

REVERSING THE MIDDLE-CLASS GAZE IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE:
AN ANALYSIS OF WORKING CLASS ADOLESCENT PROTAGONISTS IN
*A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN, THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET, AND
THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN*

by

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This thesis is dedicated to Corina Redding Carpenter, my mother.

“We’ll keep pushin’ till it’s understood, and these badlands start treating us good.”

- Bruce Springsteen

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CHAPTER I.

Introduction

Listening to Terry Gross interview Maureen Corrigan on her new book, *So We Read On: How The Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why it Endures*, I was struck by Corrigan's comment that when she first read *The Great Gatsby*, she thought, "Oh, it's another novel about rich people." She adds that she grew up in a blue-collar community and, as "so many readers do, especially when we're young, I was looking for myself in what I was reading." Although I love *The Great Gatsby*, I agree with Corrigan that it certainly does not represent the life I knew or the life of anyone I met growing up in modern America. Unfortunately, as Heather Brook and Dee Michell observe, "the highly relevant, well-informed, and readily accessible accounts offered by academics from working-class backgrounds are not credited with the attention they deserve" (588).

Nor, I would add, are they represented on suggested required reading lists of high schools in the U.S. On the suggested reading list for the common core standards in 2012 for high school students, most texts are either classics, adult protagonist oriented, or world literature ("List: What Common Core authors suggest high schoolers should read" Valerie Strauss). It isn't that these texts ignore issues of class or adolescents, but rather that there is a noticeable lack of modern American working-class texts that are being taught to modern American students. The College Board's recommended reading list is more complex and nuanced, with more class conscious texts and writers of colors featured, but with very few adolescent protagonists concerned with working-class issues and with classics like Shakespeare (of which five of his plays are recommended) weighing heavily on the list. Heidi Stevens, in her essay on required reading, notes that in

2007, “Teri Lesesne, executive director of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents... conducted a study that looked at how school reading lists had changed since the 1970s.” She concludes that in the three decades that followed, “ Nothing much had changed... You'd see a couple titles of authors of color — Langston Hughes, Sandra Cisneros — but you'd still see a tendency to lean mostly toward classics.”

This tendency to lean towards classics can lead to a marginalization of the voices of modern working-class adolescents whose position in society is already prone to shaming and feelings that Samantha Lyle argues are the “result [of] an anxiety about the working classes that has historically entailed the (mis)recognition of the working class as being of lesser value, as particularly suited to specific forms of labour, and as a pathological, abject other” (320).

I assert that the middle-class gaze “shores up the upper and middle classes’ own identities as of greater value” (320). However, I also argue that working-class authors relating their lived experience can reverse the middle-class gaze, thereby creating texts uniquely suited to engaging and inspiring working-class adolescents who likewise learn how to reverse the gaze. I am using the term “reversing the gaze” to show that through these narratives, the adolescents turn the gaze that is placed on them by the middle-class back on the middle-class through resistance and critique of the status quo.

In this thesis, I focus on Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, and Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in order to pinpoint how the texts reverse the middle-class gaze and thereby validate the working-class experience of adolescent students. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to foreground the experiences of adolescents marginalized by class,

both in literary texts and in high school literature classrooms. This experience, as experienced by the protagonists, is made through texts that reflect real, lived experience by the authors. While issues of class can exist in any genre of literature, I believe that through realist renderings of day-to-day life working-class students are able to identify their own experiences.

While scholars such as Amber M. Simmons, author of “Class on Fire: Using *The Hunger Games Trilogy* to Encourage Social Action,” argue that discussions of class implications and discriminations surface in fantasy Young Adult (YA) novels such as Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* series, these dystopian worlds are imaginary and class is just one theme in a larger plot. What I believe is needed is literature that considers how the material experience of class functions. As Jeanne M. Connell explains, “the distinctive potential of the arts to provide students with lived through experiences highlights the importance of the study of the arts in the school curriculum” (34).

This lived experienced is featured prominently in the texts mentioned in this thesis; all of the authors have personal experiences growing up working-class. This authentic aspect of their narrative can provide direct and meaningful connections for students. In his article, “The Age of----?: Using Young Adult Literature To Make Sense of The Contemporary World,” Thomas Philion states, “I believe that readers generate ... insights when they are able to create ‘text- to-world connections,’ or linkages between literary language and messages and prevailing social issues and contexts” (47). Louise Rosenblatt’s statement that “transactions with texts that offer some linkage with the child’s own experiences and concerns can give rise aesthetically to new experiences” echoes this need for “text-to-world connections” (275). Likewise, Gay Ivey and Peter H.

Johnston explain that within their study, “Some students ... admitted to having begun the year with a simmering anger because of their personal, economic, or family situation, but reading books in which plausible characters, with whom they could relate, have lives much harder than theirs, gave them a different perspective on their own lives” (264). It is this lived experience that separates these authors from others who represent the working-class but are not themselves working-class. As Francie Nolan in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* points out, “It doesn’t take long to write of things of which you know nothing. When you write of actual things, it takes longer, because you have to live them first” (320).

However, it is important to note that the working-class experience is not static—it is influenced by cultural, gender, and racial expectations. These texts represent a broad section of working-class adolescents in literature, including intersectional concerns of race and gender and the potential of creative multi-genre texts to educate and engage adolescents in order to represent both the evolving nature of the working-class experience and the diversity of that experience.

“Working Class” Definition

As the texts discussed in this thesis range in time period from the mid 20th century (*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*) to the early 21st century (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*), an economic definition of “working class” is problematic. My definition is in line with Terry Wrigley’s in his article “Curriculum Change in English Schools: Educating Working Class Children”: “I am using the term ‘working class’ here in a traditional sense to refer to manual workers of various skill levels but also less skilled or lower paid clerical or ‘service’ workers (e.g. waiters, shop assistants, care assistants)”

(211). Additionally, I believe that the term “working-class” is a spectrum that can and does include the poor, just as there are upper and lower middle class individuals. I would also expand this definition to include the uneasy financial instability that occurs as characters continually struggle to pay rent, provide food, and in some cases, try to pass as a higher socio-economic class than they really are (as evidenced in Junior’s comic “How to Pretend You’re Not Poor” from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (120). Junior’s illustrations on how to cover up your poverty illustrates B. Skegg’s point that “Appearance matters. It is the means by which others are recognized and it is part of the way in which we want to recognize ourselves” (qtd. in Lyle 322).

Therefore, I am establishing that the adolescents within the novels come from working-class families with recurring (and often overlapping) themes of shame, scarcity, power struggles, and an identity that is seen as “less than.” The “middle-class gaze” is consistently present, especially in the shame the protagonists feel. Early in *The House on Mango Street*, for example, Esperanza expresses this shame when the nuns of her school take her home; “You live *there*? The way [the nun] said it made me feel like nothing. *There*. I lived *there*. I nodded. I knew then I had to have a house. A real house” (5, author’s emphasis). The othering and lack of resources that these adolescents face contributes to the difficulty of their situation. Esperanza’s home illustrates Lyle’s point that “aspects of working-classness, in particular, remain an aspect of social derogation” (322).

Thesis Chapters

Chapter Two is a look at the 1943 text *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith. Judith E. Smith asserts that the novel was an “immediate best-seller” that “became part of a broad public conversation” (41). While the text was popular for many reasons, it was “especially appealing to readers from working-class backgrounds” (49). In this chapter, I show how this is a seminal text in the study of working-class literature for adolescents. Importantly, Betty Smith’s representation of contemporary working-class culture is echoed in the later texts that I discuss and is therefore crucial in establishing a foundational study of literary depictions of working-class life and discrimination against poor children (in particular the middle-class gaze placed on Francie, her family, and her community). The text establishes the foundation of my argument of the middle-class gaze, showing how the gaze can be so influential that it causes self-shaming for the Brooklyn community that manifests in bullying, criticism, and an aversion to charity. This self-shaming can be seen as a negative internalization of the middle-class gaze and the values of a capitalist society.

Chapter Three is an examination of the 1984 text *A House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and represents an important shift in literary perspective in discussing the depiction of working-class adolescents through the inclusion of a minority author depicting a political lived experience. Here the term “political” is used as “having to do with power relationships,” as Carol Hanisch explains in her 1969 essay “The Personal is Political.” Kimberlee Crenshaw writes that “this process of recognizing as social and systematic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of African Americans [and] other people of color” (1241-1242).

Additionally, the recognition of an experience as shared versus individual can be seen as a “source of strength, community, and intellectual development” (1242). The timeliness of *The House on Mango Street* then cannot be understated. *The House on Mango Street* came to prominence when minority literature was growing in academia and shows a shift in style from more traditional literary narrative techniques to the less traditional (in this case, vignettes).

Cisneros’ protagonist Esperanza Cordero also represents a shift from Francie Nolan as she introduces the first triple oppressed working-class adolescent of this study-- a Latina in 1980s Chicago. Much as Betty Smith’s own working-class background informed Francie Nolan’s experience, Sandra Cisneros’ experiences growing up are also reflected in Esperanza’s narrative. In her article, “Difference, Identity, and Sandra Cisneros's *The House On Mango Street*,” Jayne Marek states, “As Esperanza becomes more aware of the meanings of her surroundings, she learns to recognize based on her gender, ethnicity, and class-standing, the three most crucial complicators in her development” (173).

The gendered struggles and defiance of Esperanza are more overt than seen in Francie’s experience. In one vignette, “Beautiful and Cruel,” Esperanza states “I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (89). Additionally, the validity given to the lived experience of minority writers can be seen as a positive source of inspiration for students reading the text and transitions into another marginalized group- the rural poor.

Chapter Four is an examination of Sherman Alexie’s 2007 novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. This text is the most contemporary of the selections

and is “inherently relevant in that, by design, they [contemporary novels] are responsive to the emotional and cultural challenges young people face in their everyday lives” (Ivey and Johnston 257). In an attempt to show a balanced portrayal of contemporary working-class adolescents, the focus here moves to male protagonists. Junior is acutely aware of the middle-class gaze placed on him, going so far as to write a comic strip on how he can hide his poverty from his classmates.

Absolutely True Diary takes place in a rural environment (on and off a reservation in Spokane, Washington) and has faced numerous issues with censorship. The book has been on the American Library’s Associations Top Ten Challenged Books every year since 2010, and as of 2013, was listed as number three. Similar to *A House on Mango Street*, issues of race and poverty combine to show another viewpoint of intersectionality—the experience of a working-class Native American male.

Ellen Forney’s illustrations combined with Sherman Alexie’s text allow for a humorous yet somber look at a variety of issues that influence Junior’s life including poverty, education, death, alcoholism, friendship, race relations, and romantic relationships. The evolving viewpoint of working-class adolescent literature can be seen in the effective use of mixed genre. Additionally, the inclusion of explicit language, illustrations, and a female romantic interest could be seen as appealing to male readers.

Using *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* within the thesis helps extend the conversation to show that the benefits of male privilege do not negate the realities of being a working-class male of color. By using *Absolutely True Diary*, a text that includes a male protagonist, as well as diversions from conventional techniques (through illustrations and comics), the text helps to balance the previously mentioned

novels with primarily female characters in order to expand on the discussion of gender and intersectionality. As the text is relatively new in adolescent literature, it also serves to modernize the discussion of portrayals of working-class adolescents.

In discussing misconceptions about working-class adolescents, it is important to consider the author's role in this discussion. Using this chronological approach to portray various experiences of working-class adolescents through authors with lived experience can be seen as a way to legitimize the need for literary approaches that are thoughtful in intent and scope in order to allow for the voices of the marginalized socio-economic class to be addressed.

CHAPTER II

“There is No Excuse for Poverty”: Establishing the Working-Class Adolescent

“Simply put, dirt is different when it is on a poor child’s arm” (Therrien 96).

Elizabeth Diefendorf’s *The New York Public Library’s Books of the Century* features all of the books included in the 1995 centennial celebration of the New York Public Library. Under the “Favorites of Childhood and Youth” category, Diefendorf included Betty Smith’s 1943 novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Diefendorf writes the “book was an instant best-seller, with 300,000 copies purchased in its first six weeks” (207). However, not all reviews were positive. A reviewer from *The New Republic* declares the text “a sentimental story about the poor but honest Nolan family” with Francie’s mother as “the long suffering, meek wife.”

Rather than convincing me, such a dismissal serves as a patronizing example of the middle-class gaze. The author also had to face the criticism of “some of the guardians of American literary production [who] thought Betty Smith was just a woman scribbling away at sentimental novels” (Valerie Raleigh Yow vii). Rather than criticized, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (Tree)* should be praised for its compassion for the poor, especially as Smith and her characters attempt to reverse the discriminatory gaze of the middle-class. The novel is especially useful for examining the internalization of poverty among working-class adolescents. Through *Tree*, the four themes mentioned in my definition of the working class (lack/scarcity, shame, power struggles, and an identity seen as less than) will be discussed, as well as addressing both the internalization of and resistance to

the middle-class gaze.

