students that the purpose of the assignment was to help them show what they understood about the war, as well as to have them experience the difficulty of writing history without making value judgments. In order to prepare them for this assignment and to further emphasize how the socio-historical and political contexts shape these biases, Ms. Lang had students read a variety of documents about the war written by different people at different points in history. Students were asked to determine if the documents were in support of or against the United States' expansion to the Pacific and then determine if there were patterns as to who supported or opposed expansion. The readings revealed how issues of race and nationalism influenced people's actions in the past, and also how these same issues affected how people interpreted these events and documented them as history. The day prior to the bias-free summary writing assignment, Ms. Lang led a discussion about a

law in Florida to teach history by only teaching the facts. She discussed the term "historiography" and how there are different perspectives on how history can be written, which she summarized on the board by writing "history writing - factual vs. constructed." (Field notes 12/17/08)

It is especially clear in this section of the Westward Expansion unit that focused on the war with Mexico that Ms. Lang was intent on engaging students in developing critical thinking skills. She wanted them to see history as "messy" and to be critical of the information they read (Transcript 12/16/2008). She used the Mexican American War and the controversial events surrounding the war, as well as the disagreements among historians about how to tell the history of the war, to help students see the complexity of historical events and their representation, and to sharpen their critical analysis of the relationship between historical knowledge, values, and power.

Students. The students, on one level, seemed to understand that a person's identity and the time in which they live would affect how they see and make sense of the world. In class when students were examining the assumptions Americans had about Mexicans and Mexico before the war (discussed above), Estella made a contribution to the discussion that revealed a sophisticated level of understanding this concept. In response to Ms. Lang's question about the assumptions evident in the reading, Estella read from the text, " 'The present race which possesses control seems to be utterly incapable of developing her resources' […] Just because they aren't using their resources doesn't mean they can't. Maybe they just don't want to waste all their resources" (Transcript 12/11/2008). Here we can see that Estella did not accept the biased reasoning put forth by the author and was able to articulate a reason why she was critical: not all groups of people make the same decisions; not all groups place the same value on certain actions.

A few minutes later, Ms. Lang was again articulating how difficult it is to separate history and biases, trying to help students make the connection between the biases people held in the past and the process of writing history.

Ms. Lang: I want you guys to understand how important, how difficult it is to look at history and not…

Peter: Politics?

Ms. Lang: Not politics. Do want to say a little more? When you say politics, what do you mean by that?

Peter: I don't know!

(Transcript 12/11/08)

This interaction with Peter shows that he understood on some level that historical knowledge and power were related; he was unable to explain this in his own words, but his response shows that he saw a connection.

Making this connection between power, values, and history led to struggles surrounding knowing the truth of what actually happened. As Ms. Lang was describing how the war with Mexico was a controversial event that people understood differently because of their perspectives, Ronnie interjected: "Which one is right?"

Ms. Lang: Exactly, which one is right? How would you answer that, Luis? You don't know?

Unidentified male voice: Go online?

Ms. Lang: Online? You would just go online and see who started the war with Mexico and you would get the right answer?

Jade: You get somebody's opinion. (Transcript 12/16/08)

Here Ronnie and Luis do not know how to determine which perspective is right, how to determine what really happened in the past. An unidentified student mentioned going online, but Jade was able to point out that the information on the internet could also just be an opinion. Ms. Lang went on to describe how historians look at primary sources and evaluate evidence. Ms. Lang talked about how Congress made their decision to go to war without all the necessary

information based on what President Polk told them, to which Peter replied, "Polk was the President? Ok, then let's just believe him" (Outline 12/16/2008). Again, Peter was making connections between power and knowledge, but this time he was making a joke, showing that political authority does not lead to truth. While they engaged in the discussion about the relationship between power, values, and truth, students did not show any evidence that they understood this relationship between bias and evidence as there was no closure or final statement to Ronnie's question about how to determine which perspective was correct.

The next day Ms. Lang engaged the class in a discussion about why Florida would want a law that limited the history taught in schools to facts only. Javier talked about the Vietnam War and how "The history that America is teaching is putting the blame on them [the Vietnamese]" (Transcript, 12/16/08). In this comment, we can see that Javier understood the political nature of historical knowledge and that he was critical of who is telling the story and for what reasons. Diana was more interested in the more personal characteristics of historical understanding and how hearing and thinking about opinions engaged her in learning.

> Diana: Some people think that opinions shouldn't really matter, the facts should just be all they need to really focus.
>
> Ms. Lang: And what do you think about that?
>
> Diana: To me it seems like opinions help my perspectives of the… kind of the, whatever we are talking about because you get to hear everybody's opinionated answers, what they think about it and not just the facts.
>
> (Transcript 12/17/08)

Ms. Lang added to Diana's response that facts are also important because they provide guideposts to making judgments about people's opinions. Yet, again, there was no evidence that students understood the complex relationship between bias and factual information. Diana

seemed to think that there were facts that existed independently of biases and opinions, while Javier understood that those with the power to tell history were able to determine the facts.

In this unit, students openly grappled with what constituted the facts and reality of history and the role of opinions and biases in history. There was no strong sense that students as a group were making the crucial connection between knowing the facts of history and being able to critically engage with the variety of perspectives people have about history. Once again, students' understanding was uneven, though there was evidence to support a claim that many students were able to see the power of values and perspectives to create controversy over who started the war with Mexico and how it was remembered. Yet, this same level of interrogation of biases and perspectives was not as evident when students were debating America's expansion into the West.

The difficulty of Westward Expansion. The narrative of America's relationships with the Native Americans and the Mexicans in Ms. Lang's classroom included two contradictory storylines. The first was of the brave and civilized Americans fulfilling their destiny of progress by expanding into and improving the savage lands of the West. The second was of greedy and violent Americans encroaching on the lives and sovereignty of Native Americans and Mexicans. In both storylines, when it came to the stories the Native Americans, no current or ongoing issues were available for consideration. The story was over. The relationship between Americans and Mexicans, on the other hand, reached back in time to Westward Expansion and again forward into the personal lives and experiences of students in the classroom. These issues of immigration complicated the judgments of past actions, allowing these stories to be as controversial as they were tragic. Unlike slavery, which was clearly plotted as a tragic prequel to current issues of racism in America, the narrative of Westward Expansion was simultaneously difficult and controversial.

The historical actors in Westward Expansion were less individuals than they were groups: the Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans. The diversity of each mass of people was lost

in language that essentialized the American experience as a single, white experience; the Mexican experiences as a homogenous group of people living in the Southwest; and the Native Americans, a multitude of nations recast as a single story of suffering and failed resistance. Ms. Lang and the students discussed the two primary images that categorized these groups: a) the Americans were civilized and white while the Native Americans and Mexicans were savages, or b) the Americans were greedy, violent invaders, the Native Americans were noble resisters, and Mexicans were a nation defending their land. Here, as in the slavery units, student identities played significant roles in how such characters were perceived and understood.

The one issue Ms. Lang and her students seemed to agree upon in this unit was that issues of identity and socio-historic and political contexts influenced how people living in the past interpreted events just as these same issues affect those who write or learn about these events after time passes. Ms. Lang encouraged students to make the connections between issues of power and value in the perspectives people take and to use factual knowledge to think critically about the accounts of the past they encounter. With this approach to making sense of the past, the truth, the real answer, was not easily had. And it seemed that issues of perspective and opinion became of greater interest to students than knowing what really happened.

Slavery and Westward Expansion

In Ms. Lang's classroom, slavery and Westward Expansion were constructed as difficult histories: both topics addressed histories rooted in suffering and violence, both topics generated ethical questions, and students identified with historical actors in both topics. While Ms. Lang had the power to shape much of what students encountered in the classroom regarding the narrative structure of these histories as well as the historical actors involved, the students' voices played a significant role in shaping the classroom discourse around these people and events.

Ms. Lang's curriculum did not explicitly follow a single narrative pattern throughout the semester. She moved through historical and current events with little attention to the chronology

of events. And while the unifying themes or issues may have been clear to her, she did not explicitly discuss them with the class. Analyzing Ms. Lang's discourse in the classroom revealed that while the narrative she presented for slavery was consistent throughout the two slavery units, there were contradictions in the multiple narratives she presented to the class in the Westward Expansion unit. From Ms. Lang's perspective, slavery was a violent prequel to ongoing issues of race and racism in America. Yet Westward Expansion was simultaneously a natural expansion of the civilized world into the uncivilized lands of the West, a brutal domination of one culture over another, a group of events that had little bearing on the lives of students today, and another set of events that were directly connected to the lives of her students. In the slavery unit, the strong storyline, while not openly discussed, provided a structure for students to make judgments about what happened at this point in America's past. There was little room to publically debate that slavery was morally wrong, and that those who suffered were victims while those who supported the institution were oppressive perpetrators of violence. In the Westward Expansion unit, there was no strong storyline to structure students' responses to events, which led to expressed controversies about how to make sense of the events studied. Students could publically debate whether the treatment of Native Americans was justified.

During the slavery units, most students followed and even co-constructed the narrative that slavery was a violent, oppressive history that remained relevant to their lives today. The students that resisted this narrative did so through silence and non-participation. Yet during Westward Expansion, students' voices actively participated in supporting multiple narratives of expansion. These constructions of narrative played a significant role in how students engaged with information about the historical actors that populated these histories. While Ms. Lang introduced and taught about a wide variety of historical actors during the slavery units in order to portray the complexity of experiences during slavery in America, the narrative structure that framed slavery as a violent, oppressive history emphasized the experiences of black slaves as

victims and white slave owners as perpetrators. Students did not publically debate if slaves were victims of oppression and violence, nor did they publically debate the relevance of this history to life in America today. In the Westward Expansion unit, where there was not an emphasis on showing the complexity of lived experience at this point in history and no clear narrative framework to shape the experiences of historical actors, students interpreted the actions of historical actors very differently. Students openly debated if the American government and settlers had the right to expand into Native lands.

