Ain’t I a Girl: Black Girls Negotiating Gender, Race, and Class

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

This study sought to address the lack of research on young Black girls’ experiences in schooling and in their relationships with peers by exploring the experiences and perspectives of three second-grade Black girls, Adrianna, Raell, and Mariah. The particular goal of the study was to examine the ways that they were positioned and the ways they positioned themselves within the peer cultural discourses of the classroom and the prominent sociocultural discourses they drew from to explain their perceptions of these peer cultural discourses. Additionally, I was interested in the way in which discourses of difference, including discourses of race, class, and gender, were taken up within their perceptions and experiences. The results indicated that each girl had similar, yet distinctly different positionings within the larger sociocultural discourses of the classroom and their peer cultural worlds. Their perspectives were imbued with the sociohistorical, political, familial, and personal worlds that were a part of their experience. I began to theorize across each of these cases in the final chapter, revealing the complexity and commonalities of their perspectives and agency.
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Fields of Study

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CHAPTER ONE: PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Introduction

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? (Truth, Delivered 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio)

Black women have historically been unsung heroines in the advancement of human rights causes. Women’s rights movements and feminism have a history of securing accomplishments only for middle class and affluent White women, leaving the rest of women at the margins (Davis, 1981, 1989; Collins, 2000). The well-known phrase “Ain’t I a Woman,” from the above selection of a speech given by Sojourner Truth at an Akron, Ohio Women’s Convention in May 1851, made it clear that race must be considered when taking up women’s rights issues. In a society where Black women have historically been perceived as deviant versions of White middle-upper class women, Truth pointed to her experience as evidence that womanhood must not be viewed through
a singular, raceless, or classless lens if feminism were to effectively advance the rights of all women. Truth’s message is still pertinent today. Black women and girls, despite great advancements, by and large struggle to reconcile their status in a society where the standard representation of humanity has been constructed around Whiteness.

Statement of Problem

Research in general has historically ignored or minimized the experience of Black women or represented them in largely deficient ways. While a growing body of work involving the experiences of Black women and adolescents in society in general (hooks, 1981; Bell-Scott, 1994; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), and schools, in particular (Evans-Winters, 2005; Fordham, 1993; Stevens, 1997, 2002), has begun to challenge these deficit perspectives, there is a critical need for additional research and scholarship in this area. This is especially true in regards to the experiences of young Black girls where there continues to be a lack of research regarding their experiences both inside and outside of schools.

A number of different factors contribute to the lack of representation and misrepresentation of the experiences and perceptions of young Black girls. First, it is important to note that Black girls have been marginalized within already marginalized groups, namely children and girls. Gaunt (2006) notes that “children’s (and girls’) cultures are too readily equated with the pre-modern, the pre-technological, the pre-adult; all designations that invoke ‘otherness and deny the complexity of phenomenology…that contributes to the social construction of culture and identity’ (p. 54). That is, within the world of research, children are often seen as the “other,” in relation to adults, with their
voices silenced, and are represented only through psychological stages of development or as passive consumers of their raced and gendered social world (Cannella, 1997). Additionally, they have been and continue to be portrayed as helpless agents in their worlds, through designations of “innocent,” or “in need of protection” (Cannella, 1997; Gaunt, 2006).

More, recently, studies have emerged to suggest children’s active involvement in their own social worlds. Such work recognizes the social construction of children’s identities amid relationships with their peers and the co-construction of a specific children’s culture (Rizzo, 1989; Corsaro, 2003, 2005). However, this is still an underdeveloped area. More studies that investigate the active, social construction of children’s peer worlds by children and the influence of these peer worlds on their identities are needed in order to begin to understand the ways in which children co-create and negotiate childhood worlds.

Further contributing to the lack of attention to Black girl’s lives and experiences and to a deficit perspective of their experiences is the lack of attention to race, in general, in research. Like their adult contemporaries, Black girls’ experiences are assumed to be the same as those of White boys or girls (Scott, 2002, 2003), or dismissed for the sake of “equity, diversity, and inclusion,” through terms such as “girls of color” (Paul, 2003). On the other hand, in educational research that specifically takes up race or examines children’s racial perspectives and development, gender has been an ignored, thus ignoring any distinctions that may be made from Black girls’ gendered experiences (Morland, 1966; Clark, Hocevar, & Dembo, 1980; Holmes, 1995; Connolly, 1998).
Where race has been taken up in regards to the experiences of Black children, it has not necessarily been within a strength-based or asset framework. For instance, a great deal of educational research literature focuses on Black males as a social problem. Such work has focused on the overrepresentation of Black males in special education programs and increased incarceration rates (Paul, 2003) as well as the lagging academic achievement of Black males over the years (AAUW, 2008). The Black male as “in crisis” has demanded so much attention that Black girls are often rendered invisible as they are thought to be faring well when compared to their male counterparts.

The relative silence on the experience of Black girls in school masks the challenges they face and prevents the delivery of support given these needs. For instance, Black girls who have struggled with academic issues and self-esteem receive more social and less academic support from their teachers (Fordham, 1993; Jones & Shorter-Goode, 2003; Evans-Williams, 2005). Additionally, research indicates that Black girls often experience exclusion from friendship groups (Fordham, 1993; Scott, 2002, 2003) and that Black girls, like African Americans in general have to contend with negative racial stereotypes and the consequences of internalizing these stereotypes (Collins, 2000; Gaunt, 2006).

While Black girls continue to find ways to minimize the damages they sustain in life and in school and still achieve academic success, the relative silence around their experiences prevents an understanding of the ways in which challenging and negative experiences in schooling influence them in and beyond school. Thus, there is little known about the adaptations and resiliency they employ to sustain themselves throughout
their educational experiences and throughout their lives (Fordham, 1993; Stevens, 2002) and the consequences for these adaptations. For example, Fordham (1993) contends that for many Black girls, the price of academic success is often invisibility and becoming a participant in their own marginalization and exclusion. She further contends that this adaptive behavior has serious negative and long-term consequences as they may not lead to the types of behaviors necessary to be successful after secondary or post-secondary education.

Finally, one of the issues that contribute to the ways in which the educational experiences of young Black girls are rendered invisible or misrepresented is the lack of attention to the nature of multiple identity locations or the intersection of race, class, and gender in their experience. A growing body of studies have analyzed how race (Schofield, 1982; Holmes, 1995; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) impacts children’s experiences within the classroom and others have looked at gender (Davies, 1989; Connell, 1987; Blaise, 2005), and a small body of literature has begun to take up class (Hicks, 2002; Jones, 2006), however, feminist scholars who have taken up issues of power through gender have noted the need for considering the intersections of multiple identity locations within their analyses (Davies, 1989; Thorne, 1993; Gallas, 1998; Blaise, 2005). Such work is beginning to emerge across the globe. For instance, in post-apartheid South Africa researchers have examined the influence of race, gender, and class upon children’s social interactions and identity constructions (Soudien, 2004; Gaganakis, 2006; Ebrahim & Francis, 2008). However, little exists in the research literature about
these influences on Black girls within the United States (Goodwin, 1990; Scott, 2002, 2003).

**Purpose of Study**

This study sought to address the lack of research on young Black girls’ experiences in schooling and in their relationships with peers by exploring the range of experiences and perspectives of three second-grade girls identified as Black/African American by their teacher, their peers and/or themselves, namely Adrianna, Raell, and Mariah. The particular goal of the study was to examine the ways that they were positioned and the ways they positioned themselves within the peer cultural discourses of the classroom and the prominent sociocultural discourses they drew from to explain their perceptions of these peer cultural discourses. Additionally, I was interested in the way in which discourses of difference, including discourses of race, class, and gender, were taken up within their perceptions and experiences. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. What are the sociocultural discourses surrounding diversity (race, class, and gender) and difference within this classroom and within the children’s peer cultural worlds?

2. How are Black girls positioning themselves within these discourses and what are their perceptions of their efforts to position themselves?

3. How are Black girls being positioned within these discourses and what are their perceptions of the ways in which they are being positioned?
Theoretical Framework

In this study I bring together three theoretical frameworks through which to explore the perceptions and experiences of young Black girls within the peer world of their classroom—Black/Endarkened feminist, perspectives and sociocultural, and, in particular, discursive sociocultural theories. These perspectives allowed me to account for the social, political, and historical construction of Black girls in relation to their social worlds.

Black/Endarkened Feminist Perspectives

Black and Endarkened feminisms emphasize the capacity of Black women and girls to theorize their lived experiences and to establish their ‘herstories’ as acts of resisting oppression (Cauce et al., 1996; Davis & Rhodes, 1996; Sullivan, 1996; Evans-Williams, 2005). Black feminist thought has a rich tradition dating back to early nineteenth century as Black women were involved in both abolitionist and suffragist movements (Yee, 1992; Taylor, 1998). Black feminist theory insists on the humanity of the Black community and the inclusion of Black women in feminist thought (Joseph, 1995; Collins, 2000; Henry 2005). Dillard (2006) has introduced Endarkened feminist epistemology as a “new metaphor” for engaging in research as “responsibility”, one that connects self and others, as historical, communal, and cultural beings and can be seen as an extension of Black feminism through a more explicit discussion of the spiritual underpinnings of not only Black women’s knowledge base and experiences, but also the research endeavor. These perspectives share much in common, though each brings an important perspective to my lens.

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Both Black and Endarkened feminisms center Black women’s self-definition (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000; Henry, 2005; Dillard, 2006), insisting that Black women possess valid knowledge and that they theorize, and critique in their daily lives. In doing so, Black and Endarkened feminist perspectives ‘de-center’ dominant and oppressive definitions of the Black community and Black women, in particular, in order to define epistemological positions and identity locations framed by and through Black experiences and consciousness (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006).

Though one of the central aims of Black and Endarkened feminism is to push back against dominance, it also aims to interrogate beyond the world in Black and White and to situate identities as navigating the cartography of multiple worlds in a space of intersectionality. Black and Endarkened feminism work to explore identities within epistemological spaces situated and socially constructed across entangled histories amid the fluidity and intersectionality of self, community, nation and other identity markers (Crenshaw, 1991). According to Collins (1998), for Black women gain knowledge from experiences at the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender which serves as an impetus for Black women’s critical social theory. An intersectional lens was critical for this study as the purpose was to understand the complex social, political, and emotional space of the classroom marked by difference across race, class, and gender and the ways in which the Black girl’s positioned themselves and were positioned by others in their interactions within this space.

Black and Endarkened feminism does not assert the existence of an essential or archetypical Black woman with normal or authentic experiences or the existence of a
homogenous Black woman’s standpoint. On the other hand, such perspective does not deny a shared experience or epistemological thread. Rather, according to Collins (2000),

It may be more accurate to say that a Black women’s collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges. Because it both recognizes and aims to incorporate heterogeneity in crafting Black women’s oppositional knowledge, this Black women’s standpoint eschews essentialism in favor of democracy (p. 28).

The assumption that there is a common thread of structural challenges and experiences among Black women provided a lens through which to consider the ways in which Black girls possess or begin to possess racial, gender, and classed ways of knowing and being that is unique to them as a collective. Such a position offers the political and analytic means to trace Black women’s struggle and agency across history and geographical spaces amidst the shared and distinct discourses that have historically been a part of this struggle. Although there is not a uniform or fossilized “Black” or “Black female” experience, there are unique and commonalties across the experiences of Black women and girls.

Overall, then, within this study a Black and Endarkened feminist lens provided a framework to locate the agency of Black girls within a shared struggle while disrupting any oversimplistic binary of oppressed/oppressor. Such a perspective also provided a way to locate them within the intersection of identity markers and privilege their voices
within their experience in order to honor their perceptions without objectifying them and/or reifying stereotypes.

**Sociocultural Theories**

Sociocultural theoretical perspectives also inform this study. Sociocultural epistemological perspectives recognize the world as socially constituted, mediated, and open ended, and thus learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people arising from socially and culturally structured contexts (Rogoff, 2003) or culturally ‘figured worlds’ (Holland et al., 2003). Sociocultural perspectives account for the ways in which people ‘make themselves from the outside’, through acting on things in the world and engaging with the assumed meanings within social activity and interactions (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2001; Corsaro, 2003, 2005; Boocock & Scott, 2005). Such perspectives point not only to the way in which people are socially and culturally constructed, but also to the ways in which humans influence the sociocultural conditions under which they are shaped. Children, within a sociocultural perspective, are not only shaped by the social and cultural meanings of the world around them, they also shape these meanings through their participation within their social/cultural world (Vygotsky, 1978; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Wertsch, 1985; Rogoff, 2003).

In this study I was interested in understanding the ways in which the peer world of the classroom both influenced the children’s relationships with others, even as their participation in the classroom community influenced and shaped its dynamics. As such, it was important to look at both the socially constructed space of the classroom, the peer
relationships emanating from it, as well as ways in which children were making meaning of their social world.

**Discursive Sociocultural Theories**

Discursive theories, also sociocultural in make-up, focus on the nature of language in use and identity as socially constructed and dialectic in nature. Discursive theories take up power explicitly positioning language, identity, and power as inextricably bound (Fairclough, 1995/2010; Wodak, 2001). In this study I draw from Gee’s (1999/2005) definition of “Big D” discourses which represent the connection between language and power, where language is cultural, political, contextual and latent with social codes and norms through which people (social actors) negotiate social roles and goals (Gee, 1990/2008). Discourses result from social practices and histories involving shared meanings and negotiations of social roles of individuals within a particular context (Gee, 1990/2008). Within discursive theories, language on its own is not powerful; it is how people use language that lends itself to power (Wodak, 2001).

Within a discursive perspective, while there are dominant ‘authoritarian’ discourses (Bakhtin, 1981) that are historical and political in nature and that influence and shape identities, identities are also shaped within specific, locally produced cultural worlds where people come to conceptually and materially produce and perform new self understandings or identities. In this study, the classroom was understood as a particular, bounded social world where multiple political and historical discourses were converging and where a peer culture or peer cultures were being created and reproduced.
Children, however, are not passive participants in the reproduction of sociocultural worlds. While children are influenced by larger sociocultural, political, and historical discourses they also act with agency as they select the ways in which they interpret and take up these discourses, modify them, and resist them such that they create their own ‘peer cultural worlds’ (Corsaro, 2003; Kantor, et. al. 1992) constructed from the discourses around them. Thus, children are influenced by and influence the nature of the classroom world as they create a peer world and culture in which they perform identity. Like all socially constructed worlds, the construction and negotiation of social roles within it are not neutral, but rather laden with raced, classed, and gendered ideologies. Given this, I was especially interested in investigating what ‘discourses of difference’ were shaping children and how discourses of class, gender, and race were informing the meanings of their children’s interactions within this figured world.

**Significance of Study**

The results of this study have significance for a number of reasons. First, because Black girls are an under-studied population, it begins to fill the gap existing in early childhood research regarding the range Black girls’ experiences. In studies that examine classroom life, little work exists that attend to the ways in which diverse identity markers influence different perceptions and experiences in the classroom, so that the intersections of race, class, and gender remain under-theorized. The vast and unique experiences of Black girls explored within this study provide a more nuanced understanding of the construction of peer relationships and identities within the context larger sociocultural discourses in education. Second, this study seeks to add the small body of research
literature concerning the educational experiences of Black adult women and adolescents by offering the perspectives of a much younger population. Last, this study begins to address the flawed and partial understanding of child development created through the omission of the experiences of Black girls. The silencing of children and, in this case, Black girls’ voices in the research literature reinforces adultist and racist views of childhood by marginalizing their experiences as noncontributory to their social worlds. Exploring the perceptions of primary school grade Black girls allows us to understand how they are, in fact, agents in the construction of their social worlds.

**Definition of Terms**

*Agency:* an individual or group of individuals who assert themselves as active agents in the construction of their identities (Holland, Cain, Skinner, and Lachicotte, 2003).

*Black:* the self or social identification as a racial marker for groups of people, typically associated with African-ancestry, across ethnicity, language, national origin, and religion (Omi and Winant, 1994). In this study I choose to use the term Black to denote African American and bi-racial individuals of African or partial African ancestry. I use the terms Black and African American synonymously.

*Children of Color:* refers to children who not only racially self-identify, but are socially constructed and positioned as Nonwhite.

*Class:* socioeconomic status and condition of material wealth. Class is often seen as a form of culture when members of a certain class-based group take up shared patterns of being, living, speaking, valuing, and acting.
**Culture**: the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group.

**Discourse**: In this study I draw from Gee’s (1999/2005) definition of “Big D” discourses which represent the connection between language and power, where language is cultural, political, contextual and latent with social codes and norms through which people (social actors) negotiate social roles and goals. Discourses result from social practices and histories involving shared meanings and negotiations of social roles of individuals within a particular context (Gee, 1990/2008). Although Gee denotes “Discourses” by utilizing a “Big D” in his writings, for the sake of readability, I do not use this distinction when drawing upon discourse in my discussions.

**Gender**: the social construction of groups of people and assigned roles and norms according to one’s biological sex.

**Participation**: engaging in varying and overlapping ways that change with activity settings.

**Peer Culture**: the habits, attitudes, norms, beliefs and material symbols created and utilized to structure, operate and bind a group or groups of children.

**Peer world**: the cultural realm specific to a bounded group of children.

**Positioning**: the day to day interactions within a figured world through which people negotiate their socially constructed identities.

**Primary (school) grade**: span of schooling for mostly six to nine year old children, or those considered academic equivalent, encompassing first through third grades.
Race: the social construction of groups of people according to physical attributes, rooted in historical, political, economic conditions. According to Omi and Winant (1994), race is not “fixed, concrete, and objective,” as an essence, nor is it an illusion, “a purely ideological construct which some ideal non-racist social order would eliminate” (p. 54). It is “a concept with signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. Although (it) invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called ‘phenotypes’), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process” (p.55).

Status: one’s position within a socioculturally, constructed world.

Socialization: the process of learning through exchanges, interactions, and exposure to “culturally specific modes of organizing knowledge, thought, and language” (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001, p. 273).

White: socially, politically, economically and historically constructed racial category typically referring to people according to phenotype and European ancestry (Mills, 1997; Leonardo, 2002).

Organization of the Dissertation

The purpose of this study was to explore the breadth of experiences and perspectives of second-grade Black girls within the context of a particular classroom. It sought to discover the Discourses used within their peer worlds, the influence of race, class, and gender in their interactions, and the ways in which they positioned themselves and each other with these Discourses. Chapter one identified the research problem,
questions, and introduced the purpose and significance of the study. I also defined key terms that were useful for this research.

In chapter two, I review the literature influential to this study. I present different scholarship around the social worlds of children and explore empirical work that takes up race, class, and gender in the study of children’s experience, theories of discourse as well as empirical work that uses discourse as a primary feature, and scholarship and research that explores the experiences of Black lives and identity development. Chapter three gives an account of the research process and qualitative methodology undertaken in this study. In chapter four I lay out the analysis of the data using the case studies of the three girls to address the research questions and situating their cases within the larger classroom discourses. In this chapter I provide a detailed description of three Black girls, Adrianna, Mariah, and Raell, and present categorical findings in response to the research questions in order to demonstrate the ways they positioned/repositioned themselves in relation to the overall classroom discourses. In chapter five I do a cross case analysis to begin to theorize the kinds of discourses that get taken up at the intersection of race, class, and gender as young Black girls negotiate their peer worlds. In this chapter I also discuss limitations to the study, as well as point to the implications of this research.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Children are shaped by multiple, influential contexts as they grow and develop. Their interactions with their peers are shaped by socio-structural relationships of power and micro level, interpersonal spheres of influence. In order to understand how Black girls interact with and perceive their discursive peer world in the larger school discourse, I review the literature central to the research surrounding the social worlds of children and Black girlhood in particular.

First, I discuss works involving children’s social worlds. I look at the conceptualization of peer culture and friendship formation and groups and then children’s social worlds as a cultural constructed context. Next, I take up the way in which race, class, and gender have been studied in relationship to children. I look at each construct and then discuss the emerging body of work taking a more intersectional approach to understanding the dynamics of race, class, and gender in regards to this effort. Since, children use language through their interactions in their social worlds to construct their identities with each other; I turn to discourse as a theory to help situate how children use language as a mediator to navigate their social world. I underscore the defining characteristics and theories of discourse and how it has been used by scholars in various dimensions. I then draw from research on Black perspectives on racial identities to explicate the fundamental significance of race and gender in the negotiations of Black
girls and their social worlds. I discuss studies focusing on Black children’s racial self-perceptions and the influence of race on their achievement in schools. Because of their primary consideration of Black individuals, I reference these studies as an interrogative response to universal understandings of identity formation. I move on to highlight studies centering on gendered and raced aspects of Black female identities and experiences. I end with a look, specifically, at the contributory research on the Black girls’ social worlds’ experiences, examining first literature pertaining to adolescents and then studies pertaining to young girls in primary grades. These bodies of literature situate Black girls within an active and dynamic cultural group specific to children.

**Social Worlds of Children**

Scholars have studied children’s social worlds and the formation of identity in the social world in various ways. Corsaro (1985, 1992, 2003, and 2005) uses the idea of peer culture, while scholars such as Gottman (1983, 1986) and Rizzo (1989) discusses friendship interactions. In this section I explore the scholarship that situates children with their social worlds. I begin by exploring the idea of ‘peer cultures’ and then move to friendship development as well as cultural considerations of studying children’s peer interactions. I next look at the ways in which socioeconomic class, race, and gender are treated within the scholarship on children’s social worlds. I end this section with an exploration of studies attending to the intersections of race class and gender influence in children’s social worlds.

There is a growing body of early childhood scholarship concerning how children construct their relationships and friendships within their social world specific to their
peers (Gottman, 1983; Ladd, 1983; Corsaro, 1985, 1992, 2003, 2005; Rizzo, 1989; Ramsey, 1991). Corsaro (2003) introduced the concept of children’s “peer culture,” defining it as “a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that kids produce and share in interaction with each other” (p. 37). His primary work with preschool children suggested that children work within cultural systems specific to their peer world, through a peer culture. He argued that children work through “interpretive reproduction,” creating and participating in their own peer cultures, “by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns” (2005, pp. 18—19). That is children are not passive receptacles of adult discourse, but adopt them to make sense of their peer culture. They also are capable of generating their own discourses separate from those handed down from adults.

There are two primary features of children’s peer culture: “children make persistent attempts to gain control of their lives and they always attempt to share that control with each other” (p. 135). Corsaro (1985, 1992, 2003, and 2005) found that children construct and maintain their peer culture through the negotiation of play, sharing, and friendship routines by “protection of interactive space,” where they resist entry of other children in specific play routines to continue sharing with the children involved without threat of disruption to their community. Along a similar vein, Edwards et al. (2006) indicated that children use their agency as active participants in their socialization, stating “children are active protagonists in their development” and that they “not only make choices but can also negotiate, deflect, and resist socializing attempts by others” (pp. 31—33). Within children’s peer culture is a complex system,
where children in relation to each other position themselves and each other as they construct their social norms and roles. Several studies point to the children’s development and negotiation of peer friendships within their social worlds. Gottman (1983) explored the processes of children’s interactions to develop a model of their friendship development. Although his model was developed a priori to the study, it was crucial to realize that children are capable of complex manipulation of language and the social world, which is necessary to construct peer friendships.

