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Transactional Theory and the Study of Multicultural Literature

Is transactional reader response theory still a viable and valid theoretical guide for the study of multicultural literature?

When teaching multicultural literature for the purpose of multicultural education (e.g., MacPhee, 1997), many teachers use a transact-to-transform approach, a combination of Rosenblatt's transactional theory and Banks's transformation theory. They try to engage students in transaction with literature about unfamiliar cultures and encourage them to reflect on their attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs on cultures different from their own. For years, Rosenblatt (1982) "extolled the potentialities of literature for aiding us to understand ourselves and others, for widening our horizons to include temperaments and cultures different from our own, for helping us to clarify our conflicts in values, for illuminating our world" (p. 276). Banks's (2002) transformational approach ranks high in his hierarchy of approaches for integrating multicultural education into the curriculum. It aims at restructuring the curriculum and changing students' perspectives on cultural issues. Teachers hope that transaction with multicultural literature will help them achieve the goals of Banks's transformational approach.

Studies have shown that reading and responding to multicultural literature affects students' attitudes and views on racial and ethnic groups other than their own (Benson, 1995) and that becoming personally involved in a story results in a higher level of understanding than those who respond efferently (take away information only) (Altieri, 1996; Dressel, 2003). On the other hand, to the dismay of many teachers, students' transactions with this type of text can also open a Pandora's Box of misunderstandings, stereotypical perceptions, biases, and prejudices. Instead of transforming racial attitudes, it may reinforce biases and prejudices.

Take my students' responses to *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* (Staples, 1989), for example. Set in the Cholistan desert of Pakistan, the story portrays the struggle of a Pakistani teenage girl named Shabanu against the old tradition of arranged marriage. Many mainstream culture students in my advanced children's literature class see Shabanu as a victim of an "alien" culture and, although sympathizing with her, express strong resentment toward her culture. They feel lucky that they live in the United States, not in the Cholistan desert area of Pakistan. They fail to see other aspects of the Pakistani culture as portrayed in the novel. Like many other students from the mainstream culture, they read "egocentrically," assuming people from different cultures are all like them and judging people of other cultures based on the standards of the mainstream culture (Dressel, 2003).

Teachers may also be disappointed when students are asked to do critical analysis of multicultural literature but still fail to challenge the questionable portrayal of nondominant cultures. For example, teachers may want students to critique *Ten Little Rabbits* (Grossman, 1991), a picturebook that stereotypes Native Americans, but the students may say it is just an innocent counting book, and since White people are often represented as cute little animals in children's books, what is wrong with portraying American Indians that way? It seems that students' transaction with the text does not help them read the text critically. Teachers may wonder why they should bother to let students transact with the story and express opinions instead of just telling them what is wrong with it. In teaching literature about other cultures, as Kruse (2001) pointed out, teachers may face the choice between "telling/discussing" (p. 26)—in other words, between the transmission model and the transaction model of teaching. In the case of teaching this picturebook, the teacher has to decide between telling the students how

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to criticize it and letting them come up with their own critical reading through discussion.

When the transact-to-transform approach bumps into snags, teachers are likely to find transactional theory alone inadequate as a theoretical guide for using multicultural literature to achieve the goal of multicultural education. Scholars also find the theory falls short of expectations as a theoretical framework for the study of multicultural literature. As is so often true, we can all benefit from adopting a broader perspective on the issue. That is what I hope to provide here.

Responding to Criticisms of Transactional Theory

Some scholars believe that the transactional theory has its limitations in addressing the complex cultural issues presented in multicultural literature. One of the major problems they have with transactional theory is that it does not provide a critical stance. Lewis (2000), for instance, found it hard to situate critical reading in Rosenblatt's continuum of aesthetic and efferent response. Wade, Thompson, and Watkins (1994) noted, "What is missing from Rosenblatt's distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading is the analytical, critical approach to a text that some readers may adopt in some reading situations" (p. 275).

