

Towards a Culturally Situated Reader Response Theory

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Abstract This article describes a theory of how culture enables literary interpretations of texts. We begin with a brief overview of the reader response field. From there, we introduce the theory and provide illustrative participant data examples. These data examples illustrate the four cultural positions middle grade students in our research assumed when responding to salient textual features embedded in African American children's novels. Our theory suggests that because a range of cultural positions factors into students' meaning making, we should mine

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texts more carefully for cultural milieu as well as find acceptance with a broader range of literary interpretations. We conclude by discussing implications for literary researchers and practitioners who study or use multicultural children's literature.

Keywords Reader response theory · Literary interpretation · Culture

While students in Dr. Lawrence Sipe's *Responding to Literature* class at the University of Pennsylvania, we often had to write journal entries in response to the children's and young adult literature read in the course. Susan Browne (2nd author) wrote one such journal following our reading of *Zeely* by Hamilton (1967). The book holds the distinction of being one of the first highly regarded African American children's novels. It tells the story of brother and sister, Elizabeth and John Perry's summer visit to their Uncle Ross' farm. As their trip begins, the characters transform themselves into Geeder and Toeboy. During Geeder's coming of age summer, she takes a journey of rewarding self discovery after meeting Zeely, whom she believes to be a Watusi queen.

During a class sharing of responses to the text, a White American classmate mentioned that she found ending the story with Geeder talking about eating a sweet potato an odd way for Hamilton to conclude the novel. The book ends in the following way:

She was hungry again, as she usually was soon after supper. Maybe Uncle Ross had saved her a sweet potato.

"I only had one," she said. "I was talking so much, I didn't even taste it" (p. 122).

Here is Susan's journal response to the same passage.

November, 17, 1996

I have been giving more thought to *Zeely* and the way the book ended. I've come up with the idea that Geeder's closing reference to sweet potatoes is deeply embedded in culture and symbolic of her rite of passage. The sweet potato and its cousin the yam are cross continental culinary staples with deep roots in African and African American cultures. This reference to the sweet potato seems to reinforce the relationship between Geeder and Zeely, Africa and America and Geeder's new depth of understanding. Feminist author, bell hooks, points to the yam as a unifier in her book, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (1993). The sweet potato and the yam point to the discourse of feeling. Geeder has come of age and her desire to eat her sweet potato is another way of pointing that out.

Since taking the *Responding to Literature* Course and completing our dissertations under the tutelage of Dr. Sipe almost a decade ago, as African American scholars we have been thinking about and researching the puzzlement highlighted above (two very different understandings of the same book ending). However, unlike this graduate school example, our inquiries focus on middle grades African American readers and their interpretations of one sort of multicultural text, African American.

Our lines of research examine the ways literary interpretations are influenced by readers' ethnic backgrounds as well as the cultural milieu embedded in the stories they read.

Since embarking on this line of research over a decade ago, we have longed for culturally based reader response theories that might inform the analysis of our study participants' textual interpretations. In the years following our course, Dr. Sipe often encouraged us to develop grounded theoretical models from our dissertation studies and to further build on leading response theorists to better understand how culture enables literary response. This manuscript represents our development of such a theory. Throughout, we rely on data from a previous study about middle grade youth interpretations of children's books to introduce a culturally situated reader response theory. We begin with a brief overview of the reader response field. From there, we introduce the theory and provide illustrative participant response examples to exemplify the theory's tenets. We conclude by discussing implications for literary researchers and practitioners who study or use children's literature.

Brief Overview of the Reader Response Field

Reader response scholars rely on individual interpretations of books to make the literary understandings constructed throughout the reading process visible. These scholars situate children (and everything influencing their identities) in very active roles as readers (Beach, 1993; Tompkins, 1980). Despite their common goal, response theorists foreground modes of interpretations differently and across a wide continuum (See, Sipe, 2008, *Storytime*, chapters 2–3 for fuller discussion of types of reader response theories briefly summarized below.)

In general, it makes sense to organize these theorists in three broad categories. First, there is a group who privilege authors by foregrounding the construction of the genre and features of the particular narratives the authors attempt to tell (Rabinowitz, 1987). While still giving the reader an active role, these theorists pay most attention to the ways in which authors guide interpretation through a particular set of literary conventions. Still, even within this end of the continuum, it's likely that "different readers will naturally and inevitably construct different meanings of the same text" (Sipe, 2008, p. 50).

