Dangerous Play: Race and Bakhtin in a Graduate Classroom

Timothy Lensmire, Nathan Snaza, Rebecca Nathan,
Susan Leigh Brooks, and Chiara Bacigalupa

The Players (in order of appearance)

Tim, an old but laughing professor of education

Nathan, a graduate student who really is from South Dakota

Rebecca, whose graduate studies don't always go swimmingly

Susan, a graduate student who is *not* a bureaucrat in real life

Chiara, who actually believes in risk-taking in the classroom, even as a graduate student

As the curtain rises, the players are seated on stools arranged in a semicircle. Tim is immediately recognizable as the old professor because he has long grey hair and, in general, looks old. Rebecca, seated in the middle of the semicircle, is immediately recognizable as the only person of color in the group, which, as we shall see, is a normal part of her experience in graduate school—you know, "normal" as how things are in our schools and society, given historical and ongoing oppressive systems and practices.

Tim: The work of progressive and radical educators is often grounded in a storyline that goes like this—

Nathan: Traditional schooling is bad because it silences student voices and controls student bodies.

Rebecca: Something better would liberate voices and bodies—

Susan: Let them sound, move around.

Chiara: So . . . Once upon a time—

Tim: There were three small groups of Ph.D. students at work creating skits in my graduate seminar on race and Bakhtin. The first group chose to work with an example brought in by Mary. Mary had heard her small son appropriate and use words and phrases from Harry Potter books, as he tried to impress a more popular

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-B.2016.0933.2.10

classmate who was playing video games with him in Mary's home. Mary's small group created a performance styled after sports programs featuring video-playback and analysis. They re-created the conversation of Mary's son and his classmate, and analyzed what was going on. The rest of us in the classroom smiled, nodded, maybe remembering what it was like to be a little kid, looking out of the side of our eyes to see if our words were helping us make friends.

The second small group made everything bigger—the conflict embedded in the example, the volume of the presentation. The smiles of the audience grew into loud laughter. The second group performed and theorized classroom discourse between a floundering beginning high school teacher and a tough, too-smart, resistant high school student.

Do you know Conan O'Brien's "In the Year 2000" bit? With the darkened stage, the band singing like Monty-Python-making-believe-they-are-Eleanor-Roosevelt, and O'Brien and Mr. T.'s faces illuminated with flashlights as they make ridiculous predictions of future events? In the second small group's performance, the two group members playing at teacher and student were interrupted repeatedly by two other group members who were standing over in the corner. These two offered interpretations of what had just happened in the teacher-student talk—but they offered these interpretations by first flashing the light of an overhead projector that they were holding onto their faces, like O'Brien and Mr. T. with their flashlights, and then singing their interpretations, like Eleanor Roosevelt. The class was rolling.

The third small group . . . the third small group (Tim gestures to the others on the stage)—they worked with a word. Two words, actually. Or one word, that became two: Nigger. Niggah.

Nathan: Freud understood that "the essence of a group lies in the libidinal ties existing in it" (1922/1959, p. 35). That is, unless each person's own desires enter the work of the group, we won't have much of a "group" to speak of. My attempt here will be to sketch out my own needful attachments to this small group during the construction stage of the skit. First I will briefly lay out a framework for making sense of my experience.

The basic unit of speech for Bakhtin is the utterance, a "concrete unit . . . preceded by the utterances of others, and . . . followed by the responsive utterances of others" (1986, p. 71). It is the built-in necessity of a response that characterizes the utterance. The referent of the utterance is less important than the active reception by the listener: "It is not the object that serves as the arena for the encounter, but rather the subjective belief system of the listener" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 282). This is to say that each listener's response is conditioned and colored by desire. Our being-in-language is determined by our concrete lived experience, and the desires that pulse through our daily lives condition our relations to language and communication no less than they help construct our identities.

Bakhtin understands identity as an ongoing internal dialogue between all the

discourses we have heard and incorporated into our own worldviews during the process of verbal-ideological becoming. The questions of power and desire are intimately linked with these linguistic/developmental questions, for as Bakhtin says, "there can be no such thing as an absolutely neutral utterance" (1986, p. 84). Put differently, "world views, trends, viewpoints, and opinions always have verbal expression" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94) which we then integrate into our dialogic identities.

