

Exploring the Significance of Social Class Identity Performance in the English Classroom: A Case Study Analysis of a Literature Circle Discussion

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English educators at all levels have endeavored to understand difference in their classrooms both in terms of the content that they teach and in terms of the social and cultural identities of students in their classrooms. However, although educators have come a long way in understanding identity as it is constituted by race and gender, much work is needed for social class identity to be understood with nuance and complexity. This article explores the salience of class identity as it affects one aspect of learning in the English classroom—literary interpretation. Specifically, this article draws on data from a six-week literature circle unit in which four white, socioeconomically diverse students discussed Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*. By examining and uncovering the students’ social class identity performances as they influenced both their participation and interpretations in the literature circle, this article sheds light on the significance of social class identity in the English classroom and makes a case for the importance of a more thorough consideration of social class in teaching and research in English education.

I think it’s funny though cause people always criticize—like call people white trash and everything like that . . . and it’s kind of fun to read about to see what they actually mean by white trash.

—Rebecca, grade 10

When Rebecca¹ and her peers in her 10th-grade English class participated in literature circles, they were given a list of possible texts they could read and copies of those texts to examine to help them make choices. Rebecca quickly chose Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1993) after reading the back cover, explaining that she wanted to know what people mean when they use the term *white trash*—a term with which she was not unfamiliar. Growing up in a community that was perceived by many to be socially and economically divided, “class mattered” to Rebecca (hooks, 2000). However,

like many students in the United States, Rebecca and her peers rarely had the opportunity in school settings to talk about social class and the impact that class structures and hierarchies had on their identities and the identities of those around them (Hicks, 2002). A literature circle discussion in an English classroom provided a unique opportunity for broaching this subject.

Many scholars posit that in educational and social research on the whole, race and gender have often been critically analyzed while social class has rarely been foregrounded (Bettie, 2003; Hicks, 2002; hooks, 2000; Jones, 2006; Linkon, 1999; Robillard, 2003; Van Galen, 2007). Jones (2006) argues that “class might be considered ‘the uncool subject’ (hooks, 2000a,

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p.vii), while seemingly more fashionable topics such as race, gender or sexuality get close and critical analyses, more press and perhaps even more clout” (p. 294).

Lindquist (2004) suggests that one reason why class is under-theorized is that it functions less visibly than other cultural categories. She explains, “It is marked neither as an identifiable category, like gender, nor as a unified set of historical practices. It names, rather, a set of shared experiences fraught with structural tensions and contradictions” (p. 192). Likewise, Bettie (2003) argues that this lack of visibility leads race to trump and obscure class as people attempt to understand difference.

Social class is also under-theorized because it is difficult to define. Payne-Bourcy and Chandler-Olcott (2003) explain that “[d]efinitions of class are often contested among social scientists, with some researchers classifying families and individuals on the basis of income levels alone and others considering the influence of culture, educational levels, and access to formal institutions such as schools, universities and political parties” (p. 553). Lindquist (2004) posits that the contentiousness of defining social class arises because “[w]e understand class as a problem of distribution of resources, but we experience it affectively, as an *emotional* process” (p. 192; emphasis original).

Although class may be more difficult to define and identify than race or gender, English educators cannot afford to dismiss it as intangible or insignificant. Professional standards in English language arts call for students to “read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world” (NCTE & IRA, 1996) and challenge teachers to be agents of change who help students “critically examine how cultural difference related to race, class, gender, and sexuality are portrayed in texts” (Conference on English Educa-

tion, 2007). At the same time that English educators have been called to take up a political stance toward their teaching, research has documented that damaging misunderstandings occur when they adopt critical instructional approaches, but do not adequately understand the distinctive social and cultural identities that students bring to their literacy experiences (Hicks, 2004; Hull & Rose, 1990). Consequently, if English teachers are to responsibly engage students in pedagogy that evokes discussion of social class, knowledge is needed about how students' social class identity performances influence their learning.

This article explores the salience of social class identity as it affects one facet of learning in the English classroom—literary interpretation. We chose to focus on literary interpretation because we believe, as Sumara (2002a) does, that literary texts can serve as “interpretive sites for both clarifying and complicating what we believe to be true” (p. 8). Specifically, we draw on data from a six-week literature circle unit in which four white, socioeconomically diverse students discussed Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1995). Our analysis was driven by the following question: How did students from a socioeconomically divided community perform social class identities through their participation and interpretations in a literature circle discussion of *Bastard Out of Carolina*—a text that overtly represents social class hierarchies? By examining students’ social class identity performances in both their literary interpretations and in participation patterns in the literature circle, this article sheds light on the significance of social class identity performance in the English classroom and makes a case for the importance of a more thorough consideration of social class in teaching and research in English education.

Theoretical and Empirical Framing

A Theory of Social Class Identity Performance

This study is grounded in theories of social class identity as complex, fluid, and performed in relation to a number of factors beyond economics, such as family and peer relationships, and leisure and consumption practices (Bettie, 2003). This understanding of social class identity is linked to Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of “habitus,” which Gee and Crawford (1998) define as “unconscious ways of using one’s mind and body” (p. 234). For instance, Bettie (2003) argued that dress and makeup choices, often assumed to be race or gender signifiers, served as key social class performances associated with life stage expectations for the 12th-grade girls in her study. She explained that girls who expected to take on identities linked to adult responsibilities such

as working and raising families immediately after high school often chose a more sexually provocative, older look by wearing darker colors. Conversely, girls who expected to attend college were more likely to perform a younger, more innocent look by wearing pastel and neutral colors (pp. 60–61). Such an examination of dispositions and consumption practices considers performative aspects of social class identity that may or may not align with more static markers of class such as occupation and educational achievement.

The current study is also aligned with scholarship that conceives of social class identity as relational and locally constructed, taking on diverse meanings in various contexts (Linkon, 1999; McDermott, 2006; McNall, Levine, & Fantasia, 1991). For instance, McDermott (2006) illustrated how white, working-class convenience-store workers in Boston took pride in their class identities, appropriating more racist attitudes toward African Americans than did white, working-class convenience-store workers in Atlanta who perceived themselves to be “white trash.”

The theory of social class identity outlined in this article implicitly encourages research that resists static, categorical definitions of social class identity such as “working class” and “middle class,” and instead forwards more nuanced understandings of class identity. Cultural and historical theories of identity dovetail usefully with the theory of social class identity outlined above and simultaneously provide a means for understanding how class identities are established, maintained, and transformed. These theories suggest that identities, while changeable, “thicken” (Wortham, 2004), become “sedimented” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2002), or are “laminated” (Holland & Leander, 2004), as people repeatedly perform identities in particular contexts. Moreover, people “improvise” identities given past social and cultural experiences and histories, and the affordances and constraints of present social situations (Holland et al., 2002).

Building on theories of social class identity as fluid, performed, and locally constructed as well as social and cultural theories of identity, this study examined students’ participation patterns and literary interpretations as identity performances. These performances aid students in negotiating and improvising their own class identities in light of their past experiences with class in their local school, neighborhood, and families, and within the constraints and freedoms of social contexts such as the literature circle.

Sociocultural Perspectives on Response to Literature

Because our goal was to better understand how social class identity performances affect students’ interpretations of literary texts, we framed our study through sociocultural theories of response to literature.

Experiential theories of response to literature suggested that teachers should engage students in classroom literature by encouraging them to make personal connections between their own experiences, feelings, and personality traits and those of characters and situations in texts (Karolides, 2000; Probst, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1995). These theories focus on meaning as evolving from a transaction between an individual reader and a text in a social context. However, current sociocultural theories of reader response focus not on readers and texts as unique, individual entities but on how readers, texts, and contexts are shaped by socially and culturally constructed practices related to identities that are acquired and performed through participation in social and cultural worlds (Beach, 2000; Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2007; Faust, 2000; Galda & Beach, 2001; Lewis, 2000; Schweickart & Flynn, 2004; Smagorinsky, 2001; Sumara, 2002a, 2002b).