It was proposed, therefore, that a third stance, a critical stance, should be added to Rosenblatt's aesthetic and efferent stances (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997; McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004). The critical stance, which "searches for the author's underlying messages and assumptions" (Wade, Thompson, & Watkins, 1994), is held as parallel to the aesthetic and efferent stances, and all three stances should function during our reading experience. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) provide the following example to illustrate how they function: When reading a picture book about the Holocaust, we may respond aesthetically to the story and drawings in it, efferently to the number of children who died during the Holocaust, and critically to varying perspectives on the Holocaust.

It was also proposed that we should collapse the aesthetic/efferent binary opposition and develop "critical engagement that can . . . bring together personal, critical, and pleasurable" (Lewis, 2000, p. 258). Instead of perpetuating the opposition, as Rosenblatt does in some of her writings, the aesthetic stance should be broadened to "include the text as social and political construct" (p. 261). Take aesthetic response to the novel *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995), for example. In the story, a Black family living in Flint, Michigan, experiences racism in the South, including the bombing of a Black church, when they go to visit grandma in Birmingham, Alabama. Outsider readers, especially White readers, should not just identify with the universal experiences reflected in the Black family's daily life, but also develop an enhanced consciousness of the racial discriminations against Blacks and Blacks' resistance to racism.

In quest of a better way to apply transactional theory to the reading of multicultural literature, it is natural that scholars put forward different opinions on the theory. Through exchanging opinions, we may reach consensus on how to use the theory to guide critical reading of the sociocultural aspects of literature. In the discussion of the theory, however, I find some misconceptions of its nature and the two response stances it proposes. What follows is my attempt to respond to criticisms of the theory by presenting my own interpretations of its key concepts.

Transactional Theory Is a Theory of Reading That Can Encompass Any Critical Approach

Rosenblatt's theory is a theory of reading. It explores how readers read, interpret, evaluate, and criticize literature. True, it does not teach a certain critical perspective, such as Marxist, feminist, or postcolonial. But Rosenblatt (1982) does address social political concerns in connection with literature education and discuss concepts of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, along with issues of democracy, tradition, economic environment, gender, and culture. However, it is not the focus of her theory to teach these concepts or promote a certain critical perspective. You may call it the limitation of transactional theory, but it is a misunderstanding of the theory to criticize it for failure to embrace critical

Rosenblatt (1982) does address social political concerns in connection with literature education.

literacy. Some scholars (Dressel, 2003; Pradl, 1996; Probst, 2002; Short, 2001) have commented on this misunderstanding. Probst (2002) emphatically points out:

Rosenblatt has come to insist more strongly than ever that her theory is not simply a critical stance. Rather, it is a theory of reading. That is to say, Transactional Theory does not promote one set of critical questions over another, valuing the Marxist's questions about class over gender, the feminist's questions about gender over the Freudian's questions about our seamy, seething psyches. Instead, her theory suggests that each reader comes to the text with a unique history, a unique set of circumstances and abilities and inclinations, and has to take that into account as he/she shapes an understanding of the text and his/her reading of it. That complicated process of shaping . . . begins with the unique, individual, aesthetic response, and then may extend into a vast array of fascinating questions about reader, text, author, culture, society, gender, history, and more. (p. 31)

Criticism of the text from any perspective, be it feminist or postcolonial, should be anchored in the reader's aesthetic response.

While Rosenblatt emphasizes aesthetic response as the primary step in literary transaction, she never claims that it is the end of literary transaction. Instead, she insists that aesthetic response represents only the first step, "the starting point for criticism" (1985b, p. 103). On many occasions, Rosenblatt tries to clarify misunderstandings of her theory. She categorically "rejects the reader response label as too often interpreted simply as a critical approach with personal response as its end product, whereas she sees it as the matrix within which any critical approach is selected" (Rosenblatt, 2003, p. 70). Criticism of the text from any perspective, be it feminist or postcolonial, should be anchored in the reader's aesthetic response. Rosenblatt (1985b) underscores "the importance of seeing any reading event in its personal, social, cultural matrix" (pp. 103–104). Any act of reading should be viewed and analyzed in this total matrix. Speaking of the application of transactional theory to teaching, she reminds us, "Emphasis on the reader need not exclude teaching criteria of valid interpretation or application of various approaches, literary and social, to the process of critical interpretation and evaluation (Rosenblatt, 2003, p.7).