Tim: The graduate seminar I was offering, in my Department of Curriculum and Instruction, was entitled, "Race, Bakhtin, and Literacy." The politics of language, representation, and humor, especially as these figure in Black-white relations in the United States, were central concerns. I hoped to put scholarship on race into dialogue with the writings of Russian literary theorist and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin.

By the third night of the seminar, students had read Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel," his essay on speech genres, and had begun reading his work on Rabelais and carnival (Bakhtin, 1984). We hadn't yet read anything specifically about race.

Across my years as a professor, I've learned that a class usually needs a few sessions to get used to the intense reading and the rhythm of small group and large group work that characterize my courses. And then, as that gets familiar, I need to shake things up again, in order to continue the development of a different sort of classroom community. I learned this mostly in experimenting with an undergraduate philosophy of education class that I taught for many years at Washington University in St. Louis. There, I usually shook things up in the third or fourth week with a debate in which teams would argue for and against Plato and Rousseau. In my seminar on race and Bakhtin, the readings on Bakhtin didn't lend themselves to a debate—so I came up with what I called the "Show Off Your Bakhtin Contest" in which (and I'm quoting from the written directions I gave to students):

> In which you dazzle your friends and best your enemies by making believe that you understand Bakhtin and can apply his ideas to that which you apply them. To be pursued in four groups. In three stages. No prizes for winning, except that satisfaction that comes when there are no other rewards and you are desperate to feel that it was worth it anyway. (See Appendix)

Students had written short papers in preparation for the class—in these papers, they had used Bakhtin's ideas to interpret an example of language in use that they had experienced or found. Mary had written about her son playing video games with a classmate; another student, Tom, had written about the beginning teacher and the resistant student. Rebecca had written about her response to hearing her son say, "Niggah please." These examples were the jumping-off points for the three small groups, who had 25 minutes to prepare a five-minute presentation

and performance. A fourth small group served as judges and questioners—they prepared questions about language and Bakhtin that they would ask of the other three groups, after their performances.

In trying to make sense of what was at stake in the "Show Off Your Bakhtin Contest," Chiara, Susan, Rebecca, Nathan, and I met a number of times as a group, we wrote dozens of emails, and we generated various accounts of different aspects of that evening's work. We also asked three other students in the class (Mark, Mary, and Cassie)—one from each of the other three small groups—to write an account for us, from their perspectives, of what happened that night.

You need to know (Tim again gestures to the other players) that this group's presentation and performance, their skit, was brilliant. It had three parts. In each, an applicant approached a bureaucrat, played by Susan. This bureaucrat had the power to decide whether or not any particular applicant could use a particular word or utterance. That is, Susan worked in the Utterance Permission Office, and if people wanted to use a particular word or phrase, they had to petition her to use it.

The skit began with Nathan approaching Susan and saying he needed to be able to use the word "nigger" because, as a high school teacher, he wanted to teach Twain's *Huck Finn*. After asking him a series of questions that referenced Bakhtin's ideas on utterance and appropriation, Susan denied Nathan's request. Then, Chiara came in—she was angry that there even was such an office, and argued that words came from dictionaries, were neutral, and that therefore anyone could use them whenever they wanted. Susan, as harried bureaucrat, drew on Bakhtin's arguments in the speech genre essay to talk back to Chiara, who eventually stormed out. Finally, Rebecca entered and requested permission to use the word "niggah." She answered Susan's questions and was granted her request.

Nathan: In our small group, as we planned the skit we would present, I had an internal dialogue with all the utterances that came before this evening and that formed the background for my external dialogue with my fellow group members. It is worth dwelling for a moment on this interplay between my internal dialogue and the external, seemingly "academic," dialogue.