Sociocultural response theorists suggest that rather than simply examining how readers make connections between text and lived worlds based on similar events and experiences, researchers need to study how readers respond to texts by performing similar socially and culturally constructed identity practices that transfer across their interpretations of both lived and text worlds (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2007). Several scholars have conducted studies that take up this appeal by examining how response is mediated by social and cultural identity performances related to race (Beach, 1997; Brooks, 2006; Enciso, 1997; Lewis & Ketter, 2004; Möller & Allen, 2000; Sutherland, 2005; Thein, 2005; Trainor, 2008) or gender (Davies, 2005; DeBlase, 2005; Fetterley, 1978; Finders, 1997; Hartman, 2006; Radway, 1984). For instance, Lewis and Ketter (2004) considered white teachers' responses to multicultural literature through studying how these teachers' responses were mediated by their positioning of their identities and responses through two competing discourses—"liberal humanism" and "critical multiculturalism." Similarly, DeBlase (2005) documented how diverse urban girls' responses to female characters were influenced by competing performances of femininity.

While the sociocultural studies of response discussed above foregrounded race or gender identity, several of these studies indicated that social class identity performance was a significant and salient lens for understanding responses that initially appeared to be primarily mediated through practices related to race or gender. For instance, Trainor (2008), in her study of white students' responses to multicultural literature, examined how one white female student's seemingly racist response to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou, 1969) could actually be better understood as this student's reaction to her perception that Angelou was positioning her as a certain kind of class-specific white person—a "cracker," "redneck," or "hick"—rather

than as the middle-class, liberal, antiracist white person she wanted to be understood as. In another study, Thein (2005) studied the resistant response of a Hmong American 11th-grade girl to *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987). Thein found that this student's resistance could be understood through an examination of competing cultural models of identity acquired both through her experiences as a young woman in a traditional Hmong family world, and also through her experiences in worlds of a working-class neighborhood. Although neither Trainor nor Thein initially foregrounded social class as a lens for studying response to literature, both of their studies revealed class as essential for mapping a more complete picture of how students' identity performances influenced their responses to literature.

Studies by Trainor (2008) and Thein (2005) are examples of research that ultimately found social class identity to be a salient lens for understanding response to literature. However, only a few studies of response to literature initially foregrounded social class identity (Gee & Crawford, 1998; Hemphill, 1999). Payne-Bourcy and Chandler-Olcott (2005) argue that these previous studies are limited in that they investigate class by comparing "working-class" and "middle-class" students directly rather than by examining the "nuances and subtleties of within-group variation" (p. 555).

Taken in sum, this body of work suggests that more research is needed that (a) foregrounds class as an analytic category for understanding the social and cultural identity performances students enact in responding to literature and (b) examines the nuanced and fluid nature of those social and cultural identity performances.

Method

Context of the Investigation

Data were collected at Creekside Junior/Senior High School,¹ a school five miles outside of a large "rust belt" city. Creekside was a predominantly white school that served two communities—Mapleton and Venice—and drew from their two elementary schools (see Tables 1 and 2). Although Mapleton and Venice could be described as inner-ring suburbs of a larger city, they functioned as independent towns; many high school students from these communities had never visited the larger city.

Mapleton was a community of tree-lined streets comprised primarily of single-family homes. The main business district was a 10-block cobblestone street flanked by independently owned restaurants, boutiques, antique stores, and coffee shops. City ordinances restricted fast-food chains. There were several taverns in the town, most of which were located a block or two from

Table 1. Mapleton and Venice Demographic Data (2000 U.S. Census Bureau data)

	Mapleton	Venice
Total population	6911	3124
• White	97.8%	95.8%
• African American or black	0.9%	3.1%
• American Indian or Alaska Native	0.1%	0.1%
• Asian	0.5%	0.4%
• Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.0%
• Some other race	0.2%	0.2%
• Two or more races	0.5%	0.5%
• Hispanic or Latino	0.9%	0.3%
Median household income	\$41,957	\$28,245
Percent of population 25 or over with high school diploma or higher	88%	77%
Percent of population 25 or over with bachelors degree or higher	37%	10%

Table 2. Creekside School District Demographic Data

	Mapleton Elementary School	Venice Elementary School	Creekside High School
Total population	402	261	624
• White students	97%	84%	94%
• African American students	2%	14%	5%
• Hispanic students	1%	1%	1%
• Students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch	12%	60%	30%

the main business district. Mapleton was also home to a large country club; homes became larger and more overtly affluent progressing up the hill and toward the country club.

Venice was a community once centered on the railroad industry. Venice’s business district consisted of a five-block main street with independently owned consignment and antique shops as well as fast-food chains. Storefronts in Venice were typically more weathered than those in Mapleton. The several taverns that lined this district displayed neon beer and liquor advertisements. Some of the housing, particularly in the lower blocks of the town, was government subsidized. Houses in the middle blocks were often subdivided into apartments. Houses in the upper blocks were typically single-family homes.

Data used in this study are from a larger qualitative study of 90 10th-grade students' literacy practices. In this larger study we interviewed 57 students from Creekside and found they expressed many opinions about differences and similarities between Venice and Mapleton. For instance, many students said that there were simply no significant differences between the two communities. Similarly, some students said that while there were no significant differences between the two communities, other people believed that there were. Specifically, students explained that other people saw Mapleton and Venice as dichotomously rich and poor communities. Other students said that although differences did exist within the community, those differences were between the wealthy people living in upper Mapleton and the rest of the people living in both Mapleton and Venice. Finally, some students said that real, significant differences existed between the two communities—differences that were aligned with dichotomous beliefs regarding rich and poor people in the two towns.

Ethnographic observations conducted in the larger study suggested that social class in this community was more nuanced than to understand Mapleton and Venice as dichotomously rich and poor or to see differences between the towns as insignificant. There were many shades of gray among the primarily middle- and working-class people in the community.

The Literature Circle Unit

The case-study detailed in this paper investigates one small group's discussion during a six-week literature circle unit in a "regular" level 10th-grade English classroom. Students selected their top five texts from a list of 24 and were placed in groups accordingly, most reading one of their top three choices. Groups met twice weekly for approximately 30 minutes per meeting. Students were assigned roles for each meeting on a rotating basis (Daniels, 2002); however, as was the case in the group we highlight in this study, these roles were frequently abandoned and discussion was guided by students' thoughts and questions.

Researcher Roles

Amanda and Megan were participant-observers in DeAnn's classroom. Amanda was a faculty member and Megan and DeAnn were doctoral students at a local university at the time of the study. We all see ourselves as currently performing white, middle-class, female identities.

Although discussions were primarily student-centered and -directed, each of the authors joined the group at various points during the unit. Rec-

ognizing that the presence of the authors affected the nature of discussion, we analyzed our participation (see Appendix A) and found that our talk accounted for a minimal amount of total talk and could be characterized as supportive rather than directive.

The Focal Group

The focal group for this study included four students—Rebecca, Kari, Jess, and Jake—all of whom identified as white as did most students at Creekside. We chose to conduct a case study of this group for several reasons. First, as our analysis will illustrate, this group of students represented a noteworthy cross-section of social class diversity mirroring that of Mapleton and Venice more generally. Second, these students chose to read *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a novel that overtly represents issues related to social class hierarchies. Third, this group engaged in discussions that were heavily text-focused by contrast with other groups in the class—we found that over 70 percent of discussion in this group was text related. Finally, we found that 56 of the 90 text-related episodes in this data set (40 percent) contained talk thematically related to social class. These factors led us to wonder how students’ social class identity performances might have driven both participation and interpretation in this group.