Although *Tree* was written in the early 1940s, the text takes place in the first decades of the 20th century. In her article, ““Why Do They Have To...To...Say Things...?” Poverty, Class, and Gender in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*,” Kathleen Therrien states that the novel “is informed by and points back toward the multitude of conflicting discourses, ideology, and conceptions of poverty that simultaneously inform and unsettle the ongoing American cultural conversation about poverty, policy, class, and gender” (94). Judith Smith explains that “readers hailed *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* as an “authentic” and “realistic” treatment of a tenement child’s coming of age, without the degradation presumed to be the lot of the poor in naturalistic fiction” (42) and Yow believes that “*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*’s honesty in its portrayal of a family living in poverty makes it different” (193). Additional comments on the book show “at the time [of its publishing] some considered *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* a daring book, rife with pro-union sentiment and unapologetic compassion for the poor” (“Afterword” 487).

The lack of degradation within the novel can be seen as a benefit of having the author actually have the lived experience of the characters. In her biographical notes on the author, Judith Smith points to the similarity between Betty Smith’s own childhood and Francie’s, stating that Betty’s family also struggled with “economic instability connected with her father’s failure to support her family” (44). This lived experience can be seen as especially important given the reactions of working-class students to depictions of their lives. In “Poverty and the (Broken) Promise of Higher Education,” Vivian C. Adair shows that the discussion of the working-class by those without lived experience can be particularly damaging. One student, Deborah Migivern, noted that

“classes on poverty were especially challenging” because “authors seemed to romanticize the poor” and that she felt patronized by “people who had never gone hungry... discussing my family, friends, even me, as though we were all objects” (qtd. in Adair 236). In a December 1943 review of the text, Katharine Jocher states, “[Smith] is a member of the group about which she writes” and “only one who had been born and bred in Brooklyn, who had been a part of its warp and woof could have [her knowledge] to *live* there is the best way to know” (240).

Importantly, this lived experience is evident to readers who are able to sense the text’s authenticity. In “What is the Best Novel You Ever Taught?,” English teacher Susan Lewandowski affirms this sentiment, stating “My eighth grade class was clamoring to read a “real book with real people” (qtd. in Green and Hart 30). As Connell explains, “Difficult human problems cannot be effectively considered when impersonal academic treatments convert them into abstract subjects of thought that are dissociated from the human contexts in which they occur” (32). In other words, the discussion of the practical reality of working-class life gives legitimacy to the lived experience of those who do not have the luxury of thinking of their lives in terms of mere “abstractions.” Yow states that “one critic had admired the way she [Betty Smith] showed her characters doing and thinking, rather than explaining them to readers” (230). One reader of the novel, Maybelle Hoffman, confessed that Betty Smith wrote so “beautifully that which I have been weak enough to want to forget” (qtd. in Judith Smith 51).

Lack/Scarcity

Growing up in the slums of Williamsburg, Francie Nolan and her family make do with very little. In fact, the constant worry about acquiring food, stretching food out, or

getting food is prevalent in Francie's life from the beginning of the novel. For example, Francie's mother Katie instructs her on the best way to haggle for cheap meat, and Francie waits to grab the old loaves of bread thrown out on a first come, first served basis with the rest of the neighborhood, pushing and shoving her way to carry as many as she can. Instead of having her family eat just the stale bread itself, Katie uses it as a paste for noodles. Although the hunger that the Nolans face can be seen as a larger issue that many in the Williamsburg slums are dealing with, Smith emphasizes Katie's pride that prevents her from passively accepting her lot in life. This deep-rooted sense of pride will be discussed further in the section on "shame."

Another prominent form of lack in both the Nolan and Rommely (Francie's maternal extended family) households is the lack of formal education. For example, as an immigrant at the end of the 19th century, Mary Rommely, Katie's mother, has difficulties accumulating to America as she is unfamiliar with the language and the culture. Uneducated and illiterate, the early ideas of the potential of America, especially the possibility of education and literacy, heavily influence her. Mary tells her daughter Katie, "This child was born of parents who can read and write... To me, this is a great wonder" (82). Although motivated by a desire for her granddaughter to succeed, Mary also values literacy on a practical level as she was swindled out of purchased land because of her illiteracy. The title she was given in return for her money actually showed the land belonged to someone else. She was "laughed at with pity" and told Katie that "People like us, known as greenhorns from the old country, were often robbed by men... because we could not read" (86). As a woman who never learned to read or write, Mary tells Katie that she must read one page from the Bible and one page from Shakespeare in

order to instill culture and literacy in her children. Her hope for Francie is that “when the world becomes too ugly for living in, the child can reach back and live in her imagination” (83).

The oldest of Francie’s aunts, Aunt Sissy, although born in America, did not go to school or ever learn to read because Mary did not know at that time that education was provided free for children. Sissy is portrayed as loving, daring, racy, and clever. Sissy is not treated with any ill-will for her lack of education by her own family. They largely insulate her from the judgment of others, thereby resisting the idea that a lack of formal education equals a lack of wisdom. Still, her first husband “was a little ashamed because his wife couldn’t read or write. But she was so witty and clever and warmhearted that she made of living a high-joyous thing and in time he began to overlook her illiteracy” (67). Sissy’s own lack of education prompts her to be interested in providing for her niece, and it is Sissy who manages to get the Bible for Katie.

Like Katie, Johnny’s parents did not know how to read or write, and Johnny had to leave school early after his father passed away. At twelve years old, he began singing in bars “for the drunks and they threw pennies at me” (32). Unfortunately for Johnny, dropping out of school in the sixth grade left him with limited job options, causing him to rely primarily on singing and his later work as waiter. Johnny tells his children, “I’m going to see to it that you get through school” (32). In fact, Johnny’s own lack of education causes him to have sympathy for Francie when she desires to switch out of her cramped, unkempt school to a nicer, smaller school further away from her home. His actions in helping Francie attend her new school show that despite being considered “a bad provider”, he is “... in many ways, a very good father” (Therrien 100). His lack of

opportunities illustrates that “the widening chasm between the economically stable and the poor is a gap most often predicated on the distinction between those who have an education and those who do not” (Adair 222). According to the United States Census, the high school graduation rate in 1910, which is around the time Johnny would have graduated, was 8.8%. As of 2013, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for those with less than a high school degree, was 11% and the income disparity, per week on average, between those with and without a high school degree was one hundred and seventy- nine dollars. Thus the lack of education and financial security are interconnected. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of 2012, 11.8% of the lowest quarter of the population dropped out of high school, compared to only 1.9% of the highest quarter.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to define the difference between educational attainment and class in the early part of the 20th century, which is when the novel takes place, because, as Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz point in “Education and Income in the Early Twentieth Century: Evidence from the Prairies,” it wasn’t until 1940 that the US population census “ inquire[d] about education and earnings (782). However, the statistics mentioned earlier, combined with the current trend in education and class, suggest that the challenges the Nolans face in attaining an education are indicative of a problem that still persists today. Adair argues that while education is necessary for everyone, “it is absolutely essential to those who must go on to face continued obstacles of racism, classism, and sexism” (219). These obstacles show that education, especially for people who are marginalized or on the outskirts of society, can be seen as transformative and empowering for individuals. Unfortunately, the lack of education has

the opposite effect; not only does a lack of education jeopardize one's financial stability, it can mean a lack of knowledge and skills to function in society. The result can be disempowerment and shame.

Shame

Shame is so prevalent in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* that it is almost as if it were another character. From the very beginning of the novel, the text references the way shame is internalized and/or perpetuated. Therrien suggests that this internalization points to the sociological reality that “frequently cited among the many poverty-producing character flaws attributed to the undeserving poor are idleness, drunkenness, or other indulgence, and lack of foresight and thrift” (99). Once internalized, these character flaws can be used to turn those in the working-class community against each other in either intentional or covert ways. Francie sees her little brother getting taunted for being a “rag picker” and feels no comfort in the fact “that the taunters were rag pickers too” as she knows that Nelly will come back later with his friends and taunt others themselves. She sees this cycle and “feels ashamed” (5).

While this idea of shame is largely based on Francie's knowledge that their childish behavior is fueled by self-hate and is inevitable, it is another unfortunate reality that these antics are not limited to the children in the novel. “The cruelest teachers,” the narrator notes, “were those who had come from homes similar to the poor children. It seemed that in their bitterness towards those unfortunate little ones, they were somehow exorcising their own fearful background” (151). While the early example may cause the reader to hope that this cruel behavior is an unfortunate act of childishness and therefore ultimately an inconsequential action, the reality points to the lingering effects of this

behavior as adults. The teachers, now in positions of power over the students, have progressed from victim to perpetrators of socially acceptable behavior. While “it would seem as if all the unwanted children would stick together” Betty Smith writes, “[this] was not so. They hated each other as much as the teacher hated them” and mimicked the teacher’s “snarling manner when they spoke to each other” (150).

While the previous examples show how the cycle of shame can be used to oppress others, the reader also sees how Francie internalizes shame. Even when Francie transfers to a better school, the politics of poverty and class cannot be ignored. In one example, at the end of a Thanksgiving performance, a small pumpkin pie is left over. The teacher asks the class who would like to take home the leftovers, but although “some were poor” and “many were hungry” everyone was too proud to take charity. Just when the teacher is about to throw away the pie, Francie raises up her hand to take it. She lies that the pie is for “a very poor family,” but in reality, Francie eats the pie herself because she “couldn’t stand [for] that beautiful pie to get thrown away” (194). The sense of pride among the students was so strong that Francie felt she had to lie in order to keep up an appearance that it wasn’t for her. It is hardly a surprise then that Francie would later feel guilty over taking the pie. Her mother has an extremely strong aversion to charity. In one of her most desperate moments, shortly after becoming a widow, Katie tells her sisters, “When the time comes... that we have to take charity baskets, I’ll plug up the doors and windows and wait until the children are sound asleep and then turn on every gas jet in the house” (297).

Despite Katie’s aversion to charity, this is not the only time that Francie lies to have something. At a church Christmas pageant, a doll is offered up for free, but with the

stigma of being a gift from a rich girl to a poor girl. Francie wants the doll but is “bitterly” upset that they (the people in charge) can’t “just give the doll away without saying I am poor and she is rich? Why wouldn’t they just give it away without all the talking about it?” (210). Francie gets the doll, but thinks about how her mother “hated anything that smacked of charity” and later writes a story about a “ little girl who wanted a doll so much that she was willing to give over her immortal soul to Purgatory for eternity if she could have it” (211).

As the main character, it is not surprising that the bulk of the shame in the novel would come from Francie’s perspective. But as mentioned earlier, Francie is also highly influenced by her mother. Therrien notes that “It is clear throughout the course of the text that Katie is highly aware of and despises the scrutiny and judgment of others; for example the family moves each time it goes through a serious, publicly embarrassing behavior” (101).

Later, towards the end of the novel, when Francie is no longer as heavily influenced by shame, the reader sees that she still cannot escape the influence of the middle-class gaze; “In truth, [Francie] didn’t want him [Leo] to see where she lived. She loved her neighborhood and wasn’t ashamed of it. But she felt that to a stranger who didn’t know about it the way she did, it might seem a mean and shabby place” (444).

Internalizing the Validity of the Gaze

The themes of lack and shame culminate in an identity as “less than,” which can be seen as an internalization of the middle class gaze. As Judith Smith explains, “Several of the working-class readers who wrote to Smith mentioned similarities between their own experiences and the incidents in the book when family poverty elicited scorn and

humiliation from other children, teachers, patronizing doctors, and social workers” (49). Again, the realism of the Nolan family’s experience resonates with working-class readers because they are able to connect with the bias that they face in a world that perceives “the upper and middle classes own identities as of greater value” (Lyle 320).

For example, when Francie and her brother go to the clinic to get immunizations for the first time, they are covered in mud after playing outside. Francie, getting her shot first, hears her doctor declare “Filth, filth, filth, from morning to night. I know they’re poor but they could wash. Water is free and soap is cheap” (144). Francie looks to the nurse, a woman who by her voice Francie can recognize as being from her own neighborhood, to defend her. But instead, the nurse responds “There is no excuse for these people living in filth” (144). Therrien explores this particular scene in depth in her article, stating “The Nolan children’s visit to the clinic is itself a study in competing voices” and that “the nurse’s reluctance to let anyone know that she is a slum child is understandable, given the highly critical attitudes toward the poor circulating through American culture” (97). Therrien believes that as a woman nurse from a lower-socio neighborhood (the doctor is a Harvard man interning in Brooklyn, or as he calls it, “purgatory”), the nurse is at distinct disadvantage and would face repercussions for speaking out, as the doctor has substantially more political and gendered clout than Francie would. While this is an admittedly valuable point, I would disagree as it undermines the bravery it took for Francie to later stand up for herself. As a poor female child, Francie has no authority or power at all. The nurse, despite her admittedly vulnerable position, does have the ability to stand up for Francie.

