

# Acting “Cool” and “Appropriate”: Toward a Framework for Considering Literacy Classroom Interactions When Race Is a Factor

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In this article I draw on 3 incidents to investigate how teachers and students purposefully negotiate to manage incipient conflict when race is a confounding factor. I do so to propose a methodology and theoretical framework for researching multiracial classroom teaching and learning that could inform White literacy teachers’ pedagogy with students of color. The approach construes race as a dynamic part of classroom social life in which expressions of race are affected by and affect teachers’ and students’ classroom norms of conduct. Race is observed in discursive practices that interactively and influentially construct social relationships, personal identity, and academic knowledge. I demonstrate the approach by illustrating how students manage problems and boundaries within commonplace classroom interactions.

The language experience of the African diaspora is enmeshed with issues of culture, identity, memory, and citizenship. (Morgan, 1994, p. 339)

For the sake of all children, it is time to act in ways that reflect genuine valuation of language diversity and to implement policies fostering multilingualism and dialect awareness. (Smitherman, 2004, p. 186)

That cultural relevance is key in successful pedagogy has become a commonplace construct for educators interested in improving multicultural education. Theoretic-

cal arguments supported by empirical studies have amply demonstrated that teachers' effectiveness during classroom instruction has a great deal to do with teachers' and students' cultural congruence (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). When teachers' cultures of origin differ from that of their students, teachers are exhorted to improve their pedagogy by increasing its cultural relevance. These demands would more likely be effective when accompanied by empirically informed illustrations of how cultural relevance is integrated with all the other social demands of daily teaching (Lee, 2003). To be productive, this research approach would complement those currently in use by making it possible to locate, name, and describe classroom interactions that succeed or fail in being culturally relevant so as to sustain literacy learning, to note what is happening for widespread application, and to understand the complications of such generalizations so as to productively critique them.

In this article, I propose the beginning of such a theoretical lens and related methodology. I draw from a number of extant frameworks and methods for studying issues of teaching and learning complicated by race. These approaches evolved in fields of scholarship such as linguistics (Smitherman, 1977), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 2000), discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992), and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). This scholarship focuses on issues related to African American language, race and education; the individual in relation to society; and societal inequity. My argument for this new approach is predicated on the premise that furthering multicultural education requires understanding how meaning and status are negotiated in classrooms among teachers and students of similar and different races and ethnicities. To make my case, I present three illustrative classroom interactions between White and African American teachers and students.

### WHAT WE HAVE AND WHAT WE NEED

In constructing my argument and selecting the three interactions, I am responding to Smitherman's (2004) directive—"It is time to move the Black Language conversation to a higher level" (p. 195)—when she called for studies that infuse research on African American educational achievement with the results of Black Language research. Smitherman's seminal scholarship about Black Language and schooling has driven, and often framed, the conversation about which Black Language issues to consider to understand how to more fairly and ably school African American children (e.g., Smitherman, 1977, 1994). As a consequence we have a wealth of educational research that focuses on the language facilities African American students bring to the classroom (e.g., Mahiri, 1998a, 1998b; Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004) and on the role of Black language in literacy learning (e.g., Ball, 1992; Lee, 1995b). We have fewer ways of conceptualizing and investigating what

Cazden (1986) pointed out 20 years ago and what more recent research has noted as important—recognizing the operation of African American students' discursive practices in everyday classroom interaction (Fecho, 2000), describing the dynamics of threat in pedagogy (Fecho, 2001), and exploring classroom interactional events so as to understand what is meaningful to young people and how and why they act on those meanings (Green & Dixon, 1993). Understanding how teachers and students of similar and different races and ethnicities negotiate meaning and threat in classrooms is central in improving the efficacy of schooling for diverse students.

Attempts to improve the classroom academic success of racially and ethnically diverse students have primarily focused on the relation between their cultural orientation and the culture of their teachers. Scholarship linking classroom teaching with successful minority student performance has described curriculum and instruction as culturally responsive (Cazden & Leggett, 1981), culturally appropriate (Au & Jordan, 1981), culturally congruent (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), culturally synchronized (Irvine, 1990), culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995b), and culturally based (Lee, 1995a). Infrequent are studies attending to how racial dimensions of culture are negotiated in classroom instructional talk. In this article I explore classroom teaching and learning as a within- and across-race issue by focusing on classrooms in which the self-identified races of teachers and students are a complicating factor. My exploration draws on ethnographically collected data and applies analytical methods from interactional ethnography, ethnomethodology, interactional sociolinguistics, discursive psychology, and critical discourse analysis.

I analyze classroom discourse in three high school English classrooms where White and African American teachers shaped classroom talk to build social communities that forwarded literacy learning. By analyzing three incidences of racially marked talk, I aim to represent the perspectives of all the participants so as to descriptively explore interrelations among individual identity performances, social relationship building, and subject matter construction.

The three analyses raise questions about and complicate distinctions between White and Black discourse, as related to classroom teaching and learning, and encourage the evolution of ideological positions that such distinctions inform. The analyses build a case for conceptualizing race as part of the social life under construction in classrooms by illustrating how teachers and students call forth various expressions of race as purposeful types of talk. The cases make apparent that in classrooms race is a discursive practice that constructs social relationship, personal identity, and academic knowledge, and that race is influenced by and influences the normative classroom conduct of teachers and students.

I argue that when race is observed as discursive interactional acts, focusing on how and why conflicts are negotiated as race is enacted can be informative. Furthermore, studying how teachers and students purposefully manage the boundaries

of disagreement when race is a complicating factor can lead to instructive explanations of how teaching and learning are productively interactively managed in multiracial and multicultural classrooms.

## RACE AND TEACHING

Research on the issue of race in teaching tends to bifurcate into studies by researchers of the same race as their participant populations and White researchers who study differently raced populations or who investigate the interface between White educators and students of color (Perea, 2000). Despite exceptions, this dominant split in the literature tends to construct a binary perspective for studying race and teaching and curriculum.

In a review of educational research about ethnicity and gender, Foley, Levinson, and Hurtig (2001) reviewed “insider” studies conducted by “halfie” anthropologists who are members of the cultures they study. The review reinforces the perception that African American investigators of educational practices, drawing from experiences as both students and teachers, bring a particular sensitivity and knowledge to their interpretations and their representations that is meaningful to both cultural insiders and outsiders. Earlier, Irvine (1989) described how African American teachers are cultural translators or “intercessors” for Black students. She related how Black youths’ style of presentation and language clashes with typically White school cultures and how Black teachers, by establishing respect for their authority with students, can push them to achieve academic success. She noted, “What remains to be explored is how the cultural context mediates the delivery [of what works] and the teacher’s personal delivery of instruction” (p. 59) to see how they are culturally responsive.

Other than the landmark work of Ladson-Billings (1994) and Heath (1983), and the more recent study of effective White elementary school teachers by Cooper (2003), much of the scholarship about the successful teaching of African American students has focused on African American teachers, highlighting within-culture relationships between teachers and students (e.g., Lee, 2005). African American teachers who are highly effective in working with African American students build on their cultural resources to help students make essential connections between what they know and new knowledge (e.g., Foster, 1989, 1997; Hale-Benson, 1982; Hilliard, 1989; Hollins, 1982; Hollins, King, & Hayman, 1994; Hoover, 1991; Irvine, 1985, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 1992a, 1994, 1995a; Secret, 1997; Smith, 1997).

Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) described the pedagogical elements common among elementary school teachers who created an engaging and meaningful literacy-learning environment for African American students. Her work has enriched understandings of how Black and White teachers teach their African American

students by drawing on culturally relevant funds of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 1998). Lee studied the application of “signifying” as a scaffold for teaching literary interpretation (Lee, 1993, 1995b). Her scholarship utilized particular aspects of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to demonstrate how African American secondary English students benefit from having literacy learning methods tailored to suit their cultural knowledge as located in particular discourse practices (Lee, 1992, 1995a, 1995b). In analyzing classroom teacher talk, Foster (1989, 1995) described how a popular African American teacher’s language of control, curriculum, and critique served to communicate cognitive information, establish and maintain social relationships, and express attitudes. Her sociolinguistic approach to pedagogy represents African American teacher talk as culturally saturated instructional moves that create strong social connections with and among her African American students who are from similar backgrounds. The work of Lee, Ladson-Billings, and Foster describes the mostly positive effects of cultural congruence between teacher and students. Students’ increased engagement, participation, and performance are attributed to the style, language, and message of culturally resonant teaching.

In contrast, Lalik and Hinchman (2001) asserted that White researchers are often blind to race-based issues that can undermine their goals for equity. They encourage White researchers to be reflexive about how they deal with race in their work. In this spirit, as a White university-based researcher, I take the view that for too long we have left the responsibility for understanding the complexities of race and ethnicity in classroom teaching to researchers who identify via race or ethnicity with their student participants. If we are to generate sufficient studies and expand our theoretical constructs to positively inform what teachers and students can do in their classrooms, more research needs to be done by White researchers who seek to understand and move beyond the limitations of their current frameworks and methodologies.

White teachers have already taken up the challenge to reflexively study their own practice by examining the interface between their race and their teaching. In a growing number of studies, they have described the difficulties they experienced as White teachers of students unlike themselves in race, culture, and class (e.g., Ballenger, 1999; Fecho, 2003; Paley, 1989; Pixley & VanDerPloeg, 2000). African American scholars have identified this issue as crucial to the improved school performance of African American and other minority children (e.g., Ball, 1997; Delpit, 1995). Recent studies have explored the impact of White discourse on the teaching and the learning of minority students (Banning, 1999; Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Prendergast, 1998; Sleeter, 1995).

A Black–White binary for representing and exploring how the school performance of students of color can be improved has contributed to our understandings of how within-race cultural practices, beliefs, and values influence students’ participation and what teachers can do to improve it. However, I take the position that

this binary can distract us from a view of race, also extant in the literature, as a dynamic, complex factor that interfaces with other social factors. For example, a Black–White binary oversimplifies social history (Lalik & Hinchman, 2001), which depicts some racial designations as having changed over time, whereas others have remained more static. Literature describing the plasticity and changeability of racial identification and the shifting distribution of social capital on the basis of racial identity reveals how it has been strongly influenced by broad historical political, social, and economic contexts (Perea, 2000). Other research demonstrates that racial identity is also influenced by local situation and individual history and can be a personal decision as well as a social label (Lopez, 2000). Individual identities are situated and complex, comprising multiple subject positions—including those influenced by one’s gender and social class (Gee, 1996). To explore classroom teaching and learning as a raced issue requires consideration of how individuals consider themselves and those they are interacting with as raced, how they integrate their views on race with their goals for academic achievement, and the role they give to race in their social interactions. These factors need to be explored in examining the role of race in the socially constructed literacy learning practices in single-raced and multiple-raced classroom settings.

Historically, ethically, and pragmatically, classroom research that improves teaching and learning and teacher preparation for our ethnically, culturally, and racially diverse young people is our most pressing need (Ball, 2002). Lee (2003) articulated this fundamental challenge as the need to understand individuals within their ethnic cultural practices as they interface with the cultural practices of schooling. To do so requires educational research that conceptualizes the varied struggles of such children to capture the range of diversity within ethnic groups and associated context-dependent displays of competence. I mean to contribute to research by providing concepts and strategies for building and revamping teaching practices as they are constructed in teachers’ moment-to-moment interactions with their students. Such reconceptualizing research is served by observing classroom discursive practices, especially as they play out in ordinary day-to-day classroom interactions (e.g., Rex, 2000; Rex & McEachen, 1999; Rex, Murnen, Hobbs, & McEachen, 2002).

## CONCEPTUALIZING RACE IN THE CLASSROOM

Ethnographic data for this project were collected in three multiracial classrooms in which race could not be overlooked as a factor in the discourse of English language arts instruction. For students to succeed in multiracial classrooms requires a particular way of thinking about the interrelation between social roles and relationships, language use as social identity, and constructions of subject matter.

In the three classrooms, the teachers thought that building social relationships among their students was central to literacy teaching and learning. Building a literate community in which students related to one another in ways the teachers specified was at the center of their curriculum and instructional methods. Specifically, in one class, the teacher instructed students to act in ways he deemed “appropriate,” and in another class, the teacher implored students to be “cool” toward one another. In the third, the teacher stepped back to make the students responsible for conducting themselves as they saw fit. Because I observed a strong connection between these teachers’ literacy learning goals for their students, their teaching methods and curriculum, and their attempts to shape the ways in which students interacted, I derived a theoretical frame that interrelates social relationships, social identity, and subject matter to study racialized situations. To do so I drew from the scholarship of literacy scholar Gee (1996, 1999, 2000), critical discourse analyst Fairclough (1989, 1995), translinguist Bakhtin (1981, 1986), sociologist Bourdieu (1977, 1991), and linguist Locher (2004).