Bastard Out of Carolina

Bastard Out of Carolina is Dorothy Allison’s semiautobiographical novel about a young girl growing up amid poverty and abuse in the rural South. Ruth Ann “Bone” Boatwright was the “illegitimate” daughter of Anney Boatwright, a member of the hard-drinking, rough-hewn Boatwright family. Pregnant at age 15 and widowed with two daughters soon after, Anney wanted nothing more than to support her children and provide them with a good home. Anney had high hopes for the future when she met Glen Waddell, a man from a middle-class family. However, these hopes disintegrated when Glen was unable to find steady employment and began sexually abusing Bone. Caught in a cycle of poverty and abuse, Anney found herself unable to leave Glen regardless of the toll that her marriage took on Bone.

Bastard Out of Carolina is a text that invites many critical readings (Griffin, 2001; Irving, 1998; King, 2000; Lakostik, 2007; Miller, 2007; Saxey, 2005) but is most commonly recognized as a text that presents a little-told story of social class in the United States. Allison is widely cited and even canonized as a “working-class writer” (Coles & Zandy, 2006; Zandy, 1990). Likewise, much literary criticism on *Bastard Out of Carolina* focuses on Al-

lison's honest and complex depiction of the experience of poverty and the shame associated with being labeled "white trash" (Bouson, 2001; Friedel, 2005; Reynolds, 1993; Smith, 2004).

Data

Data for this study included transcripts from all 12 digitally recorded literature circle discussions from the case-study group; single hour-long, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each of the four students in which they were asked about their participation in various social, school, and family worlds as well as their perceptions of life in their community; and ethnographic observations of the participants in classroom, school, and community contexts over the course of one school year.

Coding and Interpretation

To interpret how the students' social class identity performances influenced both their social participation and literary interpretations in a literature circle context, we conducted three strands of coding and interpretation related to (a) the students' social class identity performances in family, community, and school; (b) their participation in the literature circle; and (c) their primary textual interpretations.

Interpreting students' social class identity performances in family, community, and school. Interpretations of the participants' social class identity performances were constructed using their one-on-one interviews and observations of the participants in school and extracurricular settings.

Drawing on performative understandings of social class (Bettie, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984), we interpreted interview data by isolating statements in which the participants discussed and expressed tastes, dispositions, attitudes, consumption practices, income, occupation, educational attainment, and access to power. Several tools of Critical Discourse Analysis were used to interpret these statements (Gee, 1999; Gee & Crawford, 1998; Marsh & Stolle, 2006; Thein, 2009; Young, 2004). The students' use of I-statements (Gee, 1999; Gee & Crawford, 1996; Young, 2004) or instances in which they talked about themselves in the first person were useful for pinpointing their overt beliefs or stances that guided their social class identity performances. Statements in which the students used other pronouns (e.g., *he*, *she*, *you*, *they*, *it*) illuminated less overt beliefs that guided performances (Marsh & Stolle, 2006). Specifically, the students sometimes used the pronoun *they* to distance themselves from the beliefs and actions of others (e.g., "Mapleton's supposed to be richer. They think they have better kids"), and the pronoun *you*

to universalize their beliefs and position them as norms (e.g., “Just because you have more or less money doesn’t mean you’re a different person”). The students’ verb choice (e.g., cognitive, action, affective, state-of-being) shed light on their positionings of themselves and others (Gee, 1999). For instance, action verbs often served to position people as having agency (e.g., “We work for what we have”). Affective verbs typically demonstrated emotional connectedness with a position (e.g., “When I was in Venice, I hated kids from Mapleton”). Field notes from our ethnographic observations in the school and in extracurricular settings were used to illuminate embodied aspects of the students’ social class identity performances. Finally, we considered our interpretations against the backdrop of the local social class context of Mapleton and Venice, examining how the students’ social class identity performances were linked with local constructions of social class in their communities.

Interpreting students’ participation in the literature circle. In interpreting the students’ identity performances as they affected participation patterns in the literature circle, we drew on two additional tools from Critical Discourse Analysis—*genre*, or types of communication linked to a particular setting, and *voice*, or language used to position oneself in relation to others (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Lewis & Ketter, 2004). We coded for genre by reading the 12 transcripts of the literature circle discussions for *topic control* (e.g., how new topics are initiated, how topics shift), *participant structures* (e.g., turn taking, overlap in speech, hand raising, interruptions), *encouragement/affirmation/disagreement*, and *politeness/etiquette*. Coding for genre allowed us to interpret how each student interacted with his or her peers and how community norms were established in this context. We coded for voice by reading the transcripts for each student’s use of *register* (e.g., word choice associated with identity and positioning), *affect* (e.g., irony, sarcasm, anger, sincerity), *intensifiers/qualifiers*, and *strong/tentative/inarticulate/apologetic statements*. Coding for voice allowed us to interpret how each student positioned his or her identity within the literature circle.

Locating focal students’ primary textual interpretations. Each student’s primary textual interpretation(s) was located by isolating interpretative statements from the discussion transcripts. Interpretive statements were defined as those in which the students attempted to make sense of, speculate about, make predictions about, or judge the actions and motives of characters. Interpretive statements were coded thematically through open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) to determine each student’s primary interpretation(s).

Constructing the case study. Finally, we constructed a case-study narrative of the literature circle discussion by developing interpretive links

between each student's social class identity performances, participation in the literature circle, and primary textual interpretation(s). Interview data in which the students described their family situations, parents' occupations, extracurricular involvements, and social networks were also employed to contextualize and triangulate interpretations.

Findings

Overall, our data illuminate the complexity of social class identity performance as it informs textual interpretation and participation in a literature discussion.

Overall, our data illuminate the complexity of social class identity performance as it informs textual interpretation and participation in a literature discussion. Although Rebecca, Kari, and Jess could all be considered working class and Jake middle class by criteria such as parents' income and occupations, the students' identity performances were far more nuanced than these categories would suggest. As our case study will demonstrate, discussion of *Bastard Out of Carolina* in a literature circle context compelled each of these students to improvise a unique social class identity that became increasingly sedimented through social class performances related to both their participation and interpretations in this context.

Social Class Identity Performances

Rebecca grew up in Venice and could roughly be categorized as hard-living and working-class performing² based on factors such as instability in her family situation and difficulties her parents faced in maintaining employment (Bettie, 2005). Although Rebecca considered herself to be close to her family, noting that she worked at a local grocery store with her father and cleaned houses with her mother, she did not live with her parents (whose financial troubles led them to move outside of the community), but instead with a friend at the time of the study. Rebecca often mentioned difficulties in her relationship with her family, stating, for instance, "My parents all make fun of me. It's all gravy. I don't really mind."

Rebecca saw herself as unfairly positioned by her peers as different and inadequate based *not* on factors such as her personality, dispositions, beliefs, or social practices, but instead on factors related to her life situation that were beyond her control and that she therefore believed did not matter—her position as a resident of Venice and her lack of money:

I got treated horribly. And it's just because I was from Venice. Like it's this thing where kids in the school will be like, you're from Venice. What

does that make you? I've had it said to me before and I'm like, Venice, it's a town. Congratulations . . . I live in my town. I'm a good kid. I mean, it doesn't matter if I have money or not. I have my friends, family, good health.

Rebecca's perception of being unfairly marked by her peers led her to perform an embodied identity consistent with a rejection of school social hierarchies. She dressed in ways that positioned her as a nonconformist—wearing a black sweatshirt and oversized men's jeans most days. She also said that she “could care less [about popularity]” and chose not to participate in any school-based extracurricular activities. Instead she chose to play basketball in her neighborhood most days with what she considered to be an eclectic group of friends. In describing how she chose her friends, Rebecca positioned herself as egalitarian and accepting of people from all backgrounds. She frequently used state-of-being statements to suggest that the absence or presence of money as a life situation was the only real difference among people in her community—a difference that Rebecca thought ought to be disassociated from values, norms, beliefs, and identity in general. She explained:

I hang out with 50,000 different kinds of kids. Like I go from little kids to older kids, but then I go from kids who live in Mapleton to kids who live in Venice . . . I don't see the big distinction. . . . Just because you have more or less money doesn't mean you're a different person.