Chapter 4 has shown that while students were active participants in constructing slavery and Westward Expansion as difficult histories, their contributions and responses to this process varied. In chapter 5 I will analyze ways that the focal students' understandings of these histories were mediated by their identities and how these students use their historical knowledge to better understand America. I will also examine the ways that students morally responded to slavery and Westward Expansion.

Chapter Five: Difficult Histories Beyond the Classroom

It seems to me it is all about who you are right now and that's how it was in the North and South. (Jade, Interview 2)

In the quote above, Jade engages what she learned about in Ms. Lang's class to talk about the world she lives in. She directly states that her life growing up in a city in the Midwest is like living during the Civil War: in both contexts identity shapes opportunity and experience in America. This chapter further explores the ways that students applied their understandings of the difficult histories they learned in Ms. Lang's class.

In the previous chapter, I showed how slavery and Westward Expansion were co-constructed as difficult histories in Ms. Lang's classroom. Through a close examination of the classroom context, I was able to explore the process of how students and the teacher co-constructed two particular historical events as difficult histories. Three of the key building blocks in this process were the construction of narratives of these histories, the portrayal of historical actors in these events, and the representations of these histories. In the classroom, Ms. Lang's narrative of slavery connected the violence of slavery with ongoing experiences of racism in America today. She also showed the complexity of historical actors' lived experiences during slavery, rather than generalizing the experiences of white and black people living at that time. On the other hand, her teaching of Westward Expansion included allowing for multiple narratives of the events and generalizations about the experiences of whites, Mexicans, and Native Americans living at that time. Throughout these units, Ms. Lang presented history as a social construction in which socio-historic contexts and individual biases deeply affected how events were told and remembered.

Even though the students were members of the same classroom, were exposed to the same information, and had the opportunities to participate in the same learning activities, it was evident that not all students responded to or made sense of these narratives and historical actors in

similar ways. In this chapter, I move outside the classroom to analyze the ways that students used the histories of slavery and Westward Expansion to make sense of their own lives and worlds. I analyze how students talk about these histories during their interviews to uncover the multiple ways that students' identities mediated their understanding of difficult histories. The goal was to better understand how students enacted their understandings through moral response and identification. Central to these actions of moral response and identification are students' identities, which mediate how students engage with the past while simultaneously being shaped by their interactions with the past.

Barton and Levstik (2004) argue that one of the four specific actions students are expected to perform when they learn history is to *identify*: "They are asked to embrace connections between themselves and the people and events of the past. This is one of the most common uses of history…" (p. 7). In terms of personal identification, students use the nation's history to shape a community that they are proud to belong to: "Students used history to establish 'who we are' not only by providing a community of identification, but by positioning that community as a uniquely powerful and morally superior one" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 57). A second use of history according to Barton and Levstik (2004) is engaging in *moral response*. Schweber's (2005) and Fine's (1995) research reveals that there are moral implications and lessons inherent in the content of difficult histories that, attended to by the teacher or not, deliver significant moral lessons to students. Barton and Levstik (2004) propose that developing a moral response among students is necessary to foster the abilities to remember, condemn, and admire. Others, such as Fine (1995), Noddings (1984), McKnight (2004) and myself, would include the need to foster moral thinking and the ability to develop a sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

While ethical dilemmas came up in class discussions about slavery and Westward Expansion, directly addressing moral issues was not a focus of Ms. Lang's curriculum. On the

other hand, Ms. Lang did focus on providing opportunities for identification between students, America's history, and its current events, most notably when addressing slavery and the Mexican American War. Therefore in this chapter, I am looking at how students used their historical understandings in one way that they had been prepared to do in class – identifying with the nation's past and present – and in a second way that they were not necessarily prepared to do – morally responding to what they were learning. The interview questions (see Appendix B) directly asked students to make connections between America's past and present but did not directly ask students to engage in responding to moral issues. Rather, students' moral responses to what they were learning naturally emerged in their discussions about what they learned in history class and experienced in their own lives.

Students engage with history as members of racial and cultural groups. By more closely examining students' talk about history, I show the ways that students' identities mediate their understanding of history and how their engagement with history is used to construct their identities. Like James Gee (2005), when I use the term identities, "I mean different ways of participating in different sorts of social groups, cultures, and institutions" (p. 1). Since this study focuses on students' understanding of U.S. history, much of my analysis examines how students talk about America and Americans.

Central to students' discussions about slavery and Westward Expansion were the crosscutting concepts of race and ethnicity, which shaped how the students viewed history, themselves, the nation, and how they responded to moral dilemmas. The first theme that emerged from the analysis was that *students talked about history as more a collection of perspectives and interpretations than a collection of facts or truths about the past*. This conception of history appeared to empower students to engage with history and to express their own understandings and perspectives of the past, while also allowing space for others to disagree with them. A second theme that emerged when students talked of the past was the issue of belonging, of being a part

of, or in some cases apart from, America. Students used their historical understandings of slavery and Westward Expansion to *talk about how they saw themselves belonging in the story of America or to talk about how they have been excluded from the American story*. The third theme that emerged from their responses was the *consistent pairing of ethnic/racial diversity and conflict as students discussed America*. When students drew connections between past and present, the issue of racial discord remained a significant characterization of America. The key difference between the past and present was the severity of the discord, with students generally seeing progress over time with a decline in violent conflict and the recent election of Barack Obama. Finally, analysis of the interviews revealed that *issues of race and ethnicity were deeply interwoven into how students viewed and responded to moral dilemmas*. Without a framework for engaging in ethical problems, students struggled to find ways to morally respond to the suffering and injustice they encountered in America's past and present.

Unlike the previous chapter, where voices from many of the students in Ms. Lang's class, as well as Ms. Lang herself, were present, this chapter analyzes how only the focal students talked about slavery and Westward Expansion in the interviews. It is important to note that the interview questions did not require students to directly discuss these particular histories. Rather the interview questions provided opportunities for students to talk about themselves and what they were learning in history class more broadly. It was through analysis of the interview data and of the classroom data that slavery and Westward Expansion emerged as the two histories that matched the characteristics of difficult histories.

Of the six focal students in this study, only three were born in America – Jade, Diana, and Estella. Jade identified as being both African American and bi-racial, with both white and black ancestry. Diana referred to herself as African American, and Estella as Latina, or Mexican American. All three of the boys were born outside the United States; Javier was born in Mexico, Salifou in Togo, and Luis in Ecuador. This issue of nationality is important to note because

students born outside the United States were likely to have limited prior knowledge about American history and also because assumptions about how American students use their historical knowledge to identify with America cannot easily be applied to this group.

Conceptions of History

Before examining what students do with their historical knowledge, it is important to understand their conceptions of history. Ms. Lang focused much of her curriculum on helping students see that history is more than a set of facts to be memorized. One of her goals was for students to be able to critically analyze historical documents and the ideas they encountered in history class. It is evident in students' interview responses that they viewed history as less a set of facts then a series of opinions or perspectives about past events. When talking about history, the focal students often spoke of the variety of perspectives that they and their fellow students brought to the task of learning about the past. For most students, this aspect of learning about the past seemed natural; it was not troubling to them.

Diana had very strong feelings about the importance of opinions and perspective in learning history. Not only did hearing opinions make learning history more fun, according to Diana, but it was central to the nature of history itself:

> People learn differently and people have different parents who come from different pasts, like Mexicans, and all other stuff. They come from different pasts than I come from, so then I would know something, something that they wouldn't know and they would know something I didn't know about their history. You know? And it would kind of collide and we'll get to debating and different perspectives. And they'll probably have some perspectives on history, or no slavery, but I might have more and then we'll probably debate on that and it will just go on. (Diana, Interview 1)

In this statement, Diana focused on difference: she mentioned that people "learn differently," have "different parents," come from "different pasts," and have "different perspectives," all of

which affect how they learn history. At two points in her statement it is clear that her focus on difference was a focus on ethnic or racial difference: when she said "like Mexicans" and again later when she positioned the person with a different perspective as knowing less about slavery than she, an African American, does. Difference was significant to Diana because it is a marker of what a person can know. She can know more about slavery than a Mexican because she is African American. Difference here is also connected with conflict, or "colliding" and "debating." With this response, we can see that Diana understood history as a never-ending collision of perspectives rooted in racial or ethnic diversity.

Jade's view of history was similar to Diana's. She spoke of students coming from different backgrounds and therefore having different perspectives on the past. In the following statement, she revealed how these different perspectives lead to disagreements.

> [History] can bring people together when, like, they all agree on one thing like [pause] I don't know, like that one particular thing they all agree on it. And then it'll just happen and they'll say something about one of the person's race and the whole flip will script, the whole script will flip. And then it's just like, it's not it's not like they'll stop being friends or anything, but they'll have a debate, a serious going back and forth. Going back and forth, going back and forth cuz they'll have two different opinions on it and it's true because of how people get personal with their culture and stuff like that. I think that affects it [history]. (Jade, Interview 1).