The nurse’s behavior towards Francie is an explicit instance of one of the lowest

moments of the novel for Francie, who is subject to “struggles with loneliness, ambition, family dysfunction, hunger, discrimination, and the day-to-day indignities of poverty” (Therrien 93). These “day-to-day indignities of poverty” culminate in feelings of dissatisfaction that Katie often feels, even when the rest of her family is happy. While Johnny, Francie, and Neeley are excited over the free Christmas tree that the children won, Katie watches from the window:

They think they're mighty lucky that they're living and it's Christmas again. They can't see that we live on a dirty street in a dirty house among people who aren't much good. Johnny and the children can't see how pitiful it is that our neighbors have to make this happiness off this filth and dirt. (203)

Katie's internal dialogue reveals a sense of deep dissatisfaction with the reality of her family's situation, despite whatever pride the rest of the family may feel. Francie and Neeley are proud that out of all the children in the neighborhood, they are the ones who were selected to go “up against” the Christmas tree. In their Williamsburg area, it is tradition that the trees not sold by Christmas Eve are fair game. But in order to get one for free, the neighborhood children had to be able to carry the tree thrown at them without falling down. Despite the tree being large, together the Nolan siblings manage to resist falling down and win it. Francie and Neely carry it home on their own, and Johnny is clearly impressed. Katie, on the other hand, is not impressed that the only way the family could manage to have this tree was by getting it the day before Christmas, for free, by means of a violent tradition. The small victory for the children represents to her how pitiful their financial situation is. After all, the disparity is stark between this kind of

Christmas, on “a dirty street in a dirty house among people who aren’t much good” and the “middle-class” ideal of a tree purchased, well in advance, by parents.

Although in this example Katie explicitly expresses her frustration, she also has gendered middle-class expectations placed on her, largely as a result of her job as a janitress. “Feminists” Lyle argues, referencing the work of Yuval Davis in particular, “have argued that, because women are the symbolic bearers of cultural and therefore class identity, femininity and class are inextricably linked” (322). This idea of the link between femininity and class shows up multiple times in connection with Katie’s job. Early in the novel, Francie states, “Who would ever believe that mama scrubbed floors to make a living for the four of them? She was so pretty and slight and vivid and always bubbling over with intensity and fun” (10). That Francie would come to this conclusion about class and appearance is only natural, however, as “Everyone said it was a pity that a slight pretty woman like Katie Nolan had to go out scrubbing floors” (Betty Smith 10).

Although Katie scrubbing floors is seen as a negative, it is scrubbing floors that allows Katie, despite her worries over food and money, to always have a place for her family to live. Instead of viewing her job as an extension of her strength, an ability to take care of her children, and foresight (trading her work in exchange for a place to stay), she is made aware of the stigma and signifiers of class. Her agency and empowerment that being a janitress gives her is tempered by the societal focus on what femininity should be. Katie’s calloused hands are referenced as a result of her job, and she is seen wearing gloves to hide them in select social situations. When she sees Officer McShane (the man who would become her husband following Johnny’s death) for the first time, Francie notices her covering her hands as if she is embarrassed. Later, when Katie is

pregnant and having difficulties doing her job, Francie tries to scrub the floor for her and places her hand in the soapy water. Kate takes Francie's hand out of the water and yells at her because the water has soda and lye in it; "She [holds] out her shapely but work-scarred hands. I don't want you to get your hands like that. I want you to have nice hands always" (324).

Fredrickson and Roberts suggest that this kind of awareness about physical appearance may, unfortunately, be warranted: "Given the evidence that women's social and economic prospects can be determined by their physical appearance, it behooves women to anticipate the repercussions of their appearance" (179). In thinking about the repercussions associated with class background, it is interesting to note that "She [Betty Smith] worried about the social costs of being identified with the working-class background she had described" (Judith Smith 43).

Unfortunately, the support that Johnny and the rest of the Nolan family provide Francie is tempered by the realities and politics of her school. Despite her internal desire to learn, Francie's first school is "ugly" and "brutalizing" with facilities that were packed with three times as many students as there should be (150). The lack of adequate facilities and motivated, encouraging teachers at this school is extremely apparent. On top of these conditions is the noticeable bias against poor children. At this school, Francie "learned of the class system of a great Democracy" and she sees the prejudice that the poorest children face, concluding

Obviously the teacher hated her and others like her for no other reason than that they were what they were. Teacher acted as though they had no right to be in the school but that she was forced

to accept them and was doing so with as little grace as possible.

She begrudged them the few crumbs of learning she threw at them

(Betty Smith 150).

One of the explanations Betty Smith gives for the teacher's actions towards the poor children is that the teachers themselves are ashamed of their own upbringing. This internalizing of the gaze is a prevailing and prominent component of the text and a defining characteristic of the portrayal of working-class adolescents in literature. Still, the resistance that Francie also shows in the novel helps to reverse the effects of this gaze.

Reversing the Gaze

Although the nurse mentioned above shows that she has clearly internalized the middle-class gaze, Francie reverses this gaze and stands up for her brother Neeley, telling both the nurse and the doctor, "My brother is next. His arm is just as dirty as mine so don't be surprised. And you don't have to tell him. You told me" (Betty Smith 145). Like the teachers who were cruel to her and the other students, Francie realizes

A person who pulls himself up from a low environment via the boot-strap route has two choices. Having risen above his environment, he can forget it; or, he can rise above it and never forget it and keep compassion and understanding in his heart for those he has left behind him in the cruel uphill climb (145).

In addition to learning how she does not want to be, from the example of her nurse and early teacher, Francie is fortunate to be able to see, through her mother, a positive female role models of strength and resilience against the trials of working-class life. Although Francie is often at odds with her mother, she clearly respects and admires

her. Katie's strength and resilience allows her to be an influential role model for her daughter. For a text written in 1943 and set in the early decades of the 20th century, the portrayal of Katie and Francie is refreshingly progressive and surprisingly feminist. Katie does not wallow in the hardships of a life married to an alcoholic or in her fate as a young widow with three children. Instead, she is continually portrayed as tough and strong because she "had a fierce desire for survival which made her a fighter" (96). Katie's resourcefulness parallels Betty Smith's own, where "... growing up working-class meant you might not be able to assume anything would turn out right, but you could be certain that your own grit would see you through" (Yow vi). Yow's statement, although seemingly contradictory, illustrates the idea that while Katie cannot be certain where her life will lead her, in terms of finances and unforeseen tragedies, she can trust her own strength to pull her and her family through. Judith Smith observes that "the most powerful force for social betterment imagined in the novel is... self-help and self-improvement" (48).

Francie mimics her mother's desire for stability in the face of repeated financial insecurity. But more than stability, Francie has an acute desire to thrive that is nourished by both her immediate and extended family's desire for improved education for the next generation. Francie can then be seen "... moving towards the middle class through a combination of hard work, careful saving, and public education" (Judith Smith 48).

While heading towards the middle class might appear to be a positive improvement for Francie, it is important to consider that "the semblance of upward mobility can be a source of both comfort and conflict" (Brook and Michell 590). Francie's improved exterior status, primarily the result of education attained and

improved job opportunities, still does not remove or erase her working-class roots. Yow suggests that this reality is similar to that of Betty Smith because no matter how successful and far removed from poverty she became, “I [Yow] saw a pattern evolving in her life story; she always found herself on the margin” (vi).

If, as Yow suggests, “Betty Smith wanted to change the way people thought about the working-class and the way working-class people thought about themselves,” then in this regard she is successful (192). Judith Smith notes that “[Betty] Smith describes the Nolan family as “individualist” and declares that the family “conformed to nothing except what was essential to their being able to live in their own world” (48). The Nolans desire to be seen as individuals and do not see themselves as victims to blame for their poverty. Susan Lewandowski notes that the novel does not place blame on the working-class and instead “relentlessly confronts without apology societal ills such as poverty, illness” (Green 30). Despite her family’s hardships, Francie is able to grow up healthy and with the knowledge that she is just as deserving of happiness as anyone else.

Despite the obvious immediate need for money, food, and resourcefulness, Katie also recognizes the need for “luxury” for her children. She allows her children to drink or throw away as much coffee as they like, much to the chagrin of her sisters who find it wasteful. Katie retorts in response, “I think it’s good that people like us can waste something once in a while and get the feeling of how it would be to have lots of money and not have to worry about scrounging” (Betty Smith 12). Katie’s use of “us” clearly shows a marked line in the sand of the difference between those who can regularly waste or not have to worry about the cost of living and the working-class who worry consistently. This desire to have something to waste is a way to both pass as a higher

social class and to resist the idea that the poor have to always suffer as a way to redeem the crime of poverty. In this moment, Betty Smith shows the complicated relationship the working-class have with the middle-class gaze. Not only do characters internalize and resist the gaze they can do both simultaneously. Katie's decision is met with pride on the part of Francie: "It was one of the links between the ground-down poor and the wasteful rich. The girl felt that even if she had less than anybody in Williamsburg, somehow she had more. She was richer because she had something to waste" (12-13).

One of the more explicit acts of resistance against the middle-class gaze occurs when Francie, typically an A student in English, begins receiving "C's" on her papers. After the death of her father, Francie develops a noticeable shift in subject matter on her compositions. Whereas previously she wrote about "birds and trees and My Impressions," she begins writing stories about her home life and her father to show that, "in spite of his short-comings, he had been a good father and a kindly man" (314-315). Her teacher, Miss Gardner, questions the change in her writing, explaining that Francie used to "write so prettily" (315). At first, Francie is confused about what she did wrong, explaining that she thought the students were allowed to choose what they wrote.

Miss Gardner explains that "poverty, starvation, and drunkenness are ugly subjects to choose. We all admit these things exist. But one doesn't write about them" (315). At this point, Francie begins to realize that her teacher does not want to read about her life as it really is. Miss Gardner continues to criticize Francie's "sordid little stories," explaining that "Drunkenness is neither truth nor beauty. It's a vice... and poverty. There is no excuse for that. There's work enough for all who want it. People are poor because they are too lazy to work." Francie becomes angry and mentally lashes out at such

comments. She knows that her mother is not lazy and scoffs at Miss Gardner's notion that she too has struggled because she was "poor" (despite having a maid growing up, having a father with a steady salary, and being able to afford to go to a small college). Not sure what "sordid" means, Francie looks up in the dictionary to find that it means "filthy," "dirty," "base," "gross," and "mean and low" (317-318). She tells her teacher, "Don't you *ever* dare use that word about us!" (318).

Miss Gardner views poverty and Francie's life as the fault of her own family, illustrating Therrien's earlier point that the Nolan lifestyle is a result of "idleness, drunkenness, or other 'indulgence,' and lack of foresight and thrift" (99). Miss Gardner suggests Francie burn these new compositions, but instead, Francie gets rid of the "pretty little stories" and begins to realize that while "her life might seem revolting to some educated people... if being educated would make her ashamed of what she was, then she wanted none of it!" (319). Ultimately, Francie feels "sorry for her [teacher]. Miss Gardner had nothing in all the world excepting a sureness about how right she was" (348). Francie's realization therefore illustrates Yow's point that while money and property are worthy successes, "Francie's achievement of self-respect and a sense of self efficacy represent a different kind of success" (192). In this way, "[Betty] Smith [is able to] juxtapose middle-class contempt for the poor with working-class pride in self and history" (Judith Smith 50).

Conclusion

Francie's educational desires can generally be seen in the novel as a continued source of positive progress and pride. Fortunately, like her mother, Francie is largely self-driven and is able to surmount some of the class discrimination she faces by an intrinsic

desire to learn, especially in regard to writing and reading. On her own time and in her home, Francie does not experience the influence of the middle class gaze on her education, but outside her home she is not as lucky.