As we talked together, later, about the process leading up to the performance of the skit, where the word "nigger" became a magnet, attracting all our fears and hopes about language as well as all our fears and hopes about racial politics, it became clear that I had been pushing the group toward engaging this word. Once I heard Rebecca's scenario I jumped on the idea. The reasons I did this have to be reconstructed in order to make sense of what the skit meant to me as I attempted to steer the group toward this topic.

First, Rebecca's story was simply the best one in our small group. Second, her story was the only one that directly addressed the problems signaled in the title of the course and it seemed like building a skit around it would try to take the

pedagogical context of our skit seriously.

Additionally, Rebecca's story resonated with a range of experiences where my own understandings of race and language came into focus for me, often in uncomfortable and problematic ways. These included, on the one hand, a whole series of engagements with people, texts, and ideas that left me desiring to engage and learn from Black cultural forms. On the other, I recalled reading bell hooks's "Eating the Other" (1992) for the first time, which sent me reeling into a diagnosis of all my past engagement with "Black" texts and left me feeling a need to uncover my motives for and ways of understanding these texts in relation to my own identity. This investigation was intensified a great deal during a class in the department of American Studies on "Soul." We read Ralph Ellison's writings about culture and hybridity along with LeRoi Jones' *Blues People* (1963), creating heated discussions about the ties between discourse and the concrete lived experience of people, about capitalism and culture, and about "authenticity." I found that during the class we were often going to great lengths to position ourselves relative to each other along axes of theoretical knowledge, familiarity with jazz, blues and hip-hop, and access to self-reflexive engagement with texts. In that classroom space, it became crucially important for us to both know about Black cultural forms and to recognize the conflicted and uncertain ways we engaged with texts.

I brought all of this into our small group: a strong desire to argue about "authenticity," to position myself as willing to talk about the most difficult issues of language, culture and power, as someone who knew about discussions of "nigger"/ "nigga" from Black sources (hip-hop music, call-in shows on Minneapolis' KMOJ radio station, etc.), and as someone who was willing to examine my own relationship to this word through our class discussions. Stated differently, my own desiring investments in knowledge, culture, power and language drove my participation with the small group. The external conversation about skit construction grew from a need to work through an internal dialogue.

The results of my desiring attachment to this activity were complicated. On the one hand, it may have spurred me to be more driving in my assertions of power—that is, I have to wonder if I wasn't, in some way, bullying the group into something that would suit my own internal desires and conflicts. On another hand, the libidinal investments caused things I wouldn't have predicted (as is common): I thoughtlessly revealed my South Dakota origins (which I usually avoid) and I "played" at being the nerdy, naïve teacher, so uncomfortable in his whiteness that it hurts to watch. The trouble arises when I need to admit that my character is fairly close to what I fear I am in the classroom. The desire to pursue a difficult topic led me to expose a range of fears and uncertainties I would not have otherwise admitted.

The realization that my internal and external dialogues cannot be kept separate, that my desires will always outpace my conscious control of what I'm doing, and that the classroom is, for better or worse, a site where my own identity struggles

constantly play out has been slow in coming. While I have, for obvious reasons I suppose, focused on my own desiring attachments, I have no reason to think that I'm alone in this. If Bakhtin and Freud are correct—and I think they are—we are always using groups in order to pursue our own desires. Moreover, without those desires pulsing through the groups we participate in (in the classroom, home, city, culture, world), the group ties would dissolve and we would end up alone and silent. I therefore draw the following insight from an examination of my needful attachment to this activity: that we cannot possibly avoid the libidinal nature of group work—we couldn't construct identity without it—but we must recognize that this energy has the potential for an enormous range of consequences (from bullying and domination to submission and self-negation).

Rebecca: There were many interesting things that I learned from this classroom experience, but the part of this activity that surprised me and opened up a whole new area of personal learning was role playing. When Nathan, Chiara, Susan, and I planned our skit during our small group time we all agreed and were excited to demonstrate how Bakhtin's ideas worked out through racially charged language. Nathan and Chiara were going to "play" white people who wanted to obtain permission to use the word, but could not. I was to "play" a Black person who was able to obtain permission to use the word. Through this skit I anticipated that we would demonstrate many things that are true in our society—that different people can have a different history with and emotions toward the same word, that history can make the same sounding words two totally different utterances, and so on. It wasn't until long after the skit was over that I considered what truths in society exist about role playing.