In this frame, social relationships are not static entities, but are rather constantly constructed and modified through power and politeness moves to manage conflict (Locher, 2004). Social relationships determine who has status and power in a community and how those with power use it to exclude or include others (Fairclough, 1989). Members of the community use discourse to assert their position within the community and the relationships they have with other members. Social relationships within a community do not occur in a vacuum but rather are shaped by participants’ cultures, experiences, and values (Bourdieu, 1991). In these classrooms, teachers and students were in constant negotiation about how their classroom community would operate, who would have the power in the community, what discourses would be valued, and which would be marginalized or excluded (Rex & McEachen, 1999).

The social relationships that characterize the classroom environment arise from the sense of identity that each student and teacher brings to the class. Identities, like social relationships, are shifting and multiple rather than fixed. Language use constitutes identity formation; people construct their identities through the language they use in their interactions with others. Teachers and students position themselves, and those with whom they interact, by the way that they talk with one another. Over time, strings of discursive positionings construct identities that speakers perform for their particular group in their particular way, although they constantly reconstruct these identities as they interact both inside and outside of the classroom (Gee, 1999; Locher, 2004; Rex, 2001).

Subject matter, too, is neither stable nor constant but is something that teachers and students negotiate and mediate. Through their language, teachers and students build norms for acceptable genres of subject matter practices (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). As they communicate about what counts as literate practice over time, a commonly understood conception of what is constituted by the subject matter is reached (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992).

Taken together, these three concepts provide a view of classroom teaching and learning that is context dependent, fluid, and negotiated by the participants. Social relationships, identity construction, subject matter teaching and learning, and classroom community building exist in dialectical interrelations that are mutually constitutive. By looking at the interactivity of these elements among the students and teachers in a classroom, we can understand how these practices result from negotiations over time and how teachers and students take up particular identity positions. These classroom negotiations reflect the values and beliefs of the actors that originate outside the classroom and are rebuilt inside the classroom as community is constructed. To understand the origins, evolution, and effect of certain pedagogical practices, including those that researchers have determined to be “culturally” derived and racially imbued, we need to observe what is being accomplished in terms of relationship, identity, and subject matter in the moment-to-moment interactions in which race is a factor, and whether over time class members accept and successfully act on these accomplishments. In other words, to see race as a factor we need to think about it as connected to how social relationship, identity, and subject matter are talked into being.

## EXPLORING RACIAL INTERACTIONS IN THREE CLASSROOMS

### Why These Three Teachers?

The teachers, Stan, Marita, and Jolene, volunteered to be part of this work to improve their practice and grow as professional educators. They had strong beliefs about what they should be doing with and for their students. As I learned through interviews and observations, the three teachers believed fervently in the importance of creating a classroom atmosphere that was conducive to literacy building; they had a clearly defined sense of what that atmosphere should be like, and they explicitly indicated to students how they should behave. Each of their classrooms' practices and norms for English language arts learning was linked to their goals for, and beliefs about, their students (Rex & Nelson, 2001, 2002, 2004).

Additionally, I selected these teachers and their classes because the three configurations of race, educational achievement, and social class they represent are richly divergent and consequently offer greater opportunity for difference and particularity in the types of interactions that occur in their classrooms. Stan is a middle-class White male with extensive teaching experience, an MA in composition, and an EdD in education. He was teaching “general” tracked, working- to middle-class, predominantly African American (with some White and immigrant) students who typically struggled to accomplish required institutional grade-level competencies. Marita is an experienced African American female teacher with

two MA degrees who was homeless at age 15. She taught exclusively African American general students of working to middle class who also had a history of academic struggle and poor achievement. Jolene is a White, middle-class female who was in her third year of teaching English at the time of this study. Her class was predominantly African American honors students from the middle to upper middle class who had maintained at least a B average throughout school.

### Why These Data Samples?

The data for this essay were part of a 6-year program of ethnographic research of secondary English language arts schooling and related professional development. The research was located in two high schools in a 95% African American urban-suburban school district in which race and class differences were dominant factors. The interactional excerpts presented in this article were selected from 8 weeks of daily classroom video and field note data collected sequentially in Stan's (Weeks 1–8), Marita's (Weeks 9–16), and Jolene's (Weeks 17–24) classrooms and are complemented by extensive interviews and artifacts. The selection of the three interactions for this article emerged from my interest in exploring race as a factor in classroom teaching and learning. As often happens, my initial exploration developed into a focused argument as I read scholarship inspired by problems I encountered in understanding what I was viewing. These complementary ideas provided a way of construing what was occurring in the interactions that linked to previous seminal scholarship and implied a promising new direction.

However, although this expansive lens and methodology provided more elaborate ways of viewing the issue of race in classroom interactions, it was not appropriate for assessing the quality of the teaching and learning. The data samples were collected at different times during the school term and represent different stages in the evolution of classroom cultures and relationships among the teachers and their students. The interactions selected for this analysis are meant only to serve as useful sites for examining the complex dynamic interrelations between the building of social relationships, personal identities, and subject matter knowledge during moments when race is referred to as a factor in the interaction. Information about the teachers and their classes is reported more fully in other studies (Rex & Jordan, 2004; Rex & Nelson, 2001, 2002, 2004).

### Who Am I to Do This Work?

Because racial identity and knowledge about racial discourse are central to this article, I offer facts about my race that I think have bearing. In addition, concern about the trustworthiness of my interpretations has led me to employ a number of strategies to be sure that my own stake in this work does not unfairly compromise my representations.

I am White and have had limited experience with African American English (AAE) and with African American teachers and students. AAE refers to what is also called African American language (AAL), AAVE, and Black English. AAE as defined by Morgan (1994) refers to language varieties used by people in the United States whose major socialization has been with U.S. residents of African descent. As such, AAE has both cultural and historical meaning. Its speakers are connected both to the African diaspora and to the English-speaking diaspora. I refer to standard English to distinguish the American English variety referred to by the participants in this study. Standard English was the variety of English students and teachers believed successful Americans commanded. Standard English is treated as a “generic” English, without concern for social, cultural, class, region, age, or gender distinctions.

I began learning standard American English as a child after I immigrated from England to an all-White working-class community in the United States. I became proficient with academic standard English in high school and later earned a BA in English and an MA in composition. I did not intentionally engage with African American language or culture until 8 years ago, when I took up residence in and began researching mostly African American English teachers’ classrooms in the high schools whose data inform this article. This project is the third in a line of scholarship focused around race as a complicating factor of classroom literacy teaching and learning (Rex & Jordan, 2004; Rex & Nelson, 2002).

I was raised by British parents with a passionate attachment to British working-class values, so even after I became a U.S. citizen at age 16, I embodied national and cultural dissonance. Many years later, my consciousness has transformed considerably as my sense of what it means to be a U.S. citizen and my commitment to U.S. education have deepened.

In taking on this line of work, I took the stance that my frames of reference for interpreting classroom discourse and activity lacked experiential understanding of African American cultural sensibilities. I resolved that when classroom occurrences tied to race were unlike or at odds with my expectations, I would investigate these with the persons involved. Additionally, my research assistant and I independently analyzed the transcripts of the three cases, drawing from the ethnographic data we jointly collected, before negotiating our interpretations. Most important, the three teachers—Stan, Marita, and Jolene—were involved in the interpretations of these and related data and have read and concur with the way they, their classrooms, and their students are represented. They support my attempt to publicize the issues this article illustrates. Their reactions to my interpretations have played an instrumental role in my thinking. I was concerned about building a framework meaningful to them as well as useful in advancing their teaching goals.

## RACE AS DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP, PERSONAL IDENTITY, AND ACADEMIC PRACTICE

This section provides a brief description of Stan's, Marita's, and Jolene's classrooms before providing an analysis of a racially marked interaction from each. The analyses illustrate how teachers and students call forth various expressions of race during acts of teaching and learning as purposeful types of talk. The cases make apparent that in classrooms, race is a social relationship, a personal identity, and an academic practice that is discursively constructed. As such, race is influenced by and influences the normative classroom conduct of teachers and students.

### Negotiating "Appropriate"

The first interaction between Stan, a White male English teacher, and Sonandra, an African American 11th grader, illustrates the negotiation of a clash in what each considered "appropriate" classroom social discourse. After briefly describing the classroom and circumstances surrounding the interchange from the teacher's perspective, I present an interaction from the third day of class—first from Stan's point of view and then from an AAE perspective.

#### *The Classroom From the Teacher's Perspective*

Stan viewed his students as adolescents who lacked confidence and needed to learn how to learn. He had a purposeful plan for developing students' literacy skills over the semester by starting with simple, discrete skills and slowly increasing task complexity. We observed Stan's class for the first 8 weeks of the year, during which he spent considerable time on class procedures, spelling words, and punctuation. Stan told us that he chose to do this to allow his less skilled students to experience success by attaining some control over their writing. He hoped this would encourage them to remain engaged when more challenging activities were presented later in the year. We observed Stan's students taking up his view of literacy, actively and effectively engaging in the vocabulary, punctuation, and style exercises that Stan gave them. They also made the transition to the more difficult tasks of reading and responding, both verbally and in writing, to long, complex texts (such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*). Stan chose this book as a model of what he considered "real writing"—it incorporated conventions outside of school writing that he wanted his students to understand, appreciate, and learn how to do.

Stan's view of building the social environment of his classroom matched his approach to developing literacy. He maintained firm control over the social environ-

ment during instructional practices in the early weeks of this class, planning to model and build “respectful” social patterns that students would later practice independently. In the first semester, he led all discussions of the Hemingway novel and nearly all discussions of student writing. His questions and comments directed, coaxed, extended, probed, cajoled, and encouraged students to participate in expected ways. For the most part, they did. Stan was always the mediator. Because side talk was discouraged, students rarely talked with each other, although they sometimes made reference to another student’s comment when they spoke to Stan. At this stage, the literacy community in this classroom was characterized not by how students interacted about literacy practices with one another, but by how they interacted with Stan while the others looked on.

Stan had deliberately thought through and planned what he was trying to accomplish with his students of color. He grew up with Black children in an area near his school, which was similar in racial demographics to the one in which he taught. He was comfortable with and got along with the majority Black population at his school, but certain incidents had led him to believe that although most students did not put his Whiteness first, some did. Some students had told him he could not possibly understand them because he was the wrong color, so he regarded building their trust as a challenge. His way of developing trust was to treat everyone with respect and to hold his students to the same standard. He led students in structured trust-building activities to create a “team” sensibility for learning. He asked students to write about self-revealing subjects and then encouraged them to read their work to the class, sharing his own writing first. He believed that students would become better readers and writers if they could make and express personal connections, and he wanted students to feel safe in talking about their work with their classmates. He demanded respect by quietly, but consistently and deliberately, enforcing his rules for class participation. He managed all student activity in his classes and did not allow any “put-down” talk.

Stan was also concerned about other kinds of diversity among his 23 11th graders that might challenge social sensibilities. Among the 17 African American and 5 Arab American students were a young woman who had recently come out as lesbian, an Arab American young woman with dwarfism, and a new immigrant from the West African Republic of Cameroon with a distinctive English accent.

Most of the students spoke standard English in the classroom, although in infrequent side talk African American students spoke in AAE. Grouped as a general track class, the students’ achievement records since kindergarten indicated low to moderate scores on tests of basic skills and in grades in English, with a trend of declining achievement for half of the African American students.

At the end of their two semesters with Stan, most of the students attempted to sign up for English with him the following year. At the beginning of the year, students’ reported views of the class were similar in range and approbation to the students’ views in Marita’s class. For example, Lorraine, an Arab American girl, con-

sidered the class work easy, but assumed it would get harder. Francine, from Cameroon, said she was learning a lot and appreciated her kind teacher. Spencer, an African American boy, thought it was okay, but that they should be learning other things. Jarita, an African American girl, thought it was fun and that Mr. Stevens [Stan] was nice.