Jade struggled and could not think of an event in history that people might agree on. Yet even in this unnamed historical event that people agreed on, Jade could only see it being connected to cultural differences and therefore leading to conflict. Jade and Diana both saw cultural, or racial, differences being at the root of conflicts that arise when discussing the past. Like Diana, Jade saw conflict arise when people *talk* about history, not read or write. Neither student mentioned gender, political or religious persuasion, class, or age as possible reasons why people might develop

different perspectives about history. The root of the conflict is when people of different racial backgrounds talk to each other about the past.

Salifou, on the other hand, had a very different conception of history than Diana and Jade. For Salifou, who had first experienced learning history in a different national context, this idea of there being multiple ways of seeing the past was troublesome. Salifou talked about how school, and history class in particular, was much different in his home country of Togo. There the teacher would lecture and students would take notes. But in Ms. Lang's class, there was too much focus on talking about history.

> Salifou: Everybody have a different perspective. For example I don't like just talking about history, I like doing work, like bookwork and all that and I take notes for example, yeah. I got a lot of friends who just wanted to talk. They got a lot of things on their mind they want to say. Which is good for them but it's just not good for me. For example I got a D - back [referring to the grade he got on his slavery project].
>
> […]
>
> Interviewer: Do you think that if everyone is doing bookwork, everyone is reading the same book and answering the same questions, they will have the same ideas about the past?
>
> Salifou: Yeah I think so. I think it will help.
>
> Interviewer: It seems right now that people have different opinions about the past.
>
> Salifou: Yeah.
>
> Interviewer: Where do you think that comes from?
>
> Salifou: It comes from everything they [*unintelligible*]. Some people get it, some just don't get it. Sometimes I just don't get it so I put my head down. (Salifou, Interview 1)

According to Salifou, students' different perspectives have nothing to do with race or ethnicity, and everything to do with the type and level of work students engage in. Some students just

wanted to talk about history, so their perspective was different than his. For Salifou, this talking about history is problematic in that it seems to disrupt learning about the past rather than supporting learning. He seemed to think that his perspective, or understanding, of slavery had been hampered by the activities he was asked to do – most notably talking rather than bookwork and note taking. When he said doing more bookwork would "help," he was expressing his view that these different perspectives are problematic, a barrier to his learning history.

Only one student, Javier, spoke of the power of history to change people's perspectives. He acknowledged that people's backgrounds, such as their race, affect how they see history and how they act. Yet, when asked, he said he believed that learning history in school could lead to change.

> Javier: Some people were brought up from their grandparents and their parents and everybody telling them that they are the superior race or that they got to do this because that is part of them and then and they get their future decided for them. They don't get to choose who they want to be, they, they're already brought up that way.
>
> Interviewer: So do you think learning history in school can change that for people?
>
> Javier: Well, it can cuz you find out the horrors of the past and good stuff of the past and you realize, why am I thinking this way when this really happened? This is what people were doing to these people [pause] and [pause] thinking about that also makes you realize what would it be, how would it be if I was in the shoes of the victims or in the shoes of the, um, offenders and all that stuff. (Javier, Interview 1)

Javier expressed two opposing ideas about how people learn about the past. In the first statement, he gave the greatest significance to the family, to a person's background in determining their historical understanding. Yet in the second statement, he changed this idea that family, or cultural background, is all-powerful in determining historical understanding and gave the individual agency to engage with the history learned in school and be changed by this history. Javier

depicted the learning of history as a transformative process. This transformative process appears to happen internally rather than in conversation with others. The change he spoke of seems to come about as a result of personal reflection on the events of history.

The focal students all talked about how differing perspectives affected learning history. The majority attributed the differences in perspective to racial or ethnic differences. Salifou was the only student to see historical perspective as more related to an individual's interest in history as a subject and his/her ability to learn history. In students' responses, the open discussion between people with different perspectives appeared to cause conflict. Jade and Diana both discussed how people's diverse perspectives lead to ongoing disagreements about the past. It was only Javier who spoke of a more personal engagement with events from the past having the power to change someone's perspective.

Belonging

Students looked to difficult histories for ways of better understanding how they did or did not belong in America. Whether they were American citizens or immigrants, students used the troubling events they were learning in history class to better understand where they fit in America. Again, the crosscutting issues of race and ethnicity were central to how students identified with historical events and actors.

Estella grappled with her identity as a Mexican American as she learned about the Mexican American War. Her language choices reveal how she identified strongly with her Mexican heritage, which deeply shaped how she saw herself in the U.S. history she learned in school: "I am Hispanic, my parents are from Mexico and, like, that kind of annoys me that America took my people's land and then they won't let our people cross to America" (Estella, Interview 2). In this statement, Estella begins by identifying herself as Hispanic, informing the listener that this information is necessary to understand what she says next. What she says next distances herself from America -"America took my people's land." In this phrase, there are two

distinct characters who are at odds: Americans and her people. This conflict continues as she used the pronouns "they" and "our." With these word choices, Estella positioned herself as part of Mexico rather than America. So, in this example, Estella saw herself in American history not as a member of America, but rather as a member of a group who had been mistreated by America.

In another example, Estella identified with Americans, but still made clear that she saw herself as being slighted, or less than fully acknowledged in what she was learning.

> Like in our history textbooks, we don't even have, like, stories about how Mexican Americans came to America or something like that. We don't have that in our U.S. history textbook. We don't have, like, we only have, like, slavery but that's not a positive thing. So we don't have any positive outlooks on, like, how our cultures came to America. We only have, like, the positive, the only positive outlooks we have are of the European people. Not, like, the Hispanics or the African Americans or, like, any other people. (Estella, Interview 2)

In this statement, Estella used the pronouns "we" and "our" to show that she did identify with Americans and being American. Yet, she layed out very clearly how she felt that she had been excluded from America and the image of America that is being taught in school. Her language choice to say "we don't have that in our textbook" rather than saying there are no stories to include reveals her awareness that some people's stories are favored and given privilege over others. With this statement, she was arguing that the history she was learning in school limited the connections she could make with the nation's past; she was unable to locate herself in the positive images of the nation's beginning and growth.

Luis had the same distrust of the textbooks that Estella had. As an immigrant from Ecuador, it was not easy for Luis to see himself in the history he was learning so he often looked to the broader category of Hispanic or Latino to find ways of identifying with America's past. When asked if he had any connections to the history he was learning in Ms. Lang's class, he did

not say no. Rather, he responded with the following: "I think I have some connections because the U.S. history about the Mexican War. There wasn't just, like, Mexicans in there, there was, like, people from other countries too, actually fought in that war. I think I had some connection with that" (Luis, Interview 2). None of the class readings or discussions addressed other nations aligning and fighting with Mexico against the United States, so it is unclear here if Luis did research outside of class to get this information or if he just made an assumption. Either way, his response reflects a desire to be a part of what was happening in America's past, to have "some connection." In his second interview, Luis addressed how difficult it was to even find Hispanics in U.S. history.

> Luis: I learned that a lot of the Hispanic people fought in the Civil War against the South and North. So they know that, they don't say that in the books, but people know it's true and that is what they did.
>
> Interviewer: Uh huh. Interesting. So why do you think it is not in the books if it is true?
>
> Luis: Because they think it is not part of the U.S. history. Like, cuz they weren't from there so they are thinking that they won't be, so they are not in the history of the U.S.A. cuz they weren't born in the U.S.A. and stuff and they came from other countries. (Luis, Interview 2)

Much like Estella, Luis described an active agenda among those who create textbooks to exclude Latinos from U.S. history. Again, he was looking for evidence that he belongs, looking for examples in history of how Latinos contributed to birth and development of America. This was not a focus of class readings or discussion, but he found evidence that Hispanics participated in the Civil War. His description of why Hispanic people are not included in the history books, "they think it is not a part of the U.S. history" and "they weren't from there…so they are not in the history," is a melancholy reflection of how he feels others value his place in America. He is here, he is part of what is happening, but he feels invisible, unseen and unrecognized.

The black students did not express this same idea of being excluded from America's history. Rather, they expressed a sense of belonging specifically to America's slave past. As Diana said, "The slavery one was the best ones to me because it had, probably because it had something to do with my ancestors back in the day. It's a part of me because that is what color I am now, you know" (Diana, Interview 2). Diana did not look back in shame on the history of slavery; rather she described it as "the best" history she learned in Ms. Lang's class because it is a part of her. It is also a history she is very familiar with, as she shared later in the same interview, "Almost every history class I have been in we've learned about slavery. That's, I don't know, I don't know if that's a general lesson for history class, but we have always learned about slavery" (Diana, Interview 2). Here Diana expressed a level of skepticism ("I don't know if that's a general lesson for history class, but we…") about why she had learned so much about slavery, wondering if others had also been required to learn about as much as she, a black student, had. The more Diana talked about slavery, the more ambiguous her feelings about it appeared to be. While she talked about it being a part of her, about it being the best, later in the interview she began to show how the history troubles her.

> What really hurt me was the Dred Scott decision because he wasn't a citizen. And so, even though his master actually took him to the free state, they, you know, they convicted him or did something to him, but they said he couldn't be free, or that he couldn't sue his master for, for being free or something like that. I don't know. I can't really remember. But yeah, I think that was sad because how couldn't you be a citizen? But you're working for people who are and, I don't know, you live in the state, you live here and you're not a citizen. You're a citizen to me. (Diana, Interview 2)

This is a powerful reflection by Diana. Throughout the interviews and in class, she always had positive things to say, always had a reason to see the best in a situation. But here, she realized that as a black man, Dred Scott was legally not able to belong in America, was not an American. This

seemed to defy her understanding of America, of what it means to be an American: "you live in the state," "you're working." As someone who often talked about how important opinions and perspectives are in understanding history, she ended this reflection with a strong rejection of this history: "You're a citizen to me." But this confident statement is overshadowed by how she began the reflection with "What really hurt me." She felt this rejection, this exclusion very personally. She saw her connection to U.S. history in slavery, the very history that denied blacks the right to belong, to be American.