See, the process of having to act "Black" in class was very strange and uncomfortable. This surprised me, I think, because often times in class I consciously bring a Black perspective to a mostly white group of scholars. Often this includes exposing information specific to African Americans that is new to others in the class. And I think I thought along those lines as I anticipated doing this performance—I figured I would just simulate the times when I use a variation of the "n" word with my friends or family and show my peers that there are times when this word is used in a different way than they're used to. There was just one problem: the scenery in which it is acceptable to use this word was not there to support me or my actions. Instead I was surrounded by twenty of my white peers who rarely or never use this word and felt uncomfortable with it. The entire acting process felt very, very strange.

I tried to ditch my classroom dialect and switch to a dialect that I might use with close Black friends or family. As I went through the motions of my "role," my subconscious immediately began to wonder what role I was having in enforcing negative stereotypes about Black people. It seemed like I sounded insincere and ignorant in this setting, when normally this same language was comforting and

brilliant in its connecting power and transfer of ideas.

Historically, white society has consistently tried to create and control the role that African Americans would have in America (Watkins, 2001). The Jim Crow system was created to "keep Blacks in their place." We can see the roles traditionally ascribed to Blacks in society play out in the media, even today. There is the maid, the jokester or buffoon, the uneducated, the lazy, etc. (Boskin, 1986; Brown, 1933; Collins, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Ellison, 1953/1995; Kelley, 1997). Overwhelmingly, Black societal roles are negative. All of this suddenly became relevant as I tried to act out "my part" in the skit. White people have always had the freedom to be who they wanted to be—the roles for whites are arrayed over a wide spectrum. What does it mean to play a role in a society that has maintained a stronghold on the role that your people will play? Regardless of your good intentions or creative energy, what does it take to overcome the stench of the roles that have been created for us?

Recently I saw a presentation on Blacks in Hollywood for the last one hundred plus years. Hattie McDaniel, who repeatedly played the Mammy role, said that she'd rather play a maid than be a maid, as she had been before becoming an actress. For African Americans a tension—between the good that might result from a performance, in terms of physical and financial survival, and the potential damage, in terms of culture and society—has and continues to exist. These thoughts along with my reflection on my "performance" add another dimension to Du Bois' (1903/1997) concept of double-consciousness. For African Americans, there seems to be a heightened responsibility factor inherent in playing a role.

Bakhtin says that words or utterances are all connected to the words and utterances that came before them, as well as those that will follow. Clearly, this applies to my performance—as the only African American in the class, my role playing was steeped in knowledge of white people in the past creating and controlling the role of Black folks. But it was also connected to my present and future desires to be creative, interesting, and informative.

Controlling role and role playing is important because the role of one group or individual is always shaped by the role of another. Many children spend more time deliberating on who can be what role, than they do actually engaging in the role that they've either selected or been stuck with. How can a good guy be good, if there is no bad guy for him to overcome? How can white be known to be light without something darker to compare it to? So the attempt to control a role or societal position requires that one define and shape the role of others around them.

Today I see many white liberal people mandate, for Black people, roles different from Jim Crow ones. For example, some of our classmates were uncomfortable and upset that we chose to use this word—even though it was a class about race and language. Furthermore, I've had many conversations in which white people

express anger, confusion, and resentment toward the fact that Black people still use the "n" utterance. In order to feel not guilty about America's racial past and present, some white people have created and defined Black America's societal role as "friend." Using the "n" word violates the boundaries of the Black person in the racially uncharged friend role. I think this accounts for a lot of the resistance from my peers to my role playing.

I have used the phrase "role playing"—in terms of acting out—very similarly to the way that I have used the phrase "role playing"—in terms of the roles we live out or are expected to live out every day. That's because I'm suggesting that these terms are not very separate or different, but rather that they're very similar cousin-like ideas existing close together on one continuum. The roles that we take on in real life are often the roles that we take on even when we "play."

