

[Home](#) > Consciousness-Raising or Eyebrow-Raising? Reading Urban Fiction with High School Students in Freirean Cultural Circles

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# CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING OR EYEBROW-RAISING? READING URBAN FICTION WITH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN FREIREAN CULTURAL CIRCLES

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## INTRODUCTION

Based largely on the writings of educational philosopher and activist Paulo Freire (see, e.g. 1970, 1977, 1989, 1993), educational researchers have demonstrated the contemporary relevance of dialogic and critical pedagogy to teachers and students of all ages, especially in urban schools (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gay, 2000; Giroux, 1997; Gordon, 1993; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008; Kumashiro, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). At this point, contemporary U.S. manifestations of Freire's work tend to take place inside of classrooms, and focus on practices of questioning and tapping knowledge from students and their communities, as well as on forming a bridge to school sanctioned curricula (Ayers, 2001; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Some work focuses on practices of democratic dialogue (Darder, 2002) and on forging close relationships between teachers and students (hooks, 2003). Outside of the classroom, Youth Participatory Action Research (Y-PAR) and activism (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright, 2010) stem from Freirean philosophies. Yet, with few exceptions (Souto-Manning, 2010; Williams, 2009), researchers pay less attention to cultural circles, a method of Freirean pedagogy. Perhaps this is because Freire, wary of his methods being imported or exported, resisted providing a rote description of his cultural circles. He preferred that his pedagogy be re-invented in context (Boshier, 1999; Darder, 2002; Souto-Manning, 2010).

For Freire, cultural circles are a way to generate critical conversations among "teacher-students" and "student-teachers" and can provide the motivation for critical consciousness and political action (1970). Both teachers and students learn from one another as their democratic dialogue provides a means to name and upend social structures of privilege and oppression. As a fifth-year English teacher in New York City, in my second year of ethnographic teacher-research, I saw the need for an activist intervention in a public, small school of choice (SSC), which I call the College Preparatory Academy (CPA). I subsequently attempted my own version of a cultural circle.

In this paper, I outline a theoretical framework and the methods employed in my study, along with the goals and activities of our cultural circle experience, including the challenges that we faced. Through the cultural circle experience, we aimed to develop a critical, dialogic pedagogy through discussions and activities responding to student-selected urban fiction texts. I found that while the cultural circles garnered increased student motivation and critical engagement, participants also expressed ambivalence at critically engaging with literature and topics that were outside of school-sanctioned models of success and upward mobility. This paper will describe how these challenges arose in the cultural circle, and conclude with recommendations for teachers who want to re-write Freirean cultural circles in context. In particular, I recommend that educators build off of my exploratory work to create a cultural circle that combats deficit discourse (Valencia, 2010), as well as "colorblind" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Leonardo, 2004), meritocratic pedagogies and curricula by using student-generated content as a point of departure.

## THE SCHOOL

CPA is what the principal calls a "high profile" school; it created its own nonprofit organization to solicit donations from corporate funders and has been lauded in many newspapers and magazines for the schooling experience it provides to its "college-fragile" (CPA's own term), urban, predominantly African-American and Latino student body[i]. Currently, CPA has financial partnerships with a corporate firm, five external nonprofit organizations, seven elected officials, 34 companies and organizations, and 300 individual donors[ii]. As a result, predominantly White staff and administrators engage in heavy image management projects in order to preserve good relationships with funders.

While CPA's graduation rate (93%) and college matriculation rate (97%) are atypically high as compared to New York City's average graduation rate of 62.7% (schools.nyc.gov, 2010) I noticed during 2008-2010 (the two years I conducted teacher-research at CPA) that there was a high level of student resistance in regard to the school's discipline practices, as well as a high level of student apathy in regard to academics. For example, the average grade point average of students at the school was 79%, but many teachers complained about grade inflation during meetings and informal social events. During May of 2010, my second year teaching at CPA, there were a total of 342 students out of 465 who were barred from their school privileges (such

as attending dances, field trips, or participating in extracurricular activities) as a result of having between three and 50 un-served detentions. In my classes, students seemed disengaged at times with the school-mandated class novels that we read, and often, the majority of the class did not complete homework assignments. Carmen and Desiree[iii], two students in my cultural circle told me that when they enter the school building, they “count down until I get to go home” and “just want to get in and get right back out.” In short, underneath the school’s impressive image, students demonstrated a lack of ownership and a lack of passion in regard to their learning.