While this chapter has focused on the middle-class gaze within the text of the novel, the novel itself was subject to the same judgment. According to Judith Smith, before it was released as fiction, Betty Smith had intended for the text to be non-fiction, but was told by “editors . . . that the material be reworked for a novel. In the 1940s, the memoir was considered a polite and elite form of instructional literature, while working-class life was the stuff of popular entertainment” (43). This belittling of working-class life as “popular entertainment” exists to marginalize the experiences of those who live it. Clearly, as Yow points out, the novel’s “enormous popularity over the years [shows] that Betty Smith articulated for generations of Americans and people all over the world the experience, and psychological distress, of a childhood spent in poverty” (vii). Binaries of “polite and elite forms of instructional literature” vs. “popular entertainment” illustrate Heather Brook and Dee Michell’s point that “one of the most unsettling effects of the way knowledge is classed concerns the assumption that, for those who enter higher education as working-class people, becoming learned means becoming middle-class” (594). Among the primary purposes of an education, they argue, “should [be to] include the acquisition of skills for increased personal and social autonomy- or, however one defines it, a better life” (Brook and Michell 597). These statements illustrate that it isn’t enough to want to be educated, simply for the desire of improved agency, empowerment, and work options, the working-class are instead suppose to use their education as a stepping stool to becoming middle-class, suggesting then that the working-class life is

something that should be abandoned, instead of improved upon.

Francie, in the novel's main narrative from 1912 to 1918, matures. As a young girl, she is enthralled with meager monetary gains: "Francie had a nickel. Francie had power. She could buy practically anything in that store! It was the only place in the world where that could be" (9). She becomes a young woman who worries about how to help support her family: "But now I'm scared. I've been fired from two jobs through no fault of my own. At each job, I worked as best I could. I gave everything I could give" (417). Francie's honesty and worries concerning her life are offset by messages of hope and opportunity. She is able to grow, like the Tree of Heaven depicted in both the beginning and the end of the novel, despite the odds stacked against her. As Judith Smith notes, "The children in *Tree* are not scarred by these hurts; instead, they are prepared to move upward without having to deny their past" (49). "Through it all," Susan Lewandowski states, "she [Francie] searches for meaning in her suffering, ultimately restoring our faith in humanity" (Green 30). By exposing adolescents to this text, we can help students to see a complicated and nuanced portrait of the working-class that provides a historical foundation for the troubling implications and successful resistances of the middle-class gaze.

Not all students in a classroom will have grown up working-class, have experience in what it is like to go without, or have felt ashamed for having less. But for those who have, an honest, sincere, detailed novel like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* allows them to "relat[e] it to their experiences and the world around them" (Lewandowski qtd. in Green 31). While recognition in literature is clearly important, the ability for others of a different class to develop nuanced images of the working-class might is also significant.

CHAPTER III

“For the Ones Who Cannot Out”: The Rise of Intersectional Issues

“I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong” (Cisneros 109).

In late 2010, House Bill 2281 was passed in Arizona, prohibiting “courses designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group or advocate ethnic solidarity rather than the treatment of pupils as individuals.” In looking at the terminology of the bill, it is clear that key terms indicate the perceived crime of color. Programs and texts in Arizona public elementary and secondary schools are not allowed to

1. Promote the *overthrow* of the United States government
2. Promote *resentment* towards a race or class of people
3. [Be] designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group
4. Advocate *ethnic solidarity* instead of treating pupils like individuals (emphasis mine)

The italicized terms show a rhetoric of fear—specifically a fear of the pride, education, and community spirit of “ethnic solidarity,” which reflects the binary grouping of white vs. color, but also poor vs. rich (note the reference to “class” in item two). The dominant group can be seen as fixing poor minorities as the unprivileged, the type of people the U.S. educational system does not wish to acknowledge, much less encourage. As Therrien mentions, views of poverty are not neutral: “frequently cited among the many poverty-producing character flaws attributed to the undeserving poor are idleness, drunkenness, or other ‘indulgence,’ and lack of foresight and thrift” (99). As a result of HB 2281, the Tucson ISD Mexican American Studies program was cut.

HB 2281 is significant to this chapter on *The House on Mango Street* given that the novel was a part of the curriculum within the Mexican American Studies program (Luanne P Nelson 38). As Cisneros demonstrates, minorities from the working class fight a dual sentence of color and poverty. Consequently, this demand in HB 2881 for the erasure of ethnic literature points, in actuality, to a need for its inclusion, especially texts that portray working-class people of color. As M. Alayne Sullivan notes, “Confidence and empowerment are more likely to be engendered if readers can relate their lives to a text that mirrors their independence” (154).

The House on Mango Street is a political piece of literature designed to challenge sexism, racism, and classism. As Jayne Marek notes, “As Esperanza becomes more aware of the meanings of her surroundings, she learns to recognize based on her gender, ethnicity, and class-standing, [that these are] the three most crucial complicators in her development” (173). Specifically, Esperanza is able to vocalize both the pride and frustration of growing up as a working class Chicana in the later part of the 20th century. In this respect, Esperanza’s life can be seen as an echoing of Cisneros’ own personal experience: “As an 11 year old in Chicago, [Cisneros’] teachers thought if you were poor and Mexican you didn’t have anything to say” (Karen Clemens Warrick 25). Clearly, Esperanza’s narration in the text shows readers this is not true.

The House on Mango Street thus extends the conversation of class and gender that began in the *Tree Grows in Brooklyn* chapter to include the impact of race, though it is important to note that race, gender, and class are not discrete categories. As third world feminists such as Chela Sandoval and Emma Pérez, as well as intersectionality theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, argue, these oppressed identities work in concert, making

the experiences of women of color significantly different from the experiences of White women and men of color. This locus is called the “third space.” Emma Perez explains in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* that “third world feminist voices disappear into an interstitial space that third world women occupy” (xvi), but that third world feminists can uncover “the hidden voices of Chicanas that have been relegated to silences, to passivity, to that third space where agency is enacted through third space feminism” (xvi). Similarly, in “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” Cro, Crenshaw, and McCall clarify intersectionality as a theoretical framework that has enabled scholars to “reveal how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the recreation and deployment of overlapping identity categories” (797). Specifically, the intersectional frame of analysis attends to “a variety of context-specific inquiries, including, for example, analyzing the multiple ways that race and gender interact with class” (785). These interactions repeatedly occur throughout the text.

In *The House on Mango Street*, which is made up of individual vignettes about Esperanza and her neighborhood in urban Chicago, Cisneros comments on these intersections as the reader observes Esperanza’s and her family’s cultural values as working class Latin@s in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. For adolescent literature students, this discussion of development is particularly pertinent as many students face the realities of overlapping identities and marginalization on a daily basis. The economic, gendered, and racial experiences that Esperanza faces modernize the middle-class gaze that Francie Nolan faced.

In looking at *The House on Mango Street*, it is important to consider the cultural

conversation that evolved in the United States after the release of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* in 1943, especially in regard to racial minorities and feminists. In some respects the feminist movement and the Chicano movement have helped to liberate Latinas, but in other ways Latinas have been excluded from both movements. For example, despite the shared vested interest in the Chicana/o movement, women were largely silenced, labeled as “others” within their own community. As Marek notes,

The most visible period of Chicana/o writing was *El Movimiento* in the late 1960s, the era in which Cisneros was growing up. The movement can be characterized by the strongly political and didactic tone of much of its writing, and most of the writers classified under its rubric are men. (178)

Cisneros, like Esperanza, her protagonist in *House on Mango Street*, came of age during this empowering historical period. In a 1993 interview with the Mary B.W. Tabor of *The New York Times*, she stated, "I am a woman and I am a Latina ... Those are the things that make my writing distinctive. Those are the things that give my writing power. They are the things that give it *sabor*, the things that give it *picante*" (“At the Library with Sandra Cisneros”).

Fortunately, according to Alvina Quintana, in 1984, after eleven years of conventions, “the National Association for Chicano Studies sanctioned ... the theme of the convention—*Voces de la Mujer* (women’s voices)—to address issues related to an emergent Chicana feminist movement” (qtd. in Felicia J. Cruz 910-911). Similarly, it is noteworthy that Cisneros is now a celebrated author, and *The House on Mango Street* is seen as one of the books that helped cement the legitimacy of the Latina canon. Thelma

T. Reyna, in her book review of the 2009 edition of *The House on Mango Street*, acknowledges that no, Sandra Cisneros was not the first Latina to be published, receive a prestigious award for their work, or “be acknowledged by non-Latinos as a writer whose work cut across cultural groups.” “But,” she adds, Cisneros “was the first modern American Latina to be published by a major mainstream publisher. She is thus often credited with opening the door to other Latina/o authors’ acceptance by the mainstream.” Cisneros’ work, previously gazed upon and dismissed as unworthy by the middle-class, has therefore successfully expanded its reach and readership. According to Sandra Cisneros’ website, in 1985 the book won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award and “has sold over two million copies since its initial publication” (Reyna “About My Life and Work”).

Unfortunately, just as Chicanas felt excluded from the Chicano movement, many also did not feel represented by the mainstream feminist movement of the 1960s. The largely white, middle class women of the 1960s participated in protests, as volunteers, and in campaigns—and wanted more women to join their cause—but women of color and/or women in the lower socio-economic bracket felt largely ignored. bell hooks writes,

past feminist refusal to draw attention to and attack racial hierarchies suppressed the link between race and class. Yet class structure in American society has been shaped by the racial politics of white supremacy; it is only by analyzing racism and its function in capitalist society that a thorough understanding of class relationships can emerge. Class struggle is inextricably bound to

the struggle to end racism. (3)

In fact, “during Ronald Reagan’s presidency,” as Jackie Brookner notes in "Feminism and Students of the '80s and '90s," “feminism, along with every other social movement against oppression in our society, was vilified” (11). These oppressive dynamics explain the othering and resistance to literature that questions the status quo, a resistance that unfortunately still occurs today.

For example, a survey conducted in 1988, four years after the initial release of *The House on Mango Street*, shows that out of 488 schools teaching 7th-12th grade, “works by women still make up only 16% of the reading students are asked to do and works by nonwhite authors less than 7%” (Arthur N. Applebee 32). Nine out of the top ten books were taught in all the schools and of these books, three texts were written by Shakespeare, only one author was female (Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*), and none of the authors were minorities. To say that Cisneros’ voice was needed is an understatement. As with the previous chapter, this chapter will look at how the middle-class gaze is internalized and resisted. However, it will first highlight the economical lack and consequent shame these characters in *House on Mango Street* face and internalize.

Lack/Scarcity

In the chapter on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, I argued that the two biggest “lacks” in the novel concerned a lack of money and education. The Nolan family’s lack of money makes it difficult for them to provide for basic needs, an immediate problem that largely falls on Katie Nolan. It is therefore not surprising that she would be too busy struggling to survive to be contemplating the lack of opportunity and independence for women in her neighborhood. Katie’s experience reflects the reality of many that are economically

disadvantaged—their voices are often neglected politically, not because of apathy, but because they are faced with the immediate concerns of food and shelter. However, though Esperanza is a member of the working-class like Francie, her concerns over lack are not the same, showing that the working class experience is not static.

Despite her limited agency and empowerment as a young, working-class female Latina, Esperanza has two distinct advantages over Francie. Esperanza's family is in a better place financially, or so it seems since the text does not mention hunger or concern over shelter. In this sense I would argue, having had her basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter met, Esperanza's second advantage is the benefit of time and the advancement of nuance in the feminist movement. In fact, Esperanza "clearly attests to be a spokeswoman of her society" (Faruk Kalay 120). Nonetheless, in *House on Mango Street*, Esperanza does experience lack: the lack of independence and the lack of opportunity.

While some critics, according to Quintana, "argue that Esperanza's narrative (and, by implication, Cisneros's politics) simply illustrates an individual's desire for a house outside the barrio," I would disagree (qtd. in Cruz 917). As Monika Kaup explains, "the notion of 'house' [in the novel] is an insigne representing a person's life and society" (qtd. in. Kalay 118). For example, Virginia Woolf made famous the need for women's autonomy and independence by linking it to a room in a house: "a woman must have money and a room of her own" (qtd. in Elena Filimon 26). Similarly, the desire for a nice house can be seen as Esperanza's desire for opportunity and independence. For example, while watching the dual lives of her friend Sally who laughs and flirts with boys at school, but who wipes her makeup off and hangs her head before going back home to a

controlling household, Esperanza internally asks Sally, “Do you wish your feet would... stop in front of a house... where a room is waiting for you” (Cisneros 82). Likewise, within Cisneros’ introduction to the revised edition are numerous mentions of the desire and later attainment of a good home. “As a girl,” she writes, “[I] dreamed about having a silent home just to [myself], the way other women dreamed of their weddings” (xii). Cisneros’ comment on “other women dreamed of weddings” also serves as a reflection of Esperanza’s own distance from the women around her. While she is a part of her community, Esperanza also states that she lives in a “house I belong but do not belong to” (110). The repeated motif and desire for space of one’s own can therefore be seen as exemplifying a lack of independence.