Susan: When our presentation began, the class, having enjoyed two very light-hearted and entertaining presentations, was ready to laugh and "play along." The group, too, anticipated laughter as it entertained the class with exaggerated characters and the ridiculous setting of the Utterance Permission Office. However, the atmosphere of the class and the audience response was transformed instantly when the "n" word was stated. Mark, who had held the overhead projector and sang like Eleanor Roosevelt in an earlier performance, recalled:

> I found myself becoming more and more engaged, laughing as the officer and the South Dakotan bantered back and forth until the officer asked the South Dakotan what word he wanted to apply to use. The moment the word "nigger" was uttered, the entire feel of the room changed. It was like nothing I had ever experienced in the classroom. Suddenly, there was this serious, contemplative feeling in the room. I don't even remember looking at another student in the classroom, but I was positive everyone collectively created this serious feeling. No longer was there playfulness in the air.

This impression was similar to Mary's, whose group had explored her son's appropriations of Harry Potter discourse:

> Everyone was having a great time, and then . . . the utterance. It felt like everything just froze up. The once jovial mood of the class vanished in a split second. I think my jaw dropped. I was actually kind of upset with this group for "ruining" the festive mood of the evening.

Cassie, who was a member of the judging/questioning group, recounted:

> During the last presentation, the atmosphere in the class in-

> stantly changed. It became serious and charged with unstated—questions? Un-comfort? I remember watching this presentation and getting nervous, but I did not know why.

Even though this was a course on race and language, which puts the word "nigger" immediately in the crux, students clearly were not prepared for its use in this setting.

There had been many permissions already given that evening that normally aren't granted in the graduate classroom. Certainly, the permission to play had been granted, and the permission to use humor. Tim stated later that he "wanted to break the frame of the class" with the Bakhtin assignment. Permission had been given not to know everything about Bakhtin and to learn from each other. Permission was granted, even, to be less than polite and to play at being overt about judging others.

However, the use of the "n" word was clearly a transgression. Cassie thought that:

> The word "nigger" was loaded for me with history, guilt, and negative connotations. I do not think the class knew how to initially respond to the skit—it covered unmarked and unclear territory. And as a member of the judging group, how could I judge the skit? I remember feeling not "qualified" to extend my judgment.

Students were expected to make immediate and public responses to this transgression, responses that very well may have defined their roles in the class for the rest of the term. What if, instead, the instructor had given an assignment like "Explore the use of the word 'nigger' in the American Literature class and write a one-page, double-spaced summary of your thoughts on this topic"? Students would have been able to read and think at home—to find out what experts had to say, think about new ideas, and formulate a response. They would have been able not only to spend extended time on a response, but they could think about how much of it they would have felt comfortable sharing and how their responses might have positioned them with the rest of the class. Such an approach would offer some protection from shock and discomfort, or at least allow people to experience shock and discomfort individually, process it, and bring it to class in a nice neat package.

This activity brought the audience to a place where they had to deal with these important ideas whether they wanted to or not. And they didn't have access to much of the previous conversation that had led to our group's decision and performance. The audience members didn't know that our group had discussed other possible words, but couldn't come up with one that illustrated Bakhtin's points about language as effectively, particularly when the class was interested in how

Bakhtin, race, and language intersected. They didn't know that it really wasn't the point of the skit to shock people. Our group felt that it had some very important quotes and big ideas from Bakhtin, and the point of the assignment was, after all, to "show off your Bakhtin."

The audience didn't know that this particular presentation was based on a conversation that had taken place between Rebecca and her seven-year-old son (who, as it turned out, had come to class with Rebecca that night). Mary stated that

> I still kept an eye on Rebecca's son because I guess you have this protective part of you that wants to shield children from all that is ugly and horrible in the world—stuff like this. I also got the impression from Rebecca that she wasn't all that comfortable with it either.

Mark worried about whether Rebecca actually wanted to do this:

> I grew considerably uncomfortable for a few reasons. Here was an African-American woman actively involved in a group that was using the word nigger to demonstrate their point(s) about utterances. Whose idea was this? Was Rebecca in favor of this idea? She was in favor of it enough to allow the group to proceed. Was she even a little uncomfortable with the idea?