While graduation and college matriculation rates are close to 100% for CPA students, some teachers spoke about unsuccessful students getting “pushed out” in order to “keep the numbers up”. As one teacher put it, “we are doing great with a lot of kids in terms of college readiness, but like what are we doing with the rest of them? And if you look at the [high] percentage of kids that are transferred out of our school, why did that happen?”[iv] The same teacher spoke about feeling that most CPA students seemed “bored” in classes, and were “not learning anything”. CPA is practiced at maintaining its image regardless of students’ actions or investment.

Senior English teachers complained to me in interviews that they felt they were crossing the line between editing students’ college personal statements, and writing them for students. The college office keeps a file on each student and, as one of the college advisors puts it, “holds students’ hands” through the college application process – even if a student insists that he or she does not want to attend college, they are still mandated to apply to a minimum of six schools in the City of New York (CUNY) system. One teacher spoke about her suspicion about students’ experiences when they got to college: “some of the brightest kids that we sent are really struggling [in college]... but they’ve had straight As the entire time through CPA”. A college advisor, aware of CPA’s grade inflation, asked me, “what, are we are going to put our best students in a room and say ‘look guys, your 90’s, you know, not so much – your 90 is a kind of inferior 90? No.” The school does not yet keep data on how many students remain in college once they get there (and when I conducted interviews, the first graduating class of seniors was only in their third semester at college). In this sense, teachers manage the school’s image to give the appearance of student motivation through its high college matriculation rate – but lament the discrepancy between the image and their own real-time observations in more intimate venues.

## **Deficit Discourse at CPA**

As they tried to make students “college ready”, some teachers at CPA relied on a deficit discourse, faulting students for their lack of engagement. For example, a White female teacher whom I interviewed suggested that CPA’s behavioral expectations “[give] students an opportunity to practice the social skills required for [middle and upper class] success”. She elaborated, stating that CPA shoulders the responsibility of equipping students for what is required in a job, university or professional setting. This belief was grounded in the assumption that Black and Brown students’ homes, families and communities do not prepare them for these settings, and that without predominantly White CPA teachers, CPA students would be at a loss as to how to demonstrate the values that CPA associates with middle class success.

In a conversation about students’ morning hallway behavior, another White female teacher compared the students at the predominantly White, private high school she had attended to CPA’s students, stating (with the caveat that her comment might “sound terribly classist and racist”) that students at her high school “were just predominantly White kids from two parent families that are raised in homes that it’s not appropriate to run around and scream and curse and hit people”. This teacher makes an unfounded assumption about what happens in students’ homes, and conflates this assumption with a racialized deficit discourse about students’ abilities.

A White male teacher, in a conversation about teaching critical thinking during a staff meeting, stated that:

Where I learned to think critically wasn’t in class, it was at the dinner table, or in the back seat of the car, seeing... debates that sustained me in the classroom. Many of our kids are not exposed to much of this, so we need to expose them and build in those critical thinking moments. [Students have an interest in] success [but] there is no interest in the process...there is no love for the process and no passion about learning. That needs to be built in.

The teachers quoted above attribute behavioral issues and what they deem a lack of critical thinking skills or “college readiness” to students’ peer groups, families and communities. Often these teachers conflate students’ resistance to CPA behavioral expectations with their race and socioeconomic status, thus normalizing and upholding “whitestream” (Grande, 2000; Urrieta, 2006) discourse[v]. Based in a similar logic, much of the school’s relationship with donors was grounded in the idea that CPA needed resources to continue to save or rescue “college-fragile” students from impoverished backgrounds or circumstances.

Because of this contrast between CPA’s public image and the experiences of its students, I wanted to attempt a critical pedagogical intervention grounded in students’ agency, identities and literacies (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). Paulo Freire developed his cultural circles as a generative approach to teaching literacy that honored participants’ background experience and knowledge and moved them to *conscientização*, or critical awareness for transformative political action(Darder, 2002). This

method, grounded in participants' realities, seemed to be an appropriate response to the issues that plagued students and teachers at CPA.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

While cultural circles were integral to Freire's methods, there are key differences between Freire's educational context (Brazil in the 1960s) and the context of the contemporary United States. While Freire's students were adults who came to cultural circles of their own volition to learn to read and write, students in the United States often may not see themselves as having a choice to attend school. Schools may not build on, and often may, in fact, attempt to rob students of the knowledge or skills grounded in their homes or communities (Valencia, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999), demonstrating what Freire calls a "banking style" of education, where students are seen as empty receptacles in which school-sanctioned knowledge can be deposited (1970).

As mentioned above, there is not a rote method for developing cultural circles; however, certain aspects are common across all cultural circles. Cultural circles often include a facilitator and a small group of participants. They revolve around a collaboratively chosen "generative theme" that is grounded in participants' lives. They follow a "problem-posing" approach to dialogue that involves or engages these generative themes, and that critical dialogue leads to some sort of political action (Souto-Manning, 2010). Often, cultural circles begin with the facilitator's ethnographic exploration of participants' community (Freire, 1970). As meetings evolve, participants take on more ownership of the problem-posing dialogue, as well as the political action.