Although Rebecca's nonconformist habitus can be linked to her desire to position herself as rejecting *all* social and class-based hierarchies, each of her performances inadvertently served to further sediment her identity among her peers as markedly different from the middle-class norms of students with social power in the school and community, and therefore, markedly working-class.

Like Rebecca's parents, Jess's held traditionally working-class jobs; her mother worked as an administrative assistant for the school district and her father was a warehouse manager. However, Jess and her family improvised a middle-class habitus in this community. They lived in the middle blocks of Mapleton among primarily middle-class neighbors, and they actively participated in Mapleton's school, athletic, and social organizations. Jess's middle-class identity performance was equally evident in her school interactions. Jess was a popular student who was an athlete on the school's soccer, basketball, and softball teams—participation that was associated with a middle-class identity at Creekside. Additionally, Jess's friends were almost exclusively from Mapleton and she dressed in a preppy, athletic style associated with embodied performances of middle-class norms in this community.

When asked to consider social class difference in her school and

community, Jess's initial response was to insist that such differences do not exist. She attributed this stance to her participation in an overnight retreat organized by Creekside's Key Club for fourth through sixth graders. The retreat was intended to create bonds and reduce tensions among students from the community's two elementary schools as they prepared to attend middle school together. Jess said, "I think that's where everyone started to notice that it's really not that different." Jess's use of the pronoun "everyone" in this phrase exemplifies her belief that her stance toward social class was the norm among students at Creekside. However, Jess also noted, "People do judge each other on their looks. A lot of people, like if someone doesn't wear something, or like wears something weird, no one wants to talk to them." Comments like this one suggest that while Jess may not have recognized embodied identity performances as linked to social class, she did acknowledge their importance in how one is perceived.

Jess's stance toward class conflict in her community is logical; by living in Mapleton and performing a middle-class identity, Jess was likely not labeled through derogatory class markers as other working-class people in the community, like Rebecca, often were. For Jess, dress and disposition, which she believed that people noticed but did not recognize as class performances, played a more powerful role in how she was perceived than her parents' occupations or income. Moreover, although Jess did not seem aware that she was "class passing" (Foster, 2005) through her middle-class identity performances, she did seem to believe that it was necessary to dress and behave in particular ways to be viewed favorably among her middle-class contemporaries.

Kari also grew up with parents who worked full-time in service jobs. Like Jess, she lived in Mapleton. However, Kari lived in the lower blocks of Mapleton, close to the river—a section of town perceived to be working-class and more closely aligned with Rebecca's neighborhood in Venice than Jess's in the middle blocks of Mapleton. Still, Kari's class identity performances were different from Rebecca's. Her parents' ownership of a home, consistent employment, and secure marriage positioned her as what Bettie (2005) might call "stable living/working class." Although money was tight in Kari's family and she spent much of her free time caring for her two younger siblings to accommodate her parents' work schedule, Kari's identity performances did not suggest that she perceived herself as belonging to a disenfranchised social class group. Kari performed an identity aligned with acceptance of school culture; she was an active member of the school's chorus, had many friends at Creekside, and was well liked though not a member of high-status

social groups as Jess was. Kari described herself as “just kind of friends with everybody.”

In our coding we found that Kari’s social class performances were closely tied to her geographic position in the community. Kari said that she did not see Mapleton as a wealthy town nor did she see most people in Venice as much different from her family. This seems reasonable given that Kari grew up in Mapleton with a family who performed working-class dispositions. Kari did, however, believe that other people saw differences within the community. Specifically, Kari used the pronouns *they* and *their* to distance herself from those she saw as wealthy, living in upper Mapleton, explaining that she believed that these people thought they were “better” than others in the community. For instance, Kari said, “high class people like to make it out like their family’s perfect, like they’re so much better than everyone else.” Likewise, she noted that although most students at Creekside were friendly with one another, students from upper Mapleton “stay in their cliques and have their certain groups of friends.” In other words, she seemed to believe that only certain “high class” people placed importance on class difference. However, Kari herself made class distinctions by positioning herself in opposition to those living in upper Mapleton.

Of the four students in this group, Jake was the most firmly middle-class, based both on his class performances and dispositions and on factors such as his parents’ income and occupations. Jake grew up in the upper-middle blocks of Mapleton with parents who were professionals. He attended a private Catholic school through eighth grade prior to enrolling at Creekside—an experience that positioned him as more affluent than many students at Creekside who attended public, neighborhood elementary schools. Once at Creekside, Jake followed in the footsteps of his popular, older brother, finding success playing on the football, basketball, and baseball teams—participation associated with a middle-class identity performance at Creekside.

When asked about his perceptions of Mapleton and Venice and about Creekside as a school, Jake said he did not notice tensions and noted that Creekside is “small with lots of different types of people.” He also said that he got along with everyone. As a student who did not attend either of the neighborhood elementary schools, Jake seemed to have limited awareness of the conflict that other students talked about between Mapleton and Venice, noting that he had never heard anyone use derogatory terms related to people from either community.

The descriptions of Rebecca, Jess, Kari, and Jake in this section provide a glimpse into the complexity of class identity among students at Creekside.

Although easily categorized as working class or middle class at first glance, these students performed four distinct class identities based on their nuanced sets of experiences in their community. These experiences and performances provided the history from which these students improvised their identity performances in their participation and interpretations in the literature circle.

Participation in the Literature Circle

As participants in literature circle discussions about *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Rebecca, Jess, Kari, and Jake positioned themselves and each other in ways that were consistent with and reflective of their class identity performances

As participants in literature circle discussions about *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Rebecca, Jess, Kari, and Jake positioned themselves and each other in ways that were consistent with and reflective of their class identity performances in their larger school, community, and family worlds.

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Rebecca's position in the literature circle could easily be characterized as authoritative; she was clearly the ad hoc leader of this group. In coding for voice, we found that Rebecca frequently used strong, directive statements with few qualifiers. Her affect was often confrontational and sometimes even angry. She initiated and controlled the flow of new topics and directed participation by interrupting discussion and even prompting her peers to participate. In coding for genre, we found that Rebecca also established norms for etiquette in this group by reprimanding her peers for arriving late, failing to read, or misinterpreting the text. Moreover, Rebecca positioned herself as the authority on the text, particularly monitoring interpretations suggesting that the Boatwrights might be somehow abnormal with regard to dispositions and values. Excerpt 1 illustrates many facets of Rebecca's interactions with her peers:

REBECCA: So the hitchhiking thing.

JAKE: Yeah, I actually did read that part.

REBECCA: What 10-year-old walks down the highway and goes (sticks out her thumb)?

KARI: Yeah, especially with her little sister.

JAKE: It says like Mama just like tells her to do it.

REBECCA: Mama doesn't tell her to hitchhike!

KARI: Yeah, she told her to call her uncle.

REBECCA: Yeah, she told her to call her uncle and come pick her up. I read the whole section. They don't hitchhike anymore in the book.

In this excerpt, Rebecca positioned herself as authority over both the flow of discussion and interpretations that were posed. Although Rebecca was willing to point out the oddity of a 10-year-old hitchhiking, she was quick to use a confrontational affect leveraged by a careful reading of the text to reprimand Jake—the most overtly middle-class performing student in the group—for suggesting that this behavior on the part of a child might be more generally acceptable among adults in Bone's family. In fact, in many excerpts Rebecca firmly characterized the larger norms of the Boatwright family as upstanding, loving, and appropriate. Such a positioning of the Boatwrights seems logical from Rebecca given her perception that her family's values were unfairly judged based solely on finances.

Excerpt 1 also illustrates a component of Kari's participation in the literature circle. As a student who identified as working class—but not nearly so strongly or personally as Rebecca—Kari often supported Rebecca's interpretations as she did in Excerpt 1. Likewise, she sometimes deferred to Rebecca's interpretations of class in the novel. For instance, in Excerpt 2 Kari initially questioned why Bone did not protest after she was molested by Glen, but then she reconsidered her questioning in favor of a response more closely aligned with Rebecca's interpretation:

KARI: I thought it was weird though, after he molested her she just like went to sleep. You know what I mean? She didn't say anything, she just like went to sleep . . . and like she said she was just scared and like didn't make any noise or anything. She just sat there.