The group members, on the other hand, had access to that subtext (even if, as Nathan demonstrated earlier, there are always more subtexts). We also had more processing time—the element of surprise had been removed for us. The members of our group—or at least the white members of the group—may have also been able to distance ourselves from the word because we could respond to the word as characters—the harried bureaucrat or the civil libertarian. Ironically, then, those closest to the presentation—the group members—perhaps had the most opportunity to distance themselves from the word in this particular activity.

However, responses from both group and audience members indicated that, in this case, the lack of distance from the word brought people to realizations that they may not have come to otherwise. Cassie wrote that she was "grateful for the uncomfortableness I felt after the skit both as an observer and questioner. They were growing experiences for me." Chiara, in one of the texts she wrote as part of our group's attempts to make sense of our performance, said that "I was worried that I had somehow managed to behave as a typical, insensitive WHITE person—saying/doing something that was seen by others as completely inappropriate but not knowing what it was." The intense engagement that students reported in this task may have helped them realize more about their unprocessed feelings about race and language than a more "distanced" and "processed" activity would have. Nathan noted that "one of the odd ironies is that while we have all sorts of 'rules' about who

can say this, the only way to find out if you've met them is to say it."

Did our attempt to suspend these rules and bring the word to immediacy in the classroom succeed? If success is defined by new realizations and personal connections, it may have. We also thought that our performance would be light and funny, even if pursuing important things—but perhaps this was expecting too much. The air leaked out of the room when the word hung there. The "n" word stole the show.

Chiara: It did. But it is worth exploring more if our presentation and the larger contest activity succeeded, if they "worked."

If we evaluate that night's activity in terms of traditional classroom goals, then I would have to say that yes, it worked. There is no doubt that people in this class worked with the Bakhtinian texts, applied what they had read, and came away with a pretty good idea of how the ideas in the text might apply to life.

This activity led to a much deeper engagement with the reading than do most other in-class assignments. Tim had started the semester by stressing the importance of reading the assigned readings closely. He noted that his reading assignments were relatively brief because he wanted us to spend our time trying to understand and think about the readings. We could have disregarded these instructions, but Tim added on the assignment to bring to class a written account of an example of language-in-use. Thus, most students came to class ready to discuss and work with Bakhtin's ideas.

It was the contest, however, that really enabled us to pull together Bakhtin's ideas. We had approximately 30 minutes to decide upon and prepare our skit. Working under time pressure as well as the pressure to provide an intelligible skit, we had to extract core ideas from the readings and apply them coherently. The fact that all three groups were able to pull together excellent skits is an illustration of how engaged all of the students were with difficult Bakhtinian concepts.

But I think we were all most impressed that a different kind of learning seemed to be happening that night. When we talked about this activity, one of the themes that we kept returning to was the idea that we all felt we were taking a risk when we decided to do this skit. Everyone in the class took a risk by standing up in front of their peers and exposing their interpretations of Bakhtin to scrutiny. But we took on an additional risk when we decided to use the word "nigger" in our skit. We weren't sure what kind of classroom and social taboos we might be breaking, and we couldn't predict how our audience might react. We were out on a limb.

Although our audience's immediate reaction was the kind of stunned silence that any performer dreads, it is clear that the risk we took was a positive one in the end. Members of our audience later reported to us that even though the skit had initially shaken them, it provoked them to think about this word and race in new ways. And they reported that that new thinking continued for some time after the class was over. Any project that encourages students to think about new ideas in

new ways, and encourages them to continue thinking about those new ideas, must be, by definition, a powerful learning experience.

At a basic level, education is not possible without risk-taking. To learn anything, the learner must risk trying something she hasn't tried before and must risk exposing what she doesn't know. Taking such risks expands the student's sense of the world. Yet, many classrooms are full of students who are loathe to take such risks.