### *The Classroom Interaction*

For nearly all of the sessions during the first 8 weeks of class, only a single conversation occurred at any given moment on the classroom floor, and Stan was either part of it or overseeing it. From the first day of class, Stan made explicit to students through direct instruction, affirmation, suggestion, or correction how students should interact with him and each other. He encouraged applause for students who volunteered, willingly discussed decisions or rules students thought were unfair, and accepted self-expressive student language and interpretations that he regarded as not disrespectful of anyone in the class. He accepted a boy's declaration that the first time he "pimped" was an occasion he would like to relive. However, he told a girl her response was inappropriate when she laughed at a classmate's desire to relive the day, 5 years ago, when her father abandoned the family.

The interaction that follows occurred on the third day of class. In the prior two class sessions, students had introduced themselves by telling something everyone should know about them and about a time in their lives they would like to relive. Stan had cajoled the reluctant students into volunteering. On Day 3, he elaborated on a written sheet of class rules each student received as part of the class contract that they and he would sign:

[Rule number] four, using inappropriate language; nobody can swear in this class, under any circumstances. If you're so angry or so mad about something that you feel you're going to burst, step outside, you know, and do it out there. Okay, then come back in. You can't use inappropriate language in this class. You cannot even tell somebody to shut up. I don't want to hear anybody saying "shut up" to anybody else. That's a rude thing to say, and we're trying to build sort of like a team atmosphere here, a class where people respect one another, and telling someone to shut up is not appropriate. [Five-second pause. Stan looks at a student's list of rules.] Okay, um, there's another one I want to add to that, and that is being disrespectful to one another. That is absolutely off limits in this class. Do not be disrespectful to your fellow classmates. So please add that on that sheet. And let me give you an example, or let me define disrespect. Disrespect would be something like I'm talking to you, or I ask you to do something, or a classmate asks you to do something, and you start grumbling, and start muttering something under your breath, and it's obvious you don't like it. You haven't sworn, and you haven't said shut up. But you're grumbling and it's obvious that you're saying something. Okay, that's not, that's sort of disrespectful. There was some behavior, also Monday, that I consider to be disrespectful. Some people said a

few things, and I did not think it was appropriate. I hope that's the first and the last time that I hear that sort of thing in class. You've got to respect one another, and that's being tolerant of one another. You don't have to like what somebody else says to you, or even agree with it, but you've got to respect that person's opinion.

Later, while explaining another expectation (that students who missed class had to call a classmate for the assignment and make it up), a female African American student challenged the rule about not telling others to "shut up." She was one of the students in the class who struggled most with reading and writing and who was actively social outside of class. Sonandra was referred by her mother for special services testing in third grade, identified as learning disabled, and given pull-out services until junior high school. During that time period, she was described in school records as "compliant" and "socially well-adjusted." The year data were collected, however, she was asked to leave the yearbook staff for not being a team player and, as in previous high school years, she was suspended. She was socially active in Stan's class, mostly with the young men sitting around her. In the interchange that follows, after a brief exchange with Stan about the policy, the boy next to her made a remark and she told him to "shut up." Stan quietly, but firmly, asked her to step into the hallway (see the Appendix for transcription conventions).

### Talk Sample 1

- a Stan: Step outside, please.  
 b Sonandra: Okay. I'll quit.  
 c Stan: Step outside. Step outside.  
 d Sonandra: I'm leaving [She and the boy she was talking with laugh. The rest of the students are silent with straight faces.]  
 e Stan: There's an example of a zero. She said shut up, and she was unwrapping candy. [To the boy Sonandra told to shut up] Put that [candy] away. Thank you. [To class] Okay, does everyone understand the policy on being absent? I know you're absent sometimes, I know that ...

[Sonandra had been late to class that day, and had given Stan what school members call physical "attitude" when he inquired about the reason. This means she had rolled her eyes, turned away, and ostentatiously taken her seat. Although it was considered within bounds for her to challenge the teacher's rule about making up work, she had done so with continuing "attitude," in her tone and physical posturing, which again Stan had overlooked.

After completing explanations of the class rules and the class contract, Stan went into the hall to talk with Sonandra. At first, their roles in this interchange are quite different from those they assumed in the classroom. Stan, the insistent asserter, is replaced by a reassuring inquisitor, and Sonandra no longer gives attitude. Instead, she takes on the meek manner of a repentant child.]

- 1 Stan: Okay, what's the problem?
- 2 Sonandra: What do you mean what's the problem? What's the problem?
- 3 Stan: Is there a problem?
- 4 Sonandra: No.
- 5 Stan: Okay, Okay. Do you know why I sent you out in the hall?
- 6 Sonandra: Uh-huh.
- 7 Stan: Okay=
- 8 Sonandra: =I'm sorry.
- 9 Stan: For two reasons=
- 10 Sonandra: =The candy.
- 11 Stan: And the "shut up."
- 12 Sonandra: The "shut up"?
- 13 Stan: You told Brock to shut up. It might have been a playful way, but you did.
- 14 Sonandra: Oh, I don't remember. I'm sorry.
- 15 Stan: Okay. (.5) Now. I have the feeling that there's a problem with Brock, because you were very quiet before he came in, and then you started acting up a little bit. I will separate you guys, because it looks like =
- 16 Sonandra: =it's not a problem =
- 17 Stan: =it looks like you two together is, at least for, for order in the class, it's a bad mix.
- 18 Sonandra: No it's not=
- 19 Stan: =Okay, I'll give it a [shot
- 20 Sonandra: [We don't have any classes together=
- 21 Stan: =Okay.  
Well, okay. (1.0) But, you know, I want you to know I see what's going on. (.4) The comments you made Monday, to Francine, I didn't think was appropriate =
- 22 Sonandra: =Who's Francine?
- 23 Stan: The girl from Africa.
- 24 Sonandra: What did I say?
- 25 Stan: Well, I think there was
- 26 Sonandra: I said I liked her accent. That's what we talked about, her accent. I said I liked her accent.
- 27 Stan: But she also said that it was different there because, because everybody was friendly and she said =
- 28 Sonandra: =No, I just wanted, I wanted to know how she felt, like we was her family. That was just a question. I wasn't saying nothing toward it.
- 29 Stan: If I misunderstood, I'm sorry. I apologize.
- 30 Sonandra: Good, because I didn't mean anything by it, I was just asking her a question. I mean I would like to go there, so.
- 31 Stan: Okay. Are we all set to come back in?
- 32 Sonandra: Uh-huh.

- 33 Stan: Okay, there's no hard feelings on my part. Okay? But, you have the zero. Hang in there. Everybody's on a little five-minute break right now. I passed out four other sheets, okay, you're going to have to read them yourself, and there's a contract in there that you sign, and that I sign, okay. I'm going to collect that at the end of class.
- 34 Sonandra: Alright.
- 35 Stan: Okay. [Both return to the classroom.]

During the first part of the conversation, Sonandra offered an unsolicited apology (Line 8) for eating candy. She asserted that she did not remember telling Brock to shut up but apologized again nevertheless. In the next phase of the interchange, Stan identified a second problem—her “bad mix” (Line 17) dynamics with Brock, which contributed to her “acting up a little bit” (Line 15). Stan inferred that the two of them were engaged in flirtatious behavior. This time Sonandra’s tone changed. She dismissed the incident as not a problem and indicated that the two were not in a relationship by saying they did not have classes together. Stan acquiesced, but before opening up a third problem, he said, “I want you to know ... I see what’s going on” (Line 21). Although Stan acknowledged Sonandra’s playfulness in saying “shut up” flirtatiously to Brock (Line 13), he took a different approach in addressing the third, and more serious, perceived rule violation.

The previous class session, shy Francine from Cameroon had been persuaded to talk about missing her good life in Africa, where the people were friendly and took care of each other. In a mocking tone consistent with social talk common among students, Sonandra had responded, “Ahhh, we’re not friendly to you.” Six African American students laughed at this. Then, Sonandra followed with, “We don’t take care of each other,” which elicited more laughter. Stan told Sonandra that he did not regard her comments as appropriate, which alluded back to his class rules about not being disrespectful of classmates. Sonandra had no memory of being disrespectful. She remembered liking Francine’s accent and acted wounded and incensed by Stan’s accusation. She recalled treating Francine “like we was her family” (Line 28), and just wanting to know how she felt, not meaning anything by her comments. When Sonandra added, “I mean, I would like to go there” (Line 30), she appeared to warrant her connection to Africa, her respect for Francine’s origins, and her genuine interest in questioning her.

Whereas Sonandra had been compliantly apologetic about her first “inappropriate” infraction and gone head to head with Stan in an even contest on the second, with the third accusation she reversed the footing and positioned Stan’s problem (and, therefore, Stan) as “inappropriate.” Immediately, Stan acknowledged that he may have misunderstood and he apologized, thus diffusing Sonandra’s heightened feelings, evidenced by her acceptance of his apology. Stan declared that he harbored no hard feelings, but Sonandra provided no insights into how she was feeling about the interaction. Nevertheless, we noted that she engaged in Stan’s version of “appropriate” participatory classroom behavior for the remainder of the class pe-

riod. In subsequent classes, she asserted her own view of what was appropriate, which was sometimes the “put-down” behavior. Stan phoned her mother after a period of multiple infractions, but Sonandra remained in the class and managed to earn a passing grade. The following year, she transferred into Stan’s English class at the end of the semester, claiming that “they didn’t do enough writing in the other classroom.”

In this mixed race and ethnicity class, Stan, a White, structured, rule-enforcing teacher, did not allow what he defined as inappropriate “put-down” social behavior, although he allowed topics that arose from adolescent social life (e.g., flirtatious behavior). He clearly defined and reinforced the boundaries of social behavior and maintained social control. What Stan referred to as “put-downs” have been extensively described in literature about Black oral performance language as “signifying” (e.g., Gates, 1988; Morgan, 1994; Smitherman, 1977). Commonly engaged in by both African American men and women, signifying is a highly respected strategy of verbal artistry, a verbal game used to launch insults, that originated in African tales of the trickster Signifying Monkey. It is often a way people in weaker positions play with language to deal with those in positions of power who do not understand the language play. Signifying can mean a number of things, including making fun of a person or situation, stirring up conflict, or communicating indirectly. African American women’s signifying has been described as counterlanguage characterized by its baited indirectness (Morgan, 1989, 1991, 1993).

Sonandra’s performance of signifying by eating the candy, saying “shut up,” and responding to the girl from Cameroon was to her an ordinary and appropriate social way of being and acting. On this third day of class, she learned that her teacher did not consider it appropriate social behavior. In this interaction she engaged in the first of what would be hundreds of negotiations with him about her counterlanguage—which is to say, how she spoke, gestured, and moved—with others in the classroom. In addition, AAE linguists might describe Sonandra’s discourse in her engagement with Stan as “shucking” or “jiving” discursive behavior (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972; Rickford, 1999; Rickford & Rickford, 2000). In her first two exchanges with the authority figure, she appeased him to get out of trouble. However, in her third exchange, a more complicated elaboration of shucking occurred. Sonandra no longer appeased Stan; rather, she artfully put him on. She made a move that trumped Stan’s authority. By alluding to Francine as “family,” Sonandra aligned herself with Francine as comembers of the Black family, and she positioned Stan as an outsider who did not understand these sorts of things. Stan acquiesced to the position and acknowledged that he may have misunderstood, implying that he agreed that he lacked the knowledge, and therefore the stake and status, Sonandra possessed.

Interviews with Stan revealed he did not know about signifying and shucking and jiving. He could not possibly draw on African American oral traditions in his interaction with Sonandra. If he could have, would his assumptions, rules, and ac-

tions have been different? How should White teachers who do not speak AAE or value its qualitative characteristics, such as signifying and jiving, respond when their students engage in AAE as their preferred means of classroom engagement? Even when White teachers do know and value AAE speaking traditions, if they do not speak them, how are they to effectively engage? Also, what issues and questions about shaping classroom discourse emerge from the contest between Stan and Sonandra? What was gained, what was lost, and what was changed for Sonandra and the rest of the class because Stan had a zero-tolerance rule for signifying and because Sonandra engaged only in AAE? What are the effects on African American students and their teachers, and on the classroom teaching and learning norms that develop, when their socially and culturally familiar ways of interacting continually clash? These questions and the interaction that raised them can be propitiously pursued by considering what issues are at stake for the interactants and how they negotiate them. Negotiating stake has a lot to do with how the problem is defined and acted on in the moment by the teacher and student. Having raised this fundamental issue of a situated definition of what is at stake and a situated negotiation of stake, I defer further discussion until I present two additional interactions.