Esperanza’s lack of opportunity due to her working class status is exacerbated by her gender (and her race). We hear in *House on Mango Street* that “the boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours” (Cisneros 8). In the chapter entitled “My Name,” one of the more political vignettes in the book, Esperanza notices the divide in happiness and opportunity among the sexes, reflecting on her namesakes (her grandmother’s) own experience of “[looking] out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on their elbows... Esperanza. I have an inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (Cisneros 11).

Esperanza’s desire not to inhabit the “place by the window” shows a distinct desire for agency and empowerment, for the ability to be the one outside the window, not trapped in by circumstances that make her unable to escape. Again, the house metaphor is in operation, reminiscent of the scene in Charlotte Perkin Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” in which the protagonist observes, “I don’t like to look out of the windows

even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast” (656).

Similarly, in “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin,

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy
armchair. . . . She could see in the open square before her house the
tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. . . .
There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it,
fearfully. What was it? . . . When she abandoned herself a little
whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over
and over under her breath: “free, free, free!” (86-87)

Although both Chopin and Gilman understand the confining and oppressive nature of the patriarchal system of which Esperanza suffers, their understanding is limited by benefit of their race and class. Their understanding of gender dynamics, without the elements of class and race, can then be seen as the initial discussion of the need for feminism, before the nuance and reality of intersectionality was more commonly discussed. Angela Davis, in her discussion on the impact of Chela Sandoval’s “Theory of Differential Consciousness” notes that Sandoval “examined the limitations of a woman’s movement that “forced a false unity of women” (qtd. in Sandoval vi). That the oppression of white, middle-class women could be so stifling shows the extent to which intersectionality is needed. If life was hard for these women who had financial security and the approval of the status quo with time to rest and reflect, how much more difficult is this oppression for a poor woman of color?

This material reality then points to the fact that Esperanza has to be more strategic in her rebellion, a form of third space feminism and Differential Consciousness.

This is necessary because, as Sandoval points out, “Before the citizen-subject’s birth into the social world, the intersections of race, culture, sex, gender, class, and social powers are already locat[ed] in order to provide a particular space to hold that individual... the citizen-subject becomes regulated, branded, and shaped” (163). In other words, even if they escape the patriarchy, Esperanza and Cisneros still have elitism and racism to contend with. Women of color are not even invited to the all-White feminist party.

The lack of inclusion of women of color in feminism is a reflection of societal norms, norms that can be seen with the proliferation of popular and familiar fairy tales that advocate a lifestyle that embodies white, middle-class aspirations. Kelly Wissman, in her article “Writing Will Keep You Free”: Allusions to and Recreations of the Fairy Tale Heroine in *The House on Mango Street*,” points to the connection between fairy tales and the vignettes within the text. For example, Marcia R. Lieberman suggests that fairy tales serve to promote a “system of rewards in fairy tales... being beautiful, being chosen, getting rich” (qtd. in Wissman 20). Characters in fairy tales have also historically been White. These systems of rewards can be seen as parallel to qualities inherent in European middle-class ambition, the yardstick and gaze by which others either aspire to, maintain, or hope to improve on.

Unfortunately, in *House on Mango Street*, the fairy tale conflates with sexualization. When the girls acquire new/old shoes, they are excited and play dress up with the heels, exclaiming “Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly...those magic high heels” (40). But after their wearing of the shoes causes a homeless man to harass them, asking for a kiss, the girls come to the conclusion “we are tired of being beautiful” and would rather just go back to playing as kids (42).

The danger in the fairy tales can also be seen when girls allow others to direct their lives as Esperanza shows with Marin who “is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (Cisneros 27). The expectation is not that Marin doesn’t need others to improve her own life, but rather that she should continue to be dependent on the “falling stars” of options, a rather unrealistic and fairy tale type outcome. According to Wissman, this illustrates “the mythology of waiting for a better life to supersede the limitations of present situations of poverty, violence, and constriction to home” (23).

The girls and the women in *House on Mango Street* show that, unlike the blame-the-victim mentality, their situations are a nuanced mix of circumstances, largely inescapable due to economic dependency, children, abuse, parents, and/or lack of education. These lacks can then lead to shame, an aspect of the working-class adolescent that featured prominently in chapter two as well.

Shame

The opening vignette, “The House on Mango Street,” illustrates the internalization of the middle-class gaze by the Cordero family as a whole. When Esperanza’s parents talk about moving into their own house, they emphasize “a real house” as one that they could be proud of, one that has multiple bathrooms, “white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence. This was *the* house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket and this was the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before bed” (4). This emphasis on *the* house shows that to her parents, the house they were currently living in on Mango Street was not nearly good enough and that they were, like Esperanza, ashamed of their house. Towards the end of

the novel, Esperanza, in talking with her friend Alicia, says she doesn't have a house. But then Alicia tells her, "You live right here, 4006 Mango" (106). Esperanza says Alicia points to the house I am ashamed of" (106). Even when Alicia states this, however, Esperanza internally denies this, saying, "I don't belong. I don't ever want to be from here" (106).

This feeling of not belonging is also seen with Esperanza's mother. In "Smart Cookie," Esperanza's mother explains that shame is one of the reasons she didn't get an education:

I could've been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard... Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains. Yup, she says disgusted... I was a smart cookie then. (91)

The house and education examples mentioned previously show how shame works as a reaction to socio-economic limitations that the working-class characters face as well as show the gendering of shame. For example, Esperanza's friend Sally is first introduced as a character who wears make-up and whose religious father does not want her talking to boys. He says "to be this beautiful is trouble" (Cisneros 81). The reader later finds out that Sally's father has been beating her and that he worries that she is "going to run away like the sisters who made the family ashamed" (92). Though it seems as if Sally may escape the abuse when she comes to stay with Esperanza's family, eventually Sally's father apologizes, and she goes back home. Once he catches her talking to a boy again, he "just forgot he was her father between the belt and the buckle... You're not my daughter,

you're not my daughter. And then he broke into his hands" (93). Shame is then used as a pretense for control and protection from beauty, which is seen "here [as] dangerous and provocative; it requires regulation by fathers" and "is linked to male control of female bodies and breeds forms of violence to maintain that control" (Wissman 22). This relationship between shame and control can be seen as a reflection of the middle-class gaze. The middle-class gaze is so powerful that it perpetuates an ideal that is then aspired and desired. This prevailing image of what it means to be a success can be seen as a parallel to what it means to be a daughter. Faced with realities of class, gender, and racial gaze, the young girls in *The House on Mango Street* are caught in a system that wishes to both shame and control them.

Internalizing the Validity of the Gaze

The dangers of the middle class ambition can be seen as one of the rationales behind one of the most troubling themes within the novel—the controlling and abusive nature of the men. As Marek notes, the "ambivalent images of flight, freedom, and danger are paralleled by incidents involving gender roles" (182). The attitudes and actions of the men are "suggestive of a social reality in which women's lives are often constrained by social mores and male violence" (Wissman 17). This constraint can be viewed as an extension of the constraint men, especially working-class minority men, feel in a society that values the white and middle-class man. Violence may then be seen as internalization of middle-class values, whereby working-class Mexican-Americans are doubly oppressed by both color and income. It is important, however, to clarify that I am not suggesting that there is a direct cause and effect between working-class men and violence, instead I am suggesting that this may be a legitimate ramification, considering

the prevalence of abuse in Cisneros' text. As mentioned previously, the middle-class gaze is an attempt to control the working-class. It is therefore possible that the pressure of being controlled, or attempted to be controlled, like any form of oppression, would take its toll. The rationale and consequences behind violence, however, as it is seen across classes, show that this is an issue beyond the scope of this thesis, as it would be inaccurate to claim that violence is limited to, or exhibited only by, the working-class. Johnny Nolan in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, can after all, be seen as an example of a working-class man who isn't driven to violence. Instead, his negative internalization could be seen in his escaping into alcohol.

Still, we should not discount the role that machismo culture plays on working class minority men, but instead to suggest that the strain of being doubly discriminated against by their race and class also plays a role. These men therefore may be inclined to repress women in order to gain a sense of control and power in a society that devalues these men's contribution. This cycle of abuse and power is reminiscent of the previous discussion in chapter two wherein people within an oppressed community can choose to internalize or perpetuate these values, whether intentional or not.

This assertion of dominance by men occurs repeatedly in Esperanza's community to deny women a sense of security, respect, equality, opportunity, and independence. "Often," Wissman notes, "the women are suffering in situations where they must contend with ... debilitating life issues" (24). Esperanza illustrates numerous incidences of misogyny that she, her friends, and her neighbors have experienced, including the fear Alicia has for her father Earl who hides his wife away; Rafaela is locked in her apartment by her jealous husband; Minerva is abandoned by her husband and has to raise her

children alone; Esperanza is sexually harassed; and her friend Sally grows up to marry an angry, controlling man (Cisneros 30, 41, 71,79, 84, 92-93, 97-98, 101-102). While the depiction of these women may be looked on as victimization or weak characterization, Cisneros' statement in an interview with Feroza Jussawala and Reed Way Dasenbrock asserts otherwise: "I think that the traditional Mexican woman is a fierce woman. There's a lot of victimization but we are also fierce" (qtd. in Wissman 19). This is similar in sentiment to Sandoval's statement that, "Dependent on the chances provided by power, the differential mode of oppositional consciousness movement is conditional: subject to the terms of dominant power, yet capable of challenging and changing those very same terms" (180). Sandoval's statement underscores the necessity for women in these circumstances to learn how to carefully circumvent a life that, merely by existing, is in constant (intentional or unintentional) hostility with the middle-class, with white women, and with men in general. The gravity of this triple oppression can only be discussed when a consideration of the dominant status quo is called into question.

These dominant values can be extended to the privileging of intelligence and education within the academy that reflects classed and elitist norms. If the inherent value of the working-class is upheld in lieu of a desire to emulate the middle-class, then the desire to mimic the power and control of the ruling class by working-class men on women can be diminished. In this sense, then, the quality and status of life for working-class men would improve, and by extension, the quality of life for working class women and adolescents. "For [working-class] men in these positions," Bethany M. Coston and Michael Kimmel further suggest, "sexism and patriarchy are key features of their masculine dominance" (108). As patriarchy is related to classism, in that a working-class

man does not hold the same power as a rich man, combating this ideology could be an effective tool in advocating resistance.

Resisting the Gaze

While Esperanza lives in a neighborhood that has seen its share of hardships, she is not doomed to the same fate as the other girls around her. She takes in the neighborhood she lives in, the constant degradation and oppression females face, and she wants to move away and to have her own house one day. She declares, “I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (89). Despite the limitations others girls and women have around her, Esperanza feels that she will leave, but more importantly, that she will come back to her neighborhood and help. This return to her neighborhood can be seen as an affirmation of Antonio Gramsci’s organic intellectual, wherein Esperanza references the value in her knowledge by “active participation in practical life, not a mere orator” who advocates for her community beyond mere lip service (83). Esperanza (and Cisneros) thus stand in contrast to the nurse in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* who, once she has acquired economic power, denies her home community.

Despite her less-than-ideal life circumstances, Esperanza Cordero has no desire to be like everyone else. She can be seen as the exception that proves the rule for her community (*she* will leave, *she* does not get abused by her father, *she* is not trapped in her home by a controlling husband, *she* will have an education). The experiences of those in her own community reflect “notes of domestic misery and incest against which Esperanza implicitly measures her own dissatisfaction” (Marek 178, 181). Marek also argues that “one of the ways Esperanza resists the oppression of the dominant culture is

through refusing to identify with the ‘rulers’” (183). This can be seen explicitly in the vignette “Those Who Don’t” when Esperanza states, “Those who don’t know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we’re dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake....”. “Those” refers to White people since Esperanza says, “all brown all around we are safe” (28).

Given the autobiographical nature of *House on Mango Street*, it is not surprising that Cisneros, like Esperanza, made considerable effort to reverse the middle-class and White gaze directed at her. Just as Betty Smith accommodated the working class in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Cisneros is not ashamed of nor does she ignore working-class Latin@s; she accommodates them. For example, Cisneros explains that she chose to have *The House on Mango Street* be a collection of short vignettes because “people who are busy working for a living deserve beautiful little stories, because they don’t have much time and are often tired” (xvii). Additional comments on the text show the dual nature of Cisneros’ narrative: “While it is written from a child’s point of view,” Kalay states, “which helps in accessibility, it also serves to promote the tradition of oral storytelling” (120). Kalay also suggests that Cisneros’ writing style can be seen as a desire to “make her novel attractive and lively, especially for her Chicano readers who are not on good terms with English language” (120).