"Critical interpretation and evaluation" is efferent reading, which, as Rosenblatt defines it, is not just reading for information, as it is often interpreted in oversimplified terms. In literary study, its purpose is to retain information during reading for reflection, interpretation, analysis, and action after reading. We need to incorporate critical perspectives into efferent reading of multicultural literature—perspectives such as critical multiculturalism, postcolonialism, feminism, or Marxism—that offer readers criteria for accepting or rejecting what is called forth by the text. But we don't need to have another stance to foster critical reading. What we need is a re-visit to and true understanding of the efferent stance as defined by Rosenblatt. Transactional theory was advanced to challenge the domination of the text-centered New Criticism. As such, it emphasizes the reader's aesthetic reading as primary. But transactional theory never excludes or ignores critical reading. In an article that traces the evolution of Rosenblatt's theory, Dressman (2001) concludes that Rosenblatt has always encouraged "readers to examine the social implications embedded in the pleasure they take from their involvement in a text" (p. 142). For Rosenblatt, critical literacy is a personal as well as a political matter because it entails examining one's own aesthetic experience.

The Reader and Aesthetic Response Are Not Ideologically Innocent

While emphasizing the reader's personal transaction with the text, transactional theory acknowledges the influence of social, cultural, and political factors on the individual reader and her transaction with the text. Rosenblatt (1982) explicitly states, "The fact of the great diversity of the cultures evolved by human beings is in itself testimony to the power of the environment into which the child is born . . . . 'In depth studies' of child-rearing and particular customs or rituals document the complexity of the individual's assimilation of his culture" (p. 273). The reader will "bring to his reading the moral and religious code and social philosophy primarily assimilated from family and community background" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 89).

The influences of the social, cultural contexts are "always individually internalized" (Rosenblatt,

2003, p. 70). That is why the reader's personal response can serve as the matrix for analyzing the social cultural influences on the reader. In fact, Rosenblatt urges readers to learn to examine personal factors that enter into their transaction with literary works and critically scrutinize their responses to literary works for social, cultural influences. She calls on the teacher to help students to grow into more mature readers, not just in terms of literary understanding, but also in terms of changing personal attitudes and expanding perspectives (Rosenblatt, 1995):

The fact that the personal contribution of the reader is an essential element in any vital reading of literature justifies the demand that the teacher create a setting that makes it possible for students to have spontaneous response to literature . . . . Once the student has responded freely, a process of growth can be initiated. He needs to learn to handle with intelligence and discrimination the personal factors that enter into his reaction to books. Through a critical scrutiny of his response to literary works, he can come to understand his personal attitudes and gain the perspective needed for a fuller and sounder response to literature. (p.108)

The reader's personal response can serve as the matrix for analyzing the social cultural influences on the reader.

If the reader was ideologically innocent and her aesthetic response devoid of social political influences, she would not need to scrutinize her response from a critical perspective.

Recognizing the Connections between Aesthetic Reading and Critical Reading

Aesthetic reading is personal, but is not simply identifying with characters or expressing personal likes or dislikes about the story, as it is frequently misinterpreted. Aesthetic reading is a rather complicated process that includes evocation and response. In order to truly understand aesthetic reading, it is necessary to quote Rosenblatt's (1982) description of it at length here:

In aesthetic reading, we respond to the very story or poem that we are evoking during the transaction with the text. In order to shape the work, we draw on our reservoir of past experience with people and the world, our past inner linkage of words and things, our past encounters with spoken or written texts. We listen to the sound of words in the inner ear; we lend our sensations, our emotions, our sense of being alive, to the new experience which, we feel, corresponds to the text. We participate in the story, we identify with characters, we share their conflicts and their feelings. At the same time there is a stream of responses being generated. There may be a sense of pleasure in our own creative activity, an awareness of pleasant or awkward sound and movement in the words, a feeling of approval or disapproval of the characters and their behavior. We may be aware of a contrast between the assumptions or expectations about life that we brought to the reading and the attitudes, moral codes, social situations we are living through in the world created in transaction with the text. (p. 270, emphasis added)