In his study of the friendship development of first grade children, Rizzo (1989) suggested that children’s friendships occurred mainly through discovery and were often initiated through unrelated interactions. Although his work did not specifically address how race, class, and gender were influencing these interactions, Rizzo found that the social ecology of the classroom was instrumental in how children constructed their friendships. He contended that “we can no longer see a rejected child as one deficient merely in a number of critical skills or personal attributes. Rather, we see a Black child in a predominantly White classroom” (p. 139). Rizzo pointed to factors within the control of adults which create structures and conditions that influence children’s relationships, such as racial composition. Children form solidarity around classroom conditions where attributes of similarity and consistency could be maintained such as having the same children in each class, the presence of ability groups, or sitting in close proximity to friends. Ladd (1983) on the other hand suggested that children’s social capabilities not only determine their friendships, but also their social status within the peer world. Ramsey (1991) conceded that unlike preschool children, elementary school children often
exhibit reputational biases, accepting the same behaviors from popular children that are rejected when demonstrated by unpopular children. She suggested that children at this age are much more rigid in their thinking due to not being able to “integrate a lot of conflicted information about their peers” (p. 49).

The research involving children’s peer culture and social worlds has been particularly useful as a heuristic for understanding children’s social development. However, this literature often assumed a universal peer culture, one that was separate and distinct from the adult world. While this might be appropriate in locating the agency and operations of children’s social world, these studies served as an impetus to study the perspectives of children’s social worlds from multiple perspectives and diverse contexts. In a critique of the emphasis of peer cultural studies involving White children, Gaskins (2006), pointed to the need to consider the particularity of culture in studies of children’s social worlds. Instead of “peer culture” she argued that peer interactions were “culturally structured.” For instance, in her study of Yucatec Mayan children in culturally structured interactions she found,

…the line between attachment figures (who are often children) and peers (who are often the same children) is less clearly demarcated in their world. Likewise there is a less clear-cut distinction between their early social experiences within the family and those that come later with peers, because their social world remains primarily within the family. Parents do not mediate these experiences; rather, older siblings are given the responsibility to socialized younger siblings into the social world of children (pp. 299—300).
Contrary to most scholars’ peer cultural research, Gaskins (2006) found that the adult/child dichotomy did not delineate the boundaries of the children’s culturally structured world, and that peer age differences were not significant for determining friends. She also found that regardless of their interactions the children were more accepting across differences within their social world. As demonstrated in Gaskin’s work, because of the nonexistence of a universal “peer culture,” the need has arisen to explore the perspectives and experiences of children across cultural contexts and from diverse backgrounds.

**Politics of Race, Class and Gender in Early Childhood**

Early childhood scholars have recognized that social, cultural, and contextual factors impact children’s socialization and development, directing our attention to development of children’s raced, classed, and gender perceptions and the way these perceptions influence social interactions. While limited research has discussed socioeconomic class (Leahy, 1981; Ramsey, 1991, 2004), as an influence in children’s negotiation of their social worlds, research continues to expand to address the significance of race (Goodwin, 1990; Holmes, 1995; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) and gender (Davies, 1989; Blaise, 2005; Spatig, 2005) in children’s peer interactions. Yet an even smaller body of work exists that explores the intersections of race, class, and gender in children negotiations with the social world and with each other in the context of schooling. (Soudien, 2004; Gaganakis, 2006; Ebrahim & Francis, 2008). In the following section I review the extant scholarship in this area. First, I discuss how children’s classed socialization influences their engagement with children within and across class. After
pointing to research on children’s racialized understandings and interactions, I survey the literature addressing gender as a source of children’s segregated/integrated friendships and play. I conclude this section in a discussion of significant work untangling the intersections of race, class, and gender.

**Social Class in Early Childhood Research**

Research concerning the effects of social class on children’s peer relationships and on the construction of their identity is very limited, though there are a few. Ramsey (1991) contended that young children are not consciously aware of class differences and that there are patterns of inclusion and exclusion in class-segregated schools as well as class-mixed schools. For instance, when interviewing preschool children from class segregated schools, she found the distribution of popular, average, and rejected children was similar to that any other schools. On the other hand she pointed out that class segregation was apparent in the classroom often because of “proximity” and “similarity” where there were children of different class backgrounds. She further explained that children’s communicative patterns were aligned with later career paths maintaining that working class and working poor children, who were “more likely to end up in manual-labor or menial jobs,” tended to use “more nonverbal reinforcements with their friends,” whereas their middle-income peers, who were “being groomed for professional and bureaucratic positions which require highly developed verbal skills,” used “more more verbal reinforcements” (p. 60).

Ramsey (2004) later concluded that children develop perceptions and attitudes about people across social classes, as well as perspectives and understandings regarding
their own respective economic futures during preschool and elementary school. While younger children believe rich people should share their wealth with poor people, older children are more apt to blame the victim. (Skafto, 1988). She also found that adolescents equate wealth with academic achievement and increased social acceptance. Other researchers have connected popular media to children’s classed-based beliefs. Woods et al. (2005) found that it is the everyday experiences of disadvantaged youth rather than exposure to popular media that drive their beliefs about income-related differences in sports abilities. Although Woods and associates did not study the classed perceptions impacting peers’ interactions with each other, their work pointed to the significant influence of popular media and how children begin to develop classed perceptions of their potential and abilities.

Other scholars argued that, as children mature, their understanding of social class inequities increased in complexity and became more similar to adult beliefs (Weinstein, 1958; Chafel, 1997). For instance, when asked to describe rich and poor individuals, children from low-income families in Leahy’s (1981) study had more awareness than their affluent peers of the effects of poverty and were much more likely to share the perspective of the poor. Consistent with this conclusion, in a study with economically poor five year old children, Weinger (1998) revealed that children were highly aware of the economic disparities in society in relation to themselves.

**Race in Early Childhood Research**

Some scholars have focused on race and ethnicity as factors influencing the experiences of children in schools (Katz, 1976, 1983; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Gallas, 1998;
Holmes, 1995; Ramsey, 2004). This scholarship points towards the ways children recognize race and its influence on their perceptions. In her study of kindergarten children’s perceptions of race, Holmes (1995) indicated that children did not distinguish friends by only race, class, and gender, but also by aspects such as age, physical attributes, and address. Furthermore, she observed “racial harmony” among the children who were free of racial and gendered segregated play groups. She contended that the lack of racial tensions in these racially diverse schools was due to the children’s age and cognitive abilities and the school curriculum which provided ample cooperative learning opportunities for early and positive-cross-racial experiences. In regards to racial understanding, Holmes (1995) suggested that children were “not yet capable of making the psychological distinctions, succumbing to peer pressure, or recognizing the importance of similar attitudes and mores as a basis for friendship” (p.106). She pointed that such behaviors occur in older children. Teacher researcher, Gallas (1998) explored the classroom dynamics of her first and second grade students. She conducted a four year study to discover how children negotiate power, race, and gender with their peers. In this research she followed a group of students finding that their identity constructions, not only mirrored dominant societal norms and prejudices, but also informed their behavior and the expectations of their peers, demonstrating in this study that race, class, and gender influenced children at very young ages and that social/peer pressures impacted their beliefs and behaviors even in the primary grades.

Contrary to dominant perceptions in the United States that young children are colorblind, ample evidence has shown that children at an early age become aware of race
and begin to form corresponding racial attitudes and beliefs. Katz and Kofkin (1997) have found that infants at six months of age have been observed to react to racial differences. Ramsey (2004) contends that though young children have difficulty coordinating multiple attributes they may seem colorblind in one situation, yet greatly aware of race in another. Other studies have shown that preschool children have a rudimentary concept of race and can, with ease, identify, match, and label diverse people by racial categories (Holmes, 1995; Katz, 1976; Ramsey, 1991; Ramsey & Myers, 1990; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Other research indicates that children express racial beliefs and stereotypes among their peers, while skillfully hiding this discourse from their teachers (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

As with gender, classroom peer interactions reflect the ways racial inequities divide society in general and demonstrate that children are being socialized into dominant racial discourses, beliefs, and behaviors. For instance, Ramsey (2004) discovered that White children at an earlier age demonstrate a heightened and more consistent racial bias than do Black children, who tend to be more neutral in their preferences and “friendlier” to cross-racial peers (Hallihan & Teixeira, 1987). These researchers hypothesize that same-race preferences perhaps emerge as a result of little access to other races due to the segregated nature of life in this country and of socializing, primarily, within their own cultural groups (Ramsey, 2004). Where White children rarely have cross-race individuals in their immediate social networks (Cochran & Riley, 1988), Children of Color often find themselves in cross-raced encounters and must learn to negotiate such encounters.
Kovacs, Parker, & Hoffman (1996) maintained that Black children did not segregate friendships according to gender and had more friends across gender as compared to White children. They pointed to the ways they were socialize through families and communities to have extensive networks of closer social ties. The results from their study were similar to Goodwin (1990) in that Black children’s friendship groups in the communities were much more inclusive and extensive through their play.

Some research points to the different forms of communication and patterns of interaction as a possibility for segregated friendship patterns. For instance, in a study with predominantly Black preschool children, Corsaro (2003) observed that, similar to the Black children in Goodwin’s (1990) study, the Black children in his study engaged in much more aggressive talk, and interactions as compared to White middle class children. It is important to note that he recognized that the discourse of aggressive talk and interactions was seen as permissible by their teachers, who were also Black. While work like this is important, the limited nature of such studies concerning Black children, communicative styles, and peer culture could lead to narrow and stereotypical constructions of Black children’s social behavior.

**Gender in Early Childhood Research**

Gender has been traditionally assumed to be a natural, biological factor in mainstream early/elementary childhood education. On the other hand, feminist perspectives and feminist research conceptualize gender as a dynamic social construct. Feminist scholars have shown how children perform and reproduce gendered discourse through their positioning of each other according to social norms, often shaping the
dominance of males and marginalization of females in classrooms (Davies, 1989; Gallas, 1998; Blaise, 2005; Spatig, 2005). Although one’s biological sex has been linked to the ways gender is often interpreted (Butler, 1990; Paechter, 1998), feminist scholars maintain that gender is dynamic and socially produced and reproduced, thereby subjecting the dominant manifestations of gendered construction to contestation (Butler, 1990; Paechter, 1998) and open to challenge or change.

Connell (1987) argued that “hegemonic masculinity” as a cultural expression of the dominant form of masculinity subordinates other patterns of masculinity and femininity, shaping the structural order of all gender relations. Femininity cannot be hegemonic because social constructions of femininity maintain the power of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Blaise, 2005). Paechter (1998) suggested, “Gender is performed, in part, through the body. [Hegemonic masculinity] has been an important part of the social construction of gender in Western society” (p. 52). Masculine power and autonomy have depended upon the feminine reflection of it, reinforcing the binary, asymmetrical power implied in gendered performances (Butler, 1990). The performativity of the gendered body simply has created the “illusion of an interior and organizing gender core” (Butler, 1990, p. 136).

Research has demonstrated that often children draw from stereotypical gendered discourses in order to correctly perform within their gender roles for their peers (Davies, 1989; Butler, 1990; Paechter, 1998; Ochsner, 2000; Blaise, 2005). Through their interactions, children might police the behaviors of their peers to preserve these roles (Butler, 1990; Paechter, 1998). That is, the dominant ideologies about gender permeate
the available discourses to children from their surroundings and children perform
gendered roles deemed acceptable by society (Butler, 1990; Paechter, 1998). Boys work
to maintain dominance of masculinity by policing behaviors of other children (Davies,
1989; Paechter, 1998; Blaise, 2005) and as children interact, they position themselves and
others in their negotiations according to the “appropriate” gendered discourses (Davies,
1989; Blaise, 2005).

Research involving children’s constructions of gender have shown how they
perform and reproduce gendered discourses through their positioning of each other
according to social norms, often shaping the dominance of males and marginalization of
females in classrooms (Davies, 1989; Thorne, 1993; Gallas, 1998; Blaise, 2005; Spatig,
2005). However, research has shown that gender is dynamic and fluid and its meanings
and roles are not tightly bound to overly deterministic categories. For instance, in Davies
(1989) study of the social interactions of preschool students her findings indicated that
sex and gender are social constructions learned by children through language, signs, and
ideologies that permeate their surrounding social structure. Within the children’s play and
in response to different picture books children demonstrated the maintenance and
reproduction of power relations and gendered expectations.

Children actively have learned how to accept marginalized roles through enacting
stereotypically gendered roles. They have worked to adapt, negotiate identities and power
with each other and with their teachers (Davis, 1989; Gallas, 1998; Blaise, 2005). Even if
children possess definite ideas of what it means to be a boy or girl, Fleer (1998)
suggested they need to practice repositioning themselves to disrupt their ideas of
gendered norms and to consider multiple intersections of identity.

Thorne (1993) studied gender in children’s peer worlds with predominantly White
working class children in kindergarten, second, fourth and fifth grades. She contended
that boys and girls often maintained their boundaries through their play together as
“borderwork.” Thorne (1993) explains this concept below:

The spatial separation of boys and girls constitutes a kind of boundary, perhaps
felt most strongly by individuals who want to join an activity controlled by the
other gender. When girls and boys are together in a relaxed and integrated way,
playing a game of handball or eating and talking together at a table in the lunch
room, the sense of gender as boundary dissolves. But sometimes the girls and
boys come together in ways that emphasize their opposition; boundaries may be
created through contact as well as avoidance (p. 65).

Instead of viewing children as simply initiating segregated play according to gender, the
idea of borderwork was pertinent for it offered a more complex understanding of how
children invoked gender to structure playtime together and define boundaries in their
social organization. She also found that boys and girls also “cross” the gendered
boundaries to engage in sincere play and interactions with the opposite sex. Although the
majority of Thorne’s work involved gender, she briefly discussed the only Black child in
the fourth/fifth grade classroom as an example of how race can also impact how children
were able to “cross” gender lines and avoid the heterosexual definitions constructed by
their peers, choosing to not engage in the romantic discourses. Thorne (1993) stated,
…even if she was interested, her position as the only African American in the classroom pushed her to the margins of the developing heterosexual market; definitions of attractiveness are deeply shaped by race, and this was a White system (pp. 132—133).

Thorne’s research led to an important finding for it suggested the complexity of children’s peer culture when considering the dynamics of both race and gender from Black girls’ positions.

Other research has pointed to the way in which sexism, racism, and classism operate in tandem to reinforce inequity. Gallas (1998) argued that gender performances, whether conscious or not, give way to the adult sexist, racist, and classist behaviors that support structural oppression. She gave a telling example of witnessing a White male student speak disrespectfully to a Black male student, noticing the racial dynamics involved in the gendered interactions where White patriarchy is reinforced (Davis, 1989; Collins, 2000). However, like most studies concerning gender, race, as within both of these studies, was often at the margins and not as a category placed along other identity markers, thus gender goes ‘unracialized’.

Other studies have shown how heterosexual notions of gender are performed and the ways in which girls perform, “emphasizing femininity” within classroom contexts. These embodied performances, wearing make-up, adopting stereotypical personas, posing, twirling hair, and other body movements, positioned girls as objects, diminishing their power (Davies, 1989; Gallas, 1998; Ochnser, 2000; Blaise, 2005). Emphasized femininity, however, has been conceptualized through White, middle class and affluent
perceptions of feminine embodied performances. Embodied performances of Black girls, on the other hand often are seen as stereotypical images of Black women (Paul, 2003; Scott, 2002, 2003; Gaunt, 2006).

In her work in early childhood classrooms, Blaise (2005) explored gender as a social construction within a heterosexual matrix of power relationships. Drawing from post structural feminists and queer theoretical, she positioned gender as a social construction rather than biologically based and as actively performed, enacted, and negotiated in power relationships. In her study with kindergarten children, she found that they took active roles in teaching each other how to “play it straight” as boys and girls by accepting the engendered power relationships and discourses.

Although studies like those of Blaise (2005) supported the idea of children as participants in the development of their peer culture and connect them to larger societal influences, in her study as with others, when Black girls’ interactions are discussed, they were often represented in brief, simplistic, and uncomplicated ways. For instance, she pointed to the “sulking and slouching,” used by two Black girls from her study as exemplars of engendered, disempowering body movements. The teacher in the study confirmed these patterns of behavior as specific to the Black girls. Blaise (2005) elaborated:

Sulking and slouching positions girls as helpless… Being the last one to sit on the rug after clean up, lagging behind in line, dragging one’s feet, slumping one’s shoulders, and having a sad face are all part of the sulk (p. 68).
This helplessness analysis seems dangerously close to hopelessness associated with controlling images that have been projected on to Black women and girls—the “slouching” symbols of “welfare mothers” who need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and the “sulking,” which invokes the idea of a “matriarch” with an “attitude problem” (Collins, 2000, pp. 77—79). While Blaise’s work contributes to an understanding of gender at work, it points to the dominance of White-middle class discourses and interpretations of children’s peer world, there is room left to explore alternative understandings regarding Black girls positionality as they engage in these discourses.

**Race, Social Class and Gender in Early Childhood Research**

While a body of scholarship has demonstrated that children draw from dominant ideologies of race and gender, fewer studies have examined the intersections of race and class in the construction of identity and educational experience (Leahy, 1981; Skafte, 1988; Weinger, 1998; Proweller, 1999; Hicks, 2002; Woods, et al., 2005). Even fewer take up race, class, and gender simultaneously. In his study of Black children, Proweller (1999) recognized that they drew from their experiences of race and class for identity construction and contended that through their identity development, Black children continuously negotiate and reposition themselves “in relation to institutionalized discourses of race oriented around White middle-class norms, values and expectations” (p. 790). In their study of how the racial make-up of school and grade level influence the personal and ethnic identity development, values, and self esteem of male and female Black, Latino Americans, and White American working class adolescents, Rotheram-
Boras et al. (1996) concluded that girls were more likely to strongly identify with their ethnicity and to be less mainstream in orientation and more cooperative and less competitive than boys. Woods et al. (2005) found that both Black and White boys as young as nine already held stereotypical views of poverty and wealth, and overwhelmingly favored the wealthy in domains ranging from sports to academics. On the other hand, their studies confirmed that older children develop more sophisticated understanding of race, class, and opportunities.

Though there is little research that explored the intersection of race, class, and gender in children’s lives, there is a significant and growing body of scholarship that explores the way in which race, class, and gender affect children’s identity, relationships, and peer interactions in post-apartheid South Africa (Soudien, 2004; Gaganakis, 2006; Ebrahim & Francis, 2008). For instance, utilizing storytelling and dolls to engage 2-4 year old South African Black and White children in conversations, Ebrahim and Francis (2008) discovered that children perceived race and gender as intersecting constructs. However, they noticed that race was an elusive concept where children drew from the discourses in which they were being socialized with children of both sexes and actively exploring dominant and marginalized gendered roles to explore power and hierarchy among their peers. Similarly, Gaganakis (2006) in an ethnographic study of Black and White adolescent girls in post-apartheid Johannesburg, South Africa, found that although location, nationality, race, and gender informed their identities, socio-economic status emerged as a salient feature in Black girls’ self-definition. Gender and race were still
significant factors in peer negotiations at school, where being Black and female functioned as markers of low status.

**Discourse and Identity**

In recent years scholars have taken up the idea of discourse as a way to frame the multi-layered uses, purposes and dimensions of language to operationalize and structure the social worlds and have defined and used it in various ways. Within this section I begin with an exploration of the most prominent definitions of discourse and discuss the characteristics of discursive theory. I then present scholars who use discourse in different ways in order to understand both macro-level social structures and micro-level identity work within the social world. This will include a look at discourse as situated and laden with implications of power as well as discourse as a constructed and negotiable cultural phenomena influencing children’s educational experiences.

**Definitions and Characteristics of Discourse**

Bakhtin (1981) was perhaps one of the most influential scholars in the area of discourse, using the ideas of dialogism and discourse to refer to use of language as a social phenomena caught up in a dialogic nature with its history and the voices within this history. In his work, different kinds of discourses framed social life – the authoritative discourse and the internally persuasive discourse. Bakhtin (1981) described authoritative discourses as fused with authority and of demanding assimilation. Authoritative discourses are hierarchical in nature, situated as superior and closed to interpretation. Religious dogma, political ideology, and scientific theory are forms of
authoritative discourses. On the other hand, Bakhtin (1981) maintained that internally persuasive discourses are:

Tightly interwoven with ‘one’s own word’ [...] the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition... it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses. Our ideological [becoming or identity] is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values. (p. 346).

As indicated within this statement, Bakhtin sees individual consciousness or “ideological consciousness” created and caught up between these two discourses. Individuals are neither controlled by authoritative discourses nor is there complete freedom from them. For Bakhtin, our own voices and perspectives are competing with the voices of authority (i.e. those discourses which seeks to structure, order, correct our thinking beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of behavior), within the internally persuasive discourse. In the negotiation within these discursive realms, our identities are constructed.

Gee (1990/2008) defined discourse as an ‘identity kit’ complete with a combination and integration of “language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort
of socially recognizable identity” (p. 21). Gee (1999/2005) made a distinction between “little d” discourses, as “language in use, and the term “discourse” as “Big ‘D’” discourse. Gee defines “Big D” discourses as:

Socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the ‘right’ places and at the ‘right’ times with the ‘right’ objects (associations that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’ (p. 26).

Discourses are language with cultural, political and historical meanings. They involve particular groups of people and institutions and the means and ways in which they organize and structure situated identities and social worlds as well as the performative aspects of these identities (Gee, 1990/2008; 1999/2005). According to Gee we acquire discourse within apprenticeships in particular social contexts and in interactions with others who use the discourse. Discourses that are a part of one’s earliest socialization are referred to as “primary discourses,” whereas secondary discourses are unfamiliar and must be additionally acquired (Gee, 1999/2005).

**Power and Discourse**

Scholars have also emphasized the relationship of power to discourses. For instance, Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) define discourses as” socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned and discourse as opaque power objects in modern societies” (p. 448). In recognizing discourse as social practice, scholars such as Wodak (1997), emphasized the behavioral and socially constructive aspects of discursivity. She theorized the ways in which situations, objects of knowledge and relationships between
individuals, as well as among groups of people, institutions, and discursive events shape, frame, and structure each other to either maintain or transform the current status of power relations. Thus, for Wodak (2001), “language is not powerful on its own—it gains power by the use powerful people make of it” (p. 11) within the discourses they use.

Other scholars have explored the ways in which race, class, and gender are inextricably and unequally situated within discourse. According to Fairclough (1992), discursive dimensions of consumption, production, distribution, properties of texts, and their underlying socio-cognitive features are often connected to power relations. More specifically, in the analysis of social practices, Fairclough (1992) explicitly linked discourse with “power relations, and hegemonic projects at the societal level” (p. 226). Discourses, for Fairclough (1995/2010), are the representations of social groups through marked aspects of the social, physical and psychological world with attention to how these groups relate to each other and society. One example of this is the way in which educational processes, organizations, and curriculum materials serve to reproduce racist discourses (VanDijk, 1993).

**Discourse in School Life**

Given the unequal power relations and privileges associated with certain discourses over others within social institutions such as schools, scholars have studied conflicting discourses across communities and the ways in which school discourses align with or are in conflict with the students’ primary discourses. Kantor et al. (1992) offered “school discourses” as the “norms, expectations, roles, and relationships for conducting life together” as established by the teachers and students, that “signal what counts as
learning, participating, and communicating in classroom and subgroups of classroom life” (p. 134). Kantor et al. (1992) found that within diverse classrooms there is the possibility that misunderstanding exists and that conflict may arise if children are unaware of the ‘school discourse’. They argued, however, that preschool children and teachers construct “school discourses” together through their negotiations of subevents during recurring circle time, noting:

Over time, the discourse repertoires constructed in individual classrooms contribute to a more general register, a school discourse register that supports and constrains how students participate in events and what they interpret to be appropriate ways of participating, interacting and displaying knowledge (p. 132).