### Negotiating “Cool”

In the second interaction, the key interactants were Marita, who is African American, and two of her African American male students, Byron and Jacob. The boys were good friends and identified themselves as “rappers,” a style of speech they often exercised in the classroom, and that Marita encouraged. Following a brief description of the classroom from Marita’s perspective, I highlight the AAE signifying aspects of the classroom interaction first as a narrative to foreground the interactional dynamic and second to emphasize the conflicts of identity and values in the exercise of the signifying genre.

#### *The Classroom From the Teacher’s Perspective*

Marita believed that the best ways to develop a community of literacy learning among her students were to provide students with highly accessible texts that they could read and react to based on their personal experiences, and to let students freely express their interest and engagement. Every 3 weeks, students were required to read and report in writing on one self-selected book from the class library or their own sources. The books in the class library were biographies, mystery books, and “self-help” psychology books. Although the reports were intended to be analytic in nature, they usually fell short of Marita’s expectations. Reports were often error-ridden reconstructions of the plot and infrequently completed on time. The primary text read by the whole class was *Go Ask Alice*, an anonymous book re-

counting a young White woman's experiences with drugs, sex, and family difficulties. Marita said she chose this book because she thought that many of her students would be able to identify with the characters' situations.

Marita's pedagogy was shaped by the view that literate practices could act as a form of personal growth through self-expression. She believed that many of her students lacked the motivation to do what they were supposed to and that reading about a character's troubles and analyzing their motivations could help them make sense of their own experiences. She also encouraged writing as a therapeutic activity by telling students that writing about their feelings could help them cope with problems they faced.

In Months 3 and 4 of the semester, we observed that although Marita encouraged personal writing for daily journal topics and creative forms of expression such as poetry, her writing instruction concentrated almost exclusively on preparation for the state standardized test. She believed that for her students to express themselves effectively, she should address discrete aspects of their writing. Marita began the year with a unit on sentence writing and during observation had continued with instructional activities aimed at improving students' paragraphing skills. All of these activities were presented as test preparation tools.

Switching in and out of AAE and standard English, Marita spoke to students in an easygoing, conversational, yet maternal style. She laughed along with the class at students' social antics, threatened to phone parents to get them to work, and commiserated over students' worries or ill feelings. She explained that her "laid back" approach was her way of maintaining relationships with her students that "kept the pressure off." She made a point of spending time with individual students each day to stay involved in their personal lives and emotionally connected. She characterized her attempts to improve her teaching as the challenge to balance pushing for student performance while maintaining an environment that fostered personal engagement and individual initiative of students who did not engage readily in school learning.

Marita's 17 African American students spoke exclusively in AAE. Classified as a general 11th-grade English class, the students had consistently low school performance records measured by achievement tests, grade point averages, attendance records, and grades in English. One young woman in the class was a single parent, one young man had fathered a child, two young men had been expelled from other high schools, and three young men were suspended from school while we were there. In interviews, students volunteered a wide range of statements about the class, from Jane's assessment ("This class is unique and fun. I like to read and get As and Bs") to Jacob's more critical evaluation ("It's too easy; we did harder work in 10th grade"). However, when we compared students' daily performance records and achievement on tests and assignments, there was little direct relation between what they asserted and how they performed. For example, although Jane hurriedly read the novel, her completion of reading assignments was uneven,

and consequently she did not consistently earn As and Bs. Jacob, one of the suspended students and a key participant in the interaction that follows, completed few class assignments.

### *The Classroom Interaction*

During most class activity, students were talkative and socially engaged, lapsing in and out of playful verbal banter with each other and the teacher. Students called out their preferences as well as their answers, and when signifying occurred, Marita let the interchange run its course, stepping in only if she believed an inappropriate boundary had been crossed. In the following excerpt from a paragraph writing activity in the fourth month of school, we observe Marita stepping in when one boundary is breached. In her exchange with Byron, the student who crossed it, we observe the negotiation of what is acceptable “cool” behavior, a major social student identity marker.

Students had been writing a topic sentence and support sentences into the slots of a graphic organizer they would use to write a paragraph about the main character of the novel the class was reading. Marita called on students to report what they had written to that point to illustrate that many types of topic sentences could be written that demanded different types of evidence from the book. Calling on three students who provided useful suggestions, she walked Jacob through the writing of a new topic sentence from one of his support sentences. She then asked the class to think up a concluding sentence for the topic sentence and support sentences she had written on the board.

Before reading the interaction among Marita, Byron, and Jacob, bear in mind that Byron and Jacob were good friends, and that at the beginning of this class Jacob had informed Marita that it was Byron’s birthday, at which point Marita serenaded him with a happy birthday song. Consider, as well, that on two occasions during prior classes, we had observed Byron chiding students when he interpreted their words or actions as disrespectful of Marita.

#### **Talk Sample 2**

- 1 Marita: Okay. So, now you have another topic sentence, Jacob. Her issues are having a lasting effect on her life. Alice suffers from depression. She’s not making many friends. She feels like the black sheep of her family. And then you could tie in all of these together in one conclusion sentence. Let’s go ahead and do that now since we’ve gotten this far (.). Could someone please think about it just for one minute. Once you have it in your head just raise your hand and share with the class.  
(5-second pause)
- 2 [Jacob raises his hand.]
- 3 Marita: Jacob.

- 4 Jacob: Let's see. As a result Alice's Alice illig I mean, dang =  
 5 Marita: =go ahead
- 6 Byron: [Patience. Take your time.
- 7 Jacob: [Alice's issues (.1) overcame her life.
- 8 Byron: I thought she said figure it out and then say something.
- 9 Jacob: Playa, I don't think, Playa. I just freestyle.
- 10 Byron: She said that because so there wouldn't be no dumb stuff said.  
 [So think.
- 11 Jacob: [I just freestyle. Excuse me.
- 12 Byron: I said what you said was stupid.
- 13 [Class laughs.]
- 14 Marita: No! No! Byron! Byron! Stop putting people down. Don't do that. That's not cool.
- 15 Byron: I'm not trying to be cool. [I'm just trying to figure it out.
- 16 Patrick: [Byron that's stupido.
- 17 [Loud class laughter.]
- 18 Byron: I'm being myself. [I'm just trying to be cool with people.
- 19 Marita: [Don't. Don't. Don't put people down. Don't do that.
- 20 Byron: What's the big deal? [How you gonna live?
- 21 Patrick: [Tu el stupido. [Tu el stupido. (.5) [Tu el stupido.
- 22 Marita: [Go ahead. Go ahead. Jacob. Jacob. Continue with what you were doing before you were so rudely interrupted.
- 23 Jacob: Before before I was interrupted by this character over there. As a result Alice has uhm Alice damn man Alice's issues has =
- 24 Girl: =you said taken over her life=
- 25 Jacob: =has taken over her life.

After a long (for this classroom) period of silence—5 seconds—Jacob volunteered to give the concluding sentence for his paragraph. By waiting and raising his hand, he responded to the teacher's request to think for a minute and signal readiness with his hand. However, he had only performed half of her directions. He had not thought up a concluding sentence that he was ready to share with the class. Byron responded supportively the first time his friend stumbled over his words, but on the second try he concluded that Jacob had not followed directions and told him as much: "I thought she said figure it out and then say something" (Line 8).

Byron's conversational move was common among students in this class. Even when the teacher was directing an instructional activity, students broke into conversations that justified, challenged, supported, or defended what they had said or done, to negotiate (i.e., reinvok, reshape, reinforce) social relationship as a public performance, "playing" for public status. As with this conversation, these interactions often turned into signifying performances that gradually escalated in degree of condescension. Participants put the instruction on hold and, as in this case by in-

voking the third person “she,” positioned the teacher—and by extension, the instruction—outside the interaction.

Jacob’s response to Byron, whom he referred to in Black vernacular as “playa,” was to claim that he was just freestyling (Line 9). Jacob was referring to the spontaneous rapping that the two boys engaged in often in and outside of class. This move identified the boys as social partners who were aligned by their engagement in social rap discourse. With his response to Jacob, Byron sided with the teacher’s school instructional discourse rather than with the playful rap way of talking his friend claimed as most relevant at this moment. He spoke for Marita and for the value of the school discourse, justifying why thinking up a sentence before saying it was a better move than freestyling one. “So there wouldn’t be no dumb stuff said” (Line 10). When Jacob exhorted that he “just freestyles” (Line 11) as Byron said “so think” (Line 10), we see the clash between these two positions.

When Jacob said, “Excuse me” (Line 11), he was demanding that Byron repeat what he had been saying, because their talk had been overlapping. Byron repeated himself and increased the intensity of the put-down. He came back with a direct insult, “I said what you said was stupid,” at which point the class laughed (Line 13).

Marita read Byron’s insult as crossing the boundary of social play and told him to “stop putting people down. That’s not cool” (Line 14). By checking his act of signification and contesting the “coolness” of the talk, Marita not only took up the students’ language, she challenged the parameters of signifying talk. She had not intervened in previous classroom signifying, but this time, she drew the line at insults aimed at a student’s instructional performance.

As the class laughed, as Patrick repeated the mocking refrain in Spanish, and as Marita insisted that Byron stop acting like this, Byron attempted to justify himself. It was a pattern of justification played out often in the class, wherein the merging of social game playing and instruction could lead to either the social or the academic performance winning the class’s attention. In this case, as happened occasionally, student academic performance was subverted, even though a student and the teacher attempted to reinforce strategies that supported academic learning. Byron abandoned his alignment with the teacher’s position and defended himself against public humiliation. He told Marita that he was not trying to “be cool”: “I’m being myself. I’m just trying to be cool with people.” Byron’s way of being cool differed from his teacher’s use of the word.

At least three meanings of “cool” are evident in Marita’s and Byron’s use of the term. Each use invoked a different discourse that referenced a different cultural model as conceptualized by Gee (1999). One meaning of “cool” is the discourse of social signifying meant to establish social relationship and status. Byron denied engaging in that discourse, instead claiming to be acting as himself “trying to be cool with people.” He placed himself outside the social game and in the school-rewarded discourse of individual responsibility for one’s classmate, friend, or brother. He was just trying to be a good guy by supporting the teacher and helping

his friend be a better student. Marita's concept of "cool" combined elements of both. It was acceptable to invoke rap discourses and signify but not if it directly assaulted student academic sensibilities. From her perspective, one could be socially cool and learn academics if one knew where to draw the line.

Jacob did not take up the questions Byron directed at him: "What's the big deal? How you gonna live?" (Line 20). With these linked questions, Byron reinforced the seriousness and importance of his concern and his impatience with Jacob's dismissiveness. His first rhetorical question asserted that his stance was not "a big deal" and that Jacob and the class should not have regarded his stance as an anomaly, while venting his frustration that they did. His second, follow-up question was less rhetorical and more direct: The implication was that Jacob should be thinking about his future and how he would live without an education. In the hubbub of simultaneous talk, Marita had not heard Byron's questions. She urged Jacob on. She sanctioned Jacob's original answer to her instructional question by describing Byron's comments as rude interruptions and by asking Jacob to pick up where he left off. He may have been freestyling, but that was okay. Now he could build on what he began with, and a classmate reminded him where that was. Jacob clearly bore no ill will toward Byron and emerged from the interchange in the more powerful position. Or had he?

Byron and Jacob's interchange, joined by Patrick, can be read as the linguistic sparring of signifying. It includes many signifying elements Smitherman (1977) identified: exaggerated language (*Tu es stupido*), mimicry (*stupid–stupido*), spontaneity and improvisation, aphoristic phrasing (*How you gonna live?*), braggadocio (*I don't think. I just freestyle*), indirection (*circumlocution, suggestiveness*), and tonal semantics (*changes in pitch and emphasis to shape meaning*). Patrick joined Byron to do what Gates (1988), when discussing the archetypal signifying monkey, has described as both wreaking havoc on and inscribing order for criticism. The interaction provides a discursive genre for criticism to be leveled and confuses the pedagogical situation. Patrick's enthusiastic and skillful participation and the rapt attention of the class marked this as a discursive occasion of desired social engagement that students, if not their teacher, recognized and appreciated. The signifying rap is important as an occasion when students and the teacher challenge and redefine the normative pattern of social engagement.