On the opposite end of the continuum exist scholars who assert that the text itself has very little to do with one's interpretation of meaning. Despite the content or nature of the written words, readers create unique understandings of stories. Each person carries out his or her own very subjective reading, and arriving at similar meanings is a result of the individuals not the material itself. Bleich's earlier work (1976), for example, suggests that literary interpretation is largely a result of someone's personality/psychology. He rarely refers to the supposed meaning embedded within the literature because this meaning plays only a small role in determining a reader's textual understanding. According to Bleich, the following factors greatly influence response: "age, sex, size, family situation, race, income and other things" (1976, p. 465).

Finally, as a middle ground, some theorists depict reading as a negotiation between both the text and the person engaging in the literary interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1982). From this point of view, what gets considered is how each (reader and text) influences the other during any construction of meaning. Rosenblatt (1982) stands out as one of the earliest scholars who strikes this middle ground. In short, she argues that reading occurs as, “a transaction, a two way process involving a reader and a text at a particular time, under particular circumstances” (p. 268).

A Culturally Situated Reader Response Theory

Although varied response theorists offer useful insights into how literary interpretations occur, we argue that few appreciably grapple with the myriad cultural influences (values, practices, experiences, etc.) affecting both readers and authors, and the ways in which these influence meaning making. Instead, most of the complicating factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, social contexts, or racial backgrounds get grouped together and mentioned merely in broad strokes by response theorists, if at all. Rosenblatt, for instance, does not specifically discuss readers in relationship to their ethnic backgrounds. She generally attends to the myriad experiences (physical, personal, social, and cultural) that cause readers to perceive their lives in unique ways (1982). In one of her few implicit references to culture, Rosenblatt maintains, “In order to shape [interpret] the work, we draw on our reservoir of past experiences with people and the world [culture]” (1982, p. 270).

Even though the above theories (and others) offer useful insights that help scholars analyze reader responses given by ethnically diverse youth, these theories are limited. As far as we can determine, a culturally situated reader response theory emerging from extensive data compiled from ethnically diverse readers and multicultural books does not exist. Cai's (2002) theoretical model encompasses dimensions of the cognitive, affective and social-communal as an overlapping set of concentric circles. This theory comes the closest to a theoretical response model that prioritizes culture because it addresses how culture might influence a particular dimension of the reading process. This model, though, pays little attention to the cultural milieu embedded in the books being read.

Below we describe a grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) situated within the context of cultural practices and students' responses to multicultural literature. Parts of this grounded theory emerged from our dissertation studies, and we have continued to flesh out its applicability in our most recent research (i.e., Brooks, 2006; Browne and Brooks, 2008). This theory resides in the middle ground of the response theory spectrum. We privilege both readers and texts equally and in transactional ways. We build from reader interpretations of salient textual features embedded in novels written by and about African Americans such as recurring cultural themes, ethnic group practices and distinct linguistic styles. This theory, however, does not merely apply to African American youth and literature. It can address readers from all ethnic backgrounds. We use “African American” as a case

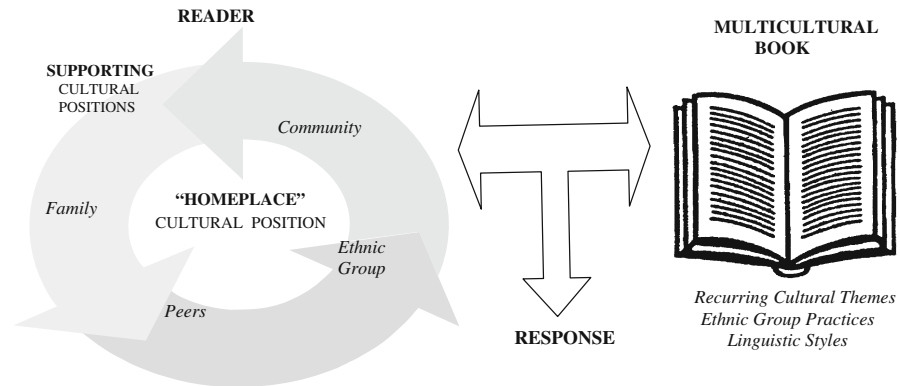


Fig. 1 “Homeplace”: culturally situated reader response model

to illustrate how culture gets mediated between readers and narratives. Specifically, the response examples explored below derived from a study in which African American pre-adolescents read historical fiction novels, like *The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963* (Curtis, 1995), in a community-based literary club. Students also read novellas by Mildred Taylor such as her 1987 text, *The Friendship*. Written and oral responses were solicited for each book read.