REBECCA: Most kids, if you like ever like—no kid who loves their parents will get them in trouble.

KARI: Yeah.

REBECCA: It's an impossible thing to do.

KARI: Yeah, she doesn't want to make her family—'cause her family's already dealing with a lot with like how the baby died so I don't think she wants to put any more on her family.

While the above excerpt illustrates Kari's deferral to Rebecca's stance, it is important that we note that Kari sometimes also amended her interpretations to align with Jess's. Moreover, Kari's pattern of participation was to follow the leads of both of the other girls in terms of topic choice, using strong, emphatic

language to position herself as readily encouraging and agreeing with the contributions of the other two girls. Kari performed a social class identity that positioned her somewhere between Rebecca and Jess, providing her with an impetus for positioning herself as a bridge between the other two girls.

While Kari seemed quick to agree with perspectives offered by both girls, Jess was more often quiet when Kari and Rebecca became animated about a given topic, often just listening or participating when she had the opportunity to change the subject or when specifically asked to share her opinion. In coding for *voice* we found that Jess often expressed single-word statements of agreement during longer stretches of dialogue between Rebecca and Kari. Likewise, we found that Jess rarely overtly expressed disagreement with any ideas posed by other students, particularly Rebecca. For example, after expressing her disapproval of Anney's decisions in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Rebecca pointedly asked Jess for her opinion in Excerpt 3:

REBECCA: Jess, do you want to throw your two cents in that you have?

KARI: I did. I just hate the mom. I just hate her.

JESS: That's how I feel.

KARI: I mean I didn't think it was like a bad ending or anything like that but I just—

REBECCA: Hate the mom.

KARI: Hate the mom.

JESS: She brought the whole book down.

MEGAN: And you said, Rebecca, at the beginning you didn't expect to hate her?

KARI: Yeah, I liked her in the beginning too and then—

REBECCA: —She just like changed over time, and I didn't like her anymore.

JESS: I agree.

As Excerpt 3 illustrates, Rebecca's questioning of Jess was sometimes confrontational in tone. To Rebecca, Jess's "class passing" may have been evident, leading her to challenge Jess to take a firm position on issues that could be understood as class-specific. However, Jess's one- or two-word statements of agreement suggest that while she was reluctant to disagree with Rebecca she was also unwilling to take up stances that might compromise her own class identity performances.

Jake was by far the least active participant of the four students in this literature circle group. There are a number of reasons for Jake's relative silence. First, while Rebecca, Jess, and Kari selected *Bastard Out of Carolina* as their first choice book, Jake selected another book. When no one else chose that book, he was placed in the *Bastard Out of Carolina* group (*Bastard Out of Carolina* was his second choice, although he later explained that he misunderstood the premise of the novel). Jake also said that he did not like the book and did not read all of it, explaining, "After I started reading it, I didn't want to read it. It was kind of disgusting, like when it would say about him [Glen] raping her and I don't really like those kinds of books."

Jake's lack of participation cannot, however, be understood as a simple lack of interest in the text. Instead, his position as a middle-class performing male student in a group with three female students who performed a range of working-class identities is critical to making sense of Jake's participation. Comments made by all three girls demonstrate that they did not believe Jake was willing or able to appropriately participate in their discussion of the text. In some cases, these comments were linked to gender, as Excerpt 4 illustrates:

KARI: (Addressing Jake) Do you think it's weird [to read this book] 'cause you're a guy? I mean, do you think it's as interesting as we do?

JAKE: I don't know. Sort of.

REBECCA: Are you actually reading the book?

JAKE: Yeah, I'm reading it.

KARI: 'Cause I know that when I'm reading a book I get like really into it and can't put it down.

It is notable that in Excerpt 4 Kari positioned the girls as a collective, pointing out that she imagined that they, as a group, had a qualitatively different experience with the book than Jake based on gender. Other times the girls questioned whether Jake was capable of developing an independent interpretation of the text, as Excerpt 5 demonstrates:

JESS: Do you think that Glen's brother would have let him keep his job if he knew he didn't have any money?

REBECCA: Yeah.

JAKE: Yeah.

REBECCA: It's family.

JAKE: It's family.

REBECCA: Will you quit repeating everything I say? Think for yourself!

JESS: Why doesn't Glen's look toward Bone change after like he feels better?

REBECCA: I don't think things are going to change because she ain't never going to say anything about it.

KARI: Yeah. What do you think Jake?

JAKE: I don't know.

JESS: Oh, you're not going to repeat anything?

REBECCA: Yeah. After I yelled at him for it.

Although the genre conventions established in this group included a great deal of one-word agreement statements on the part of the three girls, Excerpt 5 indicates that the girls did not find it appropriate for Jake to agree with their interpretations, nor did they believe that he could construct interpretations of his own. Although Jake's lack of participation may be linked to a number of factors, it seems nonetheless reasonable that he chose silence throughout much of the literature circle unit at least in part because he was continually questioned by his peers about the appropriateness of his participation and positioned as a male, middle-class, nonreader who had little to contribute to the discussion.

The analysis of Rebecca, Kari, Jess, and Jake's participation patterns in this section demonstrates how their social class identity performances influenced not only their positioning of their own stances relative to their peers and to a text about a working-class family but also their positioning of one another in the group. Rebecca's performance as a working-class girl who rejected much of dominant school culture led her to position herself as the authority on this working-class text and as the leader among the other less strongly working-class performing girls. Kari's performance as a working-class girl who "gets along with everyone" guided her toward deferring to Rebecca's authoritative stances, yet simultaneously seeking agreement with Jess and building bridges within the group. Jess's middle-class performing/working-class identity seemed to have left her in a double bind—compelling her to somewhat reluctantly agree with Rebecca, yet to also subvert any strong associations with Rebecca's perspective given that such an association would be counter to her middle-class identity performance. Finally, Jake's relative lack of participation can be linked to his identity positioning as middle-class

and male—two characteristics that the three girls in this group drew upon to position Jake as a nonreader with little ability to adequately participate in discussion of a text about a young working-class girl.

Primary Textual Interpretations

Our analysis in this section suggests that the students' primary textual interpretations are clearly linked to their social class identity performances as we have outlined them both in their lived worlds at large and in their improvisations of those identities in the immediate social context of the literature circle.

In the previous sections we provided data suggesting that Rebecca was a student who performed a working-class identity and—based in part on that identity performance—positioned herself as textual authority on *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Rebecca's interpretation of the novel, therefore, was pivotal in determining the overall direction of discussion and in influencing the interpretations that her peers constructed and shared in the literature circle.

Rebecca's primary interpretation of *Bastard Out of Carolina* was one that suggested that the Boatwrights were normal people who did not deserve derogatory social class labels such as white trash. Excerpt 6 serves as a representative example of this interpretation:

MEGAN: You said on the back cover it said something about white trash and that's one reason why you were interested in it?

REBECCA: I don't know. I think it's funny though cause people always criticize—like call people white trash and everything like that.

KARI: Yeah.

REBECCA: And it's kind of fun to read about to see what they actually mean by white trash. Because really they don't seem like that.

MEGAN: What do you think they seem like if you're not thinking of white trash?

REBECCA: I mean—

MEGAN: Like what do you think white trash means?

REBECCA: I think it's more of—I don't think they're white trash. I think white trash is more like people who are dirty.

KARI: Yeah.

REBECCA: Who can't take care of themselves hygienically or something like that. But I mean—I think they are just normal people,

just minimal wage-makers basically. They can get food, just not the greatest food. They have a house to live in. They have clothes on their back.

KARI: Yeah. I just think they do what they can.

REBECCA: I mean they do what they can. I don't think they're white trash.

KARI: Yeah.