Standards-based movements and the "audit culture" of U.S. schools discourage agency and critical thinking in the interest of the constant production of evidence to measure and evaluate schools' performance (Apple, 2001, 2007; Giroux, 2004; Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2004; Molnar, 2005; Ravitch, 2011; Urciuoli, 2010). At CPA, the ability to impress funders with numbers tends to take precedence over whether students are critically engaged in learning and extracurricular opportunities, or whether students are motivated to succeed at CPA.

Based on early conclusions of my ethnographic exploration at CPA, students were involved in an educational experience that was not grounded in their choices, lives or realities. I subsequently introduced the cultural circle experience to educate participants through an additive, as opposed to a deficit lens (Valenzuela, 1999). Based on participant-chosen texts and participant-chosen generative themes, we would critically read, write and talk about how these texts and themes related to our worlds.

Standardized assessments cannot measure what encourages students to be motivated to succeed in school – as Freire and Shor argue, motivation occurs simultaneously with knowledge production (1987). Grounded in the Freirean ideals of "education as the practice of freedom" and of humanization and agency in the interest of social change (Freire, 1970), I began the cultural circle experience with the hope that we would re-humanize the increasingly market-based and image-driven schooling at CPA. I was interested in advocating not just for academic success in the current educational system, but for a consciousness that would lead to a critique (and perhaps reworking) of the system in general.

## **PURPOSE AND FOCUS OF STUDY**

My study focuses closely on one central question: what might a critical, democratic, or humanizing education look like in the context of neoliberal education reforms? This question took shape as the discrepancies between the way that CPA presented itself to funders, and the ways that teaching and learning occurred on an everyday level became more apparent.

Through qualitative methods of participant observation, including interviews with alumni, students, families, and staff as well as classroom observations, I documented how reliance on private sector funding affects public schools. In other words, I asked, how might marketing to the private sector enable or constrain agency, and how can Freirean pedagogy be usefully re-written in this context? I utilized the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to shape conclusions grounded in coded data from school memos, fieldnotes, interview transcripts and student work and the cultural circles developed in response to the critiques that I heard from staff and students. My goal is to add to macro-level critiques of neoliberal reforms (Apple, 2001; Fabricant & Fine, 2011; Giroux, 2004; Mayo, 2005; McLaren, 1998; Ravitch, 2011) through qualitative research as well as to suggest creative ways of implementing critical or counter-hegemonic pedagogies in U.S. public schools (Camarrota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2004, 2008; Morrell, 2002). Through a combination of more traditional participant-observation and less traditional activist methods, I intend for this study and its methods to contribute to both theoretical and practitioner-oriented literature in anthropology, education and critical pedagogy.

## METHODS AND POSITIONALITY

I am a White female who has taught in New York City classrooms for five years, at the middle, high school, undergraduate and graduate levels. CPA teachers were also predominantly White[vi]. I was especially interested in how, as a White teacher-researcher, I could cultivate an anti-racist and self-reflexive identity in this space, building a critically conscious pedagogy that was not based on a deficit language or a banking model. At the time that I conducted research, I was completing a Ph.D. in anthropology. Beginning with the Freirean idea of the teacher-as-ethnographer (Moll, et al., 1992; Souto-Manning, 2010) who moves to a place of solidarity with her students thorough more closely understanding their lives, struggles and interests, I completed close to a full school year of teacher-research before I approached the idea of a cultural circle with the students in my English classes. Wanting students to participate of their own volition, I invited all of the students in my English class to participate in my summer cultural circle during an open lunch meeting in April of 2008. Forty students (37 girls and three boys) came to this meeting, but only five students (all girls) participated in the end: Carmen, Desiree, Gabriela, Princess, and Destiny. In interviews, all identified as Black or African-American except for Gabriela, who identified as Latina (of Mexican descent). Wanting to hold the circles in a power-neutral space, we held some meetings in a Unitarian church willing to let us meet in an empty chapel, and others in an outdoor public space near the school.