While Diana was often eager to talk about slavery and the difficult aspects of history, Salifou rarely mentioned slavery or Westward Expansion in the interviews. He preferred to discuss events not covered in Ms. Lang's class, such as the positive changes brought about by the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet, in the second interview, he spoke about an image that he saw in class: "When I saw the picture of the guy, back ripped, it just shocked me, almost, it was unbelievable. To think about a human being just being whipped like a dog or something like that" (Salifou, Interview 2). Here Salifou described the horror of slavery without mentioning race; instead he talked about the slave as a "human being." When asked to talk about how issues of race or ethnicity might affect how students responded to this history, he replied,

> If you're a black student you are going to feel, like oh man, that was me back then. If you a white student you gonna be like, I can't, how can, how did we do this? Why? Did we do this? If you were Mexican you might have a lot opinion about this, you feel different. So that for me, personally, I feel bad. I asked myself, how could they do this to us? We're human. We are just like them. So, it's the color of our skin that is different. (Salifou, Interview 2)

In this statement, Salifou reflected on seeing himself in the vivid image of a man's suffering. His response shows that he is moving away from his usual discourse of a color-blind America where

race is irrelevant to talk about how he imagines students in the classroom experiencing the history of slavery differently.

Unlike Salifou, Jade often spoke of slavery with deep anger toward white people. Yet she too seemed to find a new perspective on the past in her second interview. In her responses, she reveals how, as an African American, she personally identified with the slaves and struggled with mixed emotions of both pride and shame in remembering their experiences:

> We didn't start, the white people, they made the Ku Klux Klan to kill black people; they had a purpose. Most of the black people, well in my opinion, most of the black people who stood up and wrote books, it was about our freedom, our rights as human beings. Not kill the white people, let's hang them. Let's do this, we're going to get them, da da da. You know? And it just made me proud that like we are more the mature people back then. But at the same time, we were weak because [pause] the white people had, they had made our minds weak. To me, and that's what so disappointing to me because [pause] black people let them get in our head like that. (Jade, Interview 2)

Here Jade positioned the white people as violent oppressors; through her use of the pronoun "they" it is clear that she did not identify with them. She did identify with the black people, whose lack of violence and virtuous striving toward freedom gave her a sense of pride. Yet her pride was tempered by the disappointment she felt that the white people controlled black people. She continued to use the pronoun "we" to identify her sense of belonging with the slaves, even in their weakness.

Moments later Jade continued this line of thought by complicating her stated assumptions about the white people's actions. In descriptions of herself, Jade identified as being both African American and bi-racial, with white and black ancestry; and, in the following statement, for the first time, she spoke about white people with a sense of pride:

> What encouraged me more, what made me more proud, is like that all white people weren't, and I never thought this, I was like, that's impossible that all them white people were racists, you know. And that's what they always say, they always talk about in textbooks like the majority of white people and all that stuff. Like how do you know a majority of white people wasn't undercover, maybe they had to act racist to protect themselves, you know? Maybe it was that. And it's just like, you will never know about that person, you know? (Jade, Interview 2)

Here, Jade expressed a sense of hope and pride in the fact that not all white people were racist, and she explored options of why white people may have participated in and upheld slavery ("they had to act racist to protect themselves"). Yet, throughout her discussion of white people, she continued to use the term "they" rather than "we," revealing her discomfort in fully identifying with the white experience during slavery. Her sense of belonging remains tied to the slave experience.

Throughout the interviews, students' responses revealed how they used the difficult histories learned in school to make personal connections with America's past. For the Hispanic students, the desire to belong to America's story was hampered by a felt sense of being excluded from the official history. The event they most strongly identified with, the Mexican American War, limited their ability to feel a sense of belonging in America as the two groups they connected with, Mexicans and Americans, were at war. For the black students, their sense of belonging in America was tied to the slave experience. Yet, as Jade, Diana, and Salifou spoke about slavery, their sense of truly belonging in America's history was hampered by the fact that they were indentifying with those who had suffered and were oppressed.

Jade was the only student who identified with the experience of white Americans in these difficult histories. This identification was brief, and not fully realized. The black students did not identify with the experiences of Native Americans or Mexicans, and the Hispanic students did not

speak of identifying with Native American or African American experiences. The sense of belonging that the students found was limited to their ethnic or racial affiliations. There was no sense of belonging to an American history that could be separated from the unique experiences of different cultural groups.

Diversity and Discord in America

Students' discourses about America and its past often focused on ongoing divisions between different groups of people. While the past was generally positioned as embodying a more violent clash between diverse groups of people, students consistently spoke of divisions among groups of people as a similarity between America's past and present.

Diana was the type of student who was very interested in history and knowing the painful details of the past, but who always wanted to have a positive outlook on life. When asked in the second interview what she was learning about America, she responded:

> That it is a horrible country! (laughing) It went to invade Mexico, and take their land and stuff, I don't think that is very nice. (laughing) And um, that we were split up into two and fighting against, for an issue that it shouldn't been. And that, I don't know. It has come a long way. It has come a very long way. Well, from what I am learning, yeah it's came a long way. Because I don't see us, we are not fighting as much about those issues, even though there probably is some of those issues still around, but they are not as big as they were back in the day. (Diana, Interview 2)

Here Diana was openly discussing the problems of America's past, but she did it while laughing and smiling, as if to not take what happened in the past too seriously. In the past, America was violent, fighting against Mexico and itself. Note her ambiguous identification with America – using both first and third person pronouns as she described the nation's violent past. "*It* went to invade Mexico," "*it* has come a long way"; "*We* were split up in two," "*we* are not fighting as much." Yet her point was that the issues that led to violence in the past - where the national

boundaries are located and the unnamed racism that she alludes to at the heart of the Civil War - still exist with less violent manifestations today. In her first interview she was more direct about the ongoing issue of racism in America: "There still is racism but it has gone way down cuz now we have a black president" (Diana, Interview 1). And later in the second interview, "Segregation, discrimination is still around. (chuckle) That is still around. You know, some people are still in their old ways and don't want to commit to the new ones. So, what can you do?" (Diana, Interview 2). Diana was ever hopeful, yet also resigned to the idea that race will divide people. She was hopeful that the election of the first black president (just days before her first interview) reflects a decline in racism in America. But, a couple of months later, she again admits, with laughter, that racism is still around, and that it seems only natural, something that cannot change.

Luis also saw racism in America today. He made the connection between America's slave past and current racial stereotypes: "I think it [slavery] does have some effect cuz, there is some racism going on still, like about black people and stuff. So, so, I think it does effect because if you are a colored person you still get judged and stuff. Like they say, like, if you get your car stolen, somebody, like, right away you going to assume it was a black person" (Luis, Interview 1). Here Luis' connection between the past and present was related to the negative images people in America have about black people. For Luis, the racist images of blacks in America linked events he experienced in the present with what he was learning about U.S. history. It is interesting to note that while Luis was aware of how Latinos are excluded from histories, he did not connect images of Latinos in history to discrimination Latinos experience today. He talked about this issue of negative images only in relation to slavery and black Americans.

Jade was very attuned to issues of race and racism in America. One activity in class that made her particularly angry about the current state of race relations in America was a reading the class did together from the *New York Times* entitled "Obama and the War on Brains" by Nicholas Kristof (11/14/08). The article examined the idea that, in Barack Obama, Americans elected an

intellectual to the White House. In class, Ms. Lang engaged students in a discussion about what makes people more intelligent than others. The article and ensuing discussion outraged Jade. To her, the article and ensuing class discussion seemed to be rooted in the idea that people could not believe that Obama was such an intelligent man. Jade could not believe her fellow students were not as upset by this as she was. She discussed the article and her response to it in her second interview:

> It just pissed me off because like, why can't he be that smart? […] Why is that so important that he is that smart? You know? And it just made me mad because it's because he's black. That is what is said in the article. And it's just like, it made me feel like, do, do people think black people are like, ok, smart, intelligent, not *highly* intelligent, but ok smart, and most of them are dumb?! (Jade, Interview 2)

It was not much later in this same interview that Jade expressed her disappointment with the slaves: "We were weak because [pause] the white people had, they had made our minds weak. To me, and that's what so disappointing to me because [pause] black people let them get in our head like that" (Jade, Interview 2). While Jade herself did not make a direct connection between these two responses, it is clear that she was troubled and deeply affected by the idea that black people in America are considered somehow intellectually inferior. She was struggling to make sense of how the beliefs that supported slavery continue to affect how black people are perceived in America today.

Jade was not only upset about racism in America; she was also the only student to make connections between issues of wealth and injustice in America's slave past and its current economy:

> The South reminds me of how our economy is now. Everybody is greedy and wants, they want it right now, right then and there. […] They lost a slave they wanted it back by night. If they wanted, if they lost crops, they wanted to grow more like that. *You better*

> *plant that stuff*! If they wanted more cotton, you had to get more cotton. Whatever they wanted, they had to get immediately. (Jade, Interview 2)

The discord that is evident here in Jade's ideas about the economy are not rooted in race, although her mention of slavery does allow for such connections, but in the idea that wealth divides Americans. She was upset about the divisive power of the common denominator of greed in the system of slavery and in the economy today. Her concern was that the driving desire to make money limits people's capacity to work together.