Rebecca's interpretation of what *white trash* means and why the Boatwrights do not fit this designation is consistent with her identity performances relative to those of Jess, Kari, and Jake. As the only student in the group from Venice and the student from a social class background most closely resembling that of the Boatwrights, Rebecca's interpretation of the Boatwrights as "normal" likely served as a form of self-preservation. In other words, by reserving the term *white trash* for people who are destitute and who have no clothes, food, shelter, or means of maintaining hygiene—people with whom Rebecca and her peers likely had little experience in Mapleton or Venice—Rebecca distanced herself from the label of *white trash* and normalized the experiences of poverty and oppression depicted in the novel.

Because Rebecca positioned herself as the ad hoc leader of this group and the authority on the text, her interpretations set the tone for discourses that would be invoked and threads of discussion that would be taken up by the rest of the group. In fact, Rebecca's suggestion that the Boatwrights were not white trash and were in fact just normal largely curtailed any further overtly class-related discussions of the Boatwrights. However, our coding suggests that Rebecca's peers did not always agree with her interpretations. In particular Jess did not seem to agree with Rebecca's interpretation of the Boatwrights as normal. Although she avoided social class specific terminology and direct disagreement with Rebecca, Jess frequently used the words *funny* and *weird* to highlight her primary interpretation of the text—that certain dispositions and behaviors on the part of the Boatwrights were not normal. For instance, Jess said it was weird that Anney and Glen had sex in a room close to where Bone and her sister were playing. Jess was not alone in this interpretation; while Kari did not instigate such interpretations herself, she often joined Jess in exploring such interpretations. For instance, Jess and Kari pointed to an episode in which Bone was kissed by her cousin as evidence of weird behavior on the part of the Boatwrights. In Excerpt 7, DeAnn asked Jess and Kari to explain why this seemed weird to them.

DEANN: Why is it weird?

JESS: Because it's family.

KARI: People aren't supposed to like to kiss their family.

JESS: It's okay to kiss them goodbye, like hello and stuff.

KARI: Yeah.

JESS: But not like—

KARI: We're talking a peck on the cheek, but we're not talking slipping tongue and stuff. That's just weird.

JESS: I don't like walk up to my cousin and be like hey, I really like you.

KARI: She's like 12, too.

DEANN: How does she portray Butch? Like is she [Bone] bothered by it? What are her feelings?

KARI: She's just shocked by it, because she like pulled away. And then she was drunk so like she was more worried about being drunk than anything. She just like, it doesn't say anything about it. It just says like she pulls away and tries to like walk straight inside the house.

REBECCA: And that's why—and then she blames herself in this section for everything that happened.

DEANN: Because she got drunk.

REBECCA: She was drunk.

JESS: If it really bothered her that much she would be like freaked out and never go near him again.

KARI: Yeah, I don't think it bothered her that much.

Although Jess and Kari did not use class specific terminology in this excerpt, they were arguably drawing on a stereotyped image or “map of meaning” (Enciso, 1997) in which people from lower classes are imagined to be inappropriately sexual with their relatives (Friedel, 2005; Wray & Newitz, 1997). Jess's somewhat subtle evoking of this social class stereotype makes sense on several levels. First, since Jess seemed to believe that judging people based on dispositions and behavior was separate from judging people based on social class, it may have seemed to Jess that her judgments of the Boatwrights were free of social class meanings. In other words, Jess may have

agreed that the Boatwrights were normal in terms of social class as defined by their economic status and occupations, while simultaneously believing that they were weird or funny with regard to their dispositions and demeanors. Second, judging the Boatwrights as weird and funny was vital to Jess's identity performance within the literature circle. To sediment her identity in alignment with middle-class norms and dispositions, she needed to position herself in opposition to the Boatwrights. However, knowing Rebecca's overtly working-class identity performance and authoritative stance on the text, Jess was hardly in a position to explicitly disagree with Rebecca's interpretation of the Boatwrights as normal.

On the surface, Jess's silence during many stretches of discussion might have given the appearance of her tacit acceptance of Rebecca's proposition that the Boatwrights were not white trash and were, in fact, just normal. However, as Excerpt 7 illustrates, Jess's most frequent assertive interpretive move in discussion was to evaluate aspects of the Boatwrights' behavior that were funny or weird—markedly abnormal. This interpretation helped Jess to subtly yet clearly perform an identity in opposition to Rebecca.

In our coding of Kari's responses, we found that she constructed two primary interpretations that initially seemed at odds with one another, but ultimately proved logical when viewed as improvisations of her social class identity. Kari's first interpretative move in discussing *Bastard Out of Carolina* was to frame Glen's middle-class family (the Waddells) as the source of Glen and Anney's problems, drawing on an assumption (based loosely on evidence from the text) that he was abused as a child and therefore became an abusive adult. She accomplished this interpretation by positioning the Waddells through stereotypes of the wealthy as cold, uncaring, perfectionists. She described them as "one of those like—they have more money than obviously Bone's mom does and I think they act like everything's perfect, but really it's not at all. Like they try to act like they're so uppity." Further, she linked these dispositions to abuse, theorizing that abuse might be "even worse in a high class [family] . . . like I think they hide it so much more." Kari's interpretation of the Waddells was consistent with her social class identity performances in her community and her related belief that class differences only exist between the very wealthy and everyone else. As Excerpt 8 demonstrates, this interpretation served to reinforce Rebecca's interpretation of the Boatwrights as normal and "better" than the Waddells:

REBECCA: Mama's family is better.

KARI: Yeah. I think that they get along more and I think that Glen's family, if they had a problem, I think they'd hide it. They want to seem like they're perfect.

REBECCA: And they expect too much out of each other.

KARI: Yeah.

REBECCA: They make better decisions and don't criticize people like Glen's family does.

AMANDA: Can you think of an example of when they made a better decision?

REBECCA: Um, like if it was Glen's kid stealing something I think he'd like . . .

KARI: I think he would have been totally embarrassed.

REBECCA: Yeah.

KARI: I think Mama was just like, it happens. She's more understanding about it.

Kari's use of stereotypes of wealthy people was quickly taken up by Rebecca to validate her proposition that the Boatwrights are a better family than the Waddells, demonstrating how Kari's and Rebecca's interpretations complemented each other and shored up a construction of the Boatwrights as normal rather than marked by any social class stigmas.

At the same time that Kari agreed with Rebecca that the Boatwrights were normal people who did not deserve the label of *white trash*, her second primary interpretation was to simultaneously agree with Jess that they were sometimes weird or funny. Unlike Jess, however, Kari used the term *hick* to describe the Boatwrights. For instance, Kari said, "It's like a hick family pretty much. Like her cousin kisses her and stuff . . . and then how they all hang out on the porch and they just like—the image you get from reading like the way she writes it, I just think of a Southern all like running wild like crazy family." Such word choice may seem paradoxical given that *hick* is a derogatory term that is often associated with social class and closely linked with *white trash* in particular. However, when asked to define the term *hick*, Kari said, "I guess like someone who lives in the country." Kari's definition of this term suggests that she understood the term as a regional one rather than one associated with social class. Although there are certainly regional aspects to social class (Linkon, 1999; McDermott, 2006), Kari did not make these links in her use and definition of this term. Rather, she used the term *hick* to point out what she perceived to be logical differences between rural and urban culture as they function separately from social class differences. Kari's use of *hick* as a regional label might be linked to her identity performance as an urban, working-class girl. While *white trash* was commonly used as a derogatory label in Mapleton and Venice—and one that Kari may even

have been labeled with—*hick* was rarely used to describe people within these towns. Therefore, Kari was likely limited in her understanding of regional aspects of social class and of *hick* as a derogatory social class label.

By seeing some of the Boatwrights' stereotypically white-trash behaviors as hick behaviors, Kari was able to partition off these behaviors as regional quirks, disassociating them from social class specific stereotypes. Moreover, the use of *hick* aided Kari in linking Rebecca's view of the Boatwrights as normal and not white trash with Jess's view of the Boatwrights as weird and funny. This interpretive move typified Kari's social class identity performances in both the literature circle and in her lived world as someone improvising a space between working- and middle-class identity positions.