I purchased composition books for the students in which they could summarize, critique, and question the texts that we read. That summer, we had a total of seven cultural circle meetings. At the beginning all five participants showed up regularly. Gabriela went out of town and stopped coming after the third meeting, and Desiree participated in a college-preparatory summer enrichment program for three weeks in July. That meant that I had three regulars: Carmen, Destiny, and Princess, while Gabriela and Desiree came less frequently. Ms. Caldwell, a staff member who volunteered to participate, attended most of the cultural circle meetings through the month of July, and facilitated one meeting when I was out of town. In order to participate, students were required to provide consent forms signed by a parent or guardian. Consent forms stipulated that we would be reading and discussing the books of students' choice, and our discussions would be audio-recorded. I conducted a series of interviews with students during and after the cultural circle meetings, and conducted interviews with their parents after the cultural circle meetings. I met with each of their parents/ guardians during the following fall and interviewed them about their impression of students' cultural circle experience, as well as their impressions of CPA at large. In the summer of 2011, after students graduated from CPA, we met again to discuss how the experience impacted students throughout the rest of their high school experience, and how they felt the experience prepared them for their future educational goals.

## Urban Fiction

When I first took each of my tenth grade English classes into the school library in 2009, the first question from three out of the four classes (all from African-American girls) was whether the librarian had "those ghetto books." The librarian, as well as everyone in the class, knew exactly what this term meant. Some teachers and students that I spoke with at CPA worried about the impact of "urban fiction" on adolescent identity formation. They argued that these texts not only lack rigor and complexity, but perpetuate and reify sexist, demeaning images of people of color through depictions of violent crime, nonconsensual sex, and drugs (Chiles, 2006). Others argued that what youth choose to read was not as important as the fact that they were reading (Marech, 2003). Still others argued that these books provide a unique window into the challenges of U.S. urban life that is often ignored in the mainstream (ibid.). Many students whom I talked to recognized these perspectives. Nevertheless, CPA community members saw students reading urban fiction under desks in class, in the cafeteria, and sometimes, during school mandated independent reading time.

While some students actively sought to incorporate urban fiction into the mainstream curriculum—for example, during school-mandated independent reading time, or in practice essays for the New York State English regents examination—others were more skeptical or had mixed feelings about the genre. When I asked students during an informal interview early in the cultural circle experience what would happen if we read urban fiction books in English class, Carmen stated that students would be much more engaged with classroom reading, so much so that they would not be able to put the books down. I then asked students whether they thought that reading urban fiction books would prepare them for college. Desiree responded: "There's no vocabulary, there's no new words in [these books]; and there are typos in [them] too!" Desiree, along with Destiny and Carmen echoed her complaints. Interestingly, although these students are skeptical of the genre as a whole, when I asked them to create the syllabus for what we would read together over the summer, all of the books that students chose would be classified as urban fiction: Teri Woods' *True to the Game III* (2008), Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), and Sapphire's *Push* (1996). The young women expressed interest in reading and discussing these books while simultaneously critiquing their lack of challenging vocabulary or thorough copyediting.

## Cultural Circle Participants

All of the students who participated in the cultural circle currently live in New York City. Based on information gathered through attending numerous staff meetings, as well as through informal conversations with teachers, cultural circle students

have good rapport with CPA teachers. All are friends and get along well. In the table below, I detail more information about the participants:

Participant	Racial/ Ethnic Self-Identification	Age/ Grade Level	Home Neighborhood	Neighborhood Median Household Income[vii]	Cumulative Average in Subject Classes Area
Carmen	Black/ African-American	16/11	East New York, Brooklyn	\$26,143[viii]	65%
Desiree	Black/ African-American	16/11	Cambria Heights, Queens	\$72,840	92%
Destiny	Black/ African-American	16/11	Brownsville, Brooklyn	\$56,604	90%
Gabriela	Black/ African-American	16/11	Crown Heights, Brooklyn	\$26,366	96%
Ms. Caldwell	White/ European-American	23/NA	Prospect Heights, Brooklyn	\$67,650	NA
Princess	Black/ African-American	16/11	Ridgewood, Queens	\$46,096	85%

## CREATING A CURRICULUM

The list of books that students chose to read for the cultural circles was compiled from a longer list that 10th grade students came up with during the initial voluntary meetings that I held to recruit participants. The protagonists of the books are all female and African-American, and all live in urban areas of the United States. In each of the stories, the main characters struggle against social, financial and emotional difficulties to land on their feet and, sometimes struggle to be in healthy romantic relationships, family relationships and friendships. Both *True to the Game III* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* portray characters' struggle to reach economic security in the context of racial capitalism (Sweeney, 2010); the characters are either involved directly in street crime, or are romantically involved with men who are. *True to the Game III* ends as the main character, Gena, finally settles down with the drug dealer whom she has been in love with. *The Coldest Winter Ever*, however, ends with a different fate for the protagonist: Winter, the street-smart and beautiful, but materialistic main character refuses to snitch on her boyfriend, who is a crack dealer. As the story ends, Winter is serving a 15-year prison sentence. *Push* tells the story of Precious, an HIV-positive, illiterate teen mother of two who comes from an abusive home but struggles through an alternative school to become literate and to find beauty in herself and in her children.