Kantor and associates found that teachers shifted their interactions with children as they increasingly engaged in more appropriate school discourses, suggesting that children attend to both peer and school culture in their negotiations at school. More recently, Fernie and Kantor (2003), further posited that “peer and school culture overlap or intersect through daily negotiations” (p. 212).

Other research has focused on discursive patterns in children’s communicative styles. In a study that examine children’s storytelling, Bloome, Katz, and Champion (2003) found that it was common for young Black children to produce narratives as “interactional events,” which was in conflict with the sequentially structured, narrative discourse most prominent in school. They concluded that the conflict within the primary discourse of these children and expectations within the schooled discourse may lead to negative consequences for children as these students might be perceived by teachers as
needing more academic or language support. For instance, Bloome and colleagues suggested that “the student who exhibits strong verbal skills in her storytelling performance but is perceived weak in how she structured the text of her story may be placed in low ability groupings or referred for remedial/special education services” (p. 221). Similar to Kantor’s findings, Bloome et al. (2003) concluded that such discursive mismatches impact the children’s positioning within school as well as their peer discourse. Although they did not explicitly refer to discourse, their study pointed to the significance of the influence of school discourse on peer discourses, as they distinguish the interplay of the social relationships constructed among peers (peer culture) and with peers and teachers during the interactions around storytelling events (school culture).

Other studies that examined discourse as a central theoretical construct are positioned within the idea of multiple discourses. Such studies have pointed to the way in which educational discourses often conflicted with those of working-poor communities and Communities of Color (Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002; Jones, 2006; Campano, 2007). For example Jones (2006) took up the concept of discourses in a second grade class setting to study White working class girls, examining specifically the performance of “attitude” in their language practices. She found that their primary discourse was drawn from particular classed and gendered ways of being tied to family and community and that this discourse of ‘attitude’ was in conflict with the discourse within the school. When conflict between home and school discourse existed, Jones (2006) found that the girls were positioned and/or positioned themselves outside of the school discourse. In her study, she attempted to draw from the girls’ primary discourse as a resource to connect
with academic learning within the school. She maintained that it was important to use these moments to help students “think critically about social class relations and class-specific language,” and that teachers and schools must, “work toward better informed understandings of students’ linguistic tools and identity performance” (p. 172).

In her groundbreaking study of language and literacy in Maintown, Trackton, and Roadville, Heath (1983) emphasized the sociocultural context of language use and literacy and the difference in language and literacy use across socioeconomic class. She found that the primary discourses of the African American and White working-class families from Trackton and Roadville were not aligned with those of the school. This led to cultural misunderstandings and misinterpretation of children’s abilities when teachers and administrators interacted with children and families from these communities. She found that children’s achievement in school improved when they were explicitly taught the discourse of the school.

Hicks (2002) also examined the ways in which class-based discourses intersect with schooling. Following two White working-class students from kindergarten to second grade, she explored how these children attempted to negotiate the discourses and literacy practices of middle-class schools. Her work underscored that, “students’ engagements with literacies – or institutional modes of talking, reading, and writing – are connected with their own histories, formed with others whom they value and love” (p. 1). Her findings demonstrated the struggle many working class children face as they vacillate between the values and discourses privileged at home versus those privileged by the middle class in school (p. 44). In Hick’s study, the degree of dissonance within these two
children’s discursive lives had already initiated the process of disengagement by second grade.

More studies pointed to gendered discursivity within the context of schooling. Davis (2007) found that seven and eight year old children have already aligned themselves with school discourses of reading as a symbol of status, which is beneficial inside and outside of school, and that the gendered discourse of boys more than girls have are not aligned with these schooled discourses around reading. In her study with White middle-class three to five year old children, Sheldon (1997) identified the girls as engaged in a “double-voice discourse” during conflicts in which they used multiple and complex “argument strategies” through a variety of “linguistic devices” to negotiate concessions and “soften the conflict.” They were thus able to retain extensive interactions and involvement with each other during conflict, without “being confrontational” (p. 238). On the other hand, her study assumed that these discourses were only gendered, ignoring any significance of race or class.

Other research has been concerned with the ways in which teachers and children develop bridges between primary discourses and the secondary discourses of their schools. These studies drew from the hybridity of students’ language practices and multiple discourses, viewing the intersectionality and even conflict across such discourses as a third space. For instance, in their study of a combined second and third grade Spanish immersion classroom, Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejeda (1999) found that cultural conflict within classrooms can be a catalyst for curricular change, where teachers bridge school with cultural and linguistic resources from children,
families and communities. They suggested that hybrid culture of classrooms can be “actively mined in the ways the teachers and children consciously and strategically utilize their own linguistic repertoires and created new context of development,” fostering “language and literacy development” (p. 291). Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, et al. (2004) suggested bringing together discourses and everyday funds of knowledge, namely home, community, peer groups, popular culture, in a third space within the classroom to productively “scaffold for young people to learn the literacy practices that are framed by the discourses and knowledges privileged in the content areas” (p. 44). In their work in classrooms, they discovered a “peer funds of knowledge,” in which children relied upon their peers as sources of information and knowledge about how to navigate school.

**Black Racial Perspectives on Racial Consciousness and Identities**

Race has a unique history of construction with the United States as it is rooted in a complicated nexus of political, global, economic, social, and cultural discourses. Racialized and racist discourses have been an enduring framework for and legacy of this nexus. Racialized and racist discourses position people even as people take them up to position themselves and others. People of Color and Black people, specifically, have been shaped in particular ways by discourses around race. However, as is true with all discourses, they have also positioned themselves within these discourses in strategic ways as their survival and well-being depended upon this ability.

Scholars have demonstrated the ways in which African American children develop a racial consciousness as they are socialized within the primary discursive world of home and community as well as within the secondary discursive world of school and
social world, the ways in which they develop a racial consciousness, and the ways that their identities are framed and influenced within these multiple social worlds (Billingsley, 1992; Comer & Poussaint, 1992; Ladner, 2000; Hale, 2001). In this section I review pertinent scholarship about Black people by African American scholars in order to explore the way in which race, consciousness, and identity are understood within this scholarship. I begin with an exploration of early theories of Black racial consciousness and identities, I point out that scholars have shown that raced messages have been internalized by young Black children. Next, I point to educational studies involving Black identities and academic achievement. Following this discussion, I examine various models, particularly grounded in Black racial identity development. Subsequently, I shift this discussion, to review literature emphasizing the educational experiences of Black females, with the primary focus on young Black girls.

**Racialized Consciousness**

For decades, scholars have sought to understand how Black people construct their racial perspectives. DuBois (1903) introduced the particularities of Black individuals’ experiences within their social worlds, when he presented the idea of “double consciousness “in which Blacks construct themselves through the eyes of Whites and other Blacks, creating a duality in the worlds they must navigate and in their identities. This idea of dual consciousness and of having to see oneself through the eyes of a world that, as Dubois (1903) puts it, holds one in ‘contempt’ has a long history of scholarship in early childhood education where scholars have determined that young Black children not only recognize racial differences, but also begin to internalize the mainstream images.
connected with their race (Clark & Clark, 1947; Radke & Trager, 1950; Goodman, 1952; Morland, 1962). These studies often found that Black children associated their race with negative attributes, expressing their desire to be White or have lighter skin tone, and preferences for Black friends with light skin tones. For instance, Clark and Clark (1947) found that preschool Black children recognize racial distinctions and struggled to accurately self-identify their race. The majority identified a preference of a White raced doll, associating it with positive terms, in lieu of a Black race doll, to which the children responded negatively. In a study with Black and White children who mainly attended segregated schools in the South. Morland (1962) confirmed that an overwhelming majority of Black children indicated a preference to be White.

Black Children, Self-Perception and Academic Achievement

A body of studies has existed about Black student’s racial self-perception, as well as the meanings connected to this view in relation to their academic achievement (Poussaint & Atkinson, 1972; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Van Galen, 1993; Isom, 2007; Nasir et al., 2009). Often these studies illuminate important components of Black students’ level of “affiliation” with their racial group and related traditions and an association between academic achievement and their race. Poussaint and Atkinson (1972) suggested that Black’s have learned that they might not receive the same “external rewards”, such as money, acclamation, love, respect, or power, offered by social institutions even if their behavior meets their approval, or is ‘successful’” as their White counterparts who demonstrate the same behaviors (p. 64). Because of their inconsistency and discriminatory dispensation, the rewards of schooling are weak motivators for Black
youth, and that “the more immediate and direct the reward is, the stronger a motivator it is likely to be” (p. 65). Poussaint and Atkinson (1972) concluded that in order for Black children to be motivated for academic success, that the schools must combat the racist messages against them and affirm their possibilities of being successful.

In another study, despite the positive intentions of parents, faculty and peers in an interracial school, Van Galen (1993) found that Black students were socialized into roles associated with lower levels of achievement. Social influences and racial discourses in schools shape Black students’ racial identities and sense of self, and as a result, their success in school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Isom, 2007). The daily encounters of African-American students in school and in society construct the value and salience of their racial identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Isom, 2007). According to Isom (2007), Black students have to shift between their projected selves and the ways in which their peers position them and, in a DuBoisian sense, often simultaneously strive against internalized distorted self-perceptions.

**Theories and Models of Identity Development**

Other scholars have continued to focus on the processes in which Blacks develop their racial identity. Scholars within this area find that, Black children and adolescents also develop positive racial self-images (Cross, 1991; Kich, 1992). Cross (1991) established a five stage model of Black racial identity development where children achieve “Nigrescence,” which was a clear and positive identity and commitment to working to redress societal inequities in order to improve social conditions for all Black people. In terms of ethnic identity development, Uba (1994) outlined a three stage model
where the process of self-recognition and acceptance was not rooted in conflict or individualization but in the following concepts: 1) ethnicity consciousness; 2) adoption of ethnic identity or selection of a cultural reference group; and 3) enactment of ethnic identity and integration in daily contexts. Kich (1992) explored racial identity development in biracial children. He connected racial identity development to developmental changes in children, where self acceptance and an assertion of an interracial identity occur in late adolescence or early adulthood.

While these stage models pointed to the dynamic process of identity development, they are limited in that they only attend to one aspect of identity without considering other contributory factors, such as class or gender. Other research has examined the intersection of multiple identity factors. For instance, Stevens (1997, 2002) developed a multidimensional model of Black adolescent female identity development, which synthesized experience across multiple social contexts. She identified Black female identities as developed through a synthesis of their socialization experiences from mainstream (White worldview); a devalued societal status (impacted by the convergence of their race and gender status), and their cultural reference group (African American worldview).

**Black Girlhood**

Most research concerning Black female experiences and perspectives in schools involve adult, adolescent, and pre-adolescent populations (Fordham, 1993; Stevens, 2002). This literature has focused on the points at which commitments to roles and social identities within political, religious, and career related converge with gender, class,
race and ethnic cultural reference group orientations (Rotheram-Boras et al., 1996). This research indicates that structural influences pertaining to race, class, gender and sexual orientation influence the perceptions and experiences of Black girls (Risby, 1994; Evans-Williams, 2005) and that Black girls must navigate the ways in which they are often overlooked and silenced because of their embodiment of race and gender.

Research dealing with Black girls indicates that they have a complex relationship with school success. For instance, Black girls possess higher self esteem than their White female peers, despite their lower academic achievement (AAUW, 1992). In a longitudinal study, Orenstein (1994) found that some Black girls reject academic achievement out of a sense of self esteem, associating academic success with alignment to White racial standards, while other girls develop an identity that embraces both Black and White culture in order to better comply with the expectations of the educational institution.

Research indicates that this development of self esteem through rejecting the dominant institutions of education is a coping strategy and a form of resistance sometimes undertaken by Black girls (Fordham, 1993). Robinson and Ward (1991) agree that Black girls learn to value community in resistance to dominant ideologies of individualism, in that many, who work to succeed in schools, do so with a collective vision of social change.

Often the behavior of Black girls has been misunderstood and consequently led to negative interpretations by school faculty (Mirza, 1992). Evan-Williams (2005) found that Black girls often have to combat the negative and stereotypical perceptions held by their teachers and administrators. Other research indicated that Black female students
utilized much of their time at school engaging in coping and resistance strategies in response to racist, sexist, and classist expectations (Evans-Williams, 2005; Archer et al., 2007). In regards to developing coping strategies, some studies indicated that Black girls who achieve resilience often have strong relationships with their mothers or other female adults who have taught them or mentored them and are aware of the effects of race and gender on their lives and the ways they are constructed in society (Cauce et al., 1996; Davis & Rhodes, 1996; Sullivan, 1996; Evans-Williams, 2005) while other scholars maintained that peer worlds have a significant influence on Black girls’ experiences and perceptions of themselves and others (Way, 1996).

Carroll (1997) highlighted young Black girls’ perspectives about their experiences through their writings. Integral to her work were the discussion of intersections of class, race, and power from a Black girl’s perspective, and the ways they speak with and back to discourses of Black womanhood. Carroll’s work was one of the few that provided a view of identify construction from a Black girl’s viewpoint. Goodwin (1990) and Scott, (2003) also focused on the experience of Black girls. Goodwin (1990) conducted a study observing the conversational negotiations of Black children within their communities. She found that Black girls drew from cultural resources to engage in sophisticated speech activities, which organized and shaped the social identities of children within their peer world. Goodwin’s (1990) research showed that the girls were assertive and sought to construct an inclusive community of like-minded girls.

Likewise, Scott (2002, 2003) found that the racial composition of schools were a factor in determining the strategies employed by Black primary grade school girls to
navigate their peer worlds. For example, in the racially heterogeneous school, Scott found that a White girl was leader of an exclusive ‘Club’ of racially diverse girls, monitoring and reinforcing the norms of belonging to this peer group. Thus, the hierarchy of race was still present in the students’ peer group. Scott (2003) further elaborated that, “while not all White girls became leaders and the selection process for Club leader was not discernible, in class activities, any White girl had more social agency to initiate the game than did her non-White counterparts” (p. 410). In this classroom, while White girls seemed to structure the norms and expectations to be included in play, the Black girls used their perceptions of the race and gender dynamics of inclusion and exclusion to gain entry and resist the workings of their peer culture. Contrary to their experiences at the racially heterogeneous school, Scott (2003) found that the Black girls in the predominantly Black school setting were much more assertive and valued their interdependence. In, addition, in the absence of White girls, older African-American girls (second- or third-graders) established gender boundaries and norms for exclusion and inclusion. Boys were tolerated as playmates and possible threats to female group cohesion. Scott’s work makes it clear that the Black girls have to navigate the race and gender dynamics within the peer worlds and that these constructs influence the discourses used to constitute their peer culture. Her work attests to the need for continued research in understanding the discourses that are used as children position each other within their peer world from the perspectives of Black girls.
Conclusion

Scholarship on discourse and children’s social/peer worlds, the scholarship regarding the influence of race, class, and gender within children’s discursive and social worlds and research and scholarship on Black racial consciousness and identity development all informed this study. Theories of discourse and research on the social worlds of children helped to frame how language and children’s culture are intertwined and connected to larger social and cultural structures. Peer world research frames children as not only appropriators of the adult world, but as agents in constructing their own peer culture through their use of discourses. Discursive theories are particularly useful in exploring the ways Black girls and their peers make sense of and construct their peer worlds.

The absence of research in these areas has also framed this study. For instance, while there is a growing body of work involving children’s friendship and peer relationship development in schools, as well as an emerging body of work concerning the influence of gender, race, and class particularities within peer culture, the work that places race and class as framing constructs is very limited. As a result, Black children and, in particular, Black girls are rendered invisible. When there is theorizing around race or the participation of Black children in classrooms or peer worlds, their behaviors are often misinterpreted as researchers do not bring a very sophisticated understanding of the nature of race and racism as it relates to discourse and relationship to their analysis. Additionally, there is very limited work that takes up race, class, and gender simultaneously or studies the intersections of these social locations within early
childhood classroom and peer cultural discourses. In short, little exists on the ways in which young Black girls’ negotiate discourses within this peer world, the nature of their relationships, or the unique perspectives they bring to this peer culture.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to explore the range of experiences and perspectives of three second-grade girls, Adrianna, Raell, and Mariah, identified as Black/African American by peers, teachers, and/or themselves. I attempted to locate their engagement in the discourses within the peer world of their classroom context and the prominent discourses they drew from to explain these perceptions. Pertinent to this study, is the understanding that regardless of how the girls racially self-identified, they were having Black racialized experiences intersecting with class and gender. In particular, I sought to discover the ways in which these three girls, who represent different socioeconomic classes, position themselves and are positioned by their peers and the ways in which discourses of difference including discourses of race, class, and gender, influence these interactions. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. What are the sociocultural discourses surrounding diversity (race, class, and gender) and difference within this classroom and within the children’s peer cultural worlds?

2. How are Black girls positioning themselves within these discourses and what are their perceptions of their efforts to position themselves?

3. How are Black girls being positioned within these discourses and what are their perceptions of the ways in which they are being positioned?
In this chapter I discuss the methodology used for the research study. I begin by exploring the epistemological and theoretical perspective and follow with the specific methodology used. Included in this are descriptions of the participants, the timeline for the study and the particular methods used for data collection. Last I outline steps utilized in data analyses.

**Epistemological Perspectives**

This study draws from both critical and constructivist approaches to qualitative work. It is situated within Endarkened feminist, and sociocultural discursive epistemological perspectives which proceed from the recognition of the intersection of socially mediated and constructed identities and attention to structural relations of power.

**Black/Endarkened Feminist Epistemological Commitments**

In this study I positioned myself in Black feminist theory (hooks, 1981, 1989; Collins, 2000) and in particular employ an Endarkened feminist epistemological perspective (Dillard, 2006). There are a number of epistemological premises and following methods that I take from Endarkened feminism. First, Endarkened feminism centers Black women’s self-definition (hooks, 1981, 1989; Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). This self-definition is important to this study as it suggests that Black girls in the study possess valid knowledge, theorize, and critique in their daily lives across class. Second, Endarkened feminism situates research as a personal, intellectual, spiritual, and political endeavor, with the assumption that the researcher is very much a part of the research endeavor (Williams, 1998; Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). By engaging in research centering upon Black girls in order to create more space for their voices, I perceived my
research as a humanizing endeavor to strive against their invisibility in research literature. Furthermore, I worked from a deliberate and conscious politicized subjectivity as a Black woman engaging in work with Black girls. Instead of striving for the role of a distanced or removed observer, I was able to put my experiences in concert with the participants as co-researchers, in order to help question observations and push emerging themes.

**Sociocultural Epistemological Premises**

Sociocultural theoretical perspectives also inform this study. Sociocultural epistemological perspectives recognize the world as socially constituted, mediated, and open ended, and thus learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people arising from socially and culturally structured contexts (Rogoff, 2003) or culturally ‘figured worlds’ (Holland et al., 2003). Sociocultural epistemologies assume that people ‘make themselves from the outside’, through acting on things in the world and engaging with the assumed meanings within social activity and interactions (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2001; Boocock & Scott, 2005; Corsaro, 2003; 2005). Such perspectives point not only to the way in which people are socially and culturally constructed, but also to the ways in which humans influence the sociocultural conditions under which they are shaped. In short, children are not only shaped by the social and cultural meanings of the world around them, they also shape these meanings through their participation within their social/cultural world (Vygotsky, 1978; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Wertsch, 1985; Rogoff, 2003).
Sociocultural Discursive Epistemological Perspectives

In this study I was interested in understanding the ways in which the social world of the classroom both influenced the children’s relationships with others, even as their participation in the classroom community influenced and shaped its dynamics. As such, it was important to look at both the socially constructed space of the classroom as well as ways in which they making meaning of this space. Sociocultural discursive epistemological premises also guided the study. Sociocultural discursive epistemological premises position language, identity, and power as inextricably bound (Fairclough, 1992, 1995/2010; Wodak, 2001) and language as cultural, political, and contextual, and latent with social codes and norms through which people (social actors) negotiate social roles and goals (Gee, 1990/2008). Discourses result from social practices and histories involving shared meanings and negotiations of social roles of individuals within a particular context (Gee, 1990/2008).

Conclusion

These three epistemological premises coalesce to inform this study through various overlapping tenets. All three epistemologies assume that the world, groups of people, as well as individuals are socially, politically, historically, and economically constructed. While sociocultural and sociocultural discursive epistemologies do not attend to a specific cultural group per se, they support Endarkened feminist epistemology by furnishing the intricacies of the social world and the macro and level relationship and construction of these worlds in Black women’s and girls’ experiences. Furthermore, because Endarkened feminist epistemologies also critiques the functioning
of oppressive power at multileveled domains, sociocultural and discursive theories makes clear and provides a conduit for identifying and discovering how the norms, values, beliefs, standards and systems of oppression operate at these varying levels and the impact on the lives of Black women and girls.

**Methodology**

Given that the goal of this study was to understand the ways in which meaning and interaction were mutually constituted within a politically structured sociocultural context, I drew mainly from ethnographic methods. Like much ethnographic work, I was interested in making sense of the culture of a specific “bounded group” with a primary interest in exploring, understanding, describing, and analyzing, “a culture or part of a culture as a whole […] and the goal of describing a unique way of life and showing how the parts fit together into an integrated whole” (Jacob, 1987, p. 12). In this instance, the bounded group was Black girls within a second grade classroom with attention to the ways in which these Black girls navigated and perceived the larger classroom peer group and community. Situating the girls within the larger classroom context was critical as I was concerned with the larger social ecology – its processes and structures. This ecological understanding was important in understanding how Black girls negotiate the simultaneous operation of informal and formal social structures, and their respective roles in their interactions with their peers within the context (Erickson, 1985).

Ethnographic fieldwork involves extensive time in the field, the description of everyday occurrences in the field setting from the different viewpoints of the participants, and ongoing reflexivity in order to scrutinize assumptions about all meanings and
definitions within the context (Erickson, 1985). Researchers engaged in ethnographic field work within a familiar setting, particularly from a critical perspective, must examine the taken for granted, ordinary behavior, questioning the obvious and “making the familiar strange” (Erickson, 1973). In this study, extended time spent observing in the natural setting of the classroom and multiple interviews with subjects were efforts to understand the “constructions participants use to make sense of their worlds” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15).

**Context of Study**

The intent of this study was to explore the sociocultural discourses around diversity (race, class, and gender) and, specifically, the ways in which Black girls perceive and negotiate these discourses. The second grade classroom in which the study took place represented the raced, classed, and gendered diversity that allowed for this exploration. Though three Black girls were the primary focus, because the study assumes the social construction of children’s peer worlds and social roles within it, the study also examined patterns within the larger context of the classroom and the children and teacher. Situating the way in which these three girls perceived and negotiated relationships within the larger classroom allowed for a greater understanding of these perceptions and negotiations at the intersection of sociocultural and sociopolitical influences and structures, including race, class and gender.

This classroom was located in Perrin Creek Elementary School (a pseudonym), within a large Midwestern suburban district that is a unique blend of urban, rural, and suburban. The school serves 441 students in kindergarten through fourth grades. Approximately
68.3% of the students are White, non-Hispanic, followed by 8.4% Hispanic, 3.5% Asian or Pacific Islander, 14% Black, non-Hispanic, and 5.3% Multiracial students. Students on free and reduced lunch make up 66.8% of the population. 13.2% are students who are English Language Learners (ELL and students with identified disabilities represent 17.1% of the school. After school programs and extra-curricular opportunities are also provided to students. Tutoring and intervention services are available. The school is ranked as a school of “Excellence” according to state academic performance measures.