In our group, we took risks when we agreed to perform, when we exposed our specific interpretation of Bakhtin to scrutiny by our peers, and when we decided to make Rebecca's "niggah" example the focus of our skit. Other, less risky, words might have been used, but none would have worked as well. Thus, we chose to take a risk and use this word, even though we felt that it might be controversial to do so. It was the specific classroom atmosphere that had been established by Tim along with the "anything goes" feel of the contest that enabled us to take that risk.

And taking that risk paid off for us. Using that word in our skit took us into unchartered territory, where we and our classmates were forced to confront our ideas and feelings about race.

So . . . Once upon a time—

Rebecca: In a certain time and in a certain place existed a girl who was fashioned much like a mermaid. The bottom portion of her being was scaled and shaped like the tail of a giant fish, while her upper body possessed human-like characteristics—a head, arms, and shoulders.

This girl resided in a giant glass bowl. The bowl's environment was womb-like—filled with warm comforting water that allowed her to move freely and swim with ease. She could flip her tail left or right and move with speed and precision. And although other individuals like herself also existed in the enormous glass bowl, the girl would often swim up to the top of this world and perch herself at the ridge of the bowl. Her arms draped down the side of the bowl, the way a swimmer's arms hang over the side of a floating intertube.

She enjoyed this activity because outside of the bowl existed other beings who were very different from the beings in the world of her water bowl. They had no tail and in their world there was no water. The girl in the bowl found the beings outside the bowl interesting and as she popped her head above the surface and hung her arms over the top edge of the bowl, she would talk with the beings outside of the fish bowl.

And the beings outside of the bowl found the girl very interesting.

The girl became friendly with some of these beings and she learned many of their ways. She learned the conversation patterns, facial expressions, and hand gestures that the beings outside the bowl considered appropriate. The girl had many lively and interesting discussions with these beings. When she felt angry or disheartened or full of the fatigue that naturally comes from being in a constant outsider position, she would retreat back to her warm, water fish bowl world; to her

own world where she didn't concern herself with the facial expressions and hand gestures of the beings that lived outside of the bowl. Instead she swam freely with movements and freedom too natural to capture with expression.

One day as the girl was visiting the beings that lived outside the bowl, something unusual happened. One of the beings suggested that she come out of the bowl. Naturally, the girl resisted—come out—all the way out of the bowl? Certainly, she was not afraid of the world outside the bowl. She had draped her arms and talked freely in that world many times, yet the thought of bringing all herself to that world was foreign to her; almost unimaginable. But the being outside the fish bowl quickly pulled out a long scroll and began reciting several persuasive arguments as to why she could come out of the bowl.

The idea flashed through the girl's mind. Her gut was reluctant, but her head, shoulders and arms envisioned the success and benefits of jumping out of the bowl. And after all she liked the beings more than she didn't.

So, like a child on the count of three she impulsively jumped out of the bowl. For the first time all of her being became exposed to the chilling air. With the beings that lived outside the bowl looking on, she tried to move her tail to the left and then to the right, but without the water she was cold and cumbersome. The shock of the moment pulled her inside of herself and caused each moment to unfold slowly and deliberately. She looked upon the faces of the beings that lived outside the bowl, but could gather up no meaning. She imagined that her fellow beings from inside the bowl were looking upon her with confusion, dismay, or even laughter.

Outside the bowl, the girl shivered. Although she was moving, her movements felt still. She went through the motions of movements she'd done effortlessly millions of times. But without the water the motions weren't the same.

And then the moment was over and the girl splashed back into her bowl. Through the glass bowl she could see that the beings outside the bowl were clapping, cheering, and praising her performance. She wondered if they were just being polite.

Today the girl is still swimming in the bowl, inspecting her tail and scales, trying to make personal sense of her moment outside the bowl.

A short pause followed Rebecca's story, and then the audience clapped politely. The auditorium was not well lit, but Tim saw a hand raised toward the back and gestured for the person to speak.

Questioner: Thank you for your presentation, but I'm troubled by the story at the end. It uses an old trope based on a model of human agency that's mired in Enlightenment individualism. This is not good, not good antiracist practice.