Estella was less interested in talking about slavery and racism in America than she was in discussing the relationship between America's history with Mexico and its current immigration policies. She was deeply frustrated by the way the Americans viewed the land it controlled in the southwest:

> It doesn't really make sense to me like Texas and Arizona and California and all those states were ours before they were theirs, now we can't even come to visit our family that lives in there, which is really, which I am really iffy about. The immigration situation, and, like, the history of the lands and stuff like that really kind of bugs me. (Estella, Interview 2)

With this statement, Estella expressed her belief that the issue of identity and control of the land between Mexico and the United States is an ongoing issue that affects how people in both nations relate to each other. Again here, Estella identified with Mexico and not America, and pointed out that the results of the war with Mexico continue to create divisions not only in the land, but in the opportunities people have to relate to and connect with each other.

Salifou, in contrast to his classmates, saw the America he lived in as a colorblind society that provided equal opportunity for all. He spoke of his father studying for his citizenship test and often preferred to address more optimistic histories that they discussed at home, such as the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King, Jr., rather than the histories he was learning in school.

Salifou spoke of the American Dream, of working hard in America and being able to achieve anything. To him, America was better than any place in the world. So when he talked about America's history, he struggled to make connections between the difficult histories and the America he lived in: "It was pretty cruel back then. People were cruel, they just killed by themselves or something like that. Now we care about each other" (Salifou, Interview 2). In this statement, Salifou reveals his understanding of the cruelty of slavery as an individual decision. Salifou struggled to make sense of how change came about, from people being cruel to caring about each other, but he did reference his own experience with the image of the slave's torn back as a possible reason of how things had changed in America: "Maybe, ah, seeing those kind of pictures just tore people apart and made them feel bad for them and changed their idea about their beliefs and something like that" (Salifou, Interview 2). It is clear from his response that Salifou's strongly held belief in the American Dream, the belief in the individual's ability to achieve whatever she or he works for, filtered his ability to engage with and understand history and the world he lived in. Through this filter, Salifou viewed slavery as a choice individuals made and when they realized that their choice hurt others, they again made the individual decision to stop being cruel.

All students, except Salifou, made connections between America's difficult histories and current divisions among Americans. The majority of connections between the past and present related to the racism that students saw as central to the system of slavery. Even though the system of slavery had ended, whites and blacks in America continue to be divided by the beliefs and ideas they held onto about each other. Estella discussed the discord in America between immigrants and Americans, which she tied directly to the land ownership issues that resulted from the Mexican American War. And Jade discussed the divisions between the rich and poor as an ongoing American problem rooted in an economic system that prioritized profits above all else. What is striking about the prevalence among the students of this discourse of discord is that

while it does reflect the narrative of American progress (things are better now than they used to be), it does not focus on some of the more positive aspects of America. Salifou was the only student to see America as the land of opportunity and no one talked about equality or freedom as being ideas or values that connected America's past and present.

Moral Response

In the interviews, students revealed the many ways they morally responded to the difficult histories they encountered in Ms. Lang's class. While the curriculum did not provide a framework for engaging in moral response, students were unable to talk about the past without also judging, admiring, and condemning the actions of the historical actors they encountered. A key problem that became evident in their discussions was that without a moral framework with which to encounter these difficult histories, they had no clear structure to guide them in their moral reasoning and judgments. One result was that students often struggled to see what was at the root of the moral dilemmas and so they used the language of race and ethnicity to discuss issues of right and wrong. Another result was that students often passed judgment on the past, rather than on the events, activities, or actions of people who lived in the past.

"The past wasn't good" (Diana, Interview 1). Diana in particular did not know how to morally engage with the difficult histories she studied. She summarily judged the past as bad, which allowed her to learn about the past without feeling troubled about what she was learning. "It was how they were brought up, it's how the world was like that back then and so then now, like, we've changed so much. So then this is the world that I'm living in so there's nothing to be sad about" (Diana, Interview 1). In her second interview, when she expressed being upset over Dred Scott being denied citizenship, it was almost as if she was beginning to see the past differently, as a series of decisions and actions that had consequences for people, rather than the past being a place where things were naturally unfair.

Diana was very interested in remembering those who suffered, specifically the slaves. She empathized with their pain and wanted to feel how they suffered: "I just want to be back then, like, see the world, how it was and see, like, kinda feel the pain of how they were treated" (Diana, Interview 2). When asked why she thought this was important, she responded,

> I think the benefit would be, just, I don't know. Kinda to me it would be like having respect for them, kind of understanding what they went through. And just, um, I don't know, understanding what they went through and, not? Kind of like for what they went through for you especially, for us, for our generation or whatever. And just how to respect by learning what they did. (Diana, Interview 2)

Here we see Diana truly struggling to express why she wanted to feel the pain of how others suffered. She wanted to respect and remember what the slaves went through and to acknowledge that their suffering does not go unnoticed or appreciated. She felt that their pain is connected to her own life and wanted to acknowledge that, but she had no language to express what she felt compelled to do.

Jade also struggled to find the language to talk about why she wanted to know about the awful things that happened in the past. When asked what she thought was important to know about America's past, she responded,

> The ancient slave ships, how they traded slaves, how they just had them like piled on top of each other horizontally one way, this way. And like they, they didn't care if they killed the little babies that were in there, they didn't have no mercy for none of them. So I didn't know that 'til this year. And I really like, that really got to me a lot. I really like that part cuz I never knew. I like learning stuff that I didn't know. (Jade, Interview 1)

Here Jade was also talking about respecting and remembering the suffering of others who she identified with racially, but she could not find the words as to why this was important to her. So she spoke of liking that part of history and that she liked learning what she did not know. Yet,

given the painful descriptions of life on the slave ships that she provided, it seems unlikely that she "likes" knowing this. Much like Diana, she struggled to express something deeply felt and important to her.

Unlike Diana, though, Jade did not see the past as a separate place where things could summarily be judged worse than they are in the present. Rather, Jade often viewed the past through a racialized lens. Her moral compass focused on issues of race and ethnicity.

> I don't think I'm ever going to hear a black person ever say, like, it was right for them to beat us. […] And you never going to hear a white person, like you do, well, see that's the difference. You do hear white people because they disagree some. White people are like *that was wrong* and some white people are like well, *some like this* and it's all because their opinion and where they come from and how their family is raising their background. (Jade, Interview 1)

Jade used the language she had been accustomed to using when morally judging actions and people – race. The problem is, this limited her ability to make a more complex analysis of where this violence is coming from and why it was accepted. She wanted to categorize blacks into those who are good/right and whites into those who are bad/wrong. She realized this did not actually work, yet race remained the lens through which she viewed right and wrong. There is no sense of greater laws or values influencing ideas of right and wrong here; she only mentioned race and family. In her second interview, she did begin to expand her moral judgments beyond race to include class, which reveals that throughout the year she was exhibiting change in how she morally responded to what she was learning.

Javier struggled to make sense of the conflicting perspectives that historians gave regarding how the Mexican American War started. He was aware that each side would have its own view of what happened, but he was unsure of how he, a Mexican living in America, should

navigate these conflicting approaches. He also questioned how decisions about going to war should be made:

> Then when they started the war because of the dead Americans that were shot by the Mexican soldiers on the disputed land, that's what, that was a very emotional topic because [pause] you, you have to, I don't think that was right to go to war just because somebody was shot in the disputed land. I mean you have to argue about it more and then decide what the, what to do, is it to go to war or decide? (Javier, Interview 1)

Javier wanted clearer guidelines about how to determine when to go to war because he thought that might help him navigate the discrepancies between the varying perspectives on how the war started. He saw that the decision could be emotional, and that passing judgment on the decision could also be emotional. It seems that he was looking for guidelines to make such decisions more clear-cut, less about emotion and more about rational distinctions between right and wrong.

Estella was the only student who spoke about taking action as part of her moral response to the history she was learning in school. Estella was frustrated by the racial injustice that she encountered in U.S. history class. Where Jade expanded her moral reasoning to include issues of class, Estella expanded her moral reasoning to address issues of gender and power:

> I think it's like about like who is more powerful like most of our history is the white man has always been powerful instead of like the African American man or Latino man or the Latino woman. Or the white woman. Like, I think it is the power struggle, like who should be on top. And I don't see why everyone is competing against different nationalities when they should just be competing against the people in their own race or everyone else. Like yeah, I don't see why, I don't see why they would put down so many people. Like, did they feel threatened? Did they feel like they couldn't last unless they had just power over them? I don't know. (Estella, Interview 2)

Here Estella was grappling with the sources of oppression. She talked about race and nationality and gender, but she struggled to see what was behind these classifications that have led white men to oppress a vast array of others. In looking beyond race, Estella is beginning to engage in a more complex analysis of oppression.

The frustration that Estella experienced with how people oppressed and mistreated each other throughout history became even more intense when she learned about the Mexican American War. She talked about being so frustrated with how the war was connected to the immigration issues in America today that she was moved to take action.

> Estella: I write about it, either online or like on paper. I just discuss with other people about it, about that topic. Like, me and my friends made ranting blogs for a while about things like that [immigration] like all over MySpace and Facebook and stuff.
>
> Interviewer: You did? You wrote about it on MySpace?
>
> Estella: Yeah, me and my friend who were bothered about the immigration stuff, we wrote it on, no it was actually Facebook, and then we put it on MySpace. (Estella, Interview 2)

Estella's moral response expanded beyond passing judgment or admiring to feeling a sense of responsibility for the well being of others. This sense of responsibility led her to take action beyond the requirements of the course and beyond the school walls.