Classroom Context

This second grade classroom was the most racially/ethnically diverse of the four second grade classrooms in the school. Whereas the other three classrooms had two-three racial/ethnic minority children, there were thirteen Children of Color in this classroom. The children in the classroom came from generationally poor, working poor, working class, and middle class families. All of the Black girls in the grade, with the exception of one, were placed in the classroom. There was a high rate of transiency at the school. For instance, three students moved, and over the course of the year she received three new students, one of whom was enrolled for less than one week before leaving. Most of the children were avid readers and writers. Boys and girls were excited to share their drafts and published pieces with each other, as well as the teacher and myself. The teacher and I recognized that the students were very social and highly active, and she changed the seating configurations and assignments at least three times each quarter, trying to resolve distractions.
Teacher and Curricular Approach

Mrs. Thomas is a twenty-eight year old White woman who had been teaching for approximately five years, all of which were at Perrin Creek Elementary. She was very witty, cheerful and excited to teach and managed the classroom in a caring, authoritative manner. She constantly pushed herself to develop different strategies to ensure she was reaching all of her learners. If she assessed that a student needed more support on a concept, she would make time to work with them. Overall, she was equitable in allowing children across race and gender to participate in class, and supported them both academically and socially with equity. She was welcomed different aspects of multicultural education, integrating literature, educational materials, and visual images which represented an array of diversity.

Mrs. Thomas was highly organized and had all classroom materials in clearly marked areas or labeled containers. She had established a helpful set routines and processes and the classroom generally was self-operating. Each student’s desk was organized with a basket, containing math manipulatives, a pencil bag, and textbooks, notebooks, and folders. She arrived at school at least one to one and a half hours prior to school each day to plan and organize. Every morning, she would write a morning message on the white board in the meeting area. These messages would give children a reminder about an event at school that day, praise and encouragement regarding academic or social behaviors, and hints at new topics to learn in class that day. She would gather the students to the classroom meeting area, where they would say their “class pledge,” read the calendar, and a volunteer would read aloud the morning message.
Afterwards the children would practice spelling words through an activity. For example, during “back spell” the children would form a circle, and when Mrs. Thomas announced a spelling word, the children would use one of their fingers to “write” and spell aloud the word on their neighbor’s back. On other days, the children worked through different exercises - “word of the day,” vocabulary practice, or handwriting, all were contained in specific colored folders/journals made by Mrs. Thomas prior to the start of the school year. Lastly, the children had ‘character education’, where they learned tools of how to “get along” through video, role play, and stories. Around the room were large charts in children’s handwriting that were the result of discussing and exploring their thoughts together as a group. These were often referred to whenever there were conflicts. For example, the children generated a list of signs that they know they are getting angry, as well as strategies for how to deescalate.

The curricular approach used in this classroom was structured through workshops and differentiated groups. In Math, the student used Everyday Math ™. The students often worked in partners or groups of three. The school was a Literacy Collaborative School and Mrs. Thomas used a Guided Reading approach via Fountas and Pinell ™ series for her literacy instruction. Each day the children knew the expectations for writing and reading workshop. Each group had a list of learning experiences to accomplish each day. Whenever students would finish a particular task, they would refer to their schedule before moving to the next task.

As students worked independently during reading and writing workshop, Mrs. Thomas had reading instruction with small groups. She collaborated with other
colleagues to provide small group instruction for students during this time. Therefore, some children left Mrs. Thomas’ class to go to another teacher for reading group and vice-versa. As children progressed through particular reading texts, they were able to move on to more challenging texts or move to a different group. Mrs. Thomas and two other second grade teachers decided to each take a different content area to teach in the afternoon. At the end of the day, Mrs. Thomas taught social studies for her children and for the other two second grade classrooms. On Wednesday and Thursday, Mrs. Thomas’ class took Science and Health with one of the other second grade teachers.

Mrs. Thomas was committed to ongoing professional development. She had recently completed her Master’s degree and she took advantage of various curricular workshops after school. She was also an emerging leader at her school and was socially active. Mrs. Thomas was a part of a planning committee for a national education conference held at Perrin Creek. Furthermore, she was an assistant union representative for her school. She had commitments to being active in educational policy at state level and helped to organize and garner teacher support for various political demonstrations concerning, what they considered unethical educational policies.

Participants

While Black girls were identified as case-study subjects, consent was sought for participation for all of the children in the classroom. Sixteen out of twenty-five children were given consent to participate. Out of those given consent, one child did not provide assent for formal interviewing. (See Table 1 for description of student participants). Out
of those children given consent for participation, three Black girls were identified as case study children. Participants are described in more detail below.

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<th>Socio-Economic Status</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Students who withdrew from school

**Case study children.** The three case study girls in this study were Adrianna, Mariah, and Raell. Before proceeding further, it is important to revisit the use of Black as a racial category, with attention to the function of race within the U.S. Regardless of attempts to self-position or self-identify, Black as a racial marker, is politically, historically, economically, and socially constructed concept that is inescapable from imposed social ascription (Omi and Winant, 1994). Although Adrianna and Mariah self and socially identified as “Black,” Raell, whose parents are Black and White, self-identified as “bi-
racial.” On the other hand, she recognized that her appearance, i.e. phenotype, however, contributed to being socially positioned as a “Black girl.” She was included in the study as a “Black girl,” because of the significance of the workings of race as identity marker and her experience as biracial girl demonstrated the tension between self and social racial positioning, and the discourses of being identified as Black. In the following section, I provide a brief introduction to each girl. A much more thorough description is provided in the analysis in chapter four.

Adrianna. Adrianna came from a middle class family with both parents in the home. She had 2 siblings, a sister who was 10 years older and who attended this school and a new baby brother. Both of Adriana’s parents graduated from college. Adrianna’s mother worked in an upper management position with a large pharmaceutical laboratory corporation. Her father’s employment remained unknown but he worked during the day, while her mother worked at night. Adrianna’s parents owned a home and lived in a community where homes were appraised between $133,000—$177,000.

Adrianna had had a quirky sense of humor and was highly animated. She had dark brown skin and was very petite. She had short, dark brown hair with very tight curls. She often wore her hair in braids and pony tails. She was very warm, assertive, and sincere in her actions. During whole class learning experiences such as read-alouds, Adrianna would become excited and engage the teacher in “call and response” (Smitherman, 1977; 2000; Richardson, 2003) patterns, which often was addressed by the teacher.

Mariah. Mariah came from a working class family. Her parents were unmarried, but lived together and were in a long-term relationship. Mariah mentioned that her
parents were beginning to discuss getting married, since they had been together for years. Mariah’s family resided in public housing funded through the federal Section 8 funding subsidy. Her mother was unemployed and stayed at home, while her father was out of town frequently with the airline industry. She has two older brothers. One who is thirteen years of age, and the other in his early twenties. She admired her brothers, and planned to attend college like her oldest brother.

Mariah was soft-spoken and friendly. She had a very light brown complexion, and had shoulder length hair, which she often wore with hair extensions in elaborate styles. She wore designer clothing to school. She strove to do well in school, both academically and socially. Her asthma condition often caused her periods of missing school. She wanted to ensure that she maintained the respect of her parents, teachers, and peers. She was very savvy in negotiating the context of schooling, and was able to work well with children across race.

Raell. Raell also came from a working-class background. She lived in a community where homes ranged from $7,000--$74,000, with most within $7,000--$8,000 range. Although her father had full custody of her, she often stayed with her mother. Raell’s mother was unemployed and her father was struggling in his new entrepreneur venture, selling previously owned vehicles. She had an older brother who had finished high school and lived in a different part of the city. Raell rarely saw her older brother, but there were times when she would visit him and his girlfriend. Also, she had an infant baby brother. Raell’s cousin would often visit at her mother’s house. Their play often
resulted in altercations, often physical, and Raell frequently complained at school about her frustrations with her cousin’s behavior.

Raell was highly intuitive and reflective of her surroundings. She had a fair complexion, with a soft brown undertone. Her sandy blonde wavy hair was often pulled back by a headband or ponytail. Raell enjoyed leading, helping, and advocating for other children. She had an air of seriousness and was readily to take charge of any situation where a peer or teacher needed assistance. She struggled with her bi-racial identity and how she perceived it impacted her capacity to make friends at school.

**Researcher Role and Methods for Data Collection**

Ethnographic methodology relies on extensive time in the field and requires the researcher to take up a deliberate role in the setting. In this study I was in the field setting over the course of seven months – from August 2010 to February 2011. For the initial three weeks of school, from August 22, 2010 to September 9, 2010, I was at the site every day, all day. For the next six months from, September 13, 2010 to February 28, 2011, I spent three days in the field – a full day on Tuesday and half day on Thursday and Friday - for approximately 10 hours each week. The timeline for the study is detailed in Table 2.

**Researcher Role**

The researcher may take up different roles in ethnographic work. In this study I positioned myself as a participant-observer. A participant-observer participates in the social world in which they are conducting research, adopting a role that is somewhere between that of an insider and outsider (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The kind or
degree of participation varies from complete immersion in the program as a full participant to complete separation from the activities observed where one acts as a spectator. As a participant observer in this study, I became a certain kind of ‘member’ in the classroom. At times I simply observed, trying to remove myself from the activity and at times I was more of a full participant in the classroom world. This flux in acting either as more fully a participant while at other times acting as more fully an observer was a paradox that I tried to monitor. Each had its benefits. According to Glesne (2006), “the more you function as a member of the everyday world of the researched, the more risk losing the eye of the uninvolved outsider; yet the more you participate, the greater your opportunity to learn” (p. 50).

I was often positioned as a teacher’s helper, and helped in whatever way I was asked. For instance, when students were working on independent math practice, Mrs. Thomas often asked for me to assist her in helping students with questions or to check their work. However, I tried to maintain a distinction between my role and the teacher’s role by not disciplining children or giving behavioral consequences. This helped the children to see that I did not have the authority of a teacher in their school. On the other hand, the children also saw me as a confidant and came to understand that there were certain roles I would play that were not that of the teacher. Thus, at times I was more of a friend and confidant. This allowed me to participate as a caring adult/ co-teacher, and as a friendly adult who showed an interest in their games, their social worlds, and their friendships. For instance, I went out to the playground with them and engaged them during in-door recesses time as well. Instead of standing with the teachers who had recess
duty, I would walk around and observe, and talk with different children who approached me. Other times, I would join the children as they initiated play with me. I also initiated a ‘lunch bunch’ experience in which the children were able to each lunch in small groups in the classroom with me. This allowed me to build rapport and observe children in a more relaxed environment. It also allowed me to get a richer understanding of their interpersonal dynamics as well as their perspectives on various issues or situations important to them. I ensured that all children participated in lunch bunch, regardless of involvement in the study.

In addition to being a participant observer in the ethnographic sense I positioned myself in a particular and deliberate social, spiritual, and political relationship with both the children and the teacher. In doing so I took up commitments to monitoring my subjectivities, so as to ensure that I could ensure validity in the data collection. A more elaborate discussion of reflexivity will be presented at the end of this chapter.

**Data Collection**

In order to ensure validity, I triangulated the data by gathering data from multiple sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Given this, data was collected in the following ways: 1) observational field notes of children playing, talking, and interacting with peers; 2) student interviews (individual and group); 3) teacher interviews; 4) audio and video recordings of children’s actions, play, and talk; 5) research journal; 6) student artifacts (class assignments and other forms of writing) and classroom artifacts (e.g. copies of assignments; classroom newsletters).
**Observational field notes.** In order to develop a thorough understanding of the way in which students interacted across their relationships with peers, I observed students during instructional time, free time, and during lunch and recess and took extensive field notes. During the initial 3 weeks, observations occurred for four to five hours a day, four days a week in order to become immersed in the context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). For the remainder of the seven months, observations occurred two to three days a week, for four to five hours a day.

**Student interviews.** Student interviews were primary to this study as the central questions had to do with students perceptions of and negotiations within peer interactions. Two types of interviews were used with students – formal interviews and informal emergent interviews/conversation. An interview protocol was used for formal interviews. The questions in the protocol served as a guide. As children responded during the interview, additional questions emerged. In addition, there were both group and individual interviews. Adrianna, Mariah, and Raell were involved in three individual interviews. The remaining children in the study were involved in two individual interviews, with the exception of Joseph and Riley, who had one individual interview. All children were involved in at least three group interviews. These groups were configured in the following ways: homogenous and heterogeneous gender, race, and class; children who I observed and also self-identified themselves as “friends.”

**Formal group interviews.** Each student in the class who had been given consent and who provided assent were involved in three group interviews – one toward the beginning of the study, one in the middle, and one toward the end of the study. Two to
five children were involved in each group interview. Group interviews are often helpful as they provide a supportive environment for students to begin to interact within an interview setting. The group setting was intended to help children feel more powerful and in control and also encourage those children who may not be able confident to speak (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The group interviews served several purposes: a) to gain an understanding of the larger classroom context, b) to gather information about the children in order to develop targeted individual interviews and follow-up questions, and to c) to develop an understanding of the general classroom discourses. Examples of questions from the formal group interviews include:

- What do you like to do when you are not in school?
- Who are your friends? Who are your friends in your classroom? How can you tell?

Complete group interview protocols can be found in Appendix A.

**Formal individual interviews.** Three individual interviews were conducted with each child who had consent for participation in the study. This included the three case-study girls. These interviews were spread over the course of the field immersion and conducted toward the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the study. Each lasted approximately thirty to sixty minutes and was held during lunch period or recess. Examples of questions from the formal individual interviews include:

- What do you like about your life?
- Tell me about your friends at school.

Complete interview protocols can be found in Appendix A.
**Informal emergent interviews/conversations.** Informal interviews took the form of brief conversations and were used to follow up on observations of children’s interactions. Thus, questions for informal interviews emerged over the course of the study (Agar, 1980) and in response to children’s interactions with one another and with the teacher and the researcher. In conducting informal interviews/conversations the researcher was particularly sensitive to not interrupt the flow of the day. Any informal interviews began with a request to the child by the researcher in these interactions.

**Teacher interviews.** Ethnographic studies rely upon cultural informants of the group under study to get insider perspectives. In this study of the students in a classroom as a bounded cultural group, the teacher was an important informant about the students in the classroom. Both formal semi-structured and informal/conversational interviews were conducted with the teacher. Three formal interviews took place during the study. However, as a result of close, daily interaction with the teacher, most interviews were informal in nature, taking place spontaneously and almost daily which is common in immersion in an ethnographic study. The protocol for the teacher interview can be found in Appendix B.

**Audio and video recording of classroom activities.** Over the course of the seven months in the classroom, children’s interactions, play, and talk were video-taped and audio-recorded. The specific sites/experiences targeted in audio and video tapes included classroom instructional time; independent and collaborative learning experiences within the classroom, and indoor and outdoor recess. During outdoor recess, I only video taped segments where I saw children from the same class playing with each
other. However, because children played with students from other classes, as well, I collected three segments of play.

**Research journal.** The researcher maintained a research journal. This journal was used for field notes taken during daily observations as well as to maintain a reflexive record of ongoing analysis and thinking. In addition, the journal was used to begin to develop categories and codes that both influenced the ongoing research as well as begin summative analysis.

**Student and classroom artifacts.** Copies of students’ assignments, writings, and drawings were collected. This included copies of classroom rules, newsletters, or other communicative or academic material.

**Summary timeline of the study.**

Below is a summary timeline of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Analyses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 2010</td>
<td>• Observations: approximately 20 hours (4 days/week; 4-5 hours week)</td>
<td>Transcribe+coding, Preliminary Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Artifact Collection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2010</td>
<td>• Observations: approximately 15 hours (2-3 days/week; 4-5 hours week)</td>
<td>Transcribe +coding, Preliminary Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• First Formal Interview with Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emergent Informal Interviews with Students and Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emergent Informal Interviews with Students and Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Artifact Collection</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Timeline of Study (Continued)
Table 2. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Analyses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| October 2010    | • First Interview with Teacher  
• First Interview with Students (Individual and Group)  
• Informal Interviews (Students and Teacher)  
• Observations: approximately 15 hours (2-3 days/week; 4-5 hours week)  
• Artifact Collection | Transcribe+ coding, Preliminary Writing                                      |
| November 2010   | • Second Interview with Teacher  
• Second Interview with Students  
• Observations: approximately 15 hours (2-3 days/week; 4-5 hours week)  
• Artifact Collection | Transcribing, coding + categorizing, Preliminary Writing                  |
| December 2010   | • Second Formal Interview with Teacher  
• Second Formal Interview with Students (Individual and Group)  
• Informal Interviews (Teachers and Students)  
• Observations: approximately 15 hours (2-3 days/week; 4-5 hours week)  
• Artifact Collection | Transcribing, Coding + Organizing, Preliminary Analysis                   |
| January 2011    | • Third Formal Interview with Students (Individual and Group)  
• Observations: approximately 15 hours (2-3 days/week; 4-5 hours week)  
• Artifact Collection | Data Analysis and Writing  
– Continue analysis and write the dissertation. Any additional data needed to clarify findings will also be sought. |
| February 2011   | • Third Formal Interview with Teachers  
• Finish Third Formal Interview with Students (Individual and Group)  
• Observations: approximately 15 hours (2-3 days/week; 4-5 hours week)  
• Artifact Collection | Data Analysis and Writing  
– Complete analysis and write the dissertation. |
| March—August 2011 |                                                                                 |                                               |
Data Analysis

The study engaged an “emergent analysis” and used a “constant comparison” method to analyze data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) using the following steps:

1. Ongoing analysis during data collection included reviewing field notes and reviewing video and audio files in order to identify emerging themes. These emerging themes focused the data collection and influenced the development of new questions.

2. After video and audio files were transcribed, they and all other data were read and re-read to clarify and identify new emerging themes.

3. Data were thematically analyzed according to these emerging themes into groups for further description, interpretation, and analysis. Data (stories/events/quotes) were organized in stanzas or chunks after transcription (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

4. A list of all topics was created and similar topics were clustered together and organized by particular themes using a chart in Microsoft Word ®.

5. These topics were abbreviated as codes. This was my preliminary scheme which was used to analyze the data.

5. As the data was analyzed with the preliminary coding scheme, the overall list of categories were reduced by grouping topics that relate to each other or drawing lines between categories to show interrelationships, looking for disconfirming evidence.
6. Final decisions were made on the codes and configuration for each category and these were used to continue the analysis. When negative cases were found or new themes emerged, categories were collapsed, expanded, or eliminated and, if necessary, data was reanalyzed with new coding schemes.

**Quality Criteria for Proposed Study**

I used a number of methods in order to control for subjectivity and researcher bias and to further establish, confirmability, credibility, dependability and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to triangulating my methods, engaging in persistent observations, and prolonged engagement in the field, I established trustworthiness of my research through the following qualitative verification procedures outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985): self-reflective journals, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and thick description.

**Self-reflexivity.** I kept self-reflexive journals, writing before and after observations, interviews, and during data analysis in order to address my pre-conceived opinions and to reflect upon my subjectivities. Journals helped in recognizing the disparities in cultural norms that may arise from my own cultural history when interviewing across, race, class, gender, class, generation, and religion. Constantly reflecting on my cultural lenses helped me to counter making implicit cultural assumptions. Critical to this study, I needed to have consistent self-understanding in relation to and with my research through considerable self-interrogation. From an Endarkened feminist perspective, I shall examined my own “motives, methods,
interactions— and understanding and meaning-making from various members of the social and/or cultural [sought] community” (Dillard, 2006, p. 19).

**Negative case analysis.** Negative examples or cases were actively sought in order to manage researcher bias and subjectivity. The intersections of my body, geographical location, and all that it socio-economically-politically represents positioned me as an insider and outsider in the same context, depending with whom am interacting, and I must realize, that I must critique the ways in which my reading, writing, and the ways I choose to represent children and move to do research that is “respectful” and “ethical” to those in which I engage in research. Assuming that the center of research as shifting, and not always ideologically an imperial center, I regard the importance of critical understandings across boundaries, to be able to critique in an affirmation out of compassion that seeks reciprocity and goodness to all children/participants (hooks & West, 1991; Dillard, 2006; Seidl, 2007). In my efforts to reveal the ways in children position themselves and each other, I do not wish to create binaries of oppressed/oppressor, even in recognizing the way nuanced ways oppression systematically affects the lives of participants.

**Peer debriefing.** Colleagues at the university and the teacher who participated in the study provided feedback to enhance confirmability.

**Persistent observation.** Because people conduct themselves differently when they are watched, participants can easily perform for us when we are observing them. Through prolonged interaction and long periods of observation, the participants became more comfortable with our presence and will more likely behave in their usual fashion.
**Thick description.** This research hovered closely to the ground in order to provide a thorough description of the context and subjects within the context. I attempted to fully capture the storied lives of participants, carefully balancing the tensions within their lives, so as not to reinscribe the often imposed social narratives of stereotypes, heroes, and victims (Mohanty, 2003).

**Researcher Reflexivity: Endarkened Feminism and Spirituality**

While most ethnographers take on the role of participant observer and that was indeed my stance, this stance was influenced by a number of different issues. First, as a researcher who conducts research from an critical and Endarkened Feminist perspective my goal was to problematize hegemonic discourses in order challenge institutional, cultural, and structural inequality. Thus, I was interested in the children’s discursive constructions and negotiations as they were revelatory about the way social inequalities are created and sustained in peer worlds and deliberately sought to understand the children’s perspectives and use of agency.

In these efforts my goal was to capture, as much as I could, the perspectives and epistemological realities of the three Black girls, carefully balancing the tensions within their lives, so as not to reinscribe the often imposed social narratives of stereotypes, heroes, and victims (Dill-Thornton, 1994). Toward these ends, it was important that I constantly reflect upon my own socialization as a Black woman and of how the internalization of various discourses were influencing my interactions and perceptions. My internalization of Westernized discourses has been evident in my continued struggles with what it means to be a Black woman seeking to do research within a system that has
often denigrated Black people. In other words, I have wrestled between having a critical consciousness and the dominant narratives I had internalized.

In my efforts to explore the experiences and perceptions of the children in this study I did not wish to contribute to stereotypes nor create binaries of oppressed/oppressor, but to recognize nuanced ways oppression systematically affects the lives of Black girls. As a Black woman I recognized that these stereotypes and binaries were a part of my own socialization. Therefore, I had to work against myself, questioning and critiquing my perspectives, observations, and analysis in order to monitor my subjectivities. I struggled to engage in reflexivity around this effort in every step of the study from my reading of the existing scholarship, in my writing, and in the ways I choose to represent the participants. Furthermore, my classed and geographical similarities and also influenced the lens with which I viewed the research context and participants. I recognized that my own upbringing as a southern, working/middle class Black woman departed in important ways from the lives of the three girls who were the case study subjects and I, again, attempted to maintain a reflexive awareness in my efforts not to ‘read’ my own story into their lives or assume more than I knew about their experiences and lives than I did.

My commitments as a Black woman engaged in scholarly work within an Endarkened feminist perspective also compelled me to recognize and approach this study as a spiritual endeavor in several ways. First, I perceived the study as one to not only serve the purpose of contributing to the academic knowledge base, but to also contribute to a deeper meaning and appreciation of the human condition, evident in the lives of
children at school. According to Dillard (2006), Endarkened feminist research “draws on a spiritual tradition, where the concern is not solely with the production of knowledge (an intellectual pursuit) but also with uncovering and constructing truth as the fabric of everyday life (a spiritual pursuit)” (p. 21). That is my orientation towards my participants as well as toward myself was informed by my intellectual and spiritual perspectives. This orientation led me to approach the children at school as one seeking to learn from and with them as we interacted and discussed their experiences and feelings. It allowed me to approach the children not as a “rule sanctioning adult,” but one who sought to validate and appreciate their knowledge, perspectives, as well as their presence in the world.