The fact that critics label *House on Mango Street* as “simplistic” ignores the value the text has for the organic intellectual precisely because the novel is “accessible [due to] its nonintellectual themes and its rebellious, colloquial, even antiliterary tone” (Cruz 915). As Marek explains, “since otherness often involves perspectives and occurrences

that are hard to imagine if not experienced firsthand, readers privileged by and trained in a traditionally dominant viewpoint may find it hard to interpret certain characteristics of minority literatures” (174). Cisneros herself has commented on this interpretation of her work as incorporating a childlike voice and has stated “that the [narrative] voice is instead reflective of language use in Spanish” (Wissman 19). Cisneros’ novel can then thus be construed as a rejection of the power and privilege of the dominant narrative because of its accommodation to the needs of a different culture and socioeconomic group.

Conclusion

In an interview, Cisneros reveals

For a long time—and its true for many writers and women like myself who have grown up in a patriarchal culture, like Mexican culture—I felt great guilt betraying that culture. Your culture tells you that if you step out of line, if you break norms, you are becoming anglicized (qtd. in Cruz 918).

In writing *House on Mango Street*, Cisneros took a significant risk in showing the gritty aspects of working-class urban life for Chicanos. The text has not been without criticism as “Cisneros herself has noted, even when Latina/o readers do not condemn Esperanza for wanting; to be alone and/or leave, some, especially Latinas, are puzzled by her resolve to set herself apart from others” (qtd. in Cruz 916, 918). Marek’s summation of this dilemma is thoughtful: *House on Mango Street’s* narrative is “not a clear affirmation or rejection of either Chicana/o or Anglo acculturation but of the combination of both that denies Esperanza’s autonomy” (184). In reading *House on Mango Street*, it is clear that

the growth of Esperanza's character stems from an ability to recognize her intersectionality. She is not just working-class, a girl, or a Chicana, but all three. Therefore, Esperanza can be seen as someone who is comfortable negotiating multiple identities. She does not have to be pigeon-holed into some sort of perceived destiny of heartache, abuse, or struggle.

These overlapping pressures Esperanza feels in her life contribute to one of the stronger personal dilemmas she faces: despite her own desire for independence, she feels a sense of responsibility to help others. Esperanza knows that she “will say good bye to Mango [Street noting], I am too strong for her to keep me here forever... They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110). This sense of social responsibility to readers and a young audience is one of the many benefits of this piece of literature for students. The use of this novel as a pedagogical tool is seen as effective in the work of scholars like Sullivan.

Sullivan's work points to the effectiveness of a literature response study designed around the reading of *The House on Mango Street*. In reading and discussing a novel that “represents life realities and characters with which the readers can connect and within which they can be cognitively and aesthetically alive” the students' experiences were legitimized (152). A student named “James” commented that the stories were “our stories in our places where we live,” showing a sense of socio-economic solidarity with the characters depicted. The connection the students felt in reading the text, especially with comments such as “These are my people an' I can relate” underscores the empowering element of connections made between readers and *The House on Mango Street* (Sullivan 156). Banning such texts because they focus on a specific ethnic group and class is coded

racism and elitism. After all, “instruction in most U.S. schools is designed for pupils of a particular ethnic group” (Wilson “Stocking the Bodega”). I would add that the curriculum is also designed for a particular class: the middle class.

While her novella is a work of fiction, Cisneros mentions in her introduction to the 25th-anniversary edition, her own experiences growing up in Chicago and wanting a new house. She adds that her own father “who sighed and wished for me to marry, was at the end of his life, much more grateful I had my agent Susan Bergholz providing for me rather than a husband” (xxiii). The independence that Esperanza both desires and exhibits asserts a previously uncelebrated sense of radical and dangerous pride in adolescent literature for working-class readers that helps cement both its originality and its underlying message of intersectionality and rejection of the middle-class gaze. However, the need for this literature is crucial because “there must be room for a greater variety of discoveries than has been provided for by traditional literary theories, or even by theories that posit otherness in essential terms” (Marek 175). Sherman Alexie’s 2006 novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of A Part-Time Indian*, continues the discussion on the need for diversity in literature that represents the lived experience of working-class students.

CHAPTER IV

“Radical Potential”: The Male Minority Experience

“*Shit, my whole life is a fight*” (Alexie 72).

In 2011, Sherman Alexie published an article entitled “Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood” in *The Wall Street Journal*. Alexie argued for the need to have realistic content in YA books, writing that “there are millions of teens who read because they are sad and lonely and enraged. They read because they live in an often-terrible world. They read because they believe, despite the callow protestations of certain adults, that books—especially the dark and dangerous ones—will save them.”

Alexie was responding to a previous article in *The Wall Street Journal*: “Darkness Too Visible” by Meghan Cox Gurdon in which she argues that contemporary YA novels are too dark and graphic. “If you think it matters what is inside a young person’s mind,” Gurdon states, “surely it is of consequence what he [sic] reads...If books show us the world, teen fiction can be like a hall of fun house mirrors, constantly reflecting back hideously distorted portrayals of what life is.” Gurdon specifically mentions Alexie’s 2007 YA novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, noting that in 2010 the book made the top 10 list of the American Library Association’s most frequently challenged books. She then quotes Alexie as saying, “It almost makes me happy to hear books still have that kind of power... There’s nothing in my book that even compares to what kids can find on the Internet” (“Darkness Too Visible”).

Mark Vogel puts into perspective the ground-breaking and controversial nature of not only *Absolutely True Diary*, but also *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *House on Mango Street*, writing that “the history of YA literature has been a toppling of persistent taboos”

(108). Specifically, these three novels stand in contrast to the “ever-more-appalling YA books” that Alexie notes “are simply trying to protect their privileged notions of what literature is and should be. They are trying to protect privileged children. Or the seemingly privileged” (“Best Kids Books”). Vogel’s observation that “readers expect realistic stories to take on raw needs with a frankness that sometimes makes adult readers uncomfortable” (108) is borne out by the success of this novel. For example, Tammy Wahpeconiah writes, “I believe he [Alexie] is an important voice in Native American contemporary literature, and more important, my students love him” (36- 7). *New York Times* reviewer Barcott calls *Absolutely True Diary* “a gem of a book” that shows “triumph and grief come in equal measure” and calls attention to the book’s illustrations, writing that he found himself “linger[ing] over Ellen Forney’s cartoons” (“Off the Rez”). In 2007, *Absolutely True Diary* won the National Book Award [NBA] in the Young Adult Category.

Like *House on Mango Street* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Absolutely True Diary* depicts working-class life. However, unlike those two novels, Alexie’s text focuses on the role that rural locations and Native American culture, and specifically Native American contemporary reservation culture, play in contributing to the lack, scarcity, internalization, and resistance of the middle-class gaze. An additional difference is the gender of the protagonist: Junior. This difference from the two female adolescents protagonists discussed manifests itself in how Junior deals with his frustrations over both his class, racial discrimination, and the middle-class gaze he faces.

Rural Location

The rural location of *Absolutely True Diary* is a departure from both *A Tree*

Grows in Brooklyn and *The House on Mango Street* that take place in an urban area (New York for *Tree* and Chicago for *House*). As both Francie and Esperanza's experiences have shown, the lack of opportunities for the working-class in urban environments is prominent. However, Jennifer Sherman in her article "Coping with Rural Poverty: Economic Survival and Moral Capital in Rural America" reports that "rural poverty rates have been higher than urban poverty rates since the 1960s" and that "within the United States there is ample evidence to suggest much diversity in experiences and cultural norms between different poverty settings" (891).

While Junior himself may have pride in his community and culture, he clearly believes that his rural location limits his options. As the Economic Research Service notes, "the lower demand for highly educated workers among nonmetro employers is reflected in the lower wage premium that nonmetro college graduates command," and "the lower premium, in turn, may both dampen motivation for rural high school graduates to attend college and increase the net migration of college graduates out of nonmetro areas" ("Explaining the Gap in Pay Between Rural and Urban Work"). In other words, a working class individual from a rural environment can feel trapped: if he/she chooses to stay, he/she will likely remain in a lower socio-economic class, but if he/she chooses to leave, then he/she is no longer rural, and in the case of Native Americans, no longer a part of the Native American community but instead an Other in a non-Native American world.

We see this cycle at play in Junior's life: even if he does go to Reardan, the white school off the reservation with better opportunities, he knows that the chances of successfully achieving his goals in Wellpinit are minimal. The combined disadvantages

of minority status and limited job opportunities that result from the rural location of the reservation show Junior that despite the best efforts of his parents, he must make a drastic change. The paucity of educational and career options in rural environments is likewise made evident when Junior's sister Mary, who is seen as particularly bright and creative, has no outlet to express herself. She becomes a shut-in before deciding to move to Montana and get married. As Junior explains, "Reservations were meant to be prisons, you know? Indians were supposed to move onto reservations and die. We were supposed to die" (216).

Additionally, reservations came into existence because the government made it so, a government that now has no need for its indigenous people other than to exploit the isolated locations of their reservations. Early in the text, Junior states, "If the government wants to hide something, there's probably no place more isolated than my reservation, which is located approximately one million miles north of Important and two billion miles west of Happy" (Alexie 30). His use of "isolated" and his lament that his community is not "Important" conveys the lack of options that he feels the nation as a whole affords him as a poor, rural Native American whose happiness is insignificant.

The reference to the government is an obvious critique on Alexie's part about the exploitation of Indian lands, an exploitation made easier because of the lack of Native American political and economic clout. For example, from 1943 to 1987, the U.S. government produced plutonium on the 586-square mile Hanford Site in Washington, a location that was home to several Native American tribes (Department of Energy: Hanford). In "Native Americans and Nuclear Power," Dorothy Nelkin writes,

The debate over nuclear power embodies the value conflicts of

advanced industrial societies. . . .Indians have entered this debate because their land sits on uranium, Indian workers provide much of the labor in uranium mines and mill, and Indian communities compete with uranium corporations for water. The issues of equity, community rights, acceptable risk, and worker-safety pervading the nuclear debate have assumed extreme proportions among a group that has been exploited for many generations. (2)

Native American

Throughout his literary career, Alexie has exposed a prevailing prejudice that Native Americans are less than the white middle class, a claim that, ironically enough, people justify by using the poverty of Native Americans as evidence. Thus, the intersection of class and race in *Absolutely True Diary* is particularly pertinent as means to expose inherit biases within the current status quo. “Since the U.S. civil rights movement,” Pastrana writes, “class has been closely bound to issues of race” (75).

Louis Owens, however, does not quite agree that this text facilitates complex critical conversations about the role both Indians and non-Indians have played in the lives of Native Americans. Instead, Owens believes that “the non-Indian reader of Alexie’s work is allowed to come away with a sense... that no one is really to blame but the Indians, no matter how loudly the author shouts his anger” (as qtd. in Wahpeconiah 38). I disagree with this simplistic statement as there are numerous instances in the novel where Alexie makes explicit commentary on the discrimination and oppression that Native Americans face *because of* the dominant white American culture and value system.

However, it is also true that many of the troubles within the community are the

result of alcoholism. While Alexie's portrayal of alcoholism with his texts is troubling, according to Wahpeconiah, Alexie claims that it is a reflection of the reservation he grew up on (39). This is not to say that alcoholism is only a working-class societal ill, as clearly it is not. However, just as the previous chapters have shown that poverty can be seen as a result of laziness or bad decisions, these ideas have also been associated with drinking (40). Rather this is to point out that a reservation, in a rural era, with a large drinking problem means an adolescent has to either conform or resist. Wahpeconiah brings up an interesting dilemma with this, asking us to consider, "If Alexie is the best-known Native American writer and his writings contain a multitude of alcoholic Indians, what is the uneducated or unfamiliar reader going to glean from these characters?" (39). After all, even Junior states, "All Indian families are unhappy for the same exact reason: the fricking booze" (Alexie 200). While this may seem as a rationale for stereotyping the lives of Native Americans, it also represents a lack of nuanced reading. To read Alexie's novel and focus on alcoholism as if it is a complete picture of Native Americans is inaccurate.

Alcoholism is not limited to any one group, nor is representing the reality of alcohol a detriment to young adults. Junior, after all, is an adolescent who sees the life choices of those around him and aspires for something more. He does not judge those in the novel who drink as purely bad or good, recognizing the love his father has for him and describing his admiration for his sister, both of whom suffer from alcohol issues. The problem is not solely Native Americans and alcohol, the problem is the relationship with alcohol. In this regard, the use of alcohol could be seen as social commentary on societal ills.

Still, the role of the dominant culture should not be discounted or undermined. Melissa Schieble explains, “Alexie constructs spaces for white people to reflect in a critical way on their own roles and advantages, whether subconscious or conscious, with oppressive institutions” (216). Owens’ equating Junior’s legitimate frustration at the discrimination he has faced as being the fault of the Indians, despite “how loudly the author shouts his anger,” can then be seen as a reductive and patronizing statement (as qtd. in Wahpeconiah 38).