The enormity of this incident becomes more apparent when we consider that Jacob's reference to Byron as "playa" can be read as a reference to the classic "mack" or "pimp" figure in gangsta rap. Rap star Too Short's (Todd Shaw) song, "I'm a Playa," (Shaw, Clinton, Collins, & Frank, 1993) established this type of rapper figure, which became, through massive commercial circulation, the rap zeitgeist for African American and White adolescents (Quinn, 2000). The *playa* is the trickster figure based on the mythic signifying monkey. He is to be respected and emulated as he earns a rich living from his wit, guile, and dexterous language use. We cannot know how deeply embedded Jacob was in the discourse and related values of

gangsta rap when he referred to himself and his actions as those of a playa. He may only have meant that he was spontaneously freestyling. However, it is unlikely that he was holding to only a single quality of signifying discourse. It is more likely that he is doing what Byron accused him of—that is, he replaced the teacher’s academic discourse with the social discourse of rap and all its attendant values. That Byron, himself a playa, challenged his friend’s activation of rapper discourse by using the very attributes of the discourse to do so illustrates the complications of the moment. Byron invoked the social discourse appropriate for the situation to retain his social alignment with his friend. He also turned the form against itself. He used the form to disrupt the genre—or at least the values and dispositions it evokes—and align himself with his teacher and the academic enterprise. From this perspective, Byron’s “How you gonna live?” is a plea and a contestation uttered in counterpoint to Jacob’s implied claim of future economic success by continuing to be a playa and live the life. Byron’s utterance aligns him with Marita and positions him as someone who can rap and be a social playa but who has chosen not to be a pimp or a mack.

In this case, in linguistic terms, the teacher and students spoke the same language. However, in terms of what social act they were performing through that language form (Austin, 1962), and what the act meant to the speakers and hearers, there were important and informative differences. Through that language, the students were negotiating identity and the conflicting values associated with status and accomplishment. Marita distinguished between speaking the signifying genre as a discourse to strengthen social identity and relationship and as a threat to academic identity and knowledge building. At stake was her desire to inspire her students to more consistent and meaningful academic engagement and improved academic performance. She set boundaries for signifying talk; challenging academic behavior or identity was not acceptable. Is drawing this line necessary, and if it is, is it effective for increasing student academic engagement and achievement? Byron had a complicated stake in the interaction. He reminds us to consider whether and how students can have competing stakes in school discourses and in discourses (and related identities) that are antithetical. Can the ways in which students talk that seem to negate and work against objectives for literacy learning and standards for academic achievement also serve to deconstruct the hold of such practices on students?

### Enacting Academic Literacy

In this third, and final, interaction, the teacher does not speak, although her talk dominated class time and attention throughout the previous 5 months of the class. Seven students—six African American and one White—discuss, in standard English, a racially provocative question about the protagonist in Wright’s (1998) *Na-*

*tive Son* directed at Michael, the White student. The importance of stake becomes apparent as conflict is avoided even as severe threats to face are made.

### *The Classroom From the Teacher's Perspective*

In Jolene's Honors English classroom, all participants expected and wanted improvement of school-based measures of their reading and writing to be the focus of attention and criteria for assessment. Jolene gave extensive instructions and held firmly to due dates. She expected students to revise their assignments to improve their writing and their grades, to be self-directed, and to take personal responsibility for their work's quality and timely completion. Students rarely failed to meet her expectations. They looked up and defined lists of vocabulary words she provided. They read novels, such as *Native Son*, kept extensive reading journals, and wrote analytical essays, keeping track of and turning in designated drafts. They actively engaged in class discussions and even directed them on occasion (as evidenced by the Socratic seminar discussed later). Jolene prefaced new assignments with a rationale and explanation of how they fit into the flow of the curriculum. Common rationales were that the material was something they would need to know the following year, in college, or on the standardized test. By the fifth month of the year, she believed that her students had formed a strong social community in which they supported each other toward accomplishing the class work. She also believed that within this community, every student could have a voice and a moment to shine.

Students took pride in their reading and writing and were expected to rely on internal motivation to develop as literacy learners. Motivation for most of the students was strong. Getting good grades and the social capital good grades gave them meant a great deal, as did getting into a 4-year college and earning scholarships. Students kept track of their grade point averages and shared them with one another. They often encouraged and supported one another's efforts by challenging a perception, praising a performance, excusing an error, or inviting a response.

Jolene had grown up in all-White areas in the state in which she was teaching. She had attended diverse yet socially segregated secondary schools in tracked classes with all White students. She claimed to have had no experience with students from other races or ethnicities before student teaching, which she did in her current school with an experienced, respected female White teacher. It was then that she learned about African American culture and that "these kids are just like any other kids [she] would have to deal with." On occasion she did have conflicts with students, but she usually managed to get to the source of a problem and work things out. Although her White colleagues told her she would be better off teaching White students, she had learned from her friends at White high schools that their students presented their own set of problems. Jolene believed that the problems she encountered with her students were within the normal range of what she would ex-

perience with teenagers anywhere. She took race seriously as an issue in planning her teaching and curriculum, discussed race with her students, and did not express or exhibit negative racially discriminatory beliefs. For example, she selected literature that brought race forward as a problem to be addressed, and she took an antiracist stance in class discussions.

Fifteen of the 16 honors students in Jolene's class conversed in the dialect of their African American adolescent social group as well as standard English. The single White student spoke in a local variety of standard English. They all maintained high scores on standardized English tests and had earned exemplary grades in English language arts since kindergarten. They were confident readers and writers and fluently produced standard written English within the performance range expected for 11th-grade students. All students told us they aspired to earning good grades and to attending college, and their behavior in the class was consistent with this assertion. They were on time, rarely absent, completed their homework, kept deadlines, followed Jolene's instructions, stayed focused on their assignments during class time, and used social talk to forward their schoolwork. One girl, a recent transfer from another school where she had already read the book the class was reading, said she appreciated "doing" it again with this class because this would enable her to earn a higher grade. Students were socially supportive, polite, jovial, and solicitous of each other. For instance, if a student lacked paper or pen, another student would notice and, without a request being made, supply what was needed.

Typically, after providing detailed instructions for what she wanted accomplished, Jolene allowed students to set the tone and pace themselves through completing assigned tasks during large chunks of independent work time, while she talked to individual students at her desk, making occasional supervisory comments. Her students informally conferred with one another in the process of getting the work done, keeping themselves task directed. For example, one African American boy who spoke quietly, always in standard English, often wandered around the room. He frequently paused to read other students' work or went into the hall to work alone. Students respected what they thought was Joseph's need to keep moving to improve his concentration and get his work done.

### *The Classroom Interaction*

The excerpt that follows, from the first occasion of a class Socratic seminar, took place in the fifth month of the course while students were reading *Native Son*, about which they would write a literary essay as their final assessment. Jolene had already led a number of discussions about the racism chronicled in the book. The night before, students had written questions about the book's third section, addressing what they did not understand in the text or a topic they wanted to discuss in the seminar. Jolene had given a detailed explanation of the seminar protocol, with accompanying written instructions on a handout, before turning the discussion over to the students in a "fishbowl" format. Half the students sat in an inner

circle as discussants; the other half occupied an outside circle as observers whose job was to keep track of the inner-circle discussion and report on it later.

After some initial prompting and clarification by Jolene, inner-circle students caught on to the procedure and launched a dialogue with few pauses in talk. They asked each other questions and challenged or elaborated on each other's answers, referring to situations and specific lines from the book as evidence. Speakers politely waited for turns to talk. On the occasions when a speaker's enthusiasm provoked him or her to interrupt, the speaker apologized and deferred to whoever was talking; sometimes that person encouraged the speaker to go ahead. The students responded earnestly and thoughtfully to one another's questions, which often provoked an extended discussion. The inner circle stayed on topic, asked follow-up questions to clarify, probe, and extend an answer; commented; and drew each other into the conversation.

This interaction occurred 25 minutes into the discussion among the seven African American students and their one White classmate. Joseph posed a question for them to consider and then directed the question at Michael, the White boy. Joseph asked Michael to put himself in the perspective of the novel's African American protagonist. The question was laden with racial significance.

### Talk Sample 3

- 1 Joseph: I have a question for everyone. Let's say you're Bigger Thomas, and you're in the position where the only thing standing between your death or jail, and your freedom outside of jail, is killing of another White man would you do it?
- 2 Damian: I don't think I would do it, because, I mean, well actually I don't know because like I say, after he killed that, he just felt it was nothing no more, you know what I'm sayin. He just felt like his fate was, whatever was going to be was going to be, see what I'm sayin. I feel like, maybe I would, you know, but I'm sayin, then again, that would all still be on my conscience, you know, as a person who I am. I would still have thoughts about what I had done in my head and things and I would have fear about the repercussions of what had happened, you know what I'm sayin, I'm sure that what goes around comes back around. So. Yeah.=
- 3 Michael: =[I don't think
- 4 Jennifer: =[I have a question for Michael. Oh, okay,
- 5 Michael: I was just gonna add, I mean, I definitely wouldn't kill another person to possibly make myself drop the charge or whatever. But again, he was a person, that stuffed somebody like in a furnace so, you know, his mind is not real right. [a boy laughs] So, he's definitely a person that would, you know, do something like that=
- 6 Andrew: =The only reason he did that is because he was scared, you know what I'm sayin.
- 7 Michael: I know but, scared and crazy. [laughs]

- 8 [6–8 students laugh.]
- 9 Damian: Fine!
- 10 Joseph: I wouldn't call it crazy because
- 11 Andrew: [Interrupts] He was just trying to cover up for what he had done, you know what I'm sayin'? If they would have [gotten a hold of him, they would have killed him.
- 12 Michael: [That's crazy to me.
- 13 Monique: [What's he gonna do, leave the body there? What would you do Michael?
- 14 Michael: What?
- 15 Monique: If you killed her, if you accidentally killed her, what would you do? If you were African American and you killed a White lady in the '20s.
- 16 Michael: I would have left, if it was me. I would have probably left.
- 17 Damian: I would have took the Oldsmobile.
- 18 [Michael laughs. Richard raises his hand.]
- 19 Richard: I think I agree with Michael. But, I don't know if I would have put her in a furnace, but I wouldn't have stayed there to see what happened even if I did. If I would have put her in the furnace, I would have left, and I would have left town. I wouldn't have stayed there, like "I'm going to see what's gonna happen, even if I do, even if something bad happens to me, like he did." Cause, he just stayed there, and he figured he could blame it on somebody else, and he could just keep livin his life. But, it didn't turn out like that.
- 20 Monique: What do you think would have happened if he would have left her on the bed?
- 21 Andrew: I don't know, I was thinking about that?
- 22 Monique: I would have probably left her on the bed.

In this interaction we observe the African American students' attempts to have their White classmate understand the actions of the African American protagonist as the result of the racist attitudes of the times. They did so without breaking the social code with which they conducted their class work together.

Joseph announced that his question was for everyone. He asked whether, if they had been in Bigger Thomas's shoes and accidentally killed a White woman, if they would have killed another White person to avoid the consequences if they knew it would earn them their freedom. The protagonist, Bigger Thomas, had been jailed for murdering Mary Dalton, the daughter of his White employers. He had accidentally killed Mary because he feared her mother would accuse him of sexually assaulting her.

Damian thought aloud as he answered, changing his mind repeatedly until Michael volunteered a direct answer: "I don't think so." It is noteworthy that he was the only White student and the question did not invite him to answer. Even more telling about the social discursive norms in the room is what happened when he and Jennifer talked simultaneously. She wanted to direct what we can assume was

a related question to Michael, and he wanted to provide the reason for his answer—that Thomas was crazy. Jennifer, a typically assertive interactant, gave up the turn to Michael.

Andrew challenged Michael's perspective by claiming Thomas was scared because he knew he would not be treated fairly due to the racist attitudes at the time. Michael acknowledged what Andrew had said with a "yes ... but" response. He said he knew what Andrew meant, but he also thought Thomas was crazy, and then he laughed. Half of the students in the room laughed with him as Damian exhaled a growling "fine" of social approbation, which at this point served to mediate any tension in the room.