Second, research from an Endarkened spiritual perspective implies a relationship with the sacred. Whether one is barely existing or fully thriving within the realm of this world, I believe that we are connected to each other spiritually, as humans and with our her/histories. I recognized that there exists a “great chain of being” which links human nature with material and Divine (Palmer, 1993). To give attention to the intellect without the spirit destroys the self and community, for one acts without grave consideration to the humane consequences (Phelps, 1993). Thus, I saw myself as spiritually connected to the children involved and not involved in the research endeavor with me, and that the children were expressions of the Divine. I sought to interact with the children with care and respect; I perceived that my interactions with them reflected my relationship with the Divine and vice-versa. Also, as I saw children wrestling with challenges with their families and/or friends, I sought to affirm them.
Finally, from an Endarkened spiritual perspective, spirituality is beyond me and higher than me, and consequently, requires me to reconcile that there is a sacredness exceeding the confines of language or imagination. Recognizing this I spent time in prayer and reflection on my motives and my intentions, as well as my interactions with the children at school. Before I engaged in any intellectual task, such as analysis, I would ask and thank the Divine for support. That is, I examined my own “motives, methods, interactions…—and seek understanding and meaning-making from various members of the social and/or cultural community” (Dillard, 2006, p. 19). I wanted to ensure that my mind and spirit had a sense of joy, peace, openness, and that I projected goodness, so I could clearly listen and seek understanding whenever I interacted with the children.

In conclusion, conducting research from an Endarkened feminist, spiritual perspective meant that I approached any task with the understanding that I and others are spiritual beings. My sense of spirituality is a part of my personhood and informs everything I do, including research. To deny this aspect would be an act of violence against myself and others around me.
CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to explore the range of experiences and perspectives of three second-grade Black girls, Adrianna, Raell, and Mariah as they engage in the discourses within the peer world of their classroom context and the prominent discourses they drew from to explain these perceptions. In particular, I sought to discover the ways in which these three girls, who represent different socioeconomic classes, position themselves and are positioned by their peers and the ways in which discourses of difference including discourses of race, class, and gender, influence these interactions.

The specific research questions are as follows:

1. What are the sociocultural discourses surrounding diversity (race, class, and gender) and difference within this classroom and within the children’s peer cultural worlds?

2. How are Black girls positioning themselves within these discourses and what are their perceptions of their efforts to position themselves?

3. How are Black girls being positioned within these discourses and what are their perceptions of the ways in which they are being positioned?

The primary purpose of this chapter is to explore the findings of the study through the presentation of the case studies of the three Black girls involved in the study. In order to do so, however, I begin by providing a brief discussion of Discourse as these
theoretical principles, characteristics and premises provided an important theoretical lens in the analysis and the case studies. Additionally, in order to situate the three girls within the larger classroom context, I also offer a brief description of the prominent classroom. These larger classroom discourses influenced the ways in which the class in general, and the three girls, positioned and were positioned within the social world of the classroom. After a brief analysis of general classroom discourses, I present an analysis of each girl and the way in which she supported and resisted these discourses by positioning and repositioning herself as an agent within the figured world of her peers.

**Discourses and the Social Worlds of Children**

In order to analyze the ways in which the girls in this study were positioned and positioned others in their negotiation of difference within this classroom space, I employed the lens of discourse as presented by Gee (1990/2008), Holland et al. (2003) and others (Fairclough, 1992). Gee defines Big D discourses as ‘identity kits’ that result from social practices and histories involving shared meanings and negotiations of social roles of individuals within a particular context. Discourse is a way of thinking about the world as contextually, socially, politically, and historically constructed texts, which inform negotiations of power and interpretations of beliefs and actions. Discourses intersect within classroom worlds in ways that influence and shape children’s participation and identities within these worlds. Thus, the use of discourse as a theoretical lens allowed me to understand the subconscious norms and assumptions undergirding the cultural practices of children and their peers in the context of schooling in this setting.
However, children are not passive participants within the process of appropriation or socialization within an adult discursive world (Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Estell, Farmer, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002; Strayer & Santos, 1996); they are active agents in the construction of peer worlds. As Gallagher, Dadisman, Farmer, Huss, & Hutchins (2007) maintain, children in early childhood classrooms live in ‘two social worlds’ – they recognize that they can form worlds with adults as well as worlds with peers. They bring together the “interpersonal rules and expectations they learn from adults in the home and the interactional contexts they co-construct with peers in school” (Gallagher, et. al, 2007, p.1). As Corsaro (2003) contends, children socialize themselves as “agents” by appropriating discourses from the adult world to create their own peer culture. Peer culture as it has been studied in early childhood refers to the, “classroom social dynamics [that] impact children’s behavioral adjustment and interpersonal adaptation” (Gallagher et al., 2007, p.1) to these larger discourses. Thus, children form social structures and a peer culture that is a reflection of and an influence on their identities and behaviors. As they do so, children draw from their diverse firsthand experiences in the classroom, including their social class, race, and gender perceptions of the adult world in order to construct their childhood culture with each other.

Bringing together the theoretical constructs of discourse and peer cultural worlds allowed me to look at the intersection of larger, general and historical discourses as they impact the moment-to-moment construction of a ‘locally produced and peer cultural space’ in this particular classroom. This provided a theoretical space in which I could begin to see the ways in which children appropriated, modified, and even resisted these
discourses as they negotiated with peers to create specific, peer-oriented, children-centric worlds as well as the ways in which race, class, and gender influenced this negotiation.

**Prominent Peer World Discourses in Room 46**

The research questions in this study involved exploring prominent peer cultural discourses, the ways in which differences were taken up in these discourses and the ways in which children were both positioned as they positioned others within these discourses as they created their own social, peer worlds. Thus, an exploration of the discourses prominent in the children’s peer world provide an important backdrop against which to explore the way in which the three case-study girls positioned themselves and were positioned within them.

Like all social worlds, this classroom is a constructed space, a socially-constructed world in which larger social, historical discourses intersect with local discourses and peer cultural worlds to shape the community and peer interactions within this community of children. The discourses within the world of this classroom share much in common with those found in many early/elementary classrooms. For instance, Corsaro (2003) and Rizzo (1989) found that friendship was a prominent area of focus for children while Thorne (1993), Connolly (1998) and Blaise (2005) discussed the ways in which gender impacted and shaped discourses of power and belonging in their peer worlds. Others have pointed to the saliency of class and race (Holmes, 1995; Goodwin, 2006; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) as peer constructed inclusionary and exclusionary discourses.
Though the prominent discourses within this classroom can be understood both generally and historically, each classroom space becomes its own particular figured world that is constructed by the children who populate it and their unique array of experiences informing their perceptions and actions. An analysis of the data indicated that a number of discourses were especially prominent within the social world of this classroom and this community of children and teacher/s. These general discourses are important to understanding how the Black girls engaged them and were positioned within them. I explore some of the most prominent, in general, in order to place the three girls within their unique context. Below I briefly explore discourses of (a) friendship; (b) race, gender, and class; (c) belonging; and (d) popularity, which were prominent in this classroom. Each girl in this study, Adrianna, Mariah, and Raell, was influenced by these discourses in different ways. Each also purposefully engaged in the development and dissemination of these discourses, as well as positioned herself within them in attempt to support them or to create alternatives.

**Discourses of Friendship**

Discourses of friendship are central to the lives and figured worlds of many early/elementary classrooms. For instance, Corsaro (2003) found that friendship or friendship knowledge was a social process situated within children’s actions with each other across time. Friendship within peer worlds has been previously explored as a discourse constructed by the children resulting from their experiential social histories.

Friendship assumed multiple meanings and expressions for the children within this second grade classroom. In interviews and informal conversations, children indicated that
friendship had many meanings, but that there were certain criteria that set it apart from other relationships. First, children in this classroom indicated that friendship either signaled closeness and reciprocity or, on the other hand, just the presence of a cordial alliance. However, within either a close or cordial relationship there were a number of criteria. First, friendships were seen as consistent, reciprocal, and meaningful relationships with the goal of playing and sharing childhood experiences. Second, they were meant to remain intact, despite altercations, over months and often had begun prior to second grade.

However, in children’s responses to what it means to have and to be a friend there appeared to be a more casual level of friendship as well. When “friendship” was used loosely, it was heavily tied to context, and when used in this way it was used simply to identify positive interactions with other children, and implied the possibility of these interactions changing throughout the day, week, or month. For instance, Cedrick described his friends as children he “likes” and who “help him”.

At other times the term friend was used to explain perceptions and/or feelings about another peer. For example, when inquiring about specific children, subjects identified these peers as “friends” even if they did not consistently play with or engage them during and after school. During a lunch bunch which included Jordan and Adrianna, Jasmine, declared that Adrianna was her friend. In that moment the girls were cordial and appeared to enjoy each other’s company. However, later that day in an informal conversation, Jasmine revealed that Adrianna was not her friend anymore. It became apparent that at that moment when groups of students were happily interacting with each other, it was
common discourse to refer to each other as “friend.” On the other hand, when children discussed to a deeper level of “friendship,” they referred to children with whom they played and shared experiences with over a longer period of time, as Jasmine did when she maintained that she and Mariah had been friends since first grade and live in the same neighborhood.

**Race, Gender, and Class Discourses**

Discourses of race, class and gender were prominent through children’s active positioning of themselves and each other within their peer cultural worlds. Research indicates that it is clear that even young children beginning to develop different levels of understandings of race (Holmes, 1995; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001); class (Hicks, 2002) and gender (Davies, 1989; Thorne, 1993) as they construct their peer culture and that children regulate each other’s behavior through their expectations and performances across intersections of these discourses. For instance, Thorne (1993) recognized that boys and girls played together in gender-segregated and occasionally integrated groups as was the case in this classroom.

Children in this study who were able to successfully “cross” gender to play with these integrated groups communicated a sense of security in their expected gender role even as they interacted across gender. Still, even these children reinforced traditional gender discourses through their use of “border work.” For example, during recess, I observed that Cedrick and Juan would periodically interrupt a group of cheering girls to mock them or to initiate a game of chase. In their use of borderwork, it is clear that Cedrick and Juan defined the boundaries of gender, by invoking differences in play
activities. These boys also engaged in borderwork around race with groups who were all or predominantly Girls of Color.

In this classroom, children’s more traditional and consistent play groups and friendships were more segregated along the lines of race, class, and gender, meaning girls and boys would normally choose to play with their same gender, class, and racial group. Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) discuss these exclusionary gendered discourses suggesting that children produce and use racial and ethnic discourses as a means to include and exclude other children within their peer culture. Children in this classroom were also engaged in these inclusionary and exclusionary discourses. For example, during a conversation with Connor, Alex, and Amber, who are White, I asked them if they played with their Black peers. The children shook their heads. After stating that I have observed them playing together sometimes, Connor disagreed. Alex, with a puzzled expression, insisted that Connor played with Black children. It seemed that Connor might have felt pressured to say that he only played with White children because he was surrounded by his White peers. However, the other boys did not appear to be as uncomfortable discussing the issue as Connor.

Still, as a general rule in this classroom, boys and girls sought out friends of the same race. At times there were invitations across race and gender to play, however, very few White children had friends who were Children of Color and vice versa.

**Discourses of Popularity**

In this classroom, particular friendship groups became more desirable to join as children constructed and maintained their friendship bonds. Scholars have pointed out the
formation of subgroups within a classroom or school peer culture naming them ecological playgroups (Rizzo, 1989) cliques (Corsaro, 2003) or core groups (Elgas, 2003; Scott, 2003). Subgroups in any peer culture have the potential to become popular, so to speak, if the members are able to attract children who are unaffiliated. “Core group” members, in Elgas’ (2003) study did not regularly engage in school culture activities, instead opting to participate in peer culture experiences, with strategic inclusionary and exclusionary practices of “non core group” children as they maintained their status of popular. For instance, in Blaise’s (2005) study, she determined that certain groups of girls emerged as more desirable through labels, such as “fashionable” or “cool.” She also discovered that girls began to define their femininity in terms of the masculine dominated culture.

Popularity within this study became a discourse identified with terms such as “popular,” “cool,” “bad,” “hot,” “sexy,” and “nice” and there was a core group of children who were identified as popular. Popular children in the classroom were those who were perceived to possess a high status with other the children, those who drew attention from other children and those who had easy access to interactions with other children. Although the children’s friendship groups crossed gender at times, core groups of friends were gender-specific. However, the popularity of these groups was dependent upon the desirability of the members’ as defined by both same-sex popular children and popular children of the opposite gender. That is, for children to become popular, children of both genders must desire and appreciate their companionship and sometimes emulate their behavior, dress, and play routines in order to confirm their popularity.
Interviews, informal conversations, and observations indicated that popular children were admired for multiple assets: personality, physical appearance, athleticism, intellectual and abilities and verbal abilities. Contrary to Scott’s (2003) findings that popular children did not engage in the classroom culture or with other children, the popular children in this classroom had amicable relationships with other children who were not considered popular engaged in selective versus non engagement with most children and with the adults. They also actively engaged in academic experiences, but not to the extent that they were identified solely for their academic abilities. For instance, I observed Davion and Juan participating in whole class learning experiences, but I knew that they sometimes held back even when they knew a correct answer.

A Child of Color who achieved popularity among other Children of Color, even if not a member of this classroom, carried much weight within their peer world. The Children of Color often spoke about the children they knew and interacted with from different grade levels during and after school. For example, Adrianna, Jasmine, and Mariah would discuss happenings with older children, especially incidents involving older siblings or relatives. To be a Child of Color who was popular, then extended one’s status beyond grade level and the confines of school.

**Discourses of Belonging**

Children everywhere desire a sense of belonging within the school, classroom, and cultural worlds of their peers. Much research has focused on rejection from peers at school and the loneliness that result (Hatch, 1987; Asher et al., 1990; Ramsey, 1991).
For instance, Asher et al. (1990) found that children who were considered to be “lonely” were either disliked by most of their peers, or did not have a “friend.”

Common to almost all of the children in this classroom was the importance of being a friend and having friend(s). For instance, although she had an active social life outside of school and appeared to easily move across different peer groups, Alex confessed that she did not have many friends at school, identifying Jordan, Lindsey, and Amber as her only friends. It was clear from her communication that her perception that she did not have many friends was painful for her as the children in this classroom, in general, preferred boasting about having many friends.

Examples of the children seeking belonging and friends pervaded the peer group culture. One such example was seen in the way the children lined up during restroom break. After the children would form a single file line in the hallway during the restroom break, sometimes the children would play a game entitled “Quiet Mouse.” A child would stand on the opposite side of the hallway, observe the children who were in line quietly, and select a student to take his/her place to choose the next “quiet mouse.” It was common for children to select friends and classmates whom they admired or respected. I noticed that Lindsey was never called upon. She even mentioned to me that she felt “invisible,” because her peers overlooked her during this game. Once when she was not looking, I mentioned to a student that Lindsey appeared to be standing in line quietly. After the student selected Lindsey, her solemn face lit up with joy. Being selected, belonging, having friend, these things had almost unprecedented value in the classroom.
community and children were very conversant in the discourses that surrounded belonging.

Three Case Studies

Within this classroom, children positioned themselves within the larger discourses of the sociopolitical and adult world to create peer cultural discourses described above. They were positioned within this peer culture and within these discourses by others even as they took up their own positions within them. These peer cultures and the discourses within them shape the way in which the three case study girls—Adrianna, Mariah, and Raell were situated. However, each brought unique interpretations and a broad array of experiences such that they shaped the discourses even as they were being shaped by them. In the following sections I provide an exploration of the way in which each girl positioned themselves and were positioned by others within these discourses. I highlight each girl’s interpretations of these discourses, specifically as they relate to their understanding of difference as well as explore the ways in which these discourses are situated and influenced within the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Adrianna

Adrianna was brimming with imagination and energy and had a beaming smile and a quirky sense of humor to match. It was common for her to break the tension with a joke. She loved to participate in class, often responding as Mrs. Thomas would address the class in a call-and-response pattern. Adrianna was warm, sincere, and a fast talker and mover. She aspired to be a singer, “ambulance girl,” judge, doctor, or to be a “boss” like her mom. In her spare time she enjoyed listening to the music of Beyoncé and Justin
Bieber, as well as watching scary movies and “girl movies.” She enjoyed “pretty and poufy dresses,” and would wear them to school for special occasions, such as class portrait day. A Black girl from a middle-class family, Adrianna lived with her mother and father who are married. The family took trips together where she relished in meeting new people and spending time with her family. For her mother’s birthday, they went on a weekend trip to Chicago. Adrianna’s rich dark complexion was crowned with short dark brown hair, often worn in braids accessorized by barrettes. When sharing a story, Adrianna’s animated expressions were accompanied with excited gestures and smiles.

Adrianna primarily grappled with narratives from her family, peers, and her own experiences in terms of her understandings of race she carried a backpack to school with Disney’s Frog Princess (a Black princess) image. She spoke of her inspiration when watching a Black ballerina on television and looked forward to beginning ballet classes. Unlike the majority of her peers who ate the school supplied lunch, Adrianna regularly brought her own lunch to school, and her father occasionally delivered a McDonald ™’s Happy Meal ™ to school for her. Throughout her second grade year, Adrianna was faced with changes in her family. For years her older sister, two years her senior, was her only sibling, and this year brought a baby brother. Her excitement about becoming a “big sister,” began to diminish with her family’s increased preoccupation with the arrival of the new family member, and although she adored her older sister, she was often a target of her anger. It seemed that Adrianna began to struggle with her sense of belonging at home and it carried over when she attended school. Her upbeat and energized personality would transform to bursts of frustration and bouts of resulting aggression in class. This
behavior was brought on by her interactions with peers or her inability to understand an academic task. In these rather turbulent moments, Mrs. Thomas, her peers, and I would give Adrianna space to decompress and regain her composure. Adrianna’s longing to belong and perception of failing in her quest compelled her at times to act in aggressive ways with her peers and her teachers.

**Longing to Belong with My People**

Adrianna positioned herself and was positioned in the classroom discourses in particular ways. As I analyzed the data surrounding her interactions with peers and her teacher, as well as her perceptions of her changing situation, it became very clear that the theme of belonging was the most salient way of positioning herself within the prominent classroom discourses. It was very apparent that she wanted to belong—to feel a sense of acceptance among her peers at school. Her longing to belong and her growing racial consciousness fueled her desire to become friends with popular Children of Color. Adrianna exhibited the dominant discourses of race, belonging, and popularity in these particular ways shown above. Her perceptions and ways of positioning/repositioning herself within these discourses are captured within her personal discourses of: (a) racialtude; (b) friendship aspiration, (c) power and negotiation, and (d) beauty and belonging/status.

**Discourse of Racialtude**

Racialtude describes the way Adrianna understood race as encompassing an ideological belief system with governing discourses and expectations. Racialtude as a
position within the larger discourse on race was expressed/engaged in two ways: a) Black Diasporic consciousness and b) perception of internalized Whiteness.

**Black diasporic consciousness.** Adrianna had a Black Diasporic consciousness, evident in her growing cultural and historical understanding about the legacy of racism and its shaping of her direct experiences and the experiences of people on the continent of Africa. She would reference Africa in different conversations. For instance, she once said that Black people in Africa were being killed by White people. Adrianna perceived race as situated in global, historical, and political contexts and she attempted to untangle the ways structural oppression operated and influenced the peer worlds within her classroom and grade level. As one can see from the conversation below, she identified her race as one of other marginalized races. Because of this, she preferred to be included with the Children of Color clique. Still, as indicated below, her growing consciousness caused her to struggle with sensing rejection from the White children.

**SW:** So you feel like you don’t have friends here?

Adrianna:  (Shake her head in disagreement) Uh-uhn.

**SW:** Did you feel like that last year when you were in first grade?

Adrianna: Uh-uhn.

**SW:** Why you think you don’t have any friends?

Adrianna: Because all-everyone hates me.

**SW:** Why you say that? What makes you think that?

Adrianna: Everyone keeps—when I ask them a question they walk away. They turn around and leave me alone.
SW: Why do you think they do that? What do you think – why you think they do that?

Adrianna: Because I’m Black.

SW: Why do you think that?

Adrianna: Because my dad said Black people always die in Africa and White people take – my dad heard this and like the White people took them away. I don’t believe that. White people are nice, but some of them are mean, but Mrs. Thomas is nice.

(Over the summer she met one of her father’s friends from Ghana.) My dad wants to travel to Africa. Like is there a King in Africa?

(Interview, 11/11/10)

Adrianna viewed her connection with the Black Diaspora as one of strength and not victimization. Her fascination with the continent generated questions and opportunities to discuss the richness of the continent. For example she once asked about Ghana and the languages in Africa. She initially believed that there was a common “African” language. Adrianna perceived that her struggle to make friends in a predominantly White school are consequences of the historical treatment of Black people, citing the enslavement of African peoples during the Transatlantic slave trade, as relayed to her by her father. In the moment, she contended that she did not believe in slavery, because her experience suggested that there were both “mean” and “nice” White people. Her positive experience with White people, on the other hand was limited to her teacher
as an example, and not her peers. Her limited positive experience did not provide enough support for when she was overtaken in frustration from rejection from her White peers. Her perception of continual rejection from White people led her to identify these actions with only their racial group. Overall, at times Adrianna had a more nuanced understanding of race and its complicated history. However there were times, when she was uncertain about these nuances because of her experiences at school. She vacillated between accepting and questioning the dichotomy of White oppressor/Black oppressed.

**Critique of internalized Whiteness.** Adrianna perceived that Whiteness was a dominant discourse both at school and in the society at large. She also began to perceive that Black children were capable of internalizing these discourses, and as a result rejected members of their own race. In her mind, being Black came with an inherent and demonstrative solidarity with other Black children and other Children of Color, which she had learned from her father.

Throughout the study, Adrianna was extremely concerned about Davion’s refusal to be her friend (Davion was a popular Black, working class boy). During my every visit to school, and at times repeatedly throughout the day, Adrianna would vent to me about how Davion was being “mean” to her or calling her names, such as “asshole,” “stupid,” “punk,” “nerd,” “bitch,” and “nigger.” Davion did not deny his actions or language use towards Adrianna. He described her as “mean, loud… and talks a lot.” Adrianna told me that when she first met Davion in first grade, she thought he would be nice. “That’s what I thought when I first met him,” explained Adrianna, “but then when I started getting to know him a little he started to be mean.” Over time she began to perceive that his race
did not guarantee that he would be her friend. Adrianna’s sense of rejection from Davion was much more pronounced because of her racial commitments and beliefs. She was astonished that another Black child would treat her “mean,” given their shared plight of being minorities in a predominantly White school.

Adrianna struggled with Davion’s rejection of her and began to theorize about possible reasons. She attributed his rejection to his internalization of White discourses, for she likened his behavior to those experienced by her White peers. She shared some of her explanation in the text below:

SW: You said that you feel like some of the kids treat you differently because you’re black. Tell me about that.
Adrianna: Because… I don’t know. Davion sits right there and I sit right there. He…I don’t know how he can be mean to me…
SW: But he’s Black too.
Adrianna: I don’t know. I don’t think he’s Black. I think he’s like White.
SW: Why do you say that? What is it about him that makes you think he’s White?
Adrianna: Because my dad said there’s Black people who don’t think they are…there’s White people who don’t even think they are…there’s Black people who are White. Blacks who are White: They got hit by the sun!
SW: Wow. So you think Davion is like that?
Adrianna: Uh-huh. I’m permanent. He’s not permanent.
SW: You said you’re permanent?
Adrianna: I am. I’m permanent. I’m really…You’re permanent too.