The model above (see Fig. 1) highlights the cultural positions students assume while reading specific parts of stories. The Homeplace Position represents the most dominant perspective being evoked when a child offers a literary response. This position remains transient and constantly interacts with and gets informed by the other positions. The Supporting Positions continue to be influential to a student's response, but they are not as focal. These positions, moreover, cannot be fully grasped without taking into account the cultural milieu embedded in particular stories. For example, a book with a strong family theme (such as *Scorpions* by Walter Dean Myers, 1988) has been shown to compel participants to more often respond from a Family rather than an Ethnic Group positioning (Brooks, 2003).

Homeplace

As a foundation for our theory, Hooks (1990) discusses the importance of a place to call “home” for having a sense of self, personhood and identity. Through this lens, “home” embodies considerations for what it means to be an African ancedored individual and in this same way hooks' conception of “homeplace” can be understood as a meaning laden phenomenon with significant social and cultural dimensions. These dimensions emerge in the data through types of responses that led to our readers assuming four cultural positions when making sense of the books read. We've labeled these positions as: Ethnic Group, Community, Family and Peers. The positions emanating from what is termed as “Homeplace” occurred when readers identified themselves in four culturally specific ways in relationship to the text. It was in this Homeplace that the reader derived a focal cultural position. Collectively, these positions represent various multilayered aspects of one's culture

and the multitude of practices inherent within it. The positions do not emerge as mutually exclusive or static. Rather, the positions are fluid, interactive and relied upon to make sense of unique situations embedded in the texts.

The Importance of Texts

As revealed in recent research, (Louie, 2006; Walach, 2008), we argue that textual features embedded in ethnically diverse books should not be ignored even when respecting the reader's role in constructing meaning. According to past scholarship on African American children's literature, authors insert particular cultural markers into these narratives. The fabric within the stories helps to identify this literature as written by and about African Americans (Bishop, 2007). Sims carried out a landmark investigation in this area in 1982. In her research on the history and types of African American children's literature created since the 1960s, she classified the books examined in one of the following ways: socially conscious, melting pot and culturally conscious. In general, the themes and ethnic-group depictions in these books accounted for the categorizations created by Sims. More recently, Bishop has reviewed several decades of children's writing by and about African Americans. She explains the now carefully documented literary tradition in the following way:

For African American writers and artists who create children's books, embracing that freedom has resulted in a body of literature that holds within it a good deal of diversity as well as a number of important commonalities that serve to make it a distinctive body of work....African American children's books also often reflect or are influenced by the life experiences of their creators, and African American life and culture are far from monolithic. Nevertheless, the creators of African American children's literature all share the experience of being members of a society in which race matters a great deal more than it should....My assumption is that this shared concord of sensibilities, this eccentricity, this uneasy ideological difference, shapes the lenses through which Black authors and illustrators of children's books view their work and their worlds, and helps to coalesce their work in a canon of African American children's literature. (2007, Introduction, pp. xi–xii)

Other scholars with an expertise in African American children's literature have also written about distinct textual features that provide rich and authentic cultural depictions (Harris, 1990; Johnson, 1990; McNair, 2008; Rountree, 2008; Smith, 2001). Developing a theory such as this one compels us to consider the messages found within African American children's stories as a means of validating them as tools that pass on traditions, beliefs, histories, and values to upcoming generations of children (Gates, 1989, pp. 9–17).

Reader Responses from *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*

Within this section of the article, we rely on African American middle grades students' literature discussions in response to *The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963*

by Christopher Paul Curtis to illustrate the culturally specific characteristics of each of the four response positions: Ethnic Group, Community, Family and Peers. A brief explanation of each positioning follows a summary of the novel.

The culturally conscious young adult novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, is told through the voice of middle child Kenny and presents strong themes around race and culture. Specific family themes that reoccur in children's writing by and about African Americans come in the forms Harris (1992) describes as "(1) families and their loyalties and obligations to each other and (2) the strength of the extended family" (pp. 73–74). The theme of confronting and overcoming racism is likewise present in this novel. When the shenanigans of oldest child Byron become too much for the family to withstand, a family trip south is planned. This culturally based tradition of transplanting the young from the north to the south is understood as an opportunity to purge problems through a connection or reconnection with one's history. The historical fiction text "acknowledges and reflects the distinctiveness of culture" (Bishop, 2007, p. 27). This is powerfully evident when the Watsons bear witness to the tragic Ku Klux Klan bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and killing of four little girls. Kenny travels inside the bombed church and fears that he sees his younger sister injured. Brothers Kenny and Byron help each other put their lives back together from an event that has left them forever changed.