All students responded morally to what they were learning about slavery and Westward Expansion in Ms. Lang's class. Some responded by judging the actions of others, some by trying to keep the memories of how people suffered alive, and another responded by acting on a sense of responsibility for the well being of others. Since these histories were taught without attention to the moral responses students might have to them, the students were left to their own devices to navigate the tricky moral dilemmas that were part and parcel of the difficult histories. Without a language, or a framework, for engaging in these moral dilemmas, their responses were disparate

and often left the students searching for words to express ideas and thoughts that were important to them. More often than not, students turned to the language of race and ethnicity to make sense of the difficult histories they encountered, limiting the depth to which they could explore the complexities of what happened.

A Closer Look

The diverse group of students in Ms. Lang's class used the difficult histories they studied in school to engage in similar activities, such as finding ways that they belong in America, making sense of the country they live in, and morally responding to past and present events. The students' conceptions of history strongly influenced how they used their historical understanding to engage in these activities. Overall the students viewed history as a collection of perspectives and interpretations of the past that are shaped by one's racial and cultural background. Such a fluid conception of history empowered students to talk about their own views of the past and to make connections between past events and their own lives. Only Salifou, a recent immigrant to the United States from Togo, resisted this conception of history as a collection of interpretations and spoke of history as a set of facts. Salifou was also the student who struggled the most with using his historical understanding to make connections between America's past and his ideas about America today.

Most students believed that people understood history differently based on their personal backgrounds, namely race and culture. These same students believed that these different understandings of history often led to conflicts amongst people. Only one student, Javier, spoke of the transformative power of history. Javier acknowledged that a person's background deeply affected how they viewed history, yet rather than focusing on how different perspectives lead to conflict, he spoke about how learning different histories, or new perspectives related to familiar histories, in school could change a person's thinking about the past and themselves.

Students used their understanding of difficult histories to identify with America, or, put another way, to make sense of how they do or do not belong in America. Barton and Levstik (2004) describe identification as one of the most common and reviled historical activities: "the suggestion that history can tell us who we are threatens the discipline's posture as an objective and scholarly enterprise, separate and above earthly political or social concerns" (p. 45). Since most of these students did not view history as an objective or scholarly enterprise, they had little problem using their historical understanding to identify with the nation. Barton and Levstik articulate the complexity of identification by adding, "Identification is necessary for democratic life, because without attachment to community, individuals would be unlikely to take part in the hard work of seeking the common good" (p. 46). While these students used their historical knowledge to engage in the activity of identifying with the nation, their approach to identification was slightly different than how Barton and Levstik described the ideal outcome of identification.

Students in Ms. Lang's class looked for ways that these difficult histories revealed how they belonged in America and often spoke of being marginalized rather than finding attachment to a greater American community. This sense of oppression and division among groups was central to understanding both slavery and Westward Expansion, and students were able to make connections between their own experiences living in America and those more violent manifestations of divisions in America's past. Students did not speak about belonging to an American community; rather they identified with the oppressed and underrepresented groups they studied in history class. For African American students, identifying with slavery provided a sense of belonging to the American story, to the founding of the nation. Yet, this sense of belonging was limited to identifying with an African American community, rather than a greater, more inclusive American community. The Latino students spoke of being intentionally excluded from U.S. history textbooks, revealing their understanding that there is little public interest in including Latinos in America, past or present.

One student drew on what she learned about slavery as she worked through her own personal struggle with being bi-racial and identifying with the experiences of both black and white historical actors in America's slave past. While she consistently identified with the African American experience, in the interviews she did speak of changes in her perceptions of white Americans as a result of what she learned in Ms. Lang's class. The multiple images of the white experience during slavery that she encountered provided an opportunity for her to challenge her existing notions about the relationships between white and black people during slavery. Yet, Jade was the only focal student who talked about trying to make sense of the complexity of the white experience during slavery or Westward Expansion.

Students also used their understanding of difficult histories to make sense of America. Generally students were able to make connections between America's past and present, identifying such issues as prejudice and racism to demonstrate continuity over time. Students did emphasize that these persistent issues were much less severe and violent and that certainly progress had been made in regards to racism and prejudice. While inequity and progress are common themes identified by students talking about U.S. history (Cornbleth, 2002; Epstein, 2000, 2009), the image of America this group of immigrant, Latino, and African American students created when talking about difficult histories most strongly aligned with a critical counter narrative of U.S. history (Almarza, 2001; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 2000, 2009). The image these students painted of how diverse groups interacted over time in America was not positive: the Latino students often spoke of being excluded from the official history, much like the Mexican students in Almarza's (2001) study; and, similar to the black students in Epstein's (2009) study, the black and Latino students in Ms. Lang's class alluded to violence and conflict when discussing interactions between different racial groups. When referencing the difficult histories of slavery and Westward Expansion, ideas that are common in narratives of America's progress, such as freedom and equality (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Cornbleth, 2002), were

noticeably absent from these students' discussions of America. Only one student, Salifou, consistently spoke of America as the land of freedom and opportunity. As a newcomer to the United States, Salifou struggled to make sense of the divergent images of America he encountered at home and at school. His strong allegiance to the promise of the American Dream often limited his ability to make sense of the difficult histories he learned in school.

Race also played a central role in how students morally responded to difficult histories. Since students were not provided with a framework for morally responding to what they were learning in the classroom, they relied on their preexisting ideas about right and wrong, which were most strongly rooted in issues of race. Students strongly identified with historical actors from their own racial or ethnic group and spoke of wanting to remember and acknowledge their specific pain and suffering. The black students spoke of the injustice and suffering of slaves, and the Latino students spoke of the ongoing injustice of land ownership in the Southwest. Neither group spoke of the suffering and losses experienced by the Native Americans. The ability to identify with and the desire to remember the suffering of other racial or ethnic groups was missing from the students discussions. Also missing was a clear understanding of why they wanted to remember the pain suffered by the historical actors with whom they identified.

Race and ethnicity were also central to the judgments of right and wrong that students made about difficult histories. While it is absolutely true that race was a major factor in both Westward Expansion and slavery, issues of power, equity, justice, and fairness are also central to understanding these histories. But students lacked the language to discuss Westward Expansion and slavery in these terms; and, in order to make sense of right and wrong, they often relied on their experiences of race and ethnicity. Central to this problem is students' inability to identify with or see the perspectives of other racial and ethnic groups. Levstik (2001) found that students in New Zealand also struggled to reconcile the interests of their own ethnic groups when morally responding to controversial histories. The problem here, as Barton and Levstik (2004) note, is that

for these students issue of justice are framed as partisan concerns representing contemporary positions (p. 100). Such an approach to making judgments of right and wrong does not provide opportunities to bring people together; rather it supports racial and ethnic divisions.

Encountering the pain and suffering of others while studying difficult histories in their U.S. history classroom, students looked for ways that that these histories told them about themselves and their world. Yet, relying heavily on their own experiences and perceptions of contemporary issues limited the extent to which students engaged with the diverse perspectives and range of experiences they were asked to consider. At times students' perceptions of the present limited their ability to engage with the difficulty of the past; at other times, the difficulty of the past appeared to provide a deeper context to what they experienced. Only in a couple of instances did students' encounters with difficult histories provide new insight into themselves and their world in America.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Summary

This study grew out of my desire to better understand what is learned when we examine the pain and suffering of others in history classrooms. In order to clarify how such troubling events are constructed and experienced in the classroom, in the second chapter I outlined a framework for conceptualizing difficult histories. The term "difficult histories" refers to histories when three interrelated components are present: (a) content centered on traumatic events, which includes a focus on the interrelated topics of suffering, violence, and oppression; (b) a sense of identification between those studying the history and those represented in history; and (c) a moral response to those events. A significant amount of the content in history courses addresses issues such as war, oppression, and violence. Yet, not all of these histories are experienced as difficult histories. Using sociocultural theory, I explained how the difficulty of histories is often constructed by those engaged in teaching and learning about them and then analyzed the data from Ms. Lang's classroom to show how difficult histories are socially constructed within the shared place of the classroom.

In Ms. Lang's U.S. history curriculum there were multiple topics that addressed the pain and suffering of others: Columbus' encounter with the Arawaks, slavery, the conditions of migrant farm workers, and Westward Expansion. Yet, a close examination of the transcripts from class discussions and interviews, as well as the curriculum documents, revealed that only two of these histories were actually constructed as difficult histories: slavery and Westward Expansion. Even though slavery and Westward Expansion shared the defining characteristics of difficult histories, there were significant differences between how the histories were constructed in the classroom.

Central to these differences were the narratives that shaped the stories being told about these histories. With slavery, Ms. Lang presented a strong, clear narrative structure: slavery was a

violent prequel to ongoing issues of race and racism in America. This narrative structure positioned whites as oppressors and blacks as victims. While Ms. Lang presented a wide range of historical actors to create a much more complex picture of experiences during slavery than the narrative structure might imply, the narrative deeply influenced how students responded to learning about slavery. Many vocal students agreed with this narrative, using experiences from their own lives and prior knowledge to support making sense of history within this framework. There were other students who did not agree with this approach to learning about slavery, yet the strong consensus within the class around Ms. Lang's narrative did not provide opportunities for these students to openly question or resist this way of thinking about America's slave past. These students' experiences and ideas about slavery were silenced, as there was little tolerance within the classroom for expressing alternate interpretations of how slavery fit into America's history.