SW: So what makes us permanent? So there’s things he say and do that makes you think he’s not Black?

Adrianna: He’s White. He White, White, White! (Shaking her head with conviction). (Interview, 1/14/11)

At first glance, Adrianna’s interpretation of Davion’s lack of acceptance of her as a friend and her belief that he lacked ‘permanence’ and was ‘White’ appeared to be a reaction to his rejection and connected to her ‘crush’ on him. This was supported by comments from her peers. Actually, her interpretation of the dynamics of this discourse was more sophisticated than that. Over time it became clear that her beliefs about and commitments to ethnic and racial solidarity were what troubled her most about Davion’s rejection. The fact that Davion shared her dark skinned complexion further baffled her. While she did not have the language to fully articulate her theory, she recognized that not all Black people share her commitments of racial solidarity and unity, which was a painful realization for her.

As a result of this realization, Adrianna began to seek out explanations for his hurtful behavior. First she observed that Davion’s female friends were either White or light-skinned Blacks. She also recognized that the girls he pursued as what he termed “girlfriends” were ethnic minorities who were considered physically “beautiful” by White standards of beauty. Interviews with Davion confirmed his affinity for these girls. He described them as “pretty” and maintained that they “dressed pretty every day.”
Adrianna was well aware that Davion did not treat her the way he treated girls that he preferred. He did not think Adrianna was pretty. In fact, he said the thought of her as a “girl friend” “made him want to “throw up.” When Adrianna would “scoot” next to him on the meeting area, he stated that he would intentionally “scoot away.” Acknowledging that his actions would cause Adrianna to cry, he called her behavior “mean,” because he wanted to “stay in his space” and her intrusion into his space forced him to move.

Last, Adrianna perceived that Davion’s rejection of her and his discomfort with his own race was also a rejection of it. During analysis of the video and interview data, I saw several instances in which Davion communicated his discomfort in being one of the few Black boys in his grade, class and school. For instance, during a discussion involving the entire class about differences I asked students to look around and observe each others’ different hair textures. At the time I did not notice, but after careful review of the video from the session, as students enthusiastically looked at each other, talking, and observing each others’ hair, Davion covered his entire head with his arms, peeking out occasionally to ensure that no one would notice his different hair (Fieldnotes, 11/1/10). As he was cowered over in embarrassment, I realized that Adrianna may have been familiar with this behavior and had begun to theorize that Davion, who appeared to be confident, actually was struggling with his racial identity. At another time, during the following interview, when I inquired about his experience as one of a few Black boys at school, Davion became very uncomfortable and evasive:

SW: So tell me about being a Black boy at this school.

Davion: Excuse me? We’re not talking about that.
SW: Why not?

Davion: Cause I got no answers for that.

SW: Why you say that? Why do you say you don’t have any answers for that?

Davion: Cause, me – me and Cedrick is the only Black boys in Mrs. Thomas’ class.

SW: So what do you think about that?

Davion: It’s not fair.

SW: Why isn’t it fair?

Davion: Is not fair cause, there’s only two Black people in Mrs. Thomas’ class.

SW: Okay. What about when you were in first grade?

Davion: I’m okay with that. I wish I was the only one.

SW: You wish you were the only one? Why?

Davion: I don’t know. I still have friends.

Davion: Okay, next question.

SW: Next question. So you don’t like talking about that?

Davion: No.

SW: Why don’t you feel -- why aren’t you comfortable talking about it?

Davion: Cause it don’t feel good. (Interview, 2/10/11)

It is clear that Davion was uncomfortable with his position of being one of a few Black boys in the school and discussing the issue was very disturbing to him. Adrianna seemed to recognize the conflict and discomfort that Davion was experiencing even
before I did. She may have seen that he was not as secure in his race as she by the ways in which he engaged racial discourses. Davion’s discomfort with his own racial identity was manifested as his rejection of being Black. Adrianna’s observations of and experiences with Davion’s actions and attitudes warranted her claim that he had internalized White standards. She found that his behavior towards her was similar to the rejection she felt from the White children.

Pronounced ideological commitments to racial solidarity were the foundation of Adrianna’s discourse of racial tude, which included assumptions and expectations of how Black people should interact with each other. First, it was puzzling for Adrianna, who believed that Black people should be nice to each other, especially since she had learned that White people have historically, and continue, to be ‘mean’ to them, to experience rejection from Davion, a working class Black male, who she perceives as part of her racial community. Second, it frustrated Adrianna that her beliefs that Black children should support and befriend each other based on racial commonality was not shared by Davion. Adrianna reconciled his confusing behavior by ascribing a White identity to him.

**Discourse of Friendship Aspiration**

Friendship was critical to Adrianna and she would often share her frustration of not having any friends except for Raell, who had been her friend since first grade. She aspired to be accepted by the Children of Color, and in particular the popular children and constantly tried to make inroads with them during academic and nonacademic time. In this classroom, a popular school discourse states that “everyone is a friend,” which, in reality, led to the previously mentioned levels of friendship known throughout the school.
I observed that children often played in consistently racially segregated groups, and though less visible, class-segregated groups, crossing borders only from time to time. These moments of crossing race, gender, and class borders were often points of conflict for Adrianna who would come to me at different times to tell me about how she felt she was being mistreated. In her aspiration to create friendships with the popular Children of Color, Adrianna engaged the discourse of friendship in several ways: a) reaching out; b) scootin’ and ditchin’; c) and status association.

Reaching out. I observed Adrianna attempt to reach out to different students to initiate steps toward becoming a friend in two ways: initiating play or joining play with popular girls or playing with rejected children seemingly out of desperation.

First, Adrianna would seek to initiate play with different children or join a clique when it appeared that they were playing a game that was not exclusive to their group. Adrianna did not share interests with the popular girls in that she did not know how to play the rhythmic hand clapping games, and she did not know how to do cheerleading. Once, when I was on the playground, Mariah and Riley began to show me their handclapping game songs. Adrianna clearly wanted to be included in the games, but knew she needed more practice. Interestingly, the popular girls who played these handclapping games were from working-class or working-poor families. The rhymes and songs they used in the games were racialized and sexualized, songs they may have learned from older girls from their neighborhood. Adrianna did not have experience with these discourses, nor access to them. However, learning how to play these games would allow increased access to popular working-class Girls of Color. She would simply hang
around near these girls, but never got up the nerve to ask them to teach her. In her embarrassment for lacking skill in the game she attempted to get help from a White girl who also did not know the game. Adrianna took the girl by the hand and moved away from the girls so that they could practice in another area. It was clear that she was attempting to save face with the popular Girls of Color. In this instance she felt more comfortable with her White middle-class female peers than with the working class girls of her race.

Adrianna would also seek to play with other students who were even more unpopular than she was. Even though Adrianna was very aware of status and popularity, her need for friendship compelled her to momentarily reach out to students who she believed were below her status, meaning that these students had been rejected by the majority of the class and lacked not only friends, but associations. One morning, I observed Adrianna playing by herself at recess. Her friend, Raell, was playing with Amber that day so Adrianna decided to initiate play with Roderick by beginning a game of chase. She didn’t like Roderick because of behavior, but played with him out of desperation:

SW: Are there other children that you think treat you differently because you’re Black?

Adrianna: A lot of them.

SW: Who? Tell me.

Adrianna: Roderick. Roderick pushed me.

SW: He did?
Adrianna: Yeah and my hands were all scraped. I mean all scraped because of him. (Interview; Fieldnotes; 1/14/11)

Adrianna interpreted Roderick’s rough play as an intentional racially motivated act, unrelated to class or gender. Roderick is an Arabic working-class male, who was selectively mute for all of first grade. Adrianna “read” his racial identity as “White,” perhaps because of his fair complexion and hair texture. Now that he was speaking in second grade, he struggled not only academically but socially, particularly with the seemingly incomprehensible social norms of his peers. I would hear students refer to him as “weird,” and they did not bother playing with him. Adrianna usually did not acknowledge Roderick in any way, but in this instance she seemed desperate to play with someone. She immediately regretted playing with him because it took her even further away from the popular girls.

Scootin’ and ditchin’. Adrianna would often engage in spatial discourses as she attempted to connect herself with the popular children. Overall, children preferred to be in closer proximity to friends than children they personally disliked or who were widely rejected within their peer world or particular friendship group. To achieve this, children employed scootin’ and ditchin’ to create closer proximity to friends and to distance themselves from other children.

Scootin’ referred to the movements utilized by students when sitting on the floor in the meeting area to move themselves around without standing up. On multiple occasions, before students were given assigned seats, I observed how the classroom
meeting area served as a place for children to position themselves and each other socially during transitions. Students would try to save “spots” on the floor for their friends. I also noticed how students would make eye contact, nonverbal gestures (i.e. waving for a student to hurry and join them, pointing to each other—used mainly when Mrs. Thomas requested students to quietly go to the meeting area), and talking with each other as they quickly transitioned from their desks to the area. These interactions were very brief and easily missed.

When sitting in the class meeting area, children would “scoot” their bodies to position themselves closer to their friends and to create distance between themselves and children who were disliked. Adrianna tried to seize this opportunity to reposition herself in the social hierarchy as I observed in the following interaction:

During math, students return, after working with partners at their desks, to the meeting area. As usual, students begin to negotiate positions in the meeting area. They jockey for a prime spot by their friends.

First I see: Jasmine, then a little space, Mariah, then an empty space and Davion. Davion looks at Mariah and tries to sit by her by scooting closer to her. Adrianna looks at Davion and then sits beside Jasmine, between her and Mariah. Mariah looks a little bothered. She doesn’t want to seem pleased. Without saying a word, she politely slowly scoots back.

Then, Jasmine scoots back next to Mariah. Then Davion and Antonio scoots back next.
The whole group moves so they can sit by each other. Finally, I see that the back row is now, from Left to Right: Jasmine, Mariah, Davion, Antonio. Next to the back row: Riley, Raell, Adrianna, Danielle.

Raell and Adrianna are back to sitting by each other. (Fieldnotes, 11/16/10)

Adrianna obviously understood that seating location in terms of proximity to particular children represented one’s social status. Adrianna tried to make inroads with the popular group by sitting closer by them and in-between two proclaimed best friends, Mariah and Jasmine. Here the popular children rejected an unpopular child, Adrianna, who was attempting to change the social hierarchy by repositioning herself. They created visual and symbolic distance by “scooting” away from Adrianna and closer to each other. Their use of space maintained a clear gulf between popular and unpopular students.

Because of the pervasiveness of scootin’ in the classroom, Mrs. Thomas began to assign seating positions to all students in an effort to try to alleviate the social problems that were occurring because children were so intent on sitting by their friends.

The children also tried to be together during lunch and while standing in line. Ditchin’ accomplished the same goal of scootin’, except it occurred when children were standing or walking in a single line. Children would allow friends to “ditch” them (allow them to get ahead of them in line) as a sign of friendship in order to be closer to them.

Children would allow friends to “ditch” or “cut” them in line to prevent them from having to go to the back of the line. Or sometimes students would be cordial to other children by allowing them to ditch. Unlike Adrianna, the popular girls had the
privilege of ditching each other. Adrianna used the spatial discourse of ‘ditchin’ in her attempts to position herself with her potential friends. The closest to the front of the line was perceived as the ideal area. Adrianna would often rush to get to the front, for she did not have many friends to secure her a position or allow her to cut in line. Her rush to get to the front of the line and sit near more popular children symbolized Adrianna’s aspiration and accompanying pursuit of social mobility within her peer world.

**Status association.** Within their peer culture, whoever children played with influenced their position within the status hierarchy. Adrianna drew upon the discourse of status association in her attempts to make friends. She strove to play with and be friends with children who shared her status or who she perceived had a higher status in the peer world. Adrianna did not like to work or play with children whom she perceived would worsen her already troubled place in the status hierarchy. Though she was desperate for friends at times, she didn’t want them to be children who had been widely rejected. At other times she recognized that the children who had higher status were not always the best friendship material, but she still maintained her efforts for association with them. For instance, Adrianna was one step closer to her social goal by befriending Riley, who had more status with the Children of Color than she did. If she were to be associated with Riley she would be able to cross popularity borders much more easily. Riley brought a number of different important qualities to Adrianna’s aspirations for popularity. First, Riley had painstakingly learned the rhythmic handclapping game songs. She also was working class which worked in her favor as this status, as this meant that she understood the patterns of engagement in other games that the popular girls took up. Third, Riley
had a racially ambiguous appearance, which may have helped her to gain access to the Children of Colors’ social group, rather than that of the White children. Mrs. Thomas and I both recognized that Riley’s appearance did not look “White.” Other children also recognized this. However, no matter the possibilities that Riley brought to the table, Adrianna’s status association with her did not lead to friendship with more popular children, such as Davion. In an interview, Adrianna exhibited her frustration with this failure, targeting her disapproval of Davion’s friendship with Riley and his refusal of friendship with Adrianna herself:

Adrianna: Riley is sweet. She is Davion’ friend while Davion…

SW: How does it make you feel that he’s not trying to be your friend?

Adrianna: Like angry… But Davion keeps pushing Riley down. I keep telling her don’t be his friend.

SW: I see that you keep trying to be his friend too.

Adrianna: Uh-huh.

SW: He keeps calling you names.

Adrianna: I’m never his friend. (Interview 1/14/11)

In this instance, Adrianna may have wanted Riley to refuse Davion’s friendship in order to soothe her own sense of rejection. Importantly, Adrianna did not perceive that Davion was being a good friend to Riley and that she should leave him alone. On the other hand, Adrianna’s observations did not prevent her from desiring his friendship and was frustrated that Davion would not be her friend too.
Discourses of Power and Negotiation

All classrooms have discourses of power at work and a set of expected norms. For example, it is expected that in most classrooms students should share power with and for each other and not over each other. That is they are expected to address issues and ideas cooperatively with each other through a sense of shared negotiation instead of by exerting force. Data revealed that Adrianna would take up discourses of power including: a) silent reinforcement, b) resistance, c) power over, and d) socio-emotional distancing.

Silent reinforcement. Because racial solidarity and friendship were of grave importance to her, Adrianna chose to deal with Davion on her own. Adrianna chose to suffer in silence from Davion’s verbal aggressions and hence reinforce his behavior in multiple ways. First, by not reporting his behavior to the teachers, Davion was able to continue to make derogatory comments to Adrianna. Second, Adrianna and other Girls of Color empowered Davion and the other Boys of Color by accepting their positions and allowing their perceptions to shape their interactions. Finally, within their peer world, there was a common understanding that “telling” the “teacher” would harm one’s status and risk the potential of building friendships. Even though she avoided the label “tattle tale” by not reporting Davion’s behavior, Adrianna did not gain status or the desired acceptance from Davion or the other popular children.

Adrianna was reluctant to tell her teacher about Davion’s bullying, especially after the launch of a school-wide incentive with their behavioral management program. Students who had “good” days usually received the color green for their behavioral report at the end of the day. Students who consistently received green for two weeks had their
names entered into a class drawing. If their names were pulled, they won a green shirt which reads “I’m on Green” and they could wear it on a specified day with other students and the teacher. The students were very excited about the incentive. Adrianna knew that reporting Davion to the teacher would likely result in him receiving a yellow marking for his inappropriate behavior, and thus take him out of the running until the next one began.

During restroom break one afternoon, Adrianna approached me as she waited in line and told me that Davion called her a “punk bitch.” After sharing with Mrs. Thomas, she talked with him and wrote a note to his mother. On the next day, Adrianna shared that Davion continued to call her bad names and mistreat her. She began to offer her justification for her silent reinforcement:

Adrianna: Davion is still being mean. Guess what he called me? He called me a bunch of bad words when you left. He was like, blah… He called me the “N” word, “A” word, “B” word when you left and then wait, yeah all those words.

SW: Why didn’t you tell Mrs. Thomas?

Adrianna: Because I didn’t want him to get into trouble because he is always getting into trouble and he’s not going to get the green shirt.

SW: So you want him to get a green shirt? But he’s saying mean things to you…you don’t think nothing should be done about it?

Adrianna: Well if he could…he could still be mean to me…(Fieldnotes, Interview, 12/1—2/10)
Adrianna had a rationale for remaining silent. She did not perceive that the school officials could change the peer culture. Likewise, she recognized that even if Davion was reprimanded, as he had been in the past, his mistreatment of her would persist, just as before. For her, she had to be careful not to upset him too much, such as missing out on the opportunity to win a green shirt, for fear of retaliation. Underlying Adrianna’s silence was her need to protect a fellow Black student from getting in trouble. She found it very difficult to break what she believed to be acts of solidarity.

Resistance. Adrianna demonstrated resistance when being forced by Mrs. Thomas into a position of interacting/affiliating with those who would not elevate her status – or would bring her status down (in her perception). When Adrianna worked with students she preferred she was enthused to work, as would any child. However she still struggled with resisting the teacher and her peers in academic experiences. During class time, Adrianna’s response to working with students she did not prefer was often staunch refusal or delaying her participation, as in the case with Rashila. In the following instance, Adrianna refused to work with Jeffrey as a partner during a math activity:

Mrs. Thomas announces partners. Adrianna was working with Jeffrey. She begins to pout and refuses to work with him. She then sits close to Raell and Connor (who are partners), in an effort to try to become partners with them. She still will not cooperate with Jeffrey and played with Raell more than worked. Adrianna turns her back on Jeffrey and pulled her hood over her head. Jeffrey looks at Mrs. Thomas (she was talking to different children in the classroom). She tells him that
he can play by himself. Mrs. Thomas repeatedly calls Adrianna over before she eventually walks over to her to talk. (Fieldnotes, 2/22/11)

Adrianna resisted working with the student as well as with Mrs. Thomas. Her behavior interfered as Mrs. Thomas tried to work with other students at her table. She eventually had to make time to address Adrianna’s lack of cooperation and disrespect. In this occurrence, Adrianna’s behavior revealed three significant understandings of her resistance. First, she did not engage in the expected discourses of power within the classroom by not cooperating with the teacher and by resisting working with a student who she did not like. Second, Adrianna did not see her cooperation as a classroom expectation, but saw it as yet more proof of her diminished importance. Third, Adrianna did not understand how her resistant behavior contributed to her own rejection amongst her peers. Even in the peer world, the popular children occasionally worked with children who were unpopular if the accepted rules of the classroom demanded it. While Adrianna aspired to have new friendships, her resistant behavior did not impress these potential friends.

**Power over.** Adrianna often would try to exert power over peers in order to prove her own importance to them as well as herself. Adrianna had a budding friendship with Riley, but they were unable to work together which stifled their friendship. Riley, like Adrianna, was assertive, yet Riley had better social and communicative skills than most peers. Riley became Adrianna’s assigned partner at the meeting area. At first they were elated and worked well together. However, Riley’s patience with Adrianna began to
wear thin. I observed that Adrianna tried to dominate her partner by interrupting Riley when it was her turn to talk. Over time, Riley stopped working with Adrianna, as I observed one afternoon:

During a read aloud, Mrs. Thomas paused from the book. It was time for students to discuss the book with their partners, Riley just looked at Adrianna and ignored her. When I spoke to Riley about what was going on, she expressed her frustration with Adrianna wanting to dominate the conversation during their partner time at the meeting area. (Video; Fieldnotes; 1/26/11)

Adrianna decided to exert power over Riley instead of working with her to share power or use of time during academic tasks. It appeared that Adrianna did not understand that in order to cultivate friendships, she must be able to cooperate with her partner rather than hinder her.

**Socio-emotional distancing.** Within the discourses of race and belonging, Adrianna had a hierarchical rationale of mean behavior with regards to race. The saliency of race provided a space for Adrianna to emotionally distance herself in her social engagements by not taking responsibility for her contributions to her interactions with her peers. Adrianna was valid in her acknowledgment of racial issues, yet her viewpoint became problematic as it crystallized as the single interpretive lens for more complex social issues. Consequently, in Adrianna’s mind, race became the only reason and cause for conflicts. As demonstrated below, Adrianna distanced her behavior from that of her peers, by offering race as the sole factor in her exclusion:
Adrianna shares with me another incident about students who are being “mean” to her. She rationalizes that it is because she is Black… By now, I have witnessed times when she has acted “mean” as well, and have yet to hear her take responsibility…I decide to push back against her use of race as the sole reason for mean treatment by her peers. I recognize the validity in her argument, but I do not think she sees that she still have agency or that her behavior at times do not help the situation.

SW: So do you feel like sometimes you can be mean to children?
Adrianna:  I do be mean, but…everyone be mean to me that’s because I’m Black.
SW:  You think that’s just the only reason?
Adrianna:  Uh-huh.
SW:  Do you think sometimes there are things you do that causes somebody to be mean back?
Adrianna:  I don’t do anything. They…(Interview/Fieldnotes, 1/14/11)

As highlighted, Adrianna responded to the discourses of race and belonging through her socio-emotional distancing in a few instances. First, Adrianna acknowledged that she did not behave towards her peers positively at times. Second, she pointed out there are differences in motives and intentions. For Adrianna, her mean behavior did not carry the same weight and aggression as the racially motivated hostile acts that she experienced. Third, she viewed her behavior as a protective response. According to Adrianna, she had
responded to what she perceived as a hostile environment because of her race. She also felt her response to a racist institution was justified, which in her mind greatly influenced the peer culture at the school.

**Discourses of Beauty, Status, and Belonging**

Adrianna wrestled with discourses of beauty which impacted her sense of belonging and status. Although she embraced political/personal choice for Black images of beauty, Adrianna felt torn because she was faced with issues of popularity that were associated with more European, dominant images of femininity. These discourses of a) hot and sexy girls and b) boyfriends and girlfriends began to consume Adrianna’s self-image.

**Hot and sexy girls: Raced and gendered concepts of beauty.** The hot girls were of a lighter to medium complexion. They represented dominant standards of beauty and were liked by the boys. They ranged from being slender to very slender. Their long hair was straight, black and fine. I heard Connor and Davion used the term “hot” to refer to the different popular girls in class. Their popularity extended beyond the classroom to the playground where I would see other girls sometimes join their group or watch as they played. Adrianna was fascinated by the popular girls and expressed admiration of their hair. When I inquired if she liked her own hair, Adrianna responded that she did not and offered the following rationale,

SW: What do you not like about your hair?

Adrianna: I wish it was longer.

SW: You wish it was longer?

Adrianna: It’s never gonna grow. (Interview, 11/10/2010)
Adrianna began to internalize the dominant standards of beauty already reflected in her peer world. She did not perceive her hair as beautiful because she consistently compared herself to the “hot and sexy girls.” Adrianna had commented that although she perceived herself as pretty and beautiful, the attention that the popular girls received affected the ways in which she began to perceive herself.