Ethnic Group Position

First, we categorize the Ethnic Group position by the manner in which students rely on who they are as ethnic beings with a particular historical status and lineage in the world at large and United States in particular. It refers to their broad identification as African Americans, so to speak. The Ethnic Group position captures how the youth viewed themselves as African Americans and internalized what an African American would do or believe. In the discussion that follows, an Ethnic Group position emerges in response to the recurring textual theme of confronting and overcoming racism woven throughout the narrative.

Malik: So why did they [the Ku Klux Klan, white people] hate black people so much that they didn't want you to go to the same school?

Cameron: Because we were their competition in everything.

Tia: Yeah, and because they [text characters] were black.

Cameron: It's like so many people suffered for what we have today.

From the Ethnic Group position, the children's talk of the 'we' was grounded in the language of seeking and offering rationale for what happened in the past and sharing historical knowledge. From there, the discussion intensified and spiraled into many directions having to do with ethnicity that included current interactions with what the participants perceived as rude sales clerks, teachers and police officers demonstrating cultural bias as well as deep understanding of their own collective as well as subjective position within US society. Cameron's response, "It's like so many people suffered for what we have today" speaks to how the text is indeed a cultural tool that transmits information about one's ethnicity in its broadest sense.

Community Position

Next, the Community position surfaced as a result of the students' immersions in an urban environment. This environment consists of various types of institutions (i.e., churches, mosques, schools, fast food restaurants, corner stores, etc.). A series of responses emerged after reading the following passage in the text about a remorseful Byron (the older brother in the story) who throws cookies at a bird:

The cookie popped the bird smack-jab in the chest!
 When I got to Byron he'd picked up the bird and was holding it in his hands.
 You got him! You got him!
 I looked right at By and his face was all twisted up and his eyes were kind of shut.
 I stood there with my mouth open, I couldn't believe Byron was starting to cry. (Curtis, 1995, p. 81)

In the upcoming dialogue, the image that the protagonist Byron portrays in the text is discussed in relationship to images in the groups' immediate community.

- Jerome: When he [Byron] killed the bird and started crying that means that he can be all tough on the outside. It's like an orange or a pineapple. It's all rough or hard on the outside, but then it's soft on the inside.
- Cameron: Well Byron, right, he kind of resembles you know the image that people want today. The ironic part is that he killed a bird and feels sorry for it...

The Community position can be seen as the children use urbanized understandings to compare character image and persona with realities of their own community. A deeper sensibility surfaces as their talk points to understandings of socially constructed community understandings.

- Tia: Killing something is different than beating somebody up.
- Jerome: Yeah like when my friend Dwayne got shot. Tyree shot him. He's old, but he's about Tia's size. He's all right [Dwayne]. It was an accident. Tyree used to fight a lot, but when he shot him, he was like Dwayne! Oh my God!

In the textual moment that stands out for the readers, author Christopher Paul Curtis skillfully juxtaposes *wrong doing* with taking the life of a living creature. Although the discussions point to many of the realities of violence in urban life, the responses indicate a resistance to accepting the gratuitous violence that often pervades urban America. Relying on the Community position enabled the readers to work through and sustain common values evidenced through discussions about moral issues.

Family Position

The third position of Family stands out as probably the easiest to pinpoint. When the students tapped into the familial aspects of their culture, they situated themselves as members of families and assumed certain roles and perspectives from this point of

view. Indeed, a monolithic view of family did not surface, but the importance of family stood out. Below the students speak to the book's theme of families and their loyalties and obligations to each other. This discussion took place in response to Byron making charges at the grocery store without his parent's permission.

Jerome: He took what his parents were going to [then have to] pay for.

Cameron: I wouldn't do that because I would get found out. Would your parents say, oh that's fine...?

Jerome: If it was my mom, it would depend on how much it is.

As they interpreted this brief but significant event in the text, the participants did so through the perspective of sons who aimed to understand elements in the storyline such as why the parents might respond to the protagonist in particular ways. In this example, the students' textual interpretations are linked to contemporary views of their parents and the expectations they hold. Because authors cannot include everything in a book, readers insert their own story imaginings as a method of constructing meaning (Iser, 1972).