During the first cultural circle meeting, after coming up with our initial list of readings, I asked students which generative themes (Boshier, 1999; Souto-Manning, 2010) they wanted our discussions to take; themes, starting from issues relevant to participants' lives serve as the starting point for cultural circle dialogue. This is supposed to move to collective problem solving and charting a course for political action, on a personal and a social level. Although I did not use the word "generative" when asking students to come up with themes, I explained to students that we would read the books, and then talk about them in relation to themes or topics of their choice. While Carmen suggested that we talk about race, Gabriela suggested power, and Destiny suggested power and gender. We decided to focus on all of these themes.

We decided that we would take approximately two weeks to read and discuss each novel. After we read the assigned portion on

our own, we would write a summary, an analysis, and questions in our composition books, focusing on the aforementioned themes. For the most part, we stuck with this, although conversations tended to be relatively informal, and topics of conversation were not restricted to the books.

## ANALYSIS

I coded interview data and fieldnotes from the cultural circle based on our generative themes (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The following section will describe students' conversations in relation to power. We engaged the idea of power especially in relation to oppression and social mobility. Destiny stated: "I think [the ability to think of the future] is sort of a luxury. People who are oppressed are just trying to keep up." Destiny admits that there are sometimes factors that are out of one's control that might contribute to whether one is oppressed. In other words, when one is "just trying to keep up," one may lack complete control of one's circumstances, and lack a means to social mobility.

### Power, Oppression, and Individual Agency

As we began to read *Push*, the students came up with their own examples of power and oppression. We skimmed the back cover of the book together and Carmen noticed that the main character, Precious, is illiterate. Gabriela asked me what the word "illiterate" meant. I told her that it meant not being able to read or write. "I was like that", she said quietly. She spoke about her personal experience being teased, bullied, and treated "like she was stupid" in U.S. schools after spending most of her childhood in Mexico, because she did not speak English. She explained that she "didn't feel smart" but went to the library every day in order to improve her English literacy. "No matter whether it was raining [or] snowing, that didn't stop me", she said, "I went through struggles, cause I wasn't able to speak English very well. But now, like, I'm able to do anything." Here she makes a direct parallel between oppression and the lack of ability to speak one's experience. Both language and academics give her the power to "do anything."

This was also reflected in students' discussion of Precious's journey to literacy. During our last discussion of the book, after we struggled with Precious's decision not to emancipate herself from her mother, Destiny said, "In a way, I think Precious does emancipate herself. She gets stronger and freer from her writing and from the people around her." Here Destiny alludes to the possibility of the oppressed finding a sense of freedom and agency through language and community. Gabriela elaborated on her belief in the meritocratic ideal of working hard, despite obstacles, to get ahead. She shared that her family and her religious values give her the discipline to persevere in school and to someday (she hopes) excel in college. She stated that by working hard to overcome one's obstacles one can succeed: "In the future, I know that I'm gonna live the good life", she said. "In the end... it's worth it ...no matter what, you don't have to feel bad or nothing, just keep going no matter how many times you fail... you got the power. You gotta think about yourself." Students frequently spoke about academic success (most specifically, college) as leading to power and agency. Students constructed themselves as intellectuals and academic strivers as they aligned, repeatedly, with the African-American female characters in the books that displayed values of intelligence, groundedness, drive and independence and against the characters that displayed ignorance, materialism and greed.

Students' construction of their future selves often contrasted with feeling a lack of power in the present. For example, the power to control one's future, versus a lack of power in school and home contexts is demonstrated through Carmen's statement: "I don't have power over nobody, not even my little brothers and sisters". Carmen spoke about how she felt no one listened to her. Gabriela, too, shared that in the beginning of our school year, she was frequently bullied by another student, and was quiet because she was afraid that people would laugh at her.

Frequently in our conversations, despite their own dedication and hard work in school, students displayed nervousness at not being able to attain academic success in college. Yet they repeatedly expressed that academic success in college would allow them to transcend other forms of oppression. As Gabriela said, "people can say whatever they want to say. I have no problem, because I am exceeding. If you don't get the grades, then you won't be accepted into college". Students recognized some forms of oppression in their present lives and in regard to the characters in the books. Yet students were not critical of grand narratives of color-, class-, and gender-blind meritocracy, and believed, regardless of their experiences with oppression, that agency grounded in education and ambition could trump social structure.