Adrianna also began to internalize the discourse that a lighter complexion was hotter or prettier, and thus more acceptable, as indicated in her comments about changing her race:

SW: So why do you think that you don’t have many friends?
Adrianna: Well… (She says helplessly) because I’m Black.
SW: Is there any other reason, you think?
Adrianna: Nope! (Clasps her hands and begins to pray, eyes closed) I’m Black… Please change me… Pleaase change me!
SW: Do you really want to be changed?
Adrianna: Yeesss!
SW: Why?
Adrianna: Nobody likes me.
SW: Change to what?
Adrianna: My skin. (Interview, 2/21/2011)
In the past, Adrianna had not perceived her race or complexion as a faulty identity. At this time, she began to become aware that her peers excluded her because of it. This disconnect of perception caused her to grapple with the conflicting discourses and her self-perception for the first time. She drew a picture of a Black ballerina and a Black princess. The princess had a light complexion and the ballerina had a dark complexion. Adrianna explained that she made her princess with a light complexion because she “always wanted to be a princess that is a light skinned…because it makes you more pretty.” She perceived the ballerina with a dark complexion as “pretty too,” but she preferred the lighter complexion. Adrianna vacillated between maintaining a healthy self-image and succumbing to the dominant one being projected upon her by her peers.

**Boyfriends and girlfriends.** Romantic discourses were prevalent in the children’s peer world. The popular girls were pursued and desired by boys to be their girlfriends. Adrianna expressed her desire to have a boyfriend and shared that the wanted Juan to be her boyfriend. In the proceeding discussion, Adrianna disclosed her beliefs about the physical appearance and social behaviors a girl must adhere to in order to get and maintain a relationship with a boy:

Adrianna: Kiss. Making out.

SW: What is all about that?

Adrianna: They want a hot girl.

SW: They want a hot girl?

Adrianna: Sexy girl.

SW: Sexy girl? What is that?
Adrianna: A big butt.

SW: What! Where did you learn that?

Adrianna: Well, my mom… Actually, I learned it from my dad. (Interview, 2/14/11)

Adrianna began to identify expected behaviors and physical appearance required for a girl to be in a relationship with a boy. Adrianna began to situate herself within the romantic discourses of boyfriends and girlfriend in two distinct ways. First, Adrianna and her peers appropriated Afro-centric adult sexualized discourses to distinguish a romantic level of friendship amongst their peers. These discourses circulated among her peers, for I once overheard an exchange between a boy and a girl, both Children of Color, about a popular female rapper’s behind. Adrianna attempted to position herself within these discourses by expressing her desire for a popular boy, Juan, to be her boyfriend. Second, boyfriends and girlfriends had an additional set of physical expectations and corresponding behaviors. Adrianna positioned herself as an object of desire through her explanation of the performative and physical expectations of being a girlfriend.

Conclusion

Adrianna responded to the prominent discourses within the social and peer cultural worlds of the classroom in multiple ways in order to attempt to make friends. She endeavored to understand and respond to race and gender discourses through her sophisticated theorizing and enactment of racialtude. Her aspiration for friendship and belonging spurred her attempts to reach out to peers with perceived higher and lower
status than she. Adrianna’s insecurities concerning race and belonging were amplified in her attempts to negotiate power with her peers and her teacher. Last, Adrianna’s strong sense of racialtude was continually challenged by the dominant discourses of beauty and relationships circulating among her peers. The beauty and romantic discourses that lent to acceptance and popularity countered her Black consciousness discourse. As a result, Adrianna’s desire to belong caused her waiver in her perceptions of herself.

Among her peers, Adrianna recognized her lack of friendship and was grieved by her rejection. To remedy this situation, Adrianna endeavored to make inroads with Children of Color. Sometimes her interactions would be aggressive and counterproductive, and her socio-emotional distancing prevented her from attempting other healthy avenues to make friends. Still, Adrianna’s critique of the racial context of the school, where she was a numerical minority underscored her actions and her rationale for responding to the prominent discourses among her peers.

**Raell**

Raell was filled with generosity and kindness and desired to take care of those around her, and actively desired friends who would reciprocate her thoughtfulness. With an air of seriousness, Raell was highly reflective and introspective about herself and others. She loved to help others and when she saw a need, she would immediately take action. An avid communicator, Raell was very precise and clear when working with her peers. Her aspiration to be a teacher, nurse, country singer, music teacher, social worker, or police officer demonstrated her caring attitude and desire to help. Raell had firm beliefs and commitments to being loyal and supportive of friends. Furthermore, she had a
sophisticated level of discernment about others and their actions. Sometimes she would rather deal with mistreatment from a friend or family member in order further problems. She loved to spend time with her grandmother and her cousins, and she enjoyed watching *SpongeBob, George Lopez, I Carly, Zombieland* and *Selena Gomez*. She listened to a wide range of music from Lady Gaga, Beyonce, “sad songs,” Elvis Presley, country and rap music.

Raell’s father was Black and her mother was White. In conversations with Raell, it became evident that she wrestled with shame surrounding her bi-racial identity, particularly because of the negative dominant discourses about the Black racial identity, which were all around her. Raell perceived that her bi-racial identity prevented her from making friends at school. She had a fair complexion with soft brown undertones, and medium length wavy sandy blonde hair, which she often wore in a ponytail or pulled back with a head band. Although her father had full custody, Raell stayed with her mother on continual basis. When describing her relationship with her parents, she struggled with maintaining a positive perspective of either of them. She wrestled with her father’s race and obesity and her mother’s self-destructive acts often calling her a “bad mother.” Aware of both parents’ financial struggles, Raell was attuned to her working-poor socioeconomic status. The weight of not having many friends at school and the concerns with her family seemed to overwhelm her. There were many occasions when she would arrive to school obviously sad. Because of problems with her home life, she often seemed serious and adult-like, but also acted like a child at times. She was quite aware of the workings of the adult world and the ways in which children were
expected to behave. Raell desired attention from her peers and her teachers, but initially would not take a productive approach in obtaining it. She demonstrated a level of maturity not seen in other children as was evident in her self-reflective practice and in the way she used her power. Raell would later use her power to interact in a healthy manner with both her peers and teachers.

**E“racing”Identities**

As described earlier, it became clear in the study that Discourses of class, race, and friendship dominated children’s peer groups. Raell’s bi-racial identity proved to be a prominent aspect in the ways she was positioned and her perception along these Discourses. Data analyses revealed four categories of findings in that Raell positioned/repositioned herself within these Discourses through (a) racial politics of friendship; (b) gendering class, (c) catchin’ attitude, and (d) agency: pushing back and unifying.

**Racial Politics of Friendship**

Raell embodied aspects of both White and Black races and tried to position herself within the racial politics of friendship by favoring one racial aspect of her identity over the other. She did not want race to be an issue in terms of friendship, but she recognized that the lines of friendship were in fact more demarcated along the lines of race. With an understanding of White being more privileged and with numerical dominance at her school, Raell avidly sought to belong with her white female peers.

*I don’t like being one of those “N” words.* Raell really rejected her Black heritage and chose to identify herself as “mixed” and, for her, even being biracial or
mixed was seen as a problem. For instance, she believed that her peers recognized that she was bi-racial and that it negatively impacted her making friends at school. She expressed to me that she felt that kids ignored her and would not be her friend. She informed me that they didn’t invite her to play, except for Adrianna or Riley, which caused her to feel “sad, lonely, and depressed, upset.” She expressed that she was “embarrassed and “sad a little bit sometimes” because she was bi-racial and that it affected her making friends:

SW: Why do you think that?

Raell: Because sometimes they usually just walk away when I say something. Adrianna is the one that’s friendly and really nice to me.

SW: You call yourself mixed-do you ever think of that being as good thing too?

Raell: No. Bad thing.

SW: Why do you think it’s a bad thing?

Raell: Cause White – I heard my dad about when they call a person the “N” word. That would make more people say “N” word to a Black person. He said that means that they hate us and I feel that. This is like a White school.

SW: Why do you say this is a White school?

Raell: It looks like it cause… Because I see White people. (Interview, 1/26/11)

Raell perceived that racial politics of friendship were connected to her biracial identity. First, she attributed her rejection in part to being bi-racial at a predominantly White school. She, also, spoke of embracing friends across races but grappled with the diverse
ways she attempted to understand her bi-racial heritage. While she identified herself as “mixed,” instead of choosing either “White” or “Black” race, she held a negative perception about her Black ancestry. Last, Raell was aware of the visual assigning of race in this country. She recognized that her appearance provided evidence that she was not “either or.” Consequently, Raell tried to change her racial identity. She began to associate her White identity as acceptable, but perceived that her Black identity as a source of her “mixed” heritage and she associated it with rejection. In the following text, Raell discussed her dislike of her Black heritage:

Raell: I don’t like being one of those “N” words. It’s not that cuss word the “N” word. It’s not the “N” word like in the cuss words. It’s Negro. Cause I am the Negro cause I have a lot of Black in me. So that’s all Black. It’s weird to me. It’s just weird me.

SW: How do you feel about being White? Does that bother you -- a part of you being White? Does that bother you at all?

Raell: That’s a good question. No.

SW: Why doesn’t that bother you?

Raell: Just doesn’t bother me. (Interview, 1/26/11)

As seen in the excerpt above, Raell was happy with her White heritage and thought her Black heritage was weird. Raell possessed a growing awareness that dominant discourses about Black people were negative, whereas White racial constructs held the positioning of power and privilege. She not only had to navigate two, and often multiple worlds, but her embodiment of both races complicated the ways she positioned herself within them.
Raell, shared with me that “I don’t care about their skin color. I just care about that they’re my friends and I like them.” On the other hand she placed more effort in trying to play with White girls than the Girls of Color. Although she “just cared” about friends, her conflicting ideas about race and belonging influenced her interactions with peers across race.

**I don’t want them to know.** Within her attempts to ‘e-race’ her racial identity and in her efforts to align herself with White children, Raell expressed a kind of tormented sense of connection with her father. While on one hand she lived with her father and talked very negatively about her White mother, she also expressed a sense of embarrassment with her father who was African American and a belief that if children were to know this they would not befriend her.

Raell: Last year I was embarrassed of him…This girl said, is this your dad and I said no. Well I could have said something like; do you have anything to say about it? But I didn’t cause I didn’t think of that.

SW: At that moment. Why did you say no?

Raell: Cause, I was scared to tell him. I was scared to tell her, because I thought she would tell the whole entire school. Tell all her friends and…

SW: Tell all your friends what?

Raell: That I have a Black dad and make fun of him and that’s why I didn’t tell her the real truth.

SW: How did you feel about saying no when she said that?

Raell: Upset. (Fieldnotes, Interview, 1/26/11)
At that particular time, the prominence of belonging to her peers and her understandings of race compelled her to reject her father. As suggested in the text below, her rejection of her father based on race was complicated by other issues, including his size as he was somewhat overweight:

SW: How do you feel now about kids at school if they were to know your dad was Black?
Raell: Still upset.
SW: What upsets you? Why do you think kids would pick on you about that?
Raell: Because they’re dads are skinny. My dad’s – I don’t really think that he….Everybody’s dad’s so super cool and so skinny, but they think mine’s is fat. He’s not fat because he eats, it’s because he has diabetes and that makes him gain weight. I wouldn’t laugh too if you dad had diabetes and it gained you weight. I wouldn’t laugh.
SW: So if your dad was thin, like you said, if your dad was skinny…How would you feel then? Would you still be embarrassed about him being Black?
Raell: I’d be like very happy. I’m not trying to be mean. I would be just like very happy so that people wouldn’t make fun of me or like teacher say…might make an announcement. She has a Black dad and he has diabetes and that’s how he gained weight. So that’s why I’d be happy. I’m not trying to be mean or anything… I don’t care what Adrianna looks like. I just like her. I like to play with her and stuff…(Fieldnotes, Interview, 1/26/11)
As Raell demonstrated, dominant standards of physical appearance of race and body size influenced her perception of her father. First, she recognized that his race could result in her peers rejecting her, and to be both Black and overweight, to her was a potential double jeopardy. Second, because White and thin are dominant expectations of beauty in society, Raell felt embarrassed by having a father who was neither. Third, she returned again to the ideas of race, by bringing up her friend, Adrianna as proof that she did not see race as a factor for friendship. Although she was grappling with issues of physical appearance, she recognized how the mappings of race can exacerbate a negative social positioning.

**Gendering Class**

A material performance of class existed among girls in Raell’s peer cultural group. “Dressing nice” in clothes aligned with dominant conceptions of femininity, but also accessorizing, allowed girls to demonstrate their socioeconomic class position. Girls attempted to dress ‘nice’ because it not only represented popularity but because it also allowed them to display their femininity and gain attention from boys and other girls. Raell seemed aware of the material differences between her and her classmate and interpreted her family’s working class background as a devaluation of herself and another strike against her. Raell often made negative comments about her clothing. She increasingly began to over accessorize her outfits. Likewise, she began to wear her mother’s or grandmother’s jewelry to school, which usually became distracting enough to prompt Mrs. Thomas to instruct her to put the items in her book bag.
It was a common discourse for children to talk about places they were able to frequent, and activities they were able to do outside of school, as well as things and pets that they owned. On one occasion the girls were in line talking with each other, as they waited for their turns to utilize the restroom. “You are rich!” exclaims Raell to Alex. “No, I’m not!” Alex’s face reddens in embarrassment. Raell explains to me, “She has all kinds of pets… she has a dog, a frog…” She continues naming other pets (Fieldnotes, 10/21/10). Raell, who did not own a pet, understood that sometimes owning a pet or multiple pets communicated a privilege where one must have enough monetary “wealth” to take care of them.

**Catchin’ Attitude**

Raell often came across as being disrespectful to adults and demanding with her peers, displaying “attitude.” Like her friend, Adrianna, she struggled to gain a sense of place and comfort in her own skin, and the social dynamics at school exacerbated her struggle. It became a pattern throughout the study, that when Raell was getting into increased trouble with her teacher or her peers, most likely she was upset about her peers or her home life. Her sense of displacement at home was one of the lenses she filtered her interactions with her peers. Raell would share a lack of regard towards her mother through various comments. However, in deeper conversations, Raell would cry about her frustrations with her mother’s behavior and lifestyle. When Raell was upset about her home life, it dramatically showed throughout the day at school, in her mood towards students and teachers by a) getting out of place and b) acting out.
**Getting Out of Place.** Raell would often push the limits of classroom rules or challenge Mrs. Thomas’ authority. She did not adhere to the norms of the classroom or school of appropriate child-adult interactions. Mostly, she spoke to adults as if she, too, were an adult. Over time, it became clearer to me that she did not understand a “child’s place” within the school or classroom context. Raell would make facial expressions, talk to, or talk back to Mrs. Thomas in discreet and overtly disrespectful tones. Although, Mrs. Thomas chose her battles with Raell, she actively addressed Raell’s behavior. She informed me that she noticed how Raell’s social behavior in school declined when she stayed with her mother, but she did not fully know why. I recognized that Raell had days where she was very saddened or upset, which later would lead to her doing or saying something disrespectful to the teacher. In the following observation, I noticed Raell “get out of place” at different moments throughout a school week:

Raell leaves the meeting area, as Mrs. Thomas is teaching math. She walks over to get a restroom pass and leaves. This continues throughout the day, especially when Mrs. Thomas is busy with students transitioning between learning experiences. (At the end of week) Mrs. Thomas is preoccupied with a reading group, as the class work in their respective reading stations. Raell leaves her seat to go get a restroom pass. Mrs. Thomas stops her and tells her to go back to her seat, stating that they just had a break. “I am,” retorts Raell. (Fieldnotes, 12/14, 16—17/10)

It is obvious that Raell abused the use of restroom passes during times advantageous to her. When Mrs. Thomas interrupted one of her personal restroom breaks, Raell, gets out
of place through a demonstration of “talking back.” Mrs. Thomas informed me that she explained to Raell that her “talking back” was disrespectful and that she “understood that there was a lot going on at home.” She told me that Raell’s father had full custody, but she sometimes stayed with her mother. She did not understand why Raell was permitted to stay with her mother, who was not allowed to have custody. She had a sense of frustration with home, herself, and her peers and this collection of frustrations, at times, compelled her to not engage in the expected behaviors within the classroom. First, Raell would engage adults as if she were one, too because her negotiations with her peer and adult world was unstable. Second, she chose to verbally address Mrs. Thomas contrary to the expectation of adult-child interactions in school. Third, she began to push the boundaries on classroom community processes by taking advantage of the restroom pass system.

**Acting Out.** Similar to getting’ out of place, Raell would project her insecurities with problems at home and fear of rejection on her peers through her actions. She volunteered to help students whenever possible. In one sense she tried to help, while on the other hand, I noticed that Raell could be very demanding of her group. At times, she tried to take charge of the table leader’s duties when it was not her turn. Her frustrations with home and her sense of self came through in the way in which she interacted with her peers and adults. As much as she thoroughly enjoyed helping her peers, in her frustrations with them, she would yell at them. Jasmine mentioned at recess that Raell told her best friend, Mariah, to “shut up” (Fieldnotes, Interview, 10/26/10). As shown from an
interview, Raell began to connect her disrespectful behavior at home to her social behavior at school:

SW: Why do you think they ignore you and don’t come up to you sometimes?
Raell: Maybe because they hate me?
SW: Why would they hate you? You’re really nice.
Raell: I’m really not that nice a person.
SW: Why would you say that, Raell?
Raell: No, seriously. You don’t see how I treat my mom and treat my dad.
SW: How do you treat your mom and dad? (Interview, 1/24/11)
Raell cries, pouring out her frustration about hurting her parents’ feelings. “I just feel so bad…I don’t want to feel bad for myself. I don’t want to do it no more. I just want to stop doing it. I don’t know what to do. So I just leave it alone.”
(Interview, 1/24/11)

In this statement, Raell understood that her acting out at school was similar to her behavior with her parents. I asked Mrs. Thomas generally about what she had observed with Raell and her parents. She shared with me that she was in disbelief at how “disrespectful” Raell talked to both parents. She observed Raell talking to them in a very mean tone and actually bossing them around. It began to make more sense to her about the way Raell spoke to her.

Raell recognized her acting out as problematic. First, she began to perceive that in addition to race being a significant factor for her exclusion, her acting out her frustrations
at her peers did not help her to make friends. Second, she began to make significant
close connections between the ways in which she engaged her parents with how she acted with
her peers. Last, through introspection, she empathized with peers who would not want to
be her friend, stating her desire to take responsibility and change her attitude and
behavior.

**Recycling Rejection**

The children in different peer groups avidly labeled each other as accepted or
rejected. Raell and Adrianna were unified in their friendship and perceived each other as
rejected. However, they still engaged in the same exclusionary practices that they
criticized in their peers. Their active contribution in exclusionary practices recycled
discourses of rejection. In this regard, both girls were active participants in perpetuating
prevailing practices that lead to their own exclusion.

Lana was a student rejected by all her peers. She did not have any friends who
would play with her at school. She was very polite and quiet. On the other hand, she was
taller than most of her peers, and her facial features caused her to look as if she had very
little emotional affect. In the following observation, Raell and her friends contributed to
rejecting Lana:

In the group meeting area, Mrs. Thomas reviews a math concept with the class, as
they sit in a large circle. Sitting in this order are: Adam, Riley Lana, Adrianna,
Raell, Juan. Riley and Adrianna are whispering and giving a non verbal looks and
whispering trying not to get caught. Lana seems to be involved and looks
flustered at times. When Roderick momentarily leaves the circle, a spot opens on
the floor by Riley. Adrianna seizes the opportunity to go sit by Riley. Roderick comes back and wants his spot. Mrs. Thomas continuing with the review quickly points to the open spot where Adrianna was sitting. When Mrs. Thomas announces to the students that they can talk with their friends, Raell tries to sit between Riley and Lana. Riley tells Lana to scoot over. Lana refuses. Raell manages to squeeze her way in between. Raell gives a mean look and gets close to Lana’s face and appear to say something mean which makes Lana looks flustered. Riley then says something motioning her head slightly from side to side. After the class finishes their math review, it is time for recess. Students get their jackets, line up and begin to file out of the building. As we walk outside, Raell holds the door open for the rest of the class. She sees Lana and tries to let the door go, so that it will hit her. I give her a firm look. Raell acknowledges and says “Okay,” and holds the door open. (Fieldnotes, 11/16/10)

Although she grew weary of being rejected and not having many friends, Raell helped to recycle discourses of rejection and exclusion amongst her peers through her behavior with Lana. First because Raell and her friends had more status than Lana, they continued to emphasize her lower position. Next, they gained a sense of friendship and superiority in that moment by engaging Lana with negative responses and acts. Finally, instead having a sense of empathy toward Lana as one who was frequently excluded, Raell excluded her because she was even more marginalized than herself.
Agency: Pushing Back and Unifying

Raell desired acceptance by her White female peers. Her need to belong compelled her to engage in exclusionary behavior. An analysis of the data indicated that she began to reposition herself as an active agent in her peer world, and thereby became: a) unified from her marginal position and b) attempted to push back against her rejected status. Her sometimes catchin’ attitude behavior began to transform. Mrs. Thomas began to recognize a distinct positive change in her attitude towards her as well.

Unifying margins. Raell used her and Adrianna’s rejected position as a reason to unify and support each other. She struggled with the duality of her racial identities and empathized with Adrianna as embodying a marginalized position among her peers as well. When interviewed, Raell explained that she perceived that she and Adrianna were in effect, bullied at school:

SW: How do you feel about how the kids treat you here at school?
Raell: Me and Adrianna are the usual ones that get bullied.

SW: Why do you say that?
Raell: Cause, we have no friends. (Interview, 1/24/11)

Raell considered her and Adrianna to be the primary targets of bullying in the classroom because of their marginal status within the peer cultural group. Once, during recess, Cedrick pushed Adrianna on the ground. Raell, who was not playing with Adrianna at the moment, witnessed this and immediately ran over to him, stood in very close proximity, looking him in the eyes, and yelling at him about what he had just done
and the way he treated her friend. Eventually, Raell and Adrianna pushed Cedrick down to the ground. (Fieldnotes, 9/16/10)

Raell’s friendship with Adrianna was not an easy one, but despite their differences, Raell identified a sense of shared mistreatment with Adrianna from their peers. Both had insecurities related to the racial construction of friendship and popularity at their school. Both girls did not consistently “fit” into either the worlds of Children of Color or the White children. As she used her agency from the margins, she continued to wrestle with her own duality of consciousness. Adrianna and Raell adamantly supported each other, yet also antagonized each other as both held strong inclinations to take charge.

**Pushing back exclusion.** Discourses of inclusion and exclusion were used to create and maintain friendship boundaries. In an effort to push back on the exclusionary practices within the friendship groups of her White female peers, Raell used the conflict resolution tools that Mrs. Thomas taught them to talk to the core group of girls who were involved in or impacted by the exclusionary behavior, Amber and Lindsey. Amber often excluded different children when playing. On one a particular occasion, Amber decided to play with Raell, but wanted to this time exclude Lindsey. Raell obliged and later felt guilty about her involvement. I was amazed at the sophistication in her identification of the issues and her determination to resolve the problems. As a sign of maturity and leadership, she opened the conversation by taking responsibility for her actions. She called Riley over to join them, requesting for her to share her experience when Amber and Lindsey excluded her. Raell explained how she felt about this exclusion:
I feel bad about what I did yesterday. I apologize for ignoring you and not letting you play and stuff….I don’t like all of this. We all should be able to play with each other when we want to…We need to stop being mean to each other. We should play with each other and not leave anyone out. (Fieldnotes, Interview, 2/18/11)

Amber agreed, but it appeared that she was putting up a façade. Lindsey did not appear to care as much about the issue, for her primary concern up until this point had been about retaining Amber as a friend.