Peers Position

Finally, the Peers position is also central to this theory, particularly because during middle school the peer group heavily influences youth. The participants in our research often responded to the book in keeping with their adolescent developmental stage and affiliations. The Peers position was shaped by the readers' common interests, memberships and values. These features supported readings that constructed multiple hypotheses and considered varying viewpoints about what was read. Here, the students relied on a previous adolescent peer group outing they shared to explain why Byron enjoyed buying things on credit in the story. The students talked as peers with many common shared experiences as the basis for interpretation. They used adolescent-friendly examples, i.e., spending time at the Fun Factory, (a family arcade) to explain their literary interpretations.

Jerome: First he [Byron] goes and gets cookies because he can get the stuff for free. Like when we went to ... Fun Factory yesterday this machine kept giving out all of these basketballs and all of these free turns.

Cameron: I don't see how that was the same thing cause no one is really paying for it.

Isaiah: It's like saying you have unlimited money.

The Peers position allowed the readers to "...position themselves above the dynamics of the narrative: to stand outside and above it, as it were, in order to take on new perspectives in relation to the story" (Sipe, 1996, p. 200). This was evident as the discussion went on to include movies, sports, celebrity boxing and music. Responses expressed values and what Giroux (1993) describes as meanings about relationships with others inside and outside of one's world. The strength of salient textual themes fostered intertextual connections with social activities, movies, sports and music.

Discussion and Conclusion

The vast question of how culture shapes, constrains, and enables literary response is an area under active investigation....All of these factors make it important to contextualize children's responses to literature and to seek to understand the ways in which a diversity of response from a diversity of cultures can enrich literary discussion and interpretation. (Sipe, 1999, p. 126)

As Sipe suggests above, throughout our scholarly careers we have come to understand literary responses as powerfully personal evocations influenced by both readers and stories. Our reader response theory points to the ways these transactions are often mediated by the space one occupies in the world. The youths' responses to *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* (Curtis, 1995) offer illuminating examples of the types of richly contextualized interpretations readers can have. The significance of derived cultural positions embedded in Homeplace offer important implications for understanding how middle grade youth position themselves in relationship to texts with strong cultural fabric. In the four examples, response functioned in a spiraling or overlapping process in which Ethnic Group, Community, Family and Peers each contributed to a lived through experience that Rosenblatt (1985) describes as an ongoing organic process. In Fig. 1 the positions can be seen as "aspects or phases of a total situation" (p. 98). The figure illuminates positioned knowledge coming from the literature, reader and the real cultural world designated as Homeplace. This graphically depicted theory only represents approximations of the children's meanings. In practical application, the participants' interpretations are not so tidy and easily categorized. Rather, the responses are overlapping, transient and often revised, as is consistent with the nature of cultural practices and the fast-paced give and take of discussions.

In this theory, we aim to encapsulate culture (and its embedded practices) as a four pronged heuristic for the purpose of discussion. Similarly, with respect to the multifaceted concept of reading, the proposed theory addresses just one of many facets of the reading process which includes areas such as: interests and motivations, skills and interpretive strategies, cognitive development, approaches to a text, creativity and imagination, ways of assimilating knowledge and visual processing. We intend not to depict the entire reading process, but rather the ways readers culturally position themselves when engaging with texts. We also demonstrate how various features and passages from a multicultural book call forth certain types of positioned responses. The theory explains why two racially or ethnically similar children might share similar or very different interpretations of a story.

We believe this theory offers scholars and teachers of children's and young adult literature a lens through which to better situate literary interpretations. Understanding that a range of cultural positions factors into students' meaning making compels us, we argue, to mine texts more carefully for cultural milieu as well as find acceptance with a broader range of literary interpretations. Students depend on us to locate, when appropriate, the cultural access points that will enable a story to resonate and become meaningful for them. As such, we are advantaged by both valuing and more deeply understanding a wide variety of culturally positioned

responses. The pedagogical possibilities in this area are broadened when we both include many different kinds of multicultural literature and then accept as valid and/or build from responses deriving from far reaching links (e.g., racism) or really nuanced connections (e.g., the Fun Factory arcade) as found within students' lives. Figuring out when and how one position becomes focal while reading and if certain features from African American (or any kind of multicultural) narratives regularly solicit certain positions, are the types of inquiries both scholars and teachers can jointly explore. In the end, through this theory we intend for those working in the literacy field to better understand and think more deeply about, "...how culture, race, [and] ethnicity...both enable and constrain response to literature, and thus shape literary understanding" (Sipe. 2008, p. 241).

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