### Intersections of Race and Gender

Within our cultural circle, we discussed gender and race intersectionally, often in the context of power and social mobility. For example, as we finished our discussion of *Push*, we read an interview with the author, Sapphire, who spoke about her reluctance to make a movie out of the book, because in her words, "Hollywood has done a disservice to Black people" (Keehnen, 1996). As we deconstructed this comment, students immediately brought gender into the conversation, especially in relation to music videos that feature images of hyper-sexualized, materialistic Black women. Carmen worried that

Black people do a disservice to themselves in those videos, when they agree to be in them... but then sometimes, it's like a vicious cycle, because maybe you see all these images about yourself everywhere, and you actually start to believe them...

Students also discussed the idea that Hollywood doesn't just do a disservice to Black people; it does a disservice to women in general. Students brought up White popular music star Hannah Montana who they said is a teenager who "dresses like she's grown", and in their opinions, is too skinny. This, in turn, they said, sends messages to so many girls about the body types and clothes that they are expected to wear. Students felt that it is more common for White girls to get the message that they have to be skinny, versus Black and Latina girls, who get the message that it is ok to be "thick" because Black and Latino men like "thicker" women. Throughout our conversations, students recognized differing forms of sexed and gendered oppressions based on women's racialized identities.

Students saw racially differentiated expectations for body types in the context of the straight male gaze, but at the same time, saw the "right" kind of straight man as advocating for, and appreciating educated, confident, self-sufficient, independent and community-engaged women. This was demonstrated by students' critique of the gender politics of *True to the Game III*. Destiny and Princess, in particular, struggled with the question of why Quadir, the main character, falls for Gena, who students called a "hood chick", while rejecting Amelia, the beautiful doctor who is also in love with him. Destiny explained this by saying that "hood chicks" like Gena "are always in trouble, but bring excitement." Students also struggled with the question of why Amelia would risk her life and her career for Quadir, a "thug". Students use the racialized vocabulary of "hood chick" and "thug" to describe the ways that characters represent gendered stereotypes; the "hood chick" represents an undereducated woman born in the stereotypically black urban ghetto who may have street smarts, but may not have the drive, ambition or opportunity to leave the "hood". The thug represents the "hood chick's" male counterpart; while he has street smarts, and perhaps power and money within the context of his urban surroundings, he makes his money through illegal means and may end up incarcerated or dead as a result. While students admitted that they are sometimes attracted to "boys from the hood", they explicitly differentiated themselves from the stereotype of the "hood chick"; they were college-bound, and going to be independent, educated and upwardly mobile.

Destiny shared that she was surprised at the end of the story, where Gena and Quadir end up getting married in the Bahamas. Not only did she think that the ending was improbable, she found it to be too sudden: "I thought Quadir was gonna choose Amelia over Gena," she said, "I guess true love does bring two people together, even though I don't think [in Quadir and Gena's case], that it was meant to be." Destiny said that Gena "doesn't have anything going for her, and is more dependent." This is a powerful statement, especially coming from Destiny, who prides herself on being more like Amelia than Gena: she and her family live in an area of Brownsville, Brooklyn that some might construe as "the hood," where she said that they are banned from having block parties, perhaps due to violence, and where she once "walked into a shooting" because she had her headphones on. Yet rather than hanging out on the block like her brother does, which she says is "boring", she stays inside and reads, because she tells herself "I'm gonna go to college, and I'm gonna go for three different degrees".

Her choices aren't necessarily due to her parents putting extreme restrictions on her, she explained. Rather, she says, she makes the choice on her own because of her goal of upward mobility through education in the context of a meritocracy[x]. Hanging out on the block does not give her viable assurance that she will achieve her lifelong goal of becoming a lawyer. Destiny guides her daily decisions to fit this goal. Her brother, on the other hand, has other goals, which affects what he chooses to do with his time in the present.

Destiny tells herself that if she works hard to attain her occupational and academic goals, that other things (love, family, money, a stable living environment) will come. Yet, this novel portrays Amelia, a well-educated, beautiful, independent, financially stable Black woman, as the character who ends up lonely at the end of the story because the man that she loved (and who she risked her job for in order to save) went for the "hood chick" with no job and no conventional ambition. "I think when he left Amelia, I was just upset. Gena is a nice person, but she has nothing going for her, like she can't provide for him. What if he gets into debt? Amelia can provide for him," Destiny admitted. Here, Destiny's comment seems to incorporate issues of class and power as it relates to race and gender[x]; she portrays Amelia as upwardly mobile, and constructs Quadir as stagnant. In Destiny's view, Amelia has the potential to play the stereotypically feminine role of the caretaker through playing the less traditionally female role of the breadwinner, if Quadir would let her. Amelia is the real "catch".