As Rosenblatt clearly states in this quote, in aesthetic reading, the reader evocates a story world from the text, enjoying the ongoing creative process of evocation, and at the same time, she is responding to what she is evocating. In this stream of accompanying response, the reader may experience ideological and moral conflicts with what is called forth from the text. Aesthetic reading is therefore not just "personal, pleasurable reading" detached from the reader's belief system and contextual concerns of social political issues. The reader may approve or disapprove of the characters' behaviors or the attitudes, moral codes, and social situations in the story. These personal responses may be charged with social political implications. There are at least two connections between aesthetic reading and critical reading. First, aesthetic reading may contain critical elements that can be developed into systematic critical analysis of the text. Second, aesthetic reading may betray the reader's assumptions, expectations, and attitudes that need to be addressed so that the reader can learn to read the text critically. Critical reading can be developed from these connections.

Aesthetic Reading May Contain Critical Elements

In research on reader response to literature, aesthetic reading is categorized in three basic modes of aesthetic response: perception, association, and

affection (Bleich, 1978). In the perception mode, the reader notices what is interesting, meaningful, surprising, confusing, or whatever catches her attention; in the association mode, the reader relates to the characters, events, or any other aspect of the story; and in the affection mode, the reader expresses her feelings and emotions at what happens in the story. These modes of aesthetic response can contain seeds of critical reading, which, with guidance from the teacher and through discussion, can lead to critical reading of the text as a social and political construct.

The mode of perception is often closely related to the mode of affection. A reader may notice something in the story world and react strongly to it. For example, when a girl reads a picturebook biography of Jackie Robinson, she notices that the young Robinson is not allowed to swim in the swimming pool with White children, and in reaction to this injustice, she cries out, "That's not fair!" (MacPhee, 1997).The girl intuitively senses the issues of social justice reflected in the picturebook. Her response is not just personal, but also social political; not just pleasurable, but also critical.

Yenika-Agbaw (1997) presents three readings of *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters* (P. McKissack & F. McKissack, 1994): a pleasurable reading, a postcolonial reading, and a critical multicultural reading. What Yenika-Agbaw calls "pleasurable reading" is actually aesthetic reading in Rosenblatt's terminology. While I highly appreciate her critical reading of the picturebook, I disagree with her that the aesthetic reading is disconnected from postcolonial and critical multicultural reading. In her "pleasurable reading" of the book, she noticed how the slave owner was very cruel to the Black slaves, and she felt sad. Her aesthetic response in the modes of perception and affection actually contains seeds of a postcolonial reading of the book that can lead to the recognition of "slavery as a colonial institution that perpetuated the domination of others" (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997, p. 448).

In the mode of association, the reader may recall an experience similar to an event in the story, which can be a pleasant or unpleasant one. Or the reader may relate a character to someone she knows in real life. The association may also come with concurrent feelings of like or dislike. Thus, the association may imply approval or disapproval of an event or a character's behavior.

An example of how implicit criticism is embedded in the association mode of aesthetic response can be found in Yenika-Agbaw's (1997) article. In her pleasurable reading, she associates the plantation of the story with a plantation run by a British corporation in her home country of Cameroon, where Black African employees experience social inequalities and injustices similar to those experienced by Black slaves in Southern plantations. She recalls, "The parents of my friends did all the undesirable jobs for the European masters" (p. 74). This comparison, accompanied by a feeling of sadness in her response, is an implicit criticism of the slavery of Blacks in the Southern plantation. Although it is not like the systematic analysis of the book in her postcolonial or critical multicultural reading, it contains seminal elements for developing into a critical reading.