Joseph, who had been reflecting, not laughing, took Michael's words seriously. Speaking to the class, he said he would not call what Bigger had done crazy. Joseph was interrupted by Andrew, who also did not believe the character's actions were crazy. Andrew spoke directly to Michael. He explained Bigger's motivation as sensible self-protection because "if 'they' would have gotten a hold of him they would have killed him" (Line 11). His words appealed to Michael to consider the racist "theys" of that era and their most likely reaction to the death of a White woman, even if accidental, at the hands of a African American man. Andrew's "you know" was not so much a placeholder for his own thinking as much as a "you know, don't you?" plea to Michael. However, before Andrew had even finished, Michael reiterated that the behavior seemed crazy. Monique repeated Andrew's attempt to have Michael understand. She asked Michael to assume an African American identity and put himself in that situation in that place and time (Line 15). Michael responded quickly and seriously. He said he would have left. Damian rode the coat tails of Michael's answer, as he had in his earlier "fine" move (Line 9), and effectively broke the tension of the moment by saying that he would have taken the Oldsmobile (Line 17). Not only did the humor of Damian's move soothe the moment's seriousness, it also was an act of alignment by an African American boy with the proposition of a White classmate.

Richard, another reflective participant, agreed with Michael, but in a way that brought the answer back again to the racial issue and to what he had learned about it from this book. Richard had identified with Bigger, with what had happened to him, and determined that he would not have stayed around to see what occurred. Because of Bigger Thomas's experience, Richard had rethought and reconceived his understanding of previous racist conditions in America. With Richard's comment, the class's attention moved from Michael to speculating about what might have happened in the world of the novel if the character had left the dead body on the bed.

In this segment, we observe the maintenance of social community and literary analysis as students move in and out of their personal worlds, the world of the classroom, and the world of the novel. In the interchange we observe racial meaning linked to racial identity performed as subject matter. In their discussion, the Af-

rican American students created a literary interpretation of the text in relation to the racial social conditions of the time in which the novel is set. The students positioned themselves, that is to say their current identities as African Americans, within those historical conditions to make sense of the protagonist's actions. Then they made a case to convince Michael of their interpretation. As a White person historically positioned to occupy another identity (Hall, 1994), Michael made different sense of Bigger's actions. His engagement in this interchange was typical of his regular participation. He was neither quiet and withdrawn nor vocally insistent that his voice be heard. He did not speak AAE, yet he acted as a member of the group who could speak his mind when he had something to say, consistent with the reader response rules allowing for divergent readings already established in the class.

Threats to personal identity and status did not shake the social seamlessness of the group as the African American students repeatedly asked their White classmate to understand the meaning of the text as they did, and he could not. Although his meaning and identity conflicted with theirs, in tacit agreement, they continued to position Michael as a social member of the class. That this condition had been constructed and reinforced in the interactions between the students and this particular teacher became clear when, 4 weeks after this conversation, Jolene went on maternity leave. The social culture of the classroom changed dramatically during the tenure of three consecutive substitute teachers who finished out the term. Although the teachers attempted to follow Jolene's curriculum, there were no more Socratic discussions and no more race-sensitive interactions. The culture of the class shifted from a cohesive social support system for accomplishing common purposes to social interchanges that assuaged students' disgruntled resignation about the class's fractured focus and routines. Complaints and blaming became common. A once seamless social order disintegrated along with student participation and performance when a common purpose and individual stakes were not activated in the activities of the class. This sad decline highlights the accomplishment of social and academic integration under Jolene's guidance and raises an important question: How are across-race purposes conceptualized, carried out, and sustained by students and teachers as normative practices tied to academic achievement? How do individual stakes become common normative practices? This question is grounded in a view of AAE and African American social and cultural behavior as an evolving and context-related speech community only contingently visible in local, situated discursive practices.

#### RACE AS A DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP, PERSONAL IDENTITY, AND ACADEMIC PRACTICE

Taken together, these three cases illuminate some of the complexities of broadly drawn racial and social distinctions that mask the complicated work of classroom

teaching and learning. The cases demonstrate how race is part of the social life under construction in classrooms. They illustrate how teachers and students call forth various expressions of race during acts of teaching and learning as purposeful types of talk. The cases make apparent that in classrooms race is a social relationship, a personal identity, and an academic practice that is discursively constructed. As such, race is influenced by and influences the normative classroom conduct of teachers and students.

By looking closely at these three interactions, we can observe the striking rapidity and tenuousness with which the norms for identity, for social relationships, and for what counted as subject matter were reinforced, constructed, and deconstructed in interactional moments. We can note that classroom conditions for teaching and learning were strongly influenced by how teachers and students used and accepted ways of talking during instructional activity, how through these discursive conditions they positioned each other, and how these positionings contributed to or diminished conflicts (Harre & Slocum, 2003). Conflicts, as an inevitable element of classroom life tied to the purposes of individual interactants, were avoided in racially tense situations and emerged in racially neutral ones. Understanding how and why this occurred can provide insight into how teaching and learning are productively and interactively managed in multiracial and multicultural classrooms. In this section, I once again draw from the three interactions to exercise a framework that may be of use in building this understanding. I apply the framework to look at how teachers and students purposefully negotiate the boundaries of their interactions to manage conflict when race is a complicating factor.

### Different Purposes: Considering Stake, Interest, and Accountability

Although we are already aware that teachers and students frequently operate according to different purposes during classroom instruction, in these three cases we observe how differing purposes in different circumstances interface with race. Purpose as a construct created in and through the ways people talk with each other in particular situations has been theorized and studied in a number of arenas outside of, but relevant to, education. For example, discursive psychologists Edwards and Potter's (1992) discursive action model has been fruitfully applied to the social psychological concepts of attitude (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and fact construction (Potter, 1996). Potter and Edwards's discursive psychology treats social constructions through discursive interactions as epistemic. That is, through their conversations, the interactants create ways of knowing each other and whatever they are talking about because, as we have observed in the three interactions, they construct descriptions of events and of themselves and others. According to this model, speakers create descriptions that produce, protect, and justify their stake in what is going on. Their stake, the strong value and emotion they associate with their involvement, and their interest, the concern they have about the outcome, can-

not be separated from their purpose. Stake and interest, and the blaming and exoneration that occurs to protect them, can be thought of as at the core of conflict management.

### *Teachers' Stake, Interest, and Accountability*

Each teacher's discursive actions were directly related to their pedagogical stake in what was occurring. Stan and Marita responded to Sonandra's and Byron's signifying, and Jolene's students responded to Michael according to their interest in what they were attempting to teach, to how they conceived of their classrooms as learning communities, and to what they believed were the means for establishing the conditions for students to perform successfully academically. Discursive psychologists tie stake to self-interest and hold that interactants always engage to create a version of events that protects their self-interests. In the case of teachers, this is an especially tricky concept as pedagogues' purposes are expected to rise above self-interest and serve the interests of their students. Although recognizing the uniquely complicated relationship between teachers' personal and professional interests (see Rex & Nelson, 2004), the focus in this argument is on teachers' responses to students who engage to protect their self-interests and how these are tied to race. We can observe how stake is negotiated as the problem is defined and how accountability, that is blaming and exoneration, are accomplished or avoided.

*Stan.* By telling Sonandra that her signifying with a classmate from Cameroon was inappropriate, Stan moved to protect Francine and to keep Sonandra from repeating that style of talk. Stan's stake was in defending those students who did not have the personal or social confidence to withstand the put-downs, those whose academic performance he assumed would be negatively affected. In this class, these were, in addition to Francine, a student who was a dwarf and Arab American students who did not engage in cross-race signifying. Stan believed that the put-down as a means of building social relationship and social capital was counterproductive to students who were reading their personal writing aloud and talking about personal experiences, both fundamental to his stake in his "real writing" curriculum.

However, Stan did not want to blame Sonandra and alienate her from participating. When Sonandra challenged his view of her intentions toward Francine, he exonerated her by readily apologizing for a possible misreading of the situation. Although Stan would not allow her to engage in put-down talk, he did acknowledge its function as social play with her African American classmates and was willing to concede that, in this instance, it was not meant to demoralize Francine. By apologizing and saying he had no hard feelings toward her, Stan allowed that there was room for Sonandra's self-interest in her social relationship building, while declaring his stake in protecting a vulnerable classmate. However, by telling her she still

had the zero and she would need to sign the class rule contract, he was reasserting another stake, as well as his authority, in building a particular kind of social community, one that excluded put-downs as a means of personal identity building and social relating. Could there have been another way of handling the situation? Could put-down talk have remained an allowable discursive style in a classroom with this sort of diverse profile? What do White teachers need to understand about Black adolescents and their AAVE to integrate that knowledge into their pedagogy?

*Marita.* When Marita insisted to Byron that he “be cool,” she was also acting to protect both Jacob and her stake in building students’ literacy skills. She did not regard signifying as a problem in her classroom. Rather, it was a means for self-expressive social relating that complemented her interests for her students. She believed that through signifying talk students engaged in their own ways in the academic work of the class. She accepted Jacob’s freestyling answer because that was how he expressed himself and because he was willing to participate in the lesson. However, when signifying was directed at students’ academic performances, Marita stepped in because she would not allow students’ work to be demeaned. She criticized Byron’s utterances as a self-interested attack on Jacob’s academic engagement, which she interpreted, even though it was meant to support her interests in teaching the lesson, as undermining her pedagogical purpose.

Partly, Marita’s reaction is attributable to what she considered the infrequency and insufficiency of her students’ academic engagement and her interest in improving it. Consequently, when she saw a student engage, she jumped in to protect that engagement and the student identity under construction. She believed that students’ academic self-interests were fragile. She thought they had the personal and social confidence to withstand personal insult but not the academic confidence to withstand the denigration of their academic performance. The irony is that when Byron made a move that actually supported Marita’s instructional purpose—to have students give thoughtful closure sentences—she stopped him by blaming him for “putting people down” (Line 14) and excused Jacob’s less committed academic response. How could an African American teacher have responded differently? Does one goal (the academic) have to trump another (the social)? Could Jacob’s academic engagement have been maintained along with Byron’s critique of his insufficient answer so that both saved face?

*Jolene.* Jolene felt free to let students conduct the discussion as she looked on because she believed her purpose and her students’ purposes were aligned—that they shared a common stake. The way the students conducted the interchange with Michael seems to demonstrate that she was right. Each student had an opportunity to voice an opinion about the text and have it taken respectfully and seriously. In this specific case, the African American students’ interest in helping Mi-

chael understand the African American experience of racism was also one Jolene shared. She believed it was good for Michael to develop that understanding and for African American students to experience the power of making the case to convince a White classmate. That their efforts did not succeed in this instance did not undermine the overall social and academic goals of the class. To give in-depth, meaningful readings and to elaborate and warrant those readings remained the focus of the interaction, even in the midst of heightened feelings about racial injustice. Blame was not publicly assigned to Michael, and his status as a social member of the class was not threatened. Was the topic discussed too civilly? How can social equilibrium be used to advantage in discussing racial issues? How could the teacher have made use of such moments as these to promote a more critical discussion without denigrating Michael and undermining the collaborative environment?

### *Students' Stake, Interests, and Accountability*

One way of considering differences in stake and interest between students and teachers is to observe contrasts and similarities in their interpretations of the problems the teachers identified and how students hold, or do not hold, themselves accountable.

*Sonandra.* Although Sonandra acknowledged what Stan identified as the first problem with candy, she denied his second vague claim that she was flirting, and she forcefully refused his interpretation of her interchange with Francine as the problem he described. How students argue against teachers' definitions of problems can provide insight into students' stakes. In Sonandra's and Byron's cases, the ways they defended their accountability demonstrated the identities and social relations they performed.

Sonandra's engagement with Brock, through the acceptance of his candy and their put-down banter, can be read as common gendered flirtation among the African American students in this high school. Stan obliquely alluded to his feeling that this was what was going on when he noted a problem in having the two of them sit together. Sonandra refused any accountability, denying a problem or even a flirtation by saying she had no other classes with Brock. This was not a relationship but rather typical casual social talk.

Sonandra's discourse also expressed her interest in developing relationships with her African American classmates. However, she was clear in her response to Stan that she had not meant her social capital to be built at the expense of Francine, the girl from Cameroon. In her justification to Stan, she exonerated herself by aligning with Francine as an African, as family. She implied that her way of talking is something that one racial family member does with another and stated she had no other interest in mind.