The players exchanged glances. They had received a similar comment from a white male professor at a previous performance and on that occasion, Nathan had

first responded that the comment seemed to ignore everything else said by Rebecca and the rest. When the professor persisted, arguing that the story made it seem as if the outside could not be changed, so that the individual would just always have to choose to move out of the bowl or not, Rebecca had finally stood and spoken. The other players could tell she was angry, but in a controlled voice she reported that even though it was an allegory, the story was very much an attempt to express and make sense of her personal experiences with moving into and speaking in white-dominated spaces. She added that she was used to other people telling her what her experiences were supposed to be and mean.

This time, Nathan and the others remained silent. Eventually, Nathan and Chiara and Susan and Tim all ended up looking at Rebecca. Two times, Rebecca leaned forward as if, on the count of three, she might jump out into the dispute. Then she leaned back in her chair. Finally, she smiled at each of the other players, in turn, and shrugged.

The curtain closes.

References

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas.

Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University.

Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas.

Boskin, J. (1986). *Sambo: The rise and demise of an American jester*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Brown, S. (1933). Negro character as seen by white authors. *The Journal of Negro Education, 2*(2), 179–203.

Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* New York: Routledge.

Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (Eds.) (1997). *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1997). *The souls of black folk*. Boston: Bedford Books. (Original work published 1903)

Ellison, R. (1995). *Shadow and act*. New York: Vintage International. (Original work published 1953)

Freud, S. (1959). *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. (Original work in English published 1922)

hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. Boston: South End.

Jones, L. (1963). *Blues people: Negro music in white America*. New York: William Morrow & Company.

Kelley, R. (1997). *Yo' mama's disfunktional: Fighting the culture wars in urban America.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Watkins, W. (2001). *The white architects of black education: Ideology and power in America, 1865–1954*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Appendix: The First (and probably last) SHOW OFF YOUR BAKHTIN Contest

in which you dazzle your friends and best your enemies by making believe that you understand Bakhtin and can apply his ideas to that which you apply them. To be pursued in four groups. In three stages. No prizes for winning, except that satisfaction that comes when there are no other rewards and you are desperate to feel that it was worth it anyway.

Stage One—Preparations

The three competing groups: You will have 25 minutes (no more) to prepare a five minute presentation/performance. Review the short papers you wrote for class. Choose one or two examples/samples of language-in-use from these papers to work with. Develop a deep, profound, exhaustive, bordering-on-ridiculous reading/interpretation of your example(s), drawing on everything you know from Bakhtin's "Discourse in the novel" and "The problem of speech genres." Your presentation/performance should please us by teaching us about Bakhtin's work and by providing insight into our uses of language, and, by golly, even insight into what it means to be human. Make sure to include, in your presentation/performance, at least one original couplet that rhymes.

The judging-questioners group: You will have 25 minutes (no more) to prepare a list of seven or eight questions (about Bakhtin's work and the use of his ideas) that you will ask of the three competing groups (do you like my frequent use of parentheses so far?). Review and share the short papers you wrote for class. As you read, make snide almost-audible comments to the effect that your own examples and analyses are most certainly superior to anything you are going to see from the competing groups, but, that's the way it goes when you are smarter than everyone else—you'll do your best to help others learn what they can, as little as it is. Develop your list of questions, wording them in a way that is clear to you but that will probably confuse and embarrass the competing groups when they first hear them. In the end, the questions should be sincere questions that you have about Bakhtin, questions you would like to hear someone intelligent respond to (you understand and are resigned to the fact that this is not going to happen when you ask these questions of these groups).

Stage Two—Presentations/Performances

The three competing groups will present/perform, one after the other. The judging-questioners group will take notes and look haughty. The competing groups not in front will also take notes (said notes occasionally illustrated with silly drawings).

Stage Three—The Questioning and Judging

After a brief period in which the judging-questioners group chuckles and decides which specific questions it wants to ask each group, the competing groups will be asked questions, in turn. Competing groups will be given the opportunity to ask questions. After which, the judging-questioners group will again chuckle and share their evaluations of the presentations/performances and question-answering—ultimately declaring their own group the best. A tussle ensues.