In stark contrast to slavery, Ms. Lang presented multiple and contradicting narratives when she taught about Westward Expansion. Ms. Lang's narratives of Westward Expansion included: a natural expansion of the civilized world into the uncivilized lands of the west, one culture's brutal domination of another, a group of events that had little bearing on the lives of students today, and another set of events that were directly connected to the lives of her students. This lack of clear narrative structure, coupled with limited accounts of the diversity of historical actors' experiences at this time, allowed students much more freedom to openly debate the significance of these events. Without a strong narrative structure to position historical actors, there was also much discussion about how to interpret and make sense of the actions of those who participated in Westward Expansion. And without a clear understanding of the contradictions in these multiple narratives, students did not have direction as they navigated and tried to make sense of the various interpretations that were being voiced in the classroom.

In the case of both slavery and Westward Expansion, students relied heavily on their own personal experiences and beliefs to make sense of these histories. Therefore, with slavery those

students whose life experiences allowed them to accept that racism was an ongoing issue in America were more accepting of, and often contributed to, Ms. Lang's narrative. Those whose beliefs and experiences did not align with the dominant narrative were silenced. With Westward Expansion, there were multiple narratives that students could engage and align themselves with so there was less silencing and more debate. Yet, the underlying issues in these contradictory narratives went unexamined and the conflicts that arose went unresolved.

The diverse group of students in Ms. Lang's class used the difficult histories they studied in school to engage in similar activities, such as finding evidence of how they belong in America, making sense of the country they live in, and morally responding to past and present events. The students looked for ways that these difficult histories revealed how they belonged in America and often spoke of being marginalized rather than finding attachment to a greater American community. This sense of oppression and division among groups was central to understanding both slavery and Westward Expansion, and students were able to make connections between their own experiences living in America and those more violent manifestations of divisions in America's past.

Students also used their understanding of difficult histories to make sense of America. Generally students were able to make connections between America's past and present, identifying such issues as prejudice and racism to demonstrate continuity over time. Students did emphasize that these persistent issues were much less severe and violent than in the past and that certainly progress had been made in regards to racism and prejudice. Yet the image these students painted of how diverse groups interacted over time in America was not positive.

Students also used what they learned about difficult histories to engage in moral response. In doing so, they often relied on their preexisting ideas about right and wrong, which were most often talked about in terms of race and ethnicity. Students identified with historical actors from their own racial or ethnic group and spoke of wanting to remember and acknowledge

their specific pain and suffering. The black students spoke of the injustice and suffering of slaves, and the Latino students spoke of the ongoing injustice of land ownership in the Southwest. Neither group spoke of the suffering and losses experienced by the Native Americans and only one student attempted to better understand the white perspective. The ability to identify with and the desire to remember the suffering of other racial or ethnic groups was missing from the students' discussions. Also missing was a clear understanding of why they wanted to remember the pain suffered by the historical actors with whom they identified. Race and ethnicity were also central to the judgments of right and wrong that students made about difficult histories. While race was clearly a major factor in both Westward Expansion and slavery, issues of power, equity, justice, and fairness were also central to understanding these histories. Yet students struggled to discuss and analyze Westward Expansion and slavery using these ideas; rather, in order to make sense of right and wrong, they often relied on their own experiences related to race and ethnicity.

Throughout this research the power of personal beliefs and experiences, especially those related to issues of race and ethnicity, remained crucial to students' historical understanding. They were central to students' participation in co-constructing slavery and Westward Expansion as difficult histories in Ms. Lang's classroom and in their own applications of historical knowledge. At times these personal beliefs were vehicles to better understanding distant others, and at others, they were barriers.

Difficult Histories

Students' identities consistently mediated their interpretations of the difficult historical events they studied. These findings support existing research that emphasizes the importance of racial and ethnic identities in shaping students' understanding of history (Epstein 1998, 2000, 2001, 2001; Porat, 2004). Salifou, a recent immigrant from West Africa, was an outlier among the focal students in that he dismissed the importance of race and ethnicity in making sense of America and its history. Yet, his identity as an immigrant deeply affected his experiences in Ms.

Lang's classroom. Salifou's image of an America where race was not an issue and his desire for a fact-based approach to learning history were consistently challenged by the curriculum he encountered in Ms. Lang's classroom. The difficult histories of Westward Expansion and slavery clashed with his ideas about America as the land of opportunity and freedom for all. And the disconnect between his understanding of America and the difficult histories he encountered in the classroom was further troubled by the difference between how historical knowledge was conceived and taught in his home country and Ms. Lang's classroom. Salifou wanted facts and dates and the truth in history class, not opportunities to discuss and interpret events and sources. The multiple layers of difference between Salifou's conceptions of America and history and those he encountered in the classroom created significant barriers to his ability to construct meaning about difficult histories. While he was an outlier among the focal students in his struggles to connect with and engage with ideas and work of Ms. Lang's classroom, his lack of engagement and connection with history was a problem that other students in the class encountered.

With the epistemological shift in the field of history education in conceptualizing the social activity of teaching and learning history being rooted in interpretation rather than the gathering of facts and dates, the expectation that there should or can be a shared understanding of difficult histories in the classroom has been disrupted. Many students in Ms. Lang's class accepted this interpretive approach to historical knowledge, expected that there would be multiple interpretations of past events, and actually did exhibit a variety of often conflicting interpretations of the past. This acceptance of multiple interpretations was not accompanied by shared discussions about how these interpretations were achieved or the significance and implications of such differences. Unfortunately, the lack of shared meaning in Ms. Lang's classroom created a void - a lack of purpose for the work of the classroom - that was not filled by other shared activities. It is important to note that the sense of community that is needed for engaging in the social activity of doing history does not need to develop around a shared understanding of the

past; it can also develop around a shared sense of purpose in learning about the past and/or a shared process for examining the past.

Ideally, the shared space of the classroom provides the opportunity to develop a sense of community around the common work of learning the content and skills of history. Yet, in the case of Ms. Lang's class, both the classroom and school contexts provided serious barriers to creating this sense of community. The school context provided many challenges to Ms. Lang's teaching. First of all, decisions made by the administration and district regarding class size and student enrolment deeply affected the size and composition of the classroom. With a high level of uncertainty regarding who was staying in the class and who would be leaving, it was difficult for a sense of community to develop in the classroom. Secondly, the low academic achievement of students at Springs was reflective of serious problems in students' academic skills. A wide range of skill level in the classroom limited students' ability to engage in the work Ms. Lang assigned and therefore also limited the types of discussions students could have with each other about history. Finally, the lack of cohesion and collaboration within the social studies department meant that Ms. Lang was designing and teaching her curriculum without the support of her fellow history teachers. There was little overlap in the skills and approaches to teaching history throughout the school and there was little support for Ms. Lang among her colleagues when she faced problems in her classroom.

There were also challenges within the classroom itself. Among the students, there was a high rate of absenteeism and a sense of apathy towards engaging in class activities. Ms. Lang struggled to find ways to engage students and often felt frustrated with the level of effort students were putting into their work. Ms. Lang had a heavy teaching load coupled with leadership responsibilities in the school and was feeling isolated and at times overwhelmed with the many issues she and the school were facing – all of which affected the time and thought she was able to put into planning and teaching. Even though it is long, this list of barriers to developing a sense of

community within the classroom is incomplete as I am not able to document the many interactions among students that surely influenced their participation and actions in the classroom.

These challenges created a level of dysfunction in the daily life of the classroom that contributed to a felt lack of cohesiveness between and among the students and Ms. Lang. The scattered and at times unfocused nature of Ms. Lang's curriculum did not provide a strong counter to these problems. Without unifying themes, issues, or questions to guide the curriculum, there was no felt sense of continuity between the topics being studied. And while she had the clear goal of fostering critical thinkers who examined multiple sources and engaged in historical interpretation, she did not provide continuous guidance on how to do this effectively. Without this guidance, students often struggled with how to make sense of conflicting accounts of the past.

Ms. Lang's focus on critical thinking and rational aspects of learning about difficult histories (such as analyzing and contextualizing multiple sources) and did not naturally lead to supporting the emotional responses students had to the content. Students did not know how to express the emotions that bubbled to the surface when they examined difficult issues in history. These emotions either remained invisible or were expressed through uncomfortable outbursts of frustration or joking – none of which supported students' engagement with historical understanding. When addressing difficult histories, it is important to attend to both the rational process of analyzing the past and the complex ways in which students may emotionally respond to these histories. Without such attention to the emotions at play in learning, students' reactions to difficult histories have the potential to disrupt both individual learning and the classroom community.

Implications for Practice

Ms. Lang enjoyed tailoring her curriculum to address the diversity of her students. She did this by focusing on events and issues in history that she believed the students could connect

with and would be of interest to them. Yet as this study has shown, in the case of difficult histories, asking students to make personal connections with the suffering and pain of others does not necessarily lead to greater engagement or increased historical understanding. This is especially true when there is little acknowledgment or support for the emotional reactions that students may have when making personal connections to difficult histories. There are no easy lessons to be learned from these histories and preparing students to meaningfully engage with the difficulty of these specific histories requires a commitment to building a strong classroom community, developing clear purposes for engaging these histories, and scaffolding experiences to help students make sense of what they are learning.