*Byron and Jacob.* Initially, when Byron told Marita that he was not trying to be cool, he made us aware of his purpose, which was to support Marita in her teaching. However, as he defended himself, another stake became visible. He was trying to be a good friend and support Jacob in his learning. In justifying his insult, he challenged the “playa” role and freestyling manner his friend assumed to do his schoolwork. In this instance, Byron seemed to be in alignment with Marita’s stake in building her students’ literacy, which was to learn how to write standard English and do well on the high-stakes test they would soon take. Nevertheless, in the moment, Byron and Jacob defended their self-interest in protecting their relationship and their social status with the rest of the students.

*Jolene’s African American students.* Race was visible in the AAE practices in Stan and Marita’s classes, but it was not the topic of the interactions. In the interaction among Jolene’s students, race was the purpose of the conversation and reflected the African American students’ stake in their White classmate understanding the literary and historical racial situation as they did. Impressively, the African American students made three attempts to bring the White student into the African American man’s shoes. They wanted Michael to empathize with Thomas, to understand as they did the intense racist pressures of the time. Yet each time Michael was unable to step into those shoes. The African American students did not treat this as a problem. In fact, each time, the students deconstructed the conditions that could erupt in conflict by ameliorating social tension and incorporating their lone White member back into the social group. This suggests that a competing self-interest impelled the students to maintain the norms of academic performance and of social community, which they most likely see as Jolene does, as bound together.

Describing the purposes teachers and students are performing in the three cases illustrates how and why conflicts arise and their relation to race. Identity, social, and subject matter issues are complicated by stake and self-interest, which are an expression of race as discursive genre and cultural dispositions. The interactional discourse in which the participants are engaged negotiates a description of the problem giving rise to the conflict, of who is accountable, and of how such constructions relate to what is being learned and to how it is to be learned. This view of classroom race-related conflicts as competing stakes over what is happening and how to talk about it can be further understood productively as boundary setting with racial features.

## DISCOURSE BOUNDARIES

Horton-Salway (1998, 2001) explained how in any specific interactional context, the manner in which interactants categorize and construct similarity and difference

can be thought of and analyzed as situated boundary work. We observed this boundary work between Stan and Sonandra as they differently categorized the “problems” by acquiescing to similarity and holding to difference. Marita, Byron, and Jacob’s interaction can also be viewed as differences and similarities in categorization as they struggled to define and claim the boundaries of appropriate ways of engaging as a student in the lesson. Michael and his African American classmates sustain an interchange about a provocative racial topic—whether an African American murderer’s behavior is “crazy”—by holding to norms that maintain social equilibrium.

### Three Profiles of Situated Boundary Work

Stan and Sonandra’s interchange was physically removed from the public arena of the classroom. However, the classroom students and their 3-day-old embryonic culture were present in their conversation. Sonandra’s actions were not, in and of themselves, a problem. Her actions became problematically inappropriate according to Stan because of where and how they were situated in the classroom. Marita, Byron, and Jacob’s interaction had the full attention and appreciation of the entire class. Students, both vicariously as onlookers and actively as speakers (e.g., Patrick), engaged in the boundary-setting negotiations. However, the interaction was mainly Byron and Jacob’s. The rest of the students held back to see how it would play out. The girl who reminded Jacob of his initial answer to Marita’s question before Byron’s interruption (Line 24) acted as a placeholder for the lesson, as if she were waiting for them to finish their struggle so the class could get on with it. The interaction among Jolene’s students was of a different order. Although only half the students engaged in the discussion, all the others engaged as interested listeners. It was also a whole-class interaction in that it reflected the interactional norms for building academic knowledge that the class had accrued over the previous months of the term. Boundaries were not under negotiation as they were in the first two examples. Rather the students and their teacher had already established normative boundaries for social knowledge building, and what we observed in the interaction were the rules for those boundaries being acted on and reinforced.

### Boundary Construction and Competing Purposes

One way of describing what occurred between the teachers and their students in these classroom interactions is to describe their acts as demonstrating within- and across-race discourse boundary construction marked by competing purposes for building and sustaining relationships, identity, and subject matter.

#### *Jacob, Byron, and Marita*

Marita and Byron may have shared a racial and cultural identity as African Americans. However, their conflict reveals social, within-race tensions and re-

alignments. With his insult, Byron “spoke” himself into the complicated situation of having to serve two relationships simultaneously—his friendship with Jacob and his alignment with his teacher. When Marita established a boundary for his speech—he could not put down another student’s academic performance—Byron had to realign his position. He was moved to assess and justify his position because of his teacher’s instructional and social purpose. Neither Marita’s boundary nor the conflict it sparked was defined by or defined race. However, both the boundary and the conflict imbricated with race. Byron spoke in a racialized dialect; his relationship with Jacob exhibited the qualities common to African American male friendship; his AAE and culturally marked interchanges with the teacher probably contributed heavily to his willingness to align with the teacher’s purpose; and he was playing to the African American social expectations of his classmates. Nevertheless, in this particular situation we observe that Byron spoke to and from his sense of his rights and duties in terms of conflicting social relationship demands. His exclamations “I’m just trying to figure it out,” and “I’m being myself. I’m just trying to be cool with people” do not signal that this is predominantly a racial identity issue. Rather, as though encountering the electric surge of an invisible perimeter fence, he has encountered an unexpected boundary and is scrambling to find his feet. As he rights himself, Byron reasserts his social position in relation to his classmates and his teacher. Rather than a racial issue, this is more productively read as a social, face-saving episode triggered by coming into momentary conflict with the teacher’s academic purpose.

### *Stan and Sonandra*

Stan did not speak AAE, and Sonandra did not speak standard English. They did not share cultural identifications related to race, as was the case for Marita and Byron. Their interaction was clearly marked by differences in racial identity and racialized expectations for social behavior, which complicated their ways of relating as teacher and student and the learning of subject matter. Stan attached particular ways of speaking to principles for conducting social intercourse as a means of forwarding his academic purpose in engaging with curriculum. Put-downs were not appropriate. Signifying was not part of the social repertoire for Stan and some of the students, and Stan was concerned that such talk would antagonize or alienate other students and undermine the respectful learning environment he was trying to build to promote particular types of discussions of reading and writing. Sonandra, whose social world and social identity was built out of ubiquitous signifying interchanges and their consequences, overstepped Stan’s boundary. This rule, as Stan held to it, backed by institutional authority, positioned Sonandra to have to conduct her social relationship building in another way. Yet, their interchange in the hall, an across-race negotiation of authority as to whose version of events counted, constructed a different understanding about the boundary and positioned Sonandra to assert her identity in relation to her teacher’s purpose, not in direct conflict with it.

With his apology for misreading her intentions with the put-down against Francine and his declaration that he harbored no ill feelings, Stan conceded his lack of knowledge about African American social behavior and respected the boundary Sonandra drew: Do not impugn race-based acts you do not know about. Such positioning granted Sonandra particular rights to discursive acts that could sustain her stake and status in the classroom. However, Stan also maintained his boundary—Sonandra still had to sign the class rules contract. In positioning himself this way, unlike in the Marita–Byron exchange, Sonandra saved face and asserted that face as an expression of her African American identity in relation to the official authority of the White teacher.

### *Jolene's Students' Socratic Dialogue*

Jolene's students' collectively acted-on boundaries sustained social equilibrium as they pointed out historical social injustice as an exercise in literary interpretation. By positioning Michael so as to avoid blaming and conflict and assure his right to his own view, academic achievement through social civility took precedence over asserting beliefs about racial injustice. They asked Michael to try on an African American character's experience, an act they had no trouble accomplishing. They treated his responses as though they were individual literary interpretations, not personal knowledge deficits. We observed the students' boundaries in what they did not say as well as in what they said. There were no signifying acts, not even small innuendoes or suggestions that Michael did not understand. There were no direct explanations or assertions to tell him how to think. Instead, the students inquired into, agreed with, built on, laughed at, and moved on dispassionately from what Michael had to say. Literary analysis discourse took precedence.

## INFORMING SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

### Key Issues

The representations, questions, and suggestions in this article implicate a perspective that may be useful to research aimed at improving classroom pedagogy when race is one of the confounding issues. Nevertheless, the politics of linguistic representation have historically made scholarship involving AAE a dangerous, contentious, and fragile pursuit, and for good reason. Given the historical use of AAE to reinforce stereotypes that discredited African American intelligence and achievements, any researchers who venture into this territory, especially those who are White, need to be well aware of the dangers of their representations. However, it is precisely this history and these dangers that make it imperative that White researchers take on the work of understanding AAE as it is involved in cross-racial and ethnic schooling interactions. To leave such work only to African American scholars is to abrogate responsibility for the hard work of fair and trustworthy rep-

resentation. It is also to miss the opportunity to wrestle with and provide a view of classroom teaching and learning as a situated, interactional, interracial phenomenon from a perspective that speaks to the majority population of White classroom teachers. Such a view, I posit, is needed to move theory and knowledge forward to be of more use in informing the education of ethnically and racially diverse students by White teachers.

I have skirted key debates among linguists about whether AAE is a language or a dialect; whether it is limited only to African Americans, or even some groups within that demographic; its linguistic origins and features; its cultural, social, and political origins; its reason for existing; the social and political implications of its continued existence; and the role and right of various scholars to address these and other features of AAE (Morgan, 1994), although all these debates influence the relevance of my goal in this article. I have located my thinking in a perspective and logic of inquiry made possible by acknowledgment that it is impossible to identify “an” African American speech community, or a fixed African American language, because it expands and contracts across class and geographic lines (Morgan, 1994). One of my claims is that AAE as social practice also expands and contracts across racial lines for functional purposes tied to stake and self-interest and that one of those functional purposes—to maintain social and academic success in the classroom—is key. Staying in school and making the most of their classroom experiences was important for all the students in this project, regardless of class, history of achievement, or current circumstances.

According to Morgan (1994), historically, although the subject currently remains open to question, African Americans considered education more important than income and occupation in determining class and status (Glenn, 1963). Educated, which is to say middle and professional class, African Americans attached great importance to racial identity. Racial consciousness, especially identity associated with race, is not subsiding with increased education (Hughes & Demo, 1989). Middle-class African American youth who are not socialized to AAE in their home speech communities find AAE important because of their interest in African American rap and hip-hop artists (Quinn, 2000). There are reports of upper middle class African American students at elite colleges using AAE in formal and informal settings (Morgan, 2004), and of African American adults code-switching between AAE and standard English in informal conversations, irrespective of their class (Debose, 1992). Even hip-hop artists mix standard English grammar with AAE phonology and lexicon. CNN’s report that 70% of the latest hip-hop CDs were purchased by White adolescents reminds us that AAE, as a school social practice by students of all races, appears to be stronger than ever. As is often the case, scholars and educators are struggling to keep up with the rapid changes in youth culture.

I have also avoided commenting on the teaching practices visible in the three cases. I do so for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the lack of adequate space in an article of this length to fairly address Stan’s, Marita’s, and Jolene’s ped-

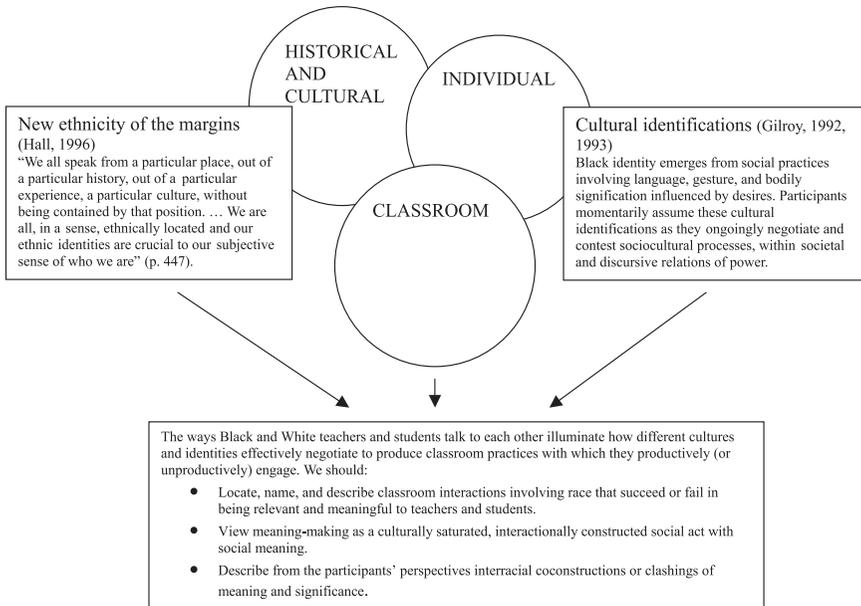
agogy. However, the danger of providing only a brief glance into their classrooms is that readers may jump to conclusions about what that glimpse says about their teaching. By not commenting, I am relying heavily on readers' good judgment not to evaluate the efficacy of a teacher by such limited measures. Yet, one reason for my choosing the three interactions was precisely their capacity to urge readers to assess. Each event provides a recognizable common teaching dilemma—regardless of race—that is further complicated by race. That readers are drawn in to considering whether Stan's, Marita's, and Jolene's actions (or in Jolene's case, lack of action) were advisable is meant to lend importance and verisimilitude to my argument that we need additional study of exactly these sorts of situations.