Owens’ criticism self-righteously implies that the anger is misplaced and is a misinterpretation of the intent of the text. In the later section of the book, Junior is obviously worried about the impression he is giving as a narrator, telling readers, “ You probably think I’ve completely fallen in love with white people and that I don’t see anything good in Indians. Well, that’s false” (152). In other words, Junior is claiming not to have internalized the middle class gaze, despite the numerous examples in the text of efforts to make him do so. For instance, Junior comments that “Everybody in Reardan assumed we Spokanes made lots of money because we had a casino” (119). However, rather than absorbing this critique perpetuated by White people, Junior criticizes the unfair system itself, observing, “But that casino, mismanaged and too far away from major highways, was a money-losing business. In order to make money from the casino, you had to work at the casino” (119).

Another example of anti-Native American sentiments occurs early in the text when Junior’s teacher Mr. P tells him,

When I first started teaching here, that’s what we did to the rowdy ones, you know? We beat them. That’s how we were taught to

teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indians to save the child... We were suppose to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren't trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture. (35)

The phrase, "kill the Indians to save the child" has roots in a report written in 1892 by Richard Pratt, one of the founders of the first Indian boarding schools, who stated, "...all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man" (qtd. in Bear).

Mr. P's revelation is in keeping with Gramsci's comment that "The social character of the school is determined by the fact that every social group has its own type of school designed to perpetuate the specific function-ruling or subordinate- of the given social structure" (80). The example above is also an illustration of Vogel's point that Alexie's "illustrations of hard truths confronting American Indian youth bring largely invisible viewpoints into the light" (106).

Ultimately Junior is forced to contemplate his own complicated dual identity of being a member of the Spokane tribe and a student who wants to excel at the all-white Reardan High School. In his discussion on double-consciousness, W. E. B. Du Bois articulates the specific conflict of negotiating "'two warring ideals': the impulse to escape the scorn of white society by living and working as a member of an elite, and a commitment to the African American community" (qtd. in Susan Wells 122). This conflict of warring ideals can also be extended to the problems Junior faces as a Native American. In a climatic scene at the school's basketball match against his former school,

Junior must confront the uncomfortable social realities of a Native American playing against his reservation on the opposing white team. In this match, he is unable to maintain the innocence of a mere game without the social politics of life interfering. While originally excited about winning, Junior realizes that for many of the Wellpinit basketball players, basketball was an escape from a harsh life that included hunger, alcoholism, and lack of opportunity. He explains, I “was suddenly ashamed,” not because of his own race or class, but rather because “I’d wanted so badly to take revenge on them [the tribe members who teased him]. I was suddenly ashamed of my anger, my rage, and my pain” (Alexie 196). As David Mura explains, “for persons in minority groups, [where] it is often a necessity to “know [how] two cultures survive... It is not a case of either/or” (qtd. in Marek 174). Junior’s self-awareness of his own role in causing unhappiness reflects a maturity and realization of the importance and obligation of community while simultaneously recognizing that the opportunities provided in the community for upward mobility are minimal.

It isn’t merely that Arnold feels like an outsider in the Reardan school and a betrayer of his community because “Some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you *become* white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful” (131, emphasis author’s). Junior is made to feel that wanting to improve your life is a negative adherence to the pressure of the middle-class gaze. This can be seen in the text as promoted by both external and internal factors. In discussing his problems with his friend Gordy, Gordy tells him, “Well, life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community” (Alexie 132). The need for this conversation, the pressures of a young Native American forced to choose

between two separate ways of life, has not typically been well-represented in current YA literature.

Junior's teacher, Mr. P, suggests he go outside the reservation for school because "You are going to find more and more hope the further you walk away from this sad, sad, sad reservation" (Alexie 43). This statement inspires Junior to think about who has the most hope. After talking with his parents, he comes to the conclusion that white people have the most hope and that his best chance at improving his education is to go to Reardan High School, a school where he would be the only Native American. However, like Esperanza, there is a sense that Junior will use his experiences to help his community. He knows, through his experience at Reardan, that there is hope for a better life, and can be seen as an example of someone who has gained not only an intellectual education, but a practical education that allows him to impart three key measures of optimism for his tribe- a desire to improve your life, a lack of dependence on alcohol, and a willingness to reach out to others. This knowledge can then be seen as organic, practical, and purposeful to improving the lives of contemporary Native Americans on the tribe.

Although Junior makes statements regarding Native Americans as a whole, he also makes distinctions between Native Americans (in general) and reservation Native Americans (in particular), stating; "We reservation Indians don't get to realize our dreams. We don't get all those chances. Or choices. We're just poor. That's all we are" (Alexie 13). In commenting on this, Junior allows the reader to see the specific discrimination those who come from a reservation face. At his new school, Junior corrects his teacher, only to have the teacher retort, "Where did you learn this fact? On

the reservation? Yes, we all know there's so much amazing science on the reservation" (85). This snarky comment and refusal to admit that Junior is right reveals an inherent bias that his teacher has against the reservation.

Alexie's novel resists the trend of marginalization and silencing of Native Americans *and* working class individuals. Adrienne Kertzer believes that "*The Absolutely True Diary* ... serves as a blunt response to the 'vanishing Indian' that has not vanished" (Alexie 56). As Kertzer observes, "being an Indian is not a minor and accidental characteristic for either Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) or Junior (Spokane); it is a primary tribal identity" (51). Alexie's realistic portrayal of Junior, stemming from his own autobiographical experiences of being a young Native American male attending a prominently white high school, illustrates the need for "Theories of reading, identity, and authenticity [that] are central to scholarship on children's literature by and about Native Americans" (Kertzer 49).

Culture and Guilt

The combined traits of location and discrimination against Native Americans leads to Junior constantly feeling a sense of guilt for leaving the reservation high school to attend an all-white school. Towards the beginning of the novel, he asks himself, "What was I doing in racist Reardan, where more than half of every graduating class went to college? Nobody in my family had ever gone near a college" (56).

While those outside his culture might feel that he is exaggerating the severity of the situation, it is important to remember that Junior is very aware of the ramifications of his decision because, after all, "You can't just betray your tribe and then change your mind ten minutes later" (55). Even though he decides to go to Reardan and leave the

reservation, he is still amazed and surprised when his sister leaves Wellpinit, stating, “Ever since the Spokane Indian Reservation was founded back in 1881, nobody in my family had ever lived anywhere else. We Spirits stay in one place. We are absolutely tribal. For good or bad, we don’t leave one another” (89). Junior’s amazement is in keeping with “findings [that] suggest that the small size, cultural homogeneity and lack of anonymity in a small rural community can create greater social pressure on the poor to be culturally acceptable according to the existing local standards” (Jennifer Sherman 893). While Junior does make a decision that he believes is in his best interest, he carries a significant amount of guilt, especially “after the death of several members of his tribe and the full realization that he himself has ‘betrayed’ his people by going to the all-white school” (Faith Beyer Hansen 33). Once in school, he initially feels isolated, especially as the only Native American on campus.

Junior also feels guilty for acknowledging his unhappiness with the low socio-economic community environment he lives in because he knows his parents are trying their best to provide for him. His ultimate decision to leave the high school at the reservation to attend the white high school in town reflects his desire for a better education and future and could be viewed as succumbing to the middle-class gaze. This action is a continuing source of internal turmoil for Junior because he knows that people in his community will believe he has turned his back on them. The most vocal opposition to his decision includes his best friend Rowdy, who declares him a “white-lover” and spends most of the novel angry at Junior (53). Despite Rowdy’s perspective, Junior does have the support of his parents. Still, the varying opinions in Junior’s reservation show that the Native American perspective of this is not monolithic: “A few folks, especially

the grandmothers, thought I was a brave little dude for going to a white school. But there was a lot more people who just called me names and slammed the door in my face” (79).

Male

The protagonists in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *House on Mango Street* are female, so *Absolute True Diary* provides an intriguing opportunity to examine the intersection of class, race, and the male gender. After all, just as there are societal scripts for females, there are established expectations for males: stoicism, strength, and the ability to provide for one’s family. As Junior notes when discussing his relationship with Rowdy, “Boys can hold hands until they turn nine” (Alexie 217). Even when he is no longer friends with Rowdy, Junior still longs for his friendship and the comfort that comes along with it, all the while knowing that he can’t or shouldn’t expect that kind of outward display of comfort from his male friend.

Although the character of Rowdy is complicated by the domestic abuse he has experienced, his anger and physical aggression are nonetheless typical male behavior in the novel. Owing to his frustration over seeing his mother’s name in his textbook, Junior throws the book and hits his teacher. Junior explains, “And let me tell you, that old, old, old decrepit geometry book hit my heart with the force of a nuclear bomb. My hopes and dreams floated up in a mushroom cloud. What do you do when the world has declared nuclear war on you?” (31). Junior’s action illustrates Paul Baker’s argument that an “important feature of hegemonic masculinity is complicity—those who are not towards the top of the hierarchy still accept and support the system” (34). Unfortunately, by behaving violently to this injustice (i.e. a lack of good education with current textbooks), Junior is validating the bigoted belief that male Native Americans are inherently violent

and therefore not deserving/capable of a good education. As Junior observes when discussing the free clinic dentist's reasoning for denying the Native Americans the required amount of Novocain, "our white dentist believed that Indians only felt half as much pain as white people did, so he only gave us half the Novocain" (Alexie 2).

Junior also responds in anger and violence when told a racist joke by Roger, a white student at Reardan High School:

"Did you know that Indians are living proof that niggers fuck buffalo?"... Roger and his friends were laughing like crazy. I hated them. And I knew I had to do something big. I couldn't let them get away with that shit. I wasn't just defending myself. I was defending Indians, black people, and buffalo. So I punched Roger in the face. (64-5)

This exhibition of anger provides a realistic rendering of a reliable narrator that is accessible to young males in general (in much the same way that Cisneros' text might resonate with young female readers), but particularly to young minority readers who are often the victims of bullying or harassment in school by socially off-colored remarks made by their white classmates. In punching Roger, Junior is rewarded for his behavior with elevated stature among the students and is seen as winning the respect of Roger, who later becomes his friend. Readers can therefore infer that his behavior is ultimately beneficial for his experience at Reardan and that violence among males is not necessarily deemed as bad. In fact, for Junior, who was picked in the reservation for his health issues, it may be a survival technique.

Junior also uses anger to deal with the death of his sister and grandma, suggesting

that anger is an expected outlet of emotion in mainstream society, despite the limitations this places on the emotional wellbeing of the young males involved. The multiple concerns and frustrations that Junior has reflect the multiple roles that he plays, an experience Burkitt describes in his article “The Time and Space of Everyday Life.” These multiple roles produce a double consciousness: “In the varied fragments of everyday life as it is currently lived, individuals have to play many and varied roles. In this, we communicate with one another and, in acting in the various fields of power, we are constantly affirming both similarity and difference with others” (226).

Lack/Scarcity

The issues of lack and scarcity within the text can be seen as a combination of issues seen in both *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *The House on Mango Street*. Like Francie, Junior experiences a basic lack of necessities, including not having enough to eat. Early in the novel, Junior states, “Do you know the worst things about being poor? . . . *Poverty = empty refrigerator + empty stomach*” (8, author’s emphasis). Also, as is the case with the Nolan family, Junior is dependent on government services to provide for these needs, but does not like the idea of charity. I believe his reluctance has to do with the fact that to admit that one needs charity means that one has to admit inferiority to the middle-class. As Junior explains, “We were poor enough to get free lunch, but I didn’t want to be the only Indian and a sad sack who needed charity” (55). When he does utilize services, they are inadequate: “But the Indian Health Service funded major dental work only once a year, so I had to have all ten extra teeth pulled in one day” (2).

Despite the lack of basic needs, like food and adequate health care, Junior also states that the worst thing about being poor isn’t hunger. It is feeling helpless. When his

dog Oscar is sick, he knows that they can't afford to go to the vet. He feels that "there was nothing I could do to save him" and when his father has to shoot Oscar to put him out of his misery, Junior is resigned to the fact that "a bullet only cost about two cents and anyone can afford that" (10,14).