The gender politics of the story's ostensible happy ending are unsettling to Destiny, who hopes to someday be academically on Amelia's level, not Gena's. To uncritical readers, the story could be construed as teaching that the "Amelias" of the world end up conventionally successful, but isolated, no matter what they do. As Destiny's analysis demonstrates, students did not necessarily take this away, as they continued to identify with Amelia, placing getting an education above "getting the guy".

This pattern continued as we read *The Coldest Winter Ever*. Sister Souljah places herself in the story as an activist radio talk show host. Students identified with the character of Sister Souljah in the story, as opposed to Winter. Students described

Winter as “superficial” and a “spoiled brat who has everything taken away from her”. According to students, Winter’s behaviors are antithetical to her independence or survival. As a young woman, even though she is beautiful, she neglects a responsibility to herself, and negates the possibility of gaining any real respect from the people around her because of her promiscuous and materialistic behavior. Desiree described Winter as a young woman who “didn’t have no standard, she just chose any sugar daddy!” Destiny agreed, saying: “she was too dependent on a man cause her father always gave her everything she wanted”. According to Desiree, “what she wanted was money and clothes, not a job, not college, not housing – nothing.” Destiny added, “and she didn’t want somebody with no degree, she wanted somebody from the streets”. While Carmen believed that Winter has low self-esteem, she didn’t believe that even this is a viable excuse for the ways that Winter behaves.

Students saw Souljah as a character that tries to help Winter, and they grew frustrated with the fact that Winter disregards Souljah’s attempts to get Winter to college and provide her with a place to live. When Winter decides to steal money from one of Sister Souljah’s charity auctions, then to rob an old woman in a hotel parking lot in order to provide for herself, Desiree said “she has no choice, it’s like when you have no choice you’ll do anything to survive.” Destiny quickly countered: “she did have a choice, though, because Sister Souljah’s going to help her enroll in college!” When Desiree responded that “[Winter] didn’t want no help”, Destiny concluded, “she’s an idiot”. As they did with Gena in *True to the Game III*, students explicitly constructed their identities counter to Winter’s character in *The Coldest Winter Ever*.

Similarly, Princess declared that she “loved Sister Souljah”, because she demonstrates values of community engagement and empowerment through her activist work, her charity work, and through her attempts to put young women like Winter on the path to education and independence. Destiny declared that she thought that Winter was “jealous” of Sister Souljah, and Carmen agreed, stating that Souljah “has a [healthy and desirable] body, she’s smart, and she’s celibate.” This, students said, was the reason that Souljah, and not Winter is able to hold the attention of Midnight, the older male character in the book who Winter is also attracted to. Destiny and Carmen agreed that from Midnight’s point of view, women are “supposed to be strong and independent”. Midnight, she said, “needed somebody to depend on if something went wrong”. Desiree added: “And not a dumb girl like Winter”. Destiny, on the other hand, said Winter was “just prostituting herself”. Through these conversations, students explicitly brought sex into the conversation; in students’ opinions, Winter demeans herself through her promiscuity, and disempowers herself through her drive to attain material goods rather than education.

When I asked students during the cultural circle what they took away from reading the book, Destiny said that she learned to “be more independent” and that she learned “not to depend on a man”. Desiree said that she learned “not to be materialistic”, and “not to mess with a boy who sells drugs”. In critical cultural circle conversations about *True to the Game III* and the *Coldest Winter Ever*, students seemed to construct themselves in opposition to the idea of the “dumb” or “materialistic” young woman. Furthermore, they supported each other in constructing college-bound, upwardly mobile raced and gendered identities.

## CONCLUSION: CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING OR EYEBROW RAISING?

In the following section, I outline the main takeaways from the cultural circle experience, including what the experience shows practitioners and researchers about the contemporary relevance of Freire’s cultural circle model in the face of deficit discourse in urban schools. I find that the experience provides more questions than answers in regard to the relevance of Freirean cultural circles in this context.

### Is Praxis Impractical? (Recommendations and Implications)

As we read the books students chose for the cultural circles, Carmen commented that she enjoyed reading the non-standard language of the books (which she called “AIM talk”[xi]), and that it “made [her] think”. Students engaged, asked and answered difficult, critical questions about the texts (for example, from *Push*: Why doesn’t Precious emancipate herself from her mother? From *True to the Game III*: Is money its own character in the story? Does it oppress the characters? From *The Coldest Winter Ever*: How is it possible to live in the projects and still place so much importance on material things?).