### Framing a Perspective

I argue for the need for a theoretical lens and related methodology that dignifies the complexity of the social practice dimensions of race in classroom contexts. To address that need, I take on the role of research bricoleur, a recommendation of Erickson's (2004) for thinking about change. By tactically "mak[ing] do with what is available at hand, adapting prestructured materials to do whatever work needs doing" (p. 165), I create a bricolage research framework. Composed of expropriated conceptual and methodological materials, my bricolage is intended to serve as a tool for inquiry, a heuristic (Johnstone, 2002). This framework should allow us to observe within- and across-race dimensions of local, situated discursive constructions involving social relationship, identity, and subject matter while drawing illumination from them to inform broader views of schooling, racial, and societal discourses (Smardon, 2004). Understanding local practices in this way can assist in the transformation of more global educational practices, structures, and institutions (Erickson, 2004). To be useful, as indicated by the issues that surfaced in the three cases, the framework should include three interrelated perspectives: a macro cultural and historical construct of race, a construct of individual racial identity, and a construct of classroom interaction as raced discursivity (see Figure 1).

### A Historical and a Cultural Perspective

In discussing diaspora, Hall (1996) declared an end to the essential Black subject. He argued for a historical view of race as a chronological series of central issues constituted at particular moments in time and in articulation. Chronologies of issues are articulated in relation to other sites of information, other categories and divisions, "and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender, and of ethnicity" (p. 444). Hall (1996) redefined ethnicity to provide a more progressive construct for racial identity while maintaining a critical perspective; ethnicity is "the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of



**FIGURE 1** Three interrelated dimensions for studying classroom interactions in which race is an important issue in literacy teaching and learning.

subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed and positioned, and all knowledge is contextual” (p. 29).

What is involved is the splitting of the notion of ethnicity between, on the one hand, the dominant notion which connects it to nation and “race” and, on the other hand, what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery. That is to say, a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position. ... We are all, in a sense, ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. (p. 447)

Hall’s new ethnicity construct allows for the complexity of describing how social identity is enacted and received in the social world and for observing what the intersection of culture, structure, and human agency produces. Combining this broad construct of ethnicity with constructs that have emerged from studies of classroom interactions that focus on cultural differences and with methods of discursive analysis has the potential to offer a rich, operational framework. Such constructs characterize classrooms as meeting places of culture (Cazden, 2001) as

third spaces (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999) and as permeable curriculum (Dyson, 1993).

An extensive ethnographic and sociolinguistic literature about complications and conflicts regarding race and classroom discourse dates back to the 1970s. Much of it has observed variations in language structure and style and the effects of these variations on student learning (e.g., Cazden, 1999; Foster, 1989, 1995; Lucas & Borders, 1987, 1994; Michaels, 1981; Moses, Kamii, Swap, & Howard, 1989; Piestrup, 1973) and focused on cultural difference (e.g., Crago, Ericks-Brophy, McAlpine, & Pesco, 1997; Gutierrez, Rhymes, & Larson, 1995; Lee, 1995a). Collectively, these studies have contributed to a foundation for describing from participants' perspectives interracial coconstructions or clashings of meaning and significance. The studies make it possible to view meaning making as a culturally saturated, interactionally constructed social act with social meaning. The concepts they generate inform a foundational construct—that what teachers and students say to each other can illuminate how different cultures effectively negotiate to produce classroom practices with which they productively (or unproductively) engage. However, it remains for us to more effectively make use of the particular contributions of such studies. Our task is to produce an empirical approach that makes it possible to locate, name, and describe classroom interactions that succeed or fail in being culturally relevant so as to sustain literacy learning. The most robust approach would allow us to note what is happening for generalized application and help us understand the complications of such generalizations so as to productively critique them.

Combining Hall's (1994) view of race as new ethnicity with methodologies for observing the generation of meaning as culturally saturated and with the negotiation of stake, status, and social equilibrium in classroom discourse requires a complementary view of group and personal identity as cultural identity. Once again, one of Hall's constructs is useful in considering group identity:

Cultural identity ... is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (p. 394)

### Individual Racial Identity

The cultural identities of Jolene's students, Sonandra, Marita, Byron, and Jacob were fluid and temporarily jelled to protect the stakes they had in their local contexts. What the students were doing as personal cultural identity and social practice

also resonates with what Gilroy (1992, 1993) construed as Black identity. Gilroy suggested that Black culture and its traditions do not constitute the essence of an unchanging racial identity. Cultural traditions, or ways of conceptualizing tenuous communicative relationships across time and space, are not so much substantive content but “evasive qualities” or “identifications” assumed by participants “that make inter-cultural, trans-national diaspora conversations between them possible” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 276). Participants momentarily assume these cultural identifications as they negotiate and contest sociocultural processes, within societal and discursive relations of power. Paradoxically, the condition of cultural hybridity persists, but is in a constant state of flux—the “changing same”—hence, the labeling of his stance as “anti-antiessentialist” (Clifford, 1994, p. 320).

According to Gilroy, individual Black identity emerges from social practices involving language (and gesture and bodily signification) and is influenced by desires. These desires derive from racialized subjectivity shaped by the impact of racist contexts and activities. Black identity is, then, the outcome of practical activity. That is, the racial identity students ascribed to their teachers, themselves, and others was temporary, situated, and provisional, emerging as it did from the confluence of embedded influences on their classroom experiences within a racialized local context and larger U.S. society. Although they may not have been fixed, these racial identities were real and consequential in that they were instrumental in producing or undermining meaningful and productive engagement and performances.

To be of use, a framework for studying classroom teaching and learning in which race and ethnicity are factors needs to take into account how students construct their racial identities within classroom interactions that build their social identities and subject matter knowledge and that are an expression of and influence the broader social view of race as an individual, social, and political practice. As Ladson-Billings (2000) demonstrated, a broader view of racialized discourses provides a perspective for working politically and making change.

### Classroom Interaction as Raced Discursivity

Combining Hall’s and Gilroy’s constructs about race as historically and locally situated with the tools of discursive psychology and discourse analysis makes it possible to observe how race is part of the social life under construction in classrooms. We can observe how teachers and students call forth various expressions of race during acts of teaching and learning as purposeful types of talk tied to discourses beyond the classroom. Race becomes observable as dynamically interrelated social relationships, personal identities, and academic practices that are discursively constructed and yet never separate from broader social and class issues. As such, race can be studied as influenced by and influencing the normative classroom conduct of teachers and students as both a local and a global phenomenon.

This lens can lead us to a more nuanced and transportable understanding of the productive distinction between disagreement and conflict. Within classroom interactions involving race, disagreement is inevitable. Participants manage disagreement so that it does or does not become conflict by negotiating their descriptions of what is occurring. The descriptions emerge from an epistemic process influenced by each person's stake in his or her self-interests. Their stake in the events influences them to view the person with whom they are speaking and the event to attribute accountability—leading to exoneration or blame. Race is one aspect of self-interest and so of stake. Through their descriptions the speakers position each other as certain types of people and identify “the problem” in ways that are raced.

Negotiations of self-interest involve within- and across-race discourse boundary construction marked by competing purposes for building and sustaining relationships, identity, and subject matter. As they interact, members of same and different races discursively construct the problem, a way of talking about it, and the resolution (e.g., conflict, truce, acquiescence, or agreement) as they construct their own and their interactant's identities—which include race—and the view of subject matter that counts. This construction involves determining the boundaries of description and engagement. Masterful handling of disagreement and management of stake marks the successful learning-centered classroom.

### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

This framework makes it possible to pursue scholarship and research that gets at pedagogical issues in need of unpacking to improve literacy education in multiracial and multiethnic classrooms. By exercising this framework on Stan, Marita, and Jolene's classroom interactions, I am able to pose questions that inspire specific scholarship or research projects that target some of these pedagogical issues.

Stan's case leads to questions such as the following: How should White teachers who do not speak AAVE or value its qualitative characteristics, such as signifying and jiving, respond when their students engage in AAE as their preferred means of classroom engagement? Even when White teachers do know and value AAVE speaking traditions, if they do not speak them, how are they to effectively engage? What is gained, what is lost, and what is changed for African American students who only engage in AAVE if their teachers do not allow some AAVE practices such as signifying? Could there have been another way of handling a put-down situation? Can put-down talk remain an allowable discursive style in classrooms with diverse racial and ethnic profiles? What are the effects on African American students and their White teachers, and on the classroom teaching and learning norms that develop, when their socially and culturally familiar ways of interacting continually clash? What do White teachers need to understand about Black adolescents and their AAVE to integrate that knowledge into their pedagogy?

Marita's case leads to questions such as the following: How and when should African American teachers encourage and utilize their own and their students' AAVE? Is it ever necessary for African American teachers to step in and redirect African American students' discursive practices to increase their students' academic engagement and achievement? If so, which ways are most likely to be productive? How can African American teachers make good use of signifying in relation to their other expectations for African American students' literacy achievement? How do social class differences complicate the use of AAVE in African American classrooms? When, if ever, are African American students' competing stakes in school discourses and in social discourses (and related identities) at cross purposes? In which ways and in which situations does students' AAVE talk support or negate and work against academic objectives for literacy learning?

Jolene's case leads to questions such as the following: How are across-race purposes conceptualized, carried out, and sustained by students and teachers as normative classroom practices tied to literacy academic achievement? How do individual stakes become common normative practices? What role should teachers have in framing and managing classroom interactions to promote normative classroom practices that support productive discussions of race? Is talk that engages disagreement while avoiding overt conflict productive in addressing differences in racial perspectives when classrooms are predominantly African American with only a few White students and a White teacher? How can a White teacher make use of racial events to promote critical discussion without undermining a collaborative mixed-race environment? Can the topic of race be discussed too civilly? How can social equilibrium be used to advantage in discussing racial issues?

Questions such as these can be the impetus for a body of research that illustrates and further theorizes how classroom culturally relevant pedagogy succeeds in sustaining literacy learning. Such a body of research could make it possible to answer these important educational questions: How should or could teachers conduct their classes to maximize respect and understanding as well as academic achievement? What can or should Black or White teachers do similarly or differently in their interactions with students? What should we say to teacher candidates about discourse in the classroom? How might we begin to assess teachers' actions as constructive or nonconstructive of race identity? Should the boundaries between Black and White be defined for educational "good"? If so, what is the "good"? Will this understanding of discursive boundaries assist us in closing the achievement gap or taking some positive action?

## A FINAL CONSIDERATION

Irvine inspired the preponderance of White literacy teachers who have taken on the important and daunting commitment of teaching children from cultural orientations other than their own. In her 1990 study of Black students and school failure,

she warned readers not to conclude that being African American was a failsafe or a necessity for good teaching of African American students—there are good White teachers and poor Black teachers (Irvine, 1990). She called on educational researchers to explore how teachers' knowledge of what works is mediated by the cultural context and the teacher's personal delivery of instruction (Irvine, 1989, 2000). Fifteen years later, although we have more constructs and language available to us (or perhaps because we do), we still need to pursue her call.

I have presented one way of thinking about how to do so. It is a view that illustrates the importance of understanding that in every interaction between teachers and students one's race or ethnicity is present and operating. Not to deeply understand what is happening in those moments is to miss what up to now has been underexamined—that race is an epistemic social practice in which students' identity is always at stake. Only when their identity and social relationships are productively and discursively tied to literate academic performance will students engage, and sustain engagement, long enough to improve their literacy.

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APPENDIX  
Key to Transcription Conventions

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[	Simultaneous talk
(.)	Pauses of less than a second
(2)	Pauses in seconds (e.g., 2-second pause)
=	Latching on of talk
—	Underlining reflects emphasis through louder volume

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*Note.* Adapted from Jefferson (1979).