This lack also manifests itself in ways that are distinctly representative of the adolescent experience and the desire to fit in. In one illustration, "White/Indian," we see Junior split into two. One half is dressed "white" with upscale brands like Timex and Air Jordans. The "Indian side" is dressed in a Kmart T-shirt with shoes purchased from a supermarket (57). This illustration provides an interesting contrast to his earlier drawing of "Who My Parents Would Have Been if Someone Paid Attention to Their Dreams," of how his parents would have looked (and what profession they could have achieved). In this drawing, we still see Junior's emphasis on the right look with a "stylish bob- \$50 from Vidal Sassoon" and "shiny black boots... worn by Miles Davis" (12). This focus on clothes and schools is similar to Esperanza's mother in the vignette, "Smart Cookie."

Like Esperanza, Junior also feels an acute lack of opportunities, as previously discussed in the "Rural" and "Native American" sections of this chapter. Unlike Esperanza, however, he explicitly addresses the lack of quality education at his school, leading to his throwing the book: "My school and tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. That is absolutely the saddest thing in the world" (31). The desire for a better education, like Esperanza's desire for a better home, is a major plot point in *Absolutely True Diary*.

The combination of lack of money, food, security, and good education leads Junior to have sympathy for his parents, acknowledging that perhaps things could have

been different for them, but unfortunately “they never got the chance to be anything because nobody paid attention to their dreams” (11). The marginality and invisibility Junior and his family feel are in keeping with the idea of a middle-class gaze. As a member of a working-class minority group, Junior and his family hardly hold significant ambition and clout in the fight for attention. Nonetheless, *Absolutely True Diary* gives him, and by extension others like him, a voice because, as he says, “I want the world to pay attention to me” (6).

Shame and Internalization

Interestingly, although Junior wants the world to pay attention to him, he also wants to be able to hide his class if he chooses. Shame in this text is often the underlying reason for trying to pass as a member of a higher-socioeconomic bracket. Renny Christopher explains that “in this society, in which the poor are blamed for their own poverty, we are taught to feel shame if we have not succeeded” (179). Although only a teenager, Junior feels the implications and perception of being poor. This is also seen in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Francie lies to her teacher about giving away the Thanksgiving pie to a poorer family (because she is too proud to admit that she is hungry and wants the pie), and her aunt Sadie pretends to have money so Francie can get better treatment from her teacher. Esperanza’s mother admits that shame prevented her from staying in school.

Junior tries to hide his poverty and is assisted in this by his parents: “My parents gave me just enough so that I could pretend to have more money than I did. I lied about how poor I was” (119). He explicitly mentions the middle class on that page, saying that he “pretended to be middle class. I pretended I belonged” (119). Clearly, he associates middle class with belonging. He worries, “What would they think of me if they knew I

sometimes had to hitchhike to school?” (119).

The gaze here is so strong that one of Junior’s primary goals is to not let anyone know his real situation. When he is successful, he applauds himself, saying, “I’d made it through the evening without revealing my poverty” (Alexie 123). But despite whatever outward, external level of success Junior may feel that he can maintain by pretending not to be working-class, he is not fooling himself:

It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow *deserve* to be poor. You start believing that you’re poor because you’re stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you’re stupid and ugly because you’re Indian. And because you’re Indian you start believing you’re destined to be poor. *It’s an ugly cycle and there’s nothing you can do about it.* (13)

Mr. P suggests that “the only thing you kids are being taught is how to give up,” and Junior’s comments above seem to affirm this (42). However, Junior has not resigned himself to a life defined by lack and shame when compared to a middle-class life. Instead, he can be seen as ultimately resisting the idea that working-class life for a Native American adolescent boy is somehow less than or that he has to decide between his culture and his education.

Resistance

Initially, Junior is intimidated by his new school. However, after standing up to racial slurs, befriending fellow bookworm Gordy, falling for popular girl Penelope, and joining the basketball team, he is able to make significant headway in his school environment. Junior largely feels that he has something to prove in playing basketball:

“On the first day of the practice, I stepped out on the court and felt short, skinny, and slow. All of the white boys were good. Some were great” (136). But by the novel’s end, we see Junior’s experiences with basketball parallel his experience with the school. He wants to join the basketball team, but he feels he may not be good enough. Nonetheless, he joins because he enjoys playing basketball. As Barcott points out, “Arnold’s toughness soon earns him their respect . . . as well as a spot on the varsity basketball team” (“Off the Rez”).

As an avid reader interested in obtaining a good education, Junior takes a risk in enrolling at Reardan in the hopes of increased learning opportunities. He sees that he is not less than white people as he learns that he is “smarter than most of those white kids” (Alexie 84). He gains a new friend, Gordy, who shares his love of books and who “tutor[s] me and challeng[es] me, but [also] made me realize that hard work—that the act of finishing, of completing, of accomplishing a task—is joyous” (98). Junior’s friendship with Gordy, like his evolving success on the basketball team, allows Junior to acquire a different relationship with white people. Rather than anger at all white people, Junior establishes relationships with white people based on mutual respect and common interests. As he explains, “If you let people into your life a little bit,” Junior realizes, “they can be pretty damn amazing” (129). This is an important point that Alexie is making: resistance could be read as rebellion, even violence, but to resist the Middle-Class Gaze need not require that one resist and/or condemn all interactions with the middle class.

Likewise, as was true of Cisneros’ depiction of Esperanza, Alexie is suggesting that in the face of oppression, any act of agency and resistance deserves to be applauded.

While his sister is initially portrayed as a shut-in squandering her potential, her move to Montana invokes feelings of pride in Junior. “[Although], she still can’t find a job and she’s still living in that crappy little trailer... she’s happy and working hard on her book. Her book is about hope, I guess. I think she wants me to share in her romance. I love her for that” (153). In fact, Mary exemplifies Chela Sandoval’s theory of differential consciousness, meaning she has learned to find happiness despite her lack of resources, strategically plotting her next move, even if it may seem to a White, middle-class woman to be a small one. Importantly, Junior values, as opposed to dismisses, his sister’s efforts: “I just kept thinking that my sister’s spirit hadn’t been killed. She hadn’t given up. This reservation had tried to suffocate her, had kept her trapped in a basement, and now she was out roaming the huge grassy fields of Montana” (Alexie 91).

Junior’s resistance to the Middle-Class Gaze stems from his refusal to internalize the powerful social stigma of poverty. Instead, he recognizes that his family’s situation is not solely the fault of the individual, recognizing that poverty is systemic and largely cyclical: “And it’s not like my mother and father were born into wealth. It’s not like they gambled away their family fortunes. My parents came from poor people who came from poor people who came from poor people, all the way back to the very first poor people” (11). In March of 2013, the Census Bureau released a report that showed that while “the national poverty rate is 14.3%[,for] American Indians and Alaska Natives ... the highest average poverty rate [was] 27%; in nine states, the poverty rate among American Indians and Alaska Natives was more than 30%” (Karen K. Harris). These statistics show that the poverty experienced by Native Americans is highly systemic and serves as a disheartening blow on the availability of opportunities for young adolescents.

However, unlike many working-class youth, Junior has a substantial shot at an improved quality of life because he has the benefit of a concerned teacher. His teacher Mr. P illustrates Junior's drive and determination by telling him, "You can't give up. You won't give up. You threw that book in my face because somewhere inside you refuse to give up" (43). On reflecting on the limitations that occur for both Penelope and himself (because of their statuses of minority and women in a small town), Junior states, "We were supposed to be happy with our limitations. But there was no way Penelope and I were going to sit still. Nope, we both wanted to fly..." (112).

Conclusion

Thomas King claims that the "radical potential of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* requires that readers not only listen to Junior's story, but also choose to live their lives differently" (qtd. in Kertzer 72). Alexie's explanation for why he writes for young adults shows that he hopes to be able to enact this change: "Now I write books for teenagers because I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don't write to protect them. It's far too late for that. I write to give them weapons—in the form of words and ideas—that will help them fight their monsters. I write in blood because I remember what it felt like to bleed" ("Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood").

Hanson uses *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* within her research to frame an approach that validates the experiences of multiple literacies to show that "through a coming together of stakeholders and a willingness to listen without fear of resistance ... the creation of a culturally responsive environment can progress" (37). Vogel points out that though "the adversity Alexie's characters face is sometimes

culturally specific, all young adults benefit from seeing perseverance blended with humor and all can use additional survival skills” (107).

These survival skills include, as Hansen mentions, the ability for Junior to balance his life on and off the reservation; “Throughout the novel, Alexie shows us the complexities and dichotomies that exist for a Spokane Indian trying to navigate an often hostile dominant culture” (33). In choosing to navigate both worlds, Junior illustrates Barthes’ statement, “I stubbornly choose not to choose; I choose drifting: I continue” (as qtd. in Sandoval 142).

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Kathleen Therrien explains that “the American cultural conversation about poverty is, indeed, ongoing, building upon itself and frequently gesturing back towards the ideologies, concepts, and fictive or real economic relations of the past” (94). The novels discussed in this thesis can be seen as contributing to the ongoing and evolving conversation of class, adolescents, and the middle-class gaze across different time periods, races, locations, and genders. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, as my foundational text, establishes consistent themes and problems that occur when working-class adolescents are gazed on by the middle-class. These themes include lack, consequent shame, an internalization, and resistance of the middle-class gaze. This text is significant in showing the struggles and realities of living day-to-day as a member of the working class from adolescent perspective.

While *Tree* is needed to help frame the discussion from a class and historical perspective, it is also important to have an understanding of the impact of race and gender on the lives of the modern working-class from the perspective of the protagonist. In this respect, *The House on Mango Street* serves to modernize the conversation started by Betty Smith to include intersectional issues of race and gender on class. Having used *Tree* to establish what the working-class is and the gaze that is felt, *House* can then be seen as a political novel of resistance. Francie desires to make the best of her situation, but Esperanza refuses to accept that this is all there is to life. Although the lack in *Tree* is largely a material and basic lack (as a large amount of the text is devoted to issues like

hunger), the focus on lack in *House* is opportunity and freedom, especially for girls and women, most prominently exhibited in the Esperanzas' desire to have a nice home of her own. Here readers can see the impact of both the second and third waves of feminism that occurred in the forty years between the two texts. Esperanza therefore benefits from ideas of agency and empowerment to be able to articulate her desire for independence.

Absolutely True Diary shifts the conversation in two important regards from both *Tree* and *House*: through a change in location from urban (the Williamsburg slums of Brooklyn in *Tree* and a Chicago neighborhood in *House*) to rural (reservations of Wellpinit, Washington) and by having a male protagonist instead of a female protagonist. Just as Cisneros' text complicates the discussion of class by including race and gender, the inclusion of location in the conversation of class helps to give a more nuanced look at the complication of working-class adolescents. The remote location of the reservations makes socially upward mobile opportunities even more unlikely than in urban locations. I purposefully choose to include a male protagonist to portray a contrasted gendered experience of class. My initial concern with working-class literature was the relative lack of representation. It can be assumed that just as there are working-class female students, there are working-class male students. I therefore feel that it is important to include the male perspective, as patriarchy is harmful for men, particularly minority men, as well. While Smith's text can be seen as establishing the gaze and Cisneros' text can be viewed as resisting the gaze, Alexie's novel can be seen as an explicit critique of the gaze itself where Junior's narrative establishes the struggles he faces are not without some responsibilities of the part of the dominant class by the text's historical allusions to past events.

Despite the differences in text, all three authors exhibit lived experience that brings authenticity and dignity to their portrayals of the working-class. These depictions are not sentimental or romanticized. They do not set out to prove that poverty is worthwhile or that suffering is warranted. As Junior states, “Poverty doesn’t give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor” (13). The purpose then in reading these novels, especially among adolescent working-class students, is to give a voice to the marginalized and to show that all of these authors experience life in a manner similar to their protagonists. They not only survived, but excelled to become best-selling authors, thereby becoming middle-class. Their experiences serve to give authenticity to the issues their protagonists face, as well as portraying a dignified and sincere portrayal of their experience as working-class adolescent, a service that is valuable for current working-class students looking for representation and respect in their portrayal in young adult literature.

It is important to note that the texts do not only show the hardships the protagonists face. The happiest moments in the novels stem from a sense of community and family, Francie spending time with her brother, Esperanza dancing with her uncle and playing jump rope with the neighbors, and Junior detailing the beauty of the reservation. These moments serve to show that the working-class experience is not completely bogged down by oppression and void of joy. Yet the lack of frequency of such moments is troubling.

Until the material wants of the working-class are resolved we will continue to need texts that are critical, especially for young adults. As Beryle Banfield states, “In a racist [and I would add classist] society children’s trade books and textbooks must be

viewed as one of the most effective tools of oppression” (qtd. in Schieble 212). Students can read these texts and not feel talked down to about how their experiences are perceived. Instead such students can identify their own realities within the text. If the middle-class gaze is a reflection of the values and misgivings of a dominant culture, then these novels can serve as a challenge to the status quo in which literature affirms the need to voice the concerns of the working-class adolescent.

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