Another example can be found in a student's response to the picturebook, *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), a story illustrating relationships based primarily on class-based differences. When I discussed the book with a group of fourth-graders, one of them associated a character's condescending attitude toward a young girl and her jobless father with his own mother's attitude toward a shabbily clothed man they encountered in real life. He described what had happened as his mother drove through a park: Her car broke down and as she looked under the hood, a man approached them and politely asked her what the problem was with her car. His mother was taken aback and held her son tight, although she allowed the man to check her car. Soon, with the man's help, the car started and they were on their way again. The boy's association of his mother's reaction to the man in real life with the character's condescending attitude toward the girl and her father points to this fourth-grader's emerging criticism of stereotypical perceptions and negative attitudes toward people who appear to be poor.

These modes of aesthetic response can contain seeds of critical reading, which, with guidance from the teacher and through discussion, can lead to critical reading of the text as a social and political construct.

Aesthetic reading, "essential to the beginning of a process of organic growth . . . can nourish both aesthetic and social sensibilities and can foster the development of critical and self critical judgment" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. xviii). As the reader examines and analyzes her own aesthetic experience, she can

learn to take on a perspective of cultural criticism. As the reader matures, her aesthetic response will include more critical elements and will approach what is termed "critical engagement" (Lewis, 2000). We can help the reader grow into a more mature reader who demonstrates enhanced critical awareness, but aesthetic response remains a category different from the efferent response. It is personal, private, and spontaneous, even though it can be critical at the same time. More research is needed to see how personal, pleasurable responses may contain potentials to develop into critical reading. In past research, aesthetic and efferent stances have usually been examined separately. From a Complex Theory perspective (Sumara, 2000), the relationship between them (for example, how they influence each other) deserves more investigation. However, this does not mean the binary opposition of aesthetic and efferent reading should be collapsed.

Readers' misconceptions, biases, and prejudices revealed in their aesthetic reading of a multicultural literary work should be seen as subject matter for analysis, interpretation, and criticism.

Aesthetic Reading May Reveal the Reader's Subject Position

As readers are not ideologically innocent, their response to literature inevitably reveals beliefs, values, assumptions, and attitudes that derive from a certain ideology. The reader may reveal her "subject positions" (Beach, 1993, p. 129) that inhibit critical reading. Subject positions, or "reading formations," are "those acquired ideological stances that constitute . . . certain desired ways of responding" (Beach, 1997, p. 129). For example, in a study of response to multicultural literature, McNair (2003) found that several of her college students considered *The Five Chinese Brothers* (Bishop, 1938/1996) entertaining and harmless. It was and still is one of their favorite books. They refused to acknowledge that the book was problematic, even after the instructor pointed out that it perpetuates blatant historical stereotypes of Chinese people. Their defense of the book reflects a subject position that de-racializes children's literature.

In aesthetic responses, there may be a conflict between the reader's "assumptions or expectations about life" and "the attitudes, moral codes, social situations" the reader is living through. Because of the discrepancy, the reader may resist engagement in multicultural literature (Beach, 1997). A reader may resist the author, a character, and/or the teacher's interpretation of the text (Rabinowitz and Smith, 1998). Instead of blaming the reader for showing resistance, we should regard their resistance as a springboard for discussing and clarifying critical issues related to multicultural literature. According to Rosenblatt (1985b), "The evocation together with the concurrent responses are the subject matter of interpretation . . . . Criticism should make the aesthetic transaction the starting point of a further transactional relationship between reader/critic and text—or between reader/historian and text, or reader/semiotician and text" (p. 105). Readers' misconceptions, biases, and prejudices revealed in their aesthetic reading of a multicultural literary work should be seen as subject matter for analysis, interpretation, and criticism. They may appear as barriers to critical reading of multicultural literature, but in fact they can serve as the starting point for critical reading.

Some readers' aesthetic response may not show resistance but may reveal a discrepancy between their life experience in the real world and the characters' experience in the story world. The reader's past experience with people and the world is a key factor in the evocation of the literary work. It affects the reader's selective attention in the process of evoking the literary world. Thus, a reader may ignore experiences that are not familiar to them but are important in the story world. For example, Ketter and Lewis (2001) found that during aesthetic transaction with the novel *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995), White students noticed the humorous family stories and universal themes, such as sibling rivalry and parent/child conflict. They related to the universal experiences in the story and enjoyed the recognition of them, because these experiences were similar to ones they had with people and the world. They did not feel as strongly about discrimination against Blacks as the Black students. In contrast, for Black students who experience racism, their identification was not simply with the universal experiences of the characters, but also with their experiences of being victimized in a racialized society. To understand the social political issues of the novel, the White students would need to reexamine their aesthetic responses to the text.