When we met to discuss the cultural circle experience just after students’ high school graduation, students and I spoke at length about college readiness, and about how their experience at CPA, as well as their experience in the cultural circle, prepared them. Carmen shared that it was fun, and that “a lot of people don’t see the connection between what’s going on and the stereotypes that we see all around us. We all just go about our business. It was good to actually read a book that relates to people and things I know and see.” She seems to allude to the idea here that she enjoyed pushing herself to do the analytical work that many people don’t do around urban fiction books. This was in great contrast to how she and Princess described, two summers beforehand, their feeling of boredom when they entered the school building.

At CPA, college-readiness discourse often begins with the assumption that students are not “college-ready”, and that it is the



unique role of predominantly White CPA staff members to prepare them. The cultural circle experience showed me that students not only internalize CPA's narrative about college-readiness and upward social mobility, but students also internalize CPA's deficit discourse. Even after graduating from CPA, students demonstrated a concern they may not have the skills to succeed in college. In a meeting just before most students left for college, Princess expressed that she felt woefully underprepared for the SAT, and Gabriela complained that she felt underprepared in terms of time management as well as organization. While all students expressed that CPA was a good school for getting its students involved in extracurricular activities, and for making them "college eligible", they were concerned about whether they were socially and academically "college ready" (Zelkowski, 2011).

"College readiness", then, became synonymous with agency for students and with the ability to transcend systemic oppression. Desiree stated, in regard to the cultural circles: "I feel like we learned something...it was something new". Princess elaborated, saying, "I look more closely at race now". She notices internalized racism among her family and friends, or as she put it, "that even black people can be racist". Carmen agreed, and they said that as a direct result of the discussions that we had that they voice protests to these forms of racism when they see them, even from their peers on Facebook. Carmen, after thinking for a few more moments responded:

I think we should have read those books because they were of interest to us, but I think we also should have chosen harder books...We did good, we broke it down, we criticized it, we critiqued it, but we could have got some books that were more challenging, especially to get into college. We could have done better.

Although students reported that the cultural circle experience pushed them to become everyday anti-racist activists, and to be comfortable as Black and Brown female intellectuals, students were uncritical of meritocratic and mainstream models of success to overcome structural forms of oppression. There is a tension here between individual agency and social structure that may represent an impasse in Frierean pedagogy; in these cultural circles, students were able to identify and critique oppression, but did not use this knowledge to turn against the "superstructure". Rather, they turned to their belief in the power of individual agency and meritocracy to reinforce their faith that their future selves will be untouched by systemic oppression (even despite their fear that they may not have what it takes to be "college-ready"). They demonstrated that it is possible to experience and critique structural oppression, but at the same time, hold on to a belief in individual transcendence. This tension brings up important questions and opportunities for further exploration in regard to the contemporary relevance of Freirean pedagogy. Critical educators and researchers might, in the future, grapple with ways that praxis, as Freire conceptualized it, is (or is not) practical in the context of dominant narratives of meritocracy and the power of individual agency at CPA and in the United States.

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## END NOTES

[i] According to nysed.gov (2008-09), 17% of CPA's students identify as Hispanic/ Latino, and 82% identify as Black/ African-American.

[ii] This information is available on the school's website. In order to preserve anonymity, I do not list the reference here.

[iii] In accordance with the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin, all names used in this study are pseudonyms. In most cases, pseudonyms were self-selected by participants.

[iv] According to a school data that an administrator shared with me as part of a grant application, CPA's four-year student retention rate was 72% for the graduating class of 2005, 72.58% for the graduating class of 2006, and 85.32% for the class of 2007.

[v] This term was originally used by Grande (2000) to refer to "the cultural capital of Whites in almost every aspect of society". Urrieta (2006) refers to whiteness as "the official and unofficial texts used in U.S. society that are founded on the practices, principles, morals, values and history of white Anglo-American culture, i.e. White cultural capital". He emphasizes that any person actively promoting white models as 'standard' furthers whiteness ideals. Here, I am using this term to emphasize how whiteness is normalized in the official and unofficial curricula of "college readiness" at CPA through the school's emphasis on meritocracy, as well as the ways in which "college readiness" for minority youth is framed as a deficit discourse.

[vi] 63% of CPA teachers identify as White. 20% identify as African-American or Black, 8% percent as biracial or mixed-race, and 5% as Hispanic or Latino.

[vii] Source: neighborhoodlink.com (2010)

[viii] At the time of my research, the national household income average was \$56, 604 (neighborhoodlink.com, 2010).

[ix] Interestingly, her emphasis on upward mobility connects not only to CPA's mainstream definition of *success*, but also to Marcus Garvey's racial uplift efforts in the early twentieth century; see Hill (1983).

[x] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *Perspectives on Urban Education* for pointing this out.

[xi] AOL Instant Messenger

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