Jake's interpretation of the novel is difficult to gauge because he was often silent (and silenced). He did, however, discuss his thoughts on the book in an interview, notably explaining that he thought that the story (which took place in the 1950s) must have taken place during the Great Depression because "They [the Boatwrights] didn't have anything. There was like nothing. They couldn't get anything. They didn't have anyone. And like, they were struggling . . . you wouldn't want to be in that situation. Just like work hard. You wouldn't want to be like that family." From these comments, it seems that Jake neither identified with the Boatwrights nor saw them as normal. In fact, Jake's comments suggest that his primary understanding of the kind of poverty depicted in the novel was informed by the historical lens of the Great Depression rather than any lived experiences or understandings of current socioeconomic situations. Jake's interpretation of the Boatwrights as so abnormal that they must be historically disassociated with the people in his own lived world, who he did not see as differentiated in terms of social class, lends credence to the likelihood that Jake did not share the interpretations offered in this group, but he was unable or unwilling to share other interpretations given how they might reflect his own identity performance as a middle-class, male student—a performance that was clearly positioned as less than valuable by the other members of the group.

Discussion

The case study detailed in this article illustrates both the salience and the complexity of social class as it influences students' identity performances in their engagement in literature learning in an English classroom.

The complexity of social class in students' lives and learning is demonstrated by the specificity of class performances with which each student's response was driven. Rebecca, Kari, Jess, and Jake did not act simply as

individuals in their discussions of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, nor did their identity performances neatly map onto larger conceptions of “working-class” or “middle-class” responses. Instead, their responses reflected specific social class identity performances grounded in the history of each student’s lived experiences in a socioeconomically divided community. Gauging the students’ social class identities by parents’ occupation and level of educational achievement would not have adequately captured the complexity of their social class identities or the impact of those identity performances on their participation and interpretations in a literature circle. For instance, as we noted earlier, Rebecca, Jess, and Kari could all be considered working-class based on conventional criteria. However, they performed nuanced social class identities within their school and community that led them to respond both to the social context of the literature circle and to the novel itself in distinct ways. This study, therefore, illustrates the importance of understanding social class identity as a complex phenomenon grounded in local experiences in families and communities and improvised upon within social contexts like those found in schools. Moreover, this study points to the need for English teachers and educators to develop strategies for acknowledging and building upon the specific, lived-world understandings of social class that drive students’ identity performances in the classroom.

The salience of social class in students’ literacy learning is demonstrated by the manifestation of students’ social class identities not only in the content of their interpretations but also in the form of their participation in the literature circle discussion. For instance, Kari’s interpretation of the Boatwrights as simultaneously “normal,” “weird,” and “hick” was situated in her nuanced class performance as a working-class, stable-living, urban student who—based on her lived experiences—did not believe that social class existed except between the wealthy and everyone else. Further, Kari’s performance of a social class identity aligned in some ways with both Jess and Rebecca informed her positioning of herself as a bridge or peacekeeper between the girls in both her interpretations and participation. In sum, social class identity performances influenced each student’s response to instructional materials (the literary text) as well as each student’s related interactions with his or her peers in an academic context (the literature circle).

The complexity and salience of social class identity performance

Gauging the students’ social class identities by parents’ occupation and level of educational achievement would not have adequately captured the complexity of their social class identities or the impact of those identity performances on their participation and interpretations in a literature circle.

demonstrated in this case study raises important questions about instruction related to social class in the English classroom. When DeAnn began the instructional unit that was the focus of this study, she hoped that *Bastard Out of Carolina*—a novel that grapples with social class hierarchies—would be relevant for her students and would evoke critical discussions of social class identity. While this study certainly provided a lens into her students' social class identity performances, it also demonstrated for DeAnn that asking her students to read and discuss a text about class hierarchies did not automatically engage them in critical discussions of those hierarchies. Instead, students in this group leveraged the text toward sedimentation of their social class identity performances relative to one another. A poignant example from the study was Rebecca's interpretation of the Boatwrights as "normal" people who were unaffected by social class hierarchies. It was important for Rebecca to position the Boatwrights as normal given her own social class identity performances that in some ways mirrored those of the Boatwrights. However, as literary critics have persuasively argued (Bouson, 2001; Friedel, 2005; Reynolds, 1993; Smith, 2004), *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a novel that makes pointed, overt efforts to critique social class hierarchies and to demonstrate that class *does* matter. Although the Boatwrights are depicted by Allison as a loving, loyal family with many positive attributes, the text also invites readers to see some of the ways that systemic oppression has created circumstances through which the Boatwrights do not and cannot fit within "normal" American family mythology. Therefore, the interpretation of the novel that Rebecca constructed in this literature circle represents a telling—albeit logical—denial of the novel's social and political themes.

Rebecca and her peers are not to be blamed for somehow failing to take up a critical or political stance toward this novel. Instead, this study suggests that English teachers and English educators need better instructional strategies for supporting students' exploration of their own social class identity performances as well as those in texts.

Implications

Implications for Classroom Instruction

Findings from this study demonstrate that social class as a social construct that drives identity performance needs to be acknowledged and explored in the English classroom, much as teachers have aimed to explore race and gender identity in their classrooms. One way that DeAnn explored social class (as well as race, gender, and other social constructs) with students in her classroom the year following this study was to engage students in focused

inquiry into social and cultural identities in their lived worlds. In this project she taught students Beach and Myers's (2001) strategies for inquiry into social worlds (immersion, identification, contextualization, representation, critique, and transformation) and asked students to use these strategies to consider how social and cultural hierarchies related to social class and other constructs are performed, maintained, and transformed in various social worlds in their community. She guided students in a step-by-step inquiry in which they used one of these strategies each week to inquire into their chosen social world (for instance, a family restaurant, a sports team, a church community, etc.). Students used digital blogs to write about these inquiries. DeAnn chose this format so that students could respond to their classmates, creating an authentic dialogue in which they could pose questions, ask for clarification, and provide alternative perspectives on each other's experiences and ideas. The dialogue students constructed through this project led them to better understand the fluidity of identity performance and to see some of the ways that identities become sedimented and laminated as they are repeatedly performed in particular social contexts (see Thein, Oldakowski, & Sloan, 2010 for examples of students' work on these blogs). In undertaking similar projects, teachers might look for ways to connect students to students in other communities, states, or countries through their blogs, so that they can experience even greater diversity in perspectives.

As students explored identity performances in social worlds within their communities, DeAnn noticed that they frequently mentioned stereotypes and labels that sometimes drive identity performance and positioning. Therefore, we suggest that a social worlds inquiry project may be a useful way for teachers to learn about, examine, and deconstruct stereotypes and labels that are commonly used by students in their communities. One way students could be guided in such work would be through creating a classroom word wall in which students construct their own definitions of these terms and post related examples found both in their communities and in popular media. Students could revisit, revise, and build upon these word walls as they read texts such as *Bastard Out of Carolina* that may challenge their initial definitions. An activity like the word wall would provide a space for students to interrogate ways that social class, race, and gender identities are constructed, sedimented, and even transformed through language, signs, and symbols in various literary and popular texts.

Finally, this study suggests that literary texts such as *Bastard Out of Carolina*—that overtly evoke issues related to social class conflicts and hierarchies—might be usefully thought of as multicultural or political, therefore requiring a critical literary treatment. Moreover, we argue that if students

are expected to participate in critical discussions of a text such as *Bastard Out of Carolina*, teachers need to provide them with appropriate tools for engaging in such discussions. Following the completion of this study, we carefully examined the literature circle roles that students used in the study, which were based on Daniels's (2002) work—roles like “discussion leader” and “literary luminary.” We realized that these roles are grounded in experiential theories of reader response (Probst, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1995), which do not ask students to take a critical stance on literary texts. Together, we constructed a new set of roles including problem-poser, perspective-taker, difference-locator, and stereotype-tracker that we think will bolster students' ability to acknowledge and examine how constructs like social class drive identity performances in text worlds (see Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011, for more detail on these roles). In the year following this study, DeAnn noticed that students sometimes took a more critical stance toward making sense of characters' identities in their literature circle texts using some of these roles and using Appleman's (2009) critical lenses (feminist, Marxist, deconstructionist, etc.), which draw on literary theory to help students experiment with various critical perspectives on texts.