As the reader's aesthetic transaction provides the subject matter for reflection and analysis, it is the basis for transforming the readers' subject

position and developing their ability to read critically. On the one hand, we should "encourage the most personal response," and on the other hand, we should "understand them in the larger social and cultural realm" (Rogers and Soter, 1997, p.112). Multicultural literature has the potential to help us understand ourselves and others, to change our attitudes and embrace cultures different from our own, and to gain insights into social cultural conflicts, but "these benefits spring only from emotional and intellectual participation in evoking the work of art, through reflection on our own aesthetic experience" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 276).

Moving beyond Aesthetic Reading, Not beyond Transactional Theory

Some scholars contend that we should move beyond transactional reader response theory (Rogers and Soter, 1997). I would argue that a more appropriate proposition is to move beyond aesthetic reading, not beyond transactional theory. Transactional theory does not exclude reading a literary text as a cultural construct and examining the author–reader power relationship. Those who call on us to move beyond transactional theory misunderstand the theory as valuing only personal response, and its use in classroom practice as a "pedagogy of personal relevance" (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998, p. 128). Readers' aesthetic response to literature is essential, but not enough. Many educators recognize the necessity of moving beyond aesthetic reading, especially when readers are reading outside their own cultures. They stress that readers need to participate in critical thinking about the text and about their own response to it. "It is imperative that teachers help students go beyond their spontaneous response" (Dressel, 2003, p. 12). However, if we move beyond transactional theory and bypass the essential first step of personal transaction with the text in hopes of developing critical reading ability in the reader, we run the risk of imposing a certain critical point of view on the reader without the reader really understanding and accepting it. It would be a throwback to a text-centered approach that neglects the reader's personal transaction with the text. Consequently, the critic or the teacher would again become the authority on the criticism of the text as a social construct, very much like they were the authority on the criticism of the text as an object of art during the heydays of New Criticism. Rosenblatt (1985a) explicitly states that "the literary transaction, as a form of human behavior, can be fruitfully studied from the point of view of any discipline. But from a literary point of view, such analysis is useful only if it illuminates, places in a context, and does not destroy or ignore the lived through structured evocation" (p. 39). Any critical perspective that is applied to the literary experience of a text should not be an imposition on or replacement of the reader's aesthetic response. Rather, it should be an illumination and extension of the reader's unique, individual, aesthetic response. Otherwise the critical analysis may not be useful and helpful to the individual reader.

Any critical perspective that is applied to the literary experience of a text should not be an imposition on or replacement of the reader's aesthetic response.

Rosenblatt (1985a) warns that "there is a tendency to turn away from the lived-through experience and to efferently apply a ready-made system of analysis to the reading" (p. 39). This tendency may be more obvious in the teaching of multicultural literature when students whose lives represent mainstream culture show bias or prejudice in their response toward dominated cultures or when students are unable to critically analyze social, cultural, and political issues in a text. Eager to bring about conceptual and attitudinal changes in students, the teacher may just apply "a ready-made system of analysis" to the reading, offering an authoritative explanation of what the text "means" or what the problem is with it. We want our students to question the ideological and cultural assumptions of a text. That questioning, however, should start from the students' own ideological and cultural assumptions exhibited in their personal aesthetic response to the text. When we move from aesthetic to critical, or efferent, response, we should see to it that the two types of response are not disconnected or set opposed to each other. As I have noted, the critical elements embedded in their aesthetic response can be a springboard for discussing the textual ideological and cultural assumptions. Students' misconceptions, indifference, biases, and prejudices can also serve the purpose of examining the text critically. By bridging aesthetic response and critical reading, we can promote reflection and transformation in the reader.