As detailed above, Ms. Lang struggled to create a sense of community in her 5th hour U.S. history class during the first semester. There were groups of students who were close friends but there were students who did not know the names of others in the classroom. Without knowing and trusting the people in the room, it was difficult for all students to feel safe enough to speak up and take academic risks such as sharing different opinions or questioning ideas that surfaced in class readings and discussions. When discussing difficult histories, there are also issues of addressing the pain that distant others have purposely inflicted on another group of people and the often personal reactions students have to such images and accounts. What if, like Alex during the slavery units, a student's racial or ethnic affiliation positions him alongside the perpetrators? And what if, in the same classroom, there are students, such as Jade and Diana, who identify with the victims? There needs to be a level of trust for students to open themselves up to talk about such histories. This need for community is supported by Simon and Eppert (1997) who discuss the necessity of creating communities of memory that support the study of and response to testimonies of suffering. A strong community would also support LaCapra's (2001) call to open oneself up to empathetic unsettlement. Students need to feel safe if they are going to allow themselves to be unsettled.

Another way to support students' engagement with difficult histories and to provide a safe structure for engaging with these histories is to have a clear purpose for asking students to examine difficult histories. Ms. Lang had many engaging and varied primary and secondary sources for students to read, watch, and learn from. But there was rarely a clear organizing question or purpose for the work that guided students' engagement with these sources other than to complete the required work. There can be many purposes and driving questions that shape how teachers plan for students' engagement with difficult histories. LaCapra (2001), for example, argued that we study the pain of others not just to be affected by their suffering, or merely to document facts and details about what happened; but rather to be transformed in the pursuit of meaningful questions regarding what it means to be human and to live together in this world. In taking an inquiry approach to teaching and learning about traumatic events, the moral response stance becomes a process of questioning and seeking understanding that leads to action rather than a doling out of judgment and decrees about what is right and wrong behavior.

Another way to engage students in making sense of difficult histories is to examine the narratives that are constructed to tell the stories of what happened. In Ms. Lang's class, the dominant narrative of slavery being a prequel to current issues of racism in America silenced students who did not agree with this approach to making sense of the past or did not appreciate how this narrative positioned them in relation to this history. In the Westward Expansion unit, the multiple and conflicting narratives led to open debates about what Americans should or should not have done at that time, without any guidance as to how to navigate the different accounts. Engaging students in examinations of diverse narratives could be a forum for students to share the stories and ideas they have encountered about these difficult histories outside the classroom into the official work of school-based history, which has been mentioned by key social studies researchers as a necessary activity in bridging the gap between the histories students encounter at

home and in school (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Epstein, 1998, 2009; Seixas, 1993; Wineburg et al., 2007).

If a teacher aims for students to make connections between the difficult histories and more recent events or ideas, it is important not to rely on student experience alone to make these connections. Such connections may be too personal; there is little room to question the experiences and feelings of students in such a case. Rather, it would be better for the teacher to provide cases or events for full class discussion that may help begin the discussion about where and how connections can be made across time and space.

Finally, teachers (and curriculum writers, administrators and parents) need to acknowledge that students are continuously engaging in moral response when learning about the past. Leaving students without guidance or frameworks for this process limits the discussions students can have about what meanings and lessons they are learning from difficult histories. Educators need to provide some framework to support students' thinking and talking about these complex issues, especially when they relate to students own experiences. The goal for providing these frameworks should not be to instill particular morals in students, but as Barton and Levstik (2004) argue, to engage students in the deliberation of the moral issues that arise when examining difficult histories. Teachers, working independently, could engage students in the analysis of national and international documents, such as the U.S. Constitution or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as frameworks for moral reasoning. If teachers would like to work with a network of colleagues who are trying to address moral issues in their classrooms, Facing History and Ourselves is an example of a professional development organization that has developed curriculum materials and provides educational opportunities and support for teachers addressing critical moral issues in their classrooms. Both of these options require teachers to take the initiative to find ways to incorporate moral reasoning into the classroom: finding ways to address these moral issues remains outside the expected work of teaching history. Another approach

would be to introduce preservice teachers to frameworks for addressing moral issues in their teacher education programs with the goal of instilling an approach to teaching history that incorporates an attention to moral issues. Further research needs to be done to better understand how to best incorporate addressing these difficult histories and moral issues in preservice programs.

Further Research

The most important research that needs to be done relates to closely examining the contexts and pedagogies of successful teachers of difficult histories. While Ms. Lang struggled with meaningfully engaging students in making sense of difficult histories, I know there are teachers who are experiencing greater degrees of success with teaching difficult histories. Researching what these teachers are doing and how their students are responding should provide insight into the types of pedagogical decisions teachers are making to teach difficult histories, how students are responding to these pedagogies, and also how students in different contexts are using what they learn about difficult histories. As Javier explained during his interview, learning history in school can change people's perceptions of others and themselves. More research also needs to be done in classrooms where this is happening to better understand how this happens.

Another important area related to the teaching and learning of difficult histories that needs further research is the sociocultural process of how difficulty is constructed in different settings. Examining how teachers address similar difficult histories in varying contexts could provide more insight into the process of how the social construction of difficulty is influenced by different sociocultural factors. It is also important to examine how students in these different contexts navigate the process of making sense of these histories, again paying close attention to how their identities and personal experiences shape how they make sense of these difficult histories and use what they have learned to make sense of their worlds.

And finally, it is important to examine the curriculum standards and materials that provide teachers with guidance when teaching histories that have the potential to be constructed as difficult. What resources are out there to support teachers in engaging students in thoughtful explorations of these histories? In what ways are teachers being encouraged or discouraged from addressing difficult histories with their students?

My desire to explore how historical knowledge can be engaged in ways that provide opportunities to speak across difference and promote ways of moving forward with a better understanding of each other led me to this project, and the many questions raised in this research will continue to guide my future explorations into difficult histories.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocols: Ms. Lang

Interview Protocol for First Teacher Interview
Monday September 14, 2008

1. What goals do you have for students in your U.S. history class this semester?
    a. Academic skills
    b. Content knowledge
    c. Moral/social development/citizenship
2. What influences the decisions you make about what and how to teach U.S. history?
    a. Prompt for others…
3. When you think about the content you will teach this semester, what issues or events do you think will be the most difficult to teach?
4. What do you think makes these issues/events difficult to teach?
5. What strategies will you use to address these difficulties?

Interview Protocol for Second Teacher Interview
January 21, 2009

1. You have mentioned that this year has been particularly difficult. Can you talk about what has been difficult?
2. How would you describe your 5th hour US history class?
    a. What makes this class unique?
    b. How is it like your other classes?
    c. Can you describe what it like teaching this class?
3. What are some of the successes of this particular class?
    a. What do you think accounts for these successes?
4. What have been some of the struggles?
    a. How have these struggles affected your teaching?
    b. How do you think they have affected the class as a whole?
5. You have made some unconventional decisions about what to teach this year – can you tell me about how you have made decisions about what and how to teach?
6. What have been you goals for student learning so far this year?
    a. How far do you think you have come in meeting those goals?
7. Race appears to be a central issue in the content you teach. Why do so many of the topics you address touch on race?
    a. What would you like students to learn when addressing issues of race in history and current events?
    b. How would you characterize what students are learning this year?
8. Early in the year two boys came to you after class and said they wanted to transfer out of your class because they did not like the discussion about slang words for white people.

How did you feel about this incident? How do you think it affected your teaching this year?

9. You mentioned the other day that you get upset every time you watch the Africans in America film and see the scene about the sale of the Pierce Butler slaves. Why do you teach content that is upsetting to you and possibly to the students?
    a. What do you hope they will learn?
    b. How do you structure their engagement with this content?

Appendix B
Interview Protocols: Students

First Student Interview Protocol
November 2008

I am going to ask you some questions about yourself, your school, and what you think about learning history…

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
    a. How do you spend your time outside of school?
    b. What are your interests (music, family, friends, sports, movies, TV, video games)?
2. How would you describe Springs?
3. This state, like most states, requires that students take US history in order to graduate from high school. Why do you think you are required to study history?
4. Do you ever find yourself thinking about or discussing history outside of school? Explain.
5. Do you think everyone has the same understanding or perceptions about the past? Why or why not?
6. Do you think some historical events are more important than others?
    a. Why?
    b. Can you give some examples?
    c. Are there any events in history that you think are particularly important to your life?
7. What have you learned in this class that you think is important to know about?
    a. What makes it important?
8. Is your history class this year similar or different to other history classes you have taken? How so?

Second Student Interview Protocol
January 2009

1. Tell me about how your school year is going so far.
2. How would you describe Ms. Lang's class?
    a. Is this class similar or different from other classes you are taking this year? How so?
3. What is your role in that class?
    a. Is your role in this class similar or different than in other classes?
4. What have you learned about America this year in Ms. Lang's class?
5. Does the America you study about in history class seem similar or different from the America that you live in today? How so?
6. Of the events that you have studied this year, which do you think best defines America?
7. Which events that you studied this year did you have a strong personal connection to?
8. Can you think of a time in the class where you had any emotional reactions or strong feelings about what you were learning or what was happening in class?

9. It seems that many of the topics covered in Ms. Lang's class are affected by issues of race. How would you describe the role race plays in American history? How about in America today?
    a. Do you think issues of race affect what happens in your history classroom?
    b. How students interact with each, their work, the teacher?
10. What about gender? How would you describe the role gender plays in American history? How about in America today?
    a. Do think gender issues affect what happens in your history classroom?
    b. How students interact with each other, their work, the teacher?