Implications for English Educators

If teachers are to better attend to social class in their English classrooms, then English educators must better attend to social class in preservice and inservice courses. As English educators, we three authors all realized that although we often talked about “diversity” in our courses and used texts that touched on social class as part of that consideration of diversity, we rarely spent any focused time grappling with social class in our courses. Since the culmination of this study, each of us has made efforts to more fully explore social class in our English education courses by including literary texts that take up social class identity as a primary thematic issue. For instance, Amanda and DeAnn taught Alexie's (2007) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in a course on multicultural literature instruction, highlighting for students the ways that this text might productively be taught with a focus on both race and social class as they inform identity performance. Likewise, we have taught canonical literary texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937) with an increased focus on social class.

In engaging in this work, we have found that preservice and inservice teachers have had little opportunity to discuss social class in America and are eager to learn more. Therefore, we argue that preservice and inservice

English teachers would benefit from exposure to scholarship that more explicitly grapples with social class as it affects students' experiences with schooling (Finn, 2009; Linkon, 1999; Rose, 2005; Van Galen & Noblit, 2007), literacy (Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002; Jones, 2006), and identity (Bettie, 2003; hooks, 2000). For instance, Patrick Finn's (2009) book provides teachers with a comprehensive overview and analysis of research on the inequalities that working-class students experience in schools. Stephanie Jones's (2006) book draws on a detailed ethnographic study of one economically disadvantaged community to investigate how young girls' literacy practices are linked to their social class experiences. Finally, bell hooks's (2000) book examines the relationship between social class and race, providing a compelling rationale for a more thorough consideration of social class in understanding inequalities and identity.

We have also found that reading literary texts related to social class and talking about social class in America has led our preservice and inservice teachers to an interest in and questions about social class in their own school communities. Therefore, we argue that English educators might consider incorporating projects into their coursework that ask teachers to explore ways that social class and other identities are performed by people in the communities surrounding their schools. A productive way to engage in this work would be to require students to learn basic tools for ethnographic study such as writing field notes, collecting artifacts, conducting interviews, and analyzing and writing up data (see Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007, for a useful handbook), with the goal of constructing mini-ethnographic studies of identity performances of people in the communities surrounding their schools. When teachers share their studies with their peers, they can begin to see both differences and similarities in ways that social class, race, gender, and other identities are performed, sedimented, and transformed across various communities. Teachers can then use insights from these studies to help them select texts and instructional approaches that will both acknowledge and challenge students' status quo identity performances.

We have also found that reading literary texts related to social class and talking about social class in America has led our preservice and inservice teachers to an interest in and questions about social class in their own school communities.

Implications for Research

This study suggests that social class identity performance is closely linked to local experiences in community and family worlds. We would suggest,

therefore, that further research on literacy learning and social class should not be limited to single site classroom studies that rely on broad categorical knowledge of students' class backgrounds (based, for instance, on parents' occupations). Instead, further research on class and literacy might include both macro-level study of beliefs, practices, norms, or "cultural models" (Gee, 1996) operating in students' lived worlds, as well as micro-level study of ways that students' social class identity performances in immediate instructional contexts are driven by and sedimented through those larger models.

While this study focused primarily on social class rather than race or gender, we want to emphasize that both race and gender clearly intersect with social class—these intersections merit further study. Although we did not focus on race in this study, we do want to point out that another direction for study with a data set like ours (with students who all identify as white) might be one that overtly considers how students' white racial identities intersect with their social class identities. Other related studies might examine racially diverse students' social class performances. Likewise, gender identity most certainly entered into the focal group's discussions, particularly where Jake was concerned. Again, although a detailed analysis of gender in this group was not within the scope of this paper, we acknowledge that a continued exploration of the nuances of social class should examine gender. Overall, studies of social class identity performance need to consider how a variety of social constructs such as race, religion, and gender intersect with social class in local contexts to mediate students' experiences with classroom instruction, curricular materials, and educational settings.

Finally, we note that our study focused specifically on social class identity performances as they affect learning in the English classroom. By privileging identity performance we implicitly focused on social class as a phenomenon experienced affectively (Lindquist, 2004), and as "expressive of a group identity" (Welch, 2011, p. 224). Welch (2011) importantly suggests that social class needs also to be understood and studied rhetorically by considering how particular social classes take up particular persuasive forms. We see Welch's argument as representing one of many other directions in which research on social class and English studies might productively move.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. All names and places are identified with pseudonyms.
2. The current study uses social class labels to depict the students in the study but employs those labels as tentative, fluid, and specific to the students' performed social class positions within the school and community at the time of the study. See Appendix B for details on the categories that are used in this article, which are adapted from Bettie (2005).

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Thein, Guise, and Sloan › **Analysis of a Literature Circle Discussion**

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Appendix A: Analysis of Teacher/Researcher Talk in Literature Circle

Amount of Teacher/Researcher Talk in Literature Circles

	Number of utterances	Percent relative to total number of utterances (1667)	Percent relative to total number of teacher utterances (226)
Total number of utterances among all literature circle participants	1674	NA	NA
Total number of teacher/researcher utterances	226	15.5%	NA
Total number of teacher/researcher utterances related to social class¹	22	1.3%	9.7%

Summary of All Teacher/Researcher Utterances in Each Talk Category

	Number of utterances in each category	Percent relative to total number of teacher/researcher utterances (226)
Asking for elaboration or clarification	104	46.0%
Supporting/encouraging	57	16.4%
Redirecting	51	13.7%
Directing	26	11.5%
Challenging	10	4.4%
Informing	7	5.1%
Synthesizing	5	1.5%
Miscellaneous	8	3.5%

Summary of Evidence of Uptake in All Teacher/Researcher Utterances

	Number of utterances in each category	Percent relative to total number of teacher/researcher utterances (226)
Uptake	184	81.4%
No uptake	51	15.7%
Miscellaneous ²	11	4.9%

Notes: (1) An utterance was considered to be social class related when it was related to tastes, dispositions, attitudes, consumption practices, income, occupation, educational attainment, or access to power structures; (2) Utterances that were coded as “miscellaneous” under “type of talk” were not coded for uptake, but were included in these calculations to derive an accurate percentage of total teacher/researcher talk that included uptake.

Appendix B: Bettie’s (2003) Social Class Definitions

Hard-living: Families “supported by low-paying, less-stable occupations that lack health care benefits and make homeownership impossible—self-employed, non-union labor, service work—and have lifestyles that are chaotic and unpredictable. Instability in one area of life often contributes to instability in another: a rough marriage might lead to drinking or drug use, which in turn leads to missing work or job loss. Or losing a job might lead to drinking or drug use, an eviction and marital crisis” (p. 15).

Settled-living: Families “supported by jobs that have relative security, higher pay, and, at times, health benefits. Settled-living lifestyles are orderly and predictable and sometimes include the ownership of a modest home” (p. 13).

Middle vs. working-class performing: Bettie roughly defines middle-class as students with parents who are college educated professionals. However, she makes the important observation that students (and their families) sometimes perform identities that lead them to an “upward” or “downward” trajectory. For instance a working-class student may perform a middle-class identity (an upward trajectory) by socializing primarily with middle-class students who intend to attend college, taking on middle-class dispositions for dress, make-up, and extra-curricular activities. Conversely, a middle-class student may perform a working-class identity by socializing with working-class students, and taking dispositions associated with working-class in a given community.

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