Since transactional theory does not provide specific principles of cultural criticism, it is necessary to teach them and apply them to multicultural books, but these principles should be integrated with the reader's personal transaction with the text.

Only after the reader participates emotionally and intellectually in personal transaction with the book can she really understand and benefit from the teaching of critical perspectives. When the reader is engaged in the initial aesthetic reading, she should not be asked to have a goal that calls for an efferent stance. Insistence on letting the reader have a pleasurable aesthetic reading does not set the aesthetic stance against the efferent stance. Rather, pleasurable aesthetic reading provides the basis for any efferent reflection and analysis. Rosenblatt (1995) urges readers "to reflect on their spontaneous response to it, to understand what in the work and in himself produced that reaction, and to go on thoughtfully to modify, reject, or accept it" (p. 89). Obviously, she is urging readers to move from aesthetic reading to efferent reading.

Again, take the controversial picturebook *Ten Little Rabbits* (Grossman, 1991). In their transaction with it, many students from mainstream culture read the book as an innocent counting book devoid of any cultural implications. Their failure to see the book's stereotypes and cultural inaccuracies reveals their perceptions and assumptions about Native Americans. Instead of telling them what is wrong with the book, it would work better to wait until they have a chance to respond to it, and then use probes and questions to start their process of critical inquiry into the cultural issues present in the book. According to Lehr (1995), the teacher should act not just as a facilitator, but also as a "catalyst" that pushes the students into new ways of thinking about the world and re-thinking about their initial responses to the book. Relative to *Ten Little Rabbits,* the following questions may be asked:

- Have you seen Chinese or Jewish Americans featured as cute little animals or playthings in a children's book?
- Why do we have so many children's books and movies that feature Native Americans as animals or playthings?
- Have you seen the Pope or Jesus or Christian religious ceremonies portrayed in a counting book?
- Do you think the portrayal of kachina and American Indian religious ceremonies, like rain dances, represented in the book would be offensive to Native Americans?

Only after the reader participates emotionally and intellectually in personal transaction with the book can she really understand and benefit from the teaching of critical perspectives.

It is important to note that these questions serve only as a road map for the critical inquiry; the end results of the inquiry depend on the students' efforts during and after the discussion. I suggest that after the class discussion, students read McCarty's (1995) article, "What Is Wrong with *Ten Little Rabbits*," and learn more about cultural criticism in general and this problematic book in particular. The discussion and the article would lead the students to reexamine their initial transaction with text and help them develop critical thinking.

Conclusion

I hope this article leaves you with a fuller understanding of two important points of Rosenblatt's transactional theory relative to the study of multicultural literature. First, Rosenblatt maintains that aesthetic response is primary in the reader's personal transaction with a text, and at the same time urges readers to examine personal factors that enter into their response, potentially allowing them to change and grow into mature readers. She emphasizes the necessity for readers to acquire knowledge and insights to make "fuller and sounder responses," because "Possession of knowledge or insight—historical, philosophical, psychological, political, for example—may yield a special angle of vision or powerful organizing frameworks" (1978, p. 147). Second, Rosenblatt believes that transactional theory can encompass any critical perspective and states that emphasizing the reader's response does not exclude the application of critical approaches to the interpretation and evaluation of a text. In the study of multicultural literature, it is imperative for us to teach students a critical perspective that encourages self-change and social transformation. Unfortunately this is often neglected when we apply transactional theory to classroom teaching of multicultural literature.

By constantly scrutinizing their responses and by consciously incorporating a critical perspective into their responses, students will be able to elevate their aesthetic and efferent responses to multicultural literature to a higher level of critical reading. Despite criticisms of it, transactional theory is still a viable and valid theoretical guide for the study of multicultural literature *if* we interpret it correctly and apply it properly. With the guidance

of transactional theory in the study of multicultural literature, "the student can participate through literary experiences in a diversity of worlds and systems of values, can become acquainted with the diverse interpretive frames of reference, and can be helped to critically develop a personal hierarchy of values that recognize the democratic rights of others" (Rosenblatt, 2003, p. 72).

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