Raell felt guilty about the ways she participated in exclusionary behavior for the sake of attempting to gain friendship with other White girls, especially Amber and Lindsey. She realized that she did not, in fact, achieve the friendship or sense of security that she desired. Instead, the exclusionary behavior persisted. As she became more reflective about her “mean” behavior with her family and peers, she began to further “push back” by taking action to rectify it.

Conclusion

Being knowledgeable of the discourses of race in society and among her peers, Raell’s Black identity grieved her. Raell attributed her peer rejection to her biracial identity. Although there was merit to her perception given the racial politics of the cultural world of her peers, through introspection, Raell began to still find avenues to assert her agency to change her position of rejection. She acknowledged that she participated in the same negative behaviors that she criticized in her peers. Although the
classroom discourses in her classroom frustrated her, through introspection she began to reposition herself by attempting an alternative approach to befriending her peers.

Mariah

Mariah who was personable, intelligent, radiated care, and highly intuitive, was popular among the Children of Color. She strove to be what she considered a “good friend.” She wanted to have friends who were honest with her and whom she could trust. Whenever there was a conflict between her and a friend, she sought to work through the problem. Because of her popularity, she questioned the sincerity and motives of those who she perceived as friends.

Battling a severe asthma condition, Mariah missed many days of school. Because she excelled academically her absences did not affect her reading, for she read beyond her grade level, but eventually began to hinder her mathematics progress. Mariah lived with her mother and father who were unmarried and had a commuter relationship. Her father was frequently working out of town so Mariah looked forward to moments when they spent time together. During class writing workshop, she would write about outings with her parents or other family members. She had two older brothers, who looked out for her when they would play in the neighborhood.

Mariah spoke about herself and her future with high self-regard. Mariah aspired to be a doctor, a lawyer, or a professor when she grew up, knowing that she was going to attend college like her oldest brother. She took pride in not getting in trouble at school and participating in class. Although her family had working class background, Mariah dressed her petite frame with the latest fashion. She had very light brown complexion
and maintained stylish hairdos, often wearing hair extensions and accessories in her hair to compliment her attire. She loved to listen to hip hop music and very polite and well mannered with adults. She was poised in speech and attitude, presenting herself as the quintessential good girl.

**The Weight of Popularity**

Early and throughout the study, Mariah contended with the weight of her status as a popular girl. The privileges she enjoyed from her popularity simultaneously carried responsibilities and pressures for her to maintain her position within her peer world. Mariah positioned herself within the prevalent discourses in her peer world through: (a) influence savvy; (b) intersectional shielding; (c) highly sexualized discourses; and (d) expressive femininity.

**Influence Savvy**

Influence savvy spoke to the awareness of one’s influence and the strategic use of it to secure and enhance popularity status. Mariah was able to align herself with a close-knit group of high status peers because of her influence savvy. The influence savvy discourses of that Mariah was able to employ included the following: a) inclusionary distancing; b) insider knowledge; c) shared status admiration; d) performing the role of “good girl” for grownups.

**Inclusionary distancing.** Inclusionary distancing gave the appearance of including children in academic and occasional social play. Popularity assumed with it an inherited set of privileges to exclude and include other children within the peer worlds, and to maintain this privilege, Mariah had to be adept in strategically using her influence
to give the appearance of being inclusive. To do so also entailed following school discourses of “getting along” and working together with anyone in the classroom. During one afternoon, I observed Mariah and Jasmine both interacting nicely with children who were not their preference as friends:

During Math, Mrs. Thomas announces that Mariah will work with Rashila. Her mouth drops a little in astonishment. Apparently she would prefer her friend. She exchange glances with Jasmine. Jasmine is assigned to work with Gerald. With a disappointed facial expression, Jasmine looks at me as their names are called. Mariah is collegial in her interactions as she works with Rashila. Jasmine and Gerald work together amicably. (Fieldnotes, 2/14/11)

In this brief interchange, it was apparent that Mariah, along with her friend Jasmine, was engaging in inclusionary distancing. Their initial responses indicated that they did not wish to work with the partners selected by Mrs. Thomas. Yet, their disapproval remained hidden from their partners, as they were responsive in their work together. During an interview the girls spoke more about the distancing used to assure their popular positioning with the Children of Color. Mariah described herself as “sassy” and began to elaborate about what this positioning entailed:

The girls are filling out their newly purchased journals from the book fair. They are helping each other with some of the directions and sharing entries.

Mariah: (shows a sticker she placed on a particular journal page) I used this one for both of them since I’m all sassy and stuff.

Jasmine: What’s sassy?
Mariah: Oh my God! You don’t know what sassy means?

Jasmine: No.

Mariah: Girl, it means you are too girlyish and sassy means you are stuck up.

Jasmine: What’s stuck up?

Mariah: Stuck up means you won’t talk to nobody unless they got something you like.

Jasmine: Oh, I’m so sassy!

Mariah: I’ve got stickers in each book. I’m too popular to talk to you, and you and you! (Interview, 11/14/10)

Mariah suggested that she was in a position to talk or engage other only when they had something of interest or deserving of her attention. Although, Mariah defined her popular status as being “sassy,” indicating stuck up and exclusionary, she like other popular children understood that being popular was much more nuanced, in that she knew she had a responsibility to be nice to and admired by unpopular children. To maintain this influence and high status, Mariah interacted respectfully with her peers, while also creating a distance between them by choosing to sit/stand and play with certain children on a consistent basis.

**Insider knowledge.** From time to time, popular children would reveal to unpopular children knowledge from within their higher ranks. Despite popular children knowing the latest issues among students across all statuses, unpopular children were not always privy to information about the popular children. Mariah drew from her discreet knowledge of the happenings among the popular children to assert her popularity.
position. Mariah was aware of her popular status and the contrary status of Adrianna yet remained cordial to her. At one point, I had lunch with Adrianna and Mariah where this situation became very apparent:

Adrianna exclaims, “Me and Mariah are popular!” (She beams to me, and then looks to Adrianna, with slight anxiety, awaiting her confirmation. As Adrianna makes her proclamation, Mariah appears shocked and somewhat displeased. She looks at me and shakes her head no, completely unnoticed by Adrianna. I ask Mariah if she thinks that she is popular. She responds, “I don’t think…” smiling with confidence, pauses and points a finger delicately in the air, “I know.” I ask Mariah if she thinks that Adrianna is popular. She hesitates, and answers politely. Her tone sounds as if she is forcing a convincing argument. “Well…she has a lot of friends.” Adrianna adds, “And boyfriends…like Juan.” Mariah’s eyes widen, as she shakes her head in disagreement to both remarks.

Adrianna, who is unaware of Mariah’s condescending tone, continues that “Juan likes me and I like him. Once I took the band off my hair like this (Pretends to take a band off a mock ponytail, and shakes her head, as if she is shaking her hair loose. Her hair is braided with cornrows with barrettes at the end of each braid) and he was like ‘Woo!’” Mariah catches herself from laughing in disbelief. She pointedly says to Adrianna that Juan does not like her and further comments that although Juan has broken up with his girlfriend, that “he still would not like you.” Adrianna seems to believe otherwise.
I feel grieved for Adrianna and try not to let her see this, for she seems to want to pretend that she has a particular status to perhaps ease the pain of her rejection. In the afternoon, as children are looking for books for silent reading, Mariah approaches me. “Are you mad at me about earlier?” she inquires. She reminds me about her response to Adrianna. “No,” I respond, “that was your opinion.” “Okay,” Mariah smiles with relief and walks away. She seemed to want to maintain her “good girl” status. (Fieldnotes, Interviews, 2/27/2011)

Mariah’s insider knowledge was evident through her keen awareness and understanding about her social position, the social dynamics within their peer cultural world, and interpersonal relations. Like most popular children, Mariah had a heightened communicative competence and responsiveness to her peers. When Adrianna exaggerated about her status, Mariah pretended to play along with her, expressing to me nonverbally her disagreement. She maintained Adrianna’s admiration by not pushing back too much, in that she affirmed her possession of friends and hid her nonverbal disagreement from her. Mariah had insider knowledge about the current status with the popular Children of Color, that Adrianna was not privy to and used it to push back against Adrianna’s claims about popular boys liking her, and in particular, Juan. Because Mariah has stated in the past that she believed in “keeping it honest,” she became very forthright with Adrianna about the “reality” of their peer world.

**Shared status admiration.** In order to maintain popularity, Mariah had to keep the respect and admiration of fellow popular children. This often led to a heightened
concern for loss of their friendship, and with it her status. Mariah also knew that the admiration of popular boys also solidified her high status:

SW: So what makes a kid popular?

Mariah: If a boy likes them. If they get voted every time for the number one club.

If a boy hits on a girl. That makes….like if a girl dates the popular boys of the class or the school that makes them popular.

SW: Jasmine: didn’t they vote for you for Number 1 Club?

Jasmine: Yeah.

SW: So that makes you popular?

Jasmine: Yeah.

SW: So Juan got it. Is Juan popular?

Mariah: No. Like he only popular since he’s Davion’ friend. We don’t like him.

I like Juan but I don’t like Davion. (Fieldnotes, Interview, 11/18/10)

Mariah pointed out that popularity begat popularity, which was true with the boys as well as girls. She indicated that she Juan’s popularity stemmed from his association with another popular boy, Davion. Furthermore she indicated that in order for a girl to become and remain popular, a popular boy had to flirt or date her. As a girl, Mariah understood that she needed to have friends of high status and to hold the admiration of girls with lower status. Although Mariah was recognized by the boys as one of the pretty or “hot girls,” her friend Jasmine likewise gained popularity by capturing their attention.
The girls marveled over her long black, fine hair. Mariah recognized Jasmine’s influence, and the reciprocal aspects of their shared status and friendship:

Mariah: I feel like if I am not friends with Jasmine, then I won’t be popular. But now I am not caring because I just want friends who are going to be a true friend to me back. I don’t want to tell her that I don’t want to be her friend anymore because I don’t want her to tell Mrs. Thomas and I get in trouble.

Jasmine said to me that she is using me.

Me: When was this: Kindergarten, first or second grade?

Mariah: Second grade in January.

Me: Why do you think she said that?

Mariah: She said because I have a lot of nice things…She always asking for things, and she keeps asking when I am going to give her make up for her birthday present. That hurt my feelings because she was not being honest with me and I have been with her. (Fieldnotes, Interview, 2/10/11)

The social pressures of being viewed as physically beautiful combined the expectations to present oneself beautifully impacted the socially adept popular girls to become involved in hyper maintenance of their position. Participation in this position, such as maintaining a particular sense of style, ensured visibility and attention across gender. However, in my field notes I noted that that Jasmine similarly possessed a vulnerability to losing her popularity and sense of belonging apart from a friendship with Mariah in the following occasion:
Jasmine was upset at recess about not having any friends. She has been out sick, and when she returns, it seems like no one wants to be around her. She said that Mariah came over to her and said that she will not be her friend. Mariah walks over…. She tells Jasmine that they are now friends, but she said that to Jasmine to make her feel badly (as mentioned above). (Fieldnotes, 2/22/11)

Mariah drew upon shared status admiration and yet questioned its benefits. Mariah enjoyed the privileges of popularity and assumed that her friendships within her high status circle were reciprocal and meaningful. On the other hand, she and Jasmine knew that their popularity was intricately linked to other popular girls recognizing them as friends. Her attire and possessions helped build her status, but she also desires a meaningful friendship. As a result, she began to question the sincerity of the admiration she received from fellow popular girls such as her best friend, Jasmine. To begin to pursue other friendships would risk her popularity. She may have been concerned with the rejection from her peers and punitive action from Mrs. Thomas.

Maintaining a “good girl” image for the grownups. Mariah understood the contradiction between adult expectations of the “good” girl role and the role needed to be popular within her peer group. Mariah and the other popular girls performed the “good girl” behavior for their teachers and families, recognizing that some of the popular discourses they engaged in might not be favored by adults. At the beginning of the study, Mariah and Jasmine pretended to be unaware of their status with me. They were uncertain if I would perceive them as “bad girls” for their perceptions and actions:

Mariah: Are you showing Mrs. Thomas this?
SW: Not on this. Is there something you want to say?

Jasmine: I wouldn’t say anything to her.

SW: Laugh. Do you want me to show Mrs. Thomas this?

Jasmine: No. Please.

Mariah: No. Yeah, yeah.

SW: Okay, okay, okay. Since you both don’t agree then I won’t show this.

Mariah: And when we said something about the kids we could be in trouble.

SW: You are not going to get into trouble.

Jasmine: I’m scared of her.

Mariah: I am too.

SW: Why are you scared?

Jasmine: Well she might do something to me.

SW: Like what? Call your parents?

Mariah: Yeah and say I’m bad. And then I’m going to get another punishment and then my parents are gonna whoop my butt. (Interview, 11/18/10)

Mariah and Jasmine did not want their teachers or families to know about the ways they navigated their status, for part of their status relied on adults perceiving them as “good girls.” They understood the adult discourses for children, particularly girls, and they knew that the discourses within their peer groups were contradictory, especially among the popular children. Mariah recognized that she must also retain the respect of the adult
world, namely her teachers, as well. Since most of the children look to pleasing their teachers, to get in trouble would damage their influence among all of their peers.

**Intersectional Shielding**

As all of the children negotiated the discourses of race, class, and gender within their peer groups, Mariah sought to emotionally and socially preserve herself and other popular Children of Color through intersectional shielding. Children within their peer worlds were selective in reporting their peers’ misgivings, and even when they did report them, sometimes they did not include the sexist, racist, or classist perceptions or comments underlying the infraction. Shielding entailed protecting oneself and others’ inclusive or exclusive of identity constructs through a) protective solidarity and b) makin’ the most of it.

**Protective solidarity.** In the culturally figured peer world, reporting infractions to the teachers was not just an issue of being seen as a “tattler,” but it influenced one’s credibility and solidarity with the popular Children of Color. Given that the Girls of Color perceived their sense of popularity as connected to the acceptance of popular Boys of Color, they were less willing to report unhealthy behavior to the adults about Boys of Color. Mariah would react against the boys’ misbehavior, but preferred to do so within their culturally figured world. Mariah mentioned that she wanted to adopt me in her family and that I can be like an aunt. She saw me as someone who was like family and could take care of the issue without getting her peers in trouble with the authority figures at the school. She preferred to inform me about an infraction because I would not contact
their parents or directly give behavioral consequences. When Mariah broke this protective solidarity, she was preoccupied with concern for the possible backlash:

Mariah walks over to me… She seems upset… She tells me that she is scared that no one is going to want to be her friend anymore. Davion called her a “bitch,” and she informed Mrs. Thomas. If he has to pull a card, she thinks that his friend Juan to tell others not to be his friend. I tell her to let’s first see what happens throughout the day, and that sometimes people forget about it later…And that we can check back at recess. I notice that she and Juan were partners for math. He seemed to work well with her. She came back to me twice. I reaffirmed that Juan did not seem upset with her… She thought for a moment and agreed. She began to look more relived. When she approached me again in the afternoon, she seemed to be more confident about keeping her friends. (Fieldnotes, 2/8/11)

Mariah broke the protective solidarity by involving a teacher in the conflicts of her peer group. Mariah and her Peers of Color operated from the assumption that adults should not be involved in the affairs of her peer world. In another sense, Mariah did not want to get other children “in trouble.” For her, it was a double edged sword, for breaking solidarity risked her popular status and friendships. Part of being a popular girl meant a tolerance of negative behaviors from popular boys. On this occasion, she asserted herself by pushed back against the disrespectful behavior of Davion. Yet, she was filled with regret for informing Mrs. Thomas because she feared that the possible social ramifications outweighed her power within the group.
**Makin’ the most of it.** Mariah understood the racial discourses at work amongst her peers, but she “made the most of it” by negotiated within them without allowing the dynamics to defeat her. The stakes were higher to maintain popularity with the smaller group of Black or Children of Color because perception was that ‘White children did not want to be their friends’ anyway. Instead of dwelling on the rejection from White peers, she continued to be friendly and work with them despite racial boundaries. When Mrs. Thomas changed seating arrangements in the classroom, Mariah began to sit with Lindsey (White, working class). I noticed that they seemed to talk more, but it did not materialize into a friendship.

Mariah: I am not trying to be racist but, you see there are a lot of White children in my class and they don’t talk to me or try to be my friend. Lindsey was trying—I knew her in first grade, but now she is more friends with Amber. We are getting better now.

SW: Do you think sitting by each other helps?

Mariah: Yes, and we both get treated badly sometimes. (Fieldnotes, Interview, 2/22/11)

Mariah recognized that within the Children of Color and the White children, that there was a shared sense of “oppression” experienced by their peers. It was common knowledge among the children about Amber’s consistent mistreatment of Lindsey. Mariah aspired for children across race to get to know each other. In other words, there had to be meaningful contact in order to make friends. On a different occasion, I had
noticed that Mariah attempted to get to know Amber by giving her a toy during a “lunch bunch:”

We sit around the table talking about an array of topics, as usual during these social breaks. Amber (White, working class) (not in study) calls my attention. “Look, Ms. Wahome, what Mariah gave me for my cookie that I did not want.” I see that Mariah gave her a small plastic toy, which she brought from home. Connor begins asking repeatedly for the toy from Amber. She throws the toy across the table to him. Mariah politely tells Amber, in her usual calm and poised tone, “You could have just given it back to me.” Amber does not respond or acknowledge Mariah’s invitation to assess the interaction. Mariah continues to eat and engage the children, without showing any visual sign of hurt or disappointment (1/8/11).

In this instance, Mariah sought to build a friendship connection with Amber, well aware her prior resistance to making friends, and decided to discretely call attention to Amber’s refusal. Mariah “made the most” of Mariah’s awareness of the racially segregated dynamics of her peer group, but this does not inhibit her efforts to cross borders. Next, she demonstrated her sense of strength by not allowing emotions to prevent her from directing Amber’s attention to her behavior. Last, she may have been hurt, but she did not allow Amber’s actions to upset her and ruin her lunch time socializing.

**Highly Sexualized Discourses**

The construction and maintenance of popularity partially drew from highly sexualized discourses of a) flirting; b) dating; and c) sexual aggression. Highly sexualized
discourses involved the boys referencing and rating the popular girls according to their physical appearance, potential for romantic relationships, and responses to sexual aggressions. Mariah and other popular girls participated in but also resisted the ways they were being positioned within these highly sexualized discourses.

**Flirting.** The popular boys would make verbal sexual advances at the girls who they perceived as physically attractive and friendly. Mariah adamantly had no desire to date Davion, but preferred other boys. She often invoked “age” as her reason for not dating Davion. On the other hand, she accepted the flirting as attention and a sign of popularity as she does in her conversation with other girls during recess time below.

At recess, Mariah told a huddle of girls about Davion flirting with her after school. Mariah noted, “On Tuesday, Davion asked me to be his girlfriend. He kept saying, please, baby… and he would do anything I want!” The girls erupt in laughter. “I told him that I was too young for that,” Mariah explained, “but I don’t like how he approaches girls. He gets too carried away. Besides, it’s the girls who are supposed to ask the boys to be their boyfriends and not them.” (Fieldnotes, 11/9/10)

Mariah appeared to enjoy telling the girls at recess about the attention she received from Davion. At first it appeared that she did not want to engage in flirting, but preferred to be the one to initiate a romantic relationship and not the boy. It became more evident as she discussed her flirting with Jasmine’s brother:

Jasmine: Yesterday when I was sitting by Davion, he was like hey honey.

Mariah: He’s so gross.
Jasmine: Yeah and he even thinks we like him. Yuck. Never in his dreams.

SW: Why not?

Mariah: He’s hideous.

SW: Why is he hideous?

Jasmine: He acts like a grownup. But he’s really not a grownup and he really wants a girlfriend, but he never gonna get one.

Mariah: And he’ll never have no beautiful kids.

SW: Why not?

Mariah: Because girls don’t like boys that flirt with them. The girls have to flirt with them. Like I have a crush on her brother…Caleb is her brother… he’s in the fourth grade.

Jasmine: But my brother said he like this girl names Tamra and he really, really likes her and they like each other and when Mariah came over to play at my house Mariah asked him out and he said only if you were the same height as me and Mariah was 10 years old then I would go out with you. And then the next time I asked him he said when I break up with Tamra I’ll date her. (Interview, 11/18/10)

**Dating.** The popular boys and girls often discussed or sought out potential dates. Although Mariah mentioned that she was too young to date and that she should wait until she was 16 years old, she still engaged in the dating discourse.

As the children wait in the library to pick out their books, Jasmine tells me that she and Antonio started dating on Monday and he told everybody. She said that they broke up on Wednesday. Mariah adds that Juan had just asked her to be his
girlfriend. Although, she appears a bit happy, she says that she would never do that because he dated her friend.

However weeks later, Mariah changes her mind and both girls want to date Antonio. She and Jasmine approach me enthusiastically, discussing how they are fighting over Antonio. Throughout class, the girls contend with each other about who should date him. Jasmine gets slightly upset because Mariah gives Antonio some candy, and she does not have anything to offer him. Later I watch Juan talk to both girls during a transition in class. He looks at Jasmine and then turns toward Mariah and says “I want her.” Jasmine’s mouth drops with a disappointed smile. Mariah is filled with excitement. They quickly get ready for class, believing their brief exchanged went unnoticed.

Mariah and Jasmine actively engage Juan’s propositions to date to the point of allowing him to disrupt their friendship. Both girls perceived it to be amusing to “fight” over Antonio. Instead of resisting objectification by Antonio, both girls made themselves available for him. (Fieldnotes, 1/7; 2/8/11)

**Sexual aggression.** Mariah and her friends were vulnerable to the boys not only flirting but drawing from adult sexual discourses to engage them in aggressive acts through inappropriate signals and touching. Often, the boys would begin to interact with the girls through sexually aggressive behavior covertly in moments when adults were not observant. Mariah and the girls would fight back against these advances, as she does with Davion below:

Davion: Jasmine, Jillian, and Esmerelda always kick me and stuff.
SW: So if they kick you and stuff, you still like them. So why – if Mariah acts “mean” you don’t like her anymore?

Davion: She’s hits a lot harder. (Interview, 2/10/11)

Davion recognized that Mariah, would stand up to his aggressions and he also recognized that she fought back more forcefully than the other girls. Still, it did not justify the aggressive behavior towards any of the girls. The sexual aggression that had become a part of the peer culture was something that all of the girls struggled with as they sought ways to deal with it on their own through fighting back, so that they did not implicate the boys to sanctioning adults or risk getting them into trouble. Eventually the aggressions escalated, as one of the popular boys revealed to me about this behavior.

During lunch, Cedrick discloses to me that Davion has been touching the girls’ bottoms, including Mariah. Davion confirms and also includes Juan in this activity… A girl who is not in the study states that Davion has touched her bottom… She looks distraught. I talk with her about it… After lunch, I approach Mrs. Thomas with the girl. She explains what happened to her. I then fill Mrs. Thomas in on the details of lunch and the possibly involved children. After Mrs. Thomas was informed, she and the principal met with all of the possibly children involved. The girls also confirmed that they were being touched inappropriately, but none had reported to the teacher about the occurrences. (Fieldnotes, 2/4/11)
In this instance, the boys did not expect me or any of the children at lunch to inform their teacher about the sexually aggressive behavior. The girl, who was considered a “friend,” but not a popular girl, however, seized the opportunity to come forward to deal with the situation. It appeared that she did not know how to handle the situation on her own, since Davion was her “friend,” and she did not feel comfortable with his actions. She was certain that she wanted to take action. While she did not have much status to lose, this particular girl of color did not seem to wrestle with protective solidarity, and instead perceived Davion’s acts as transgressing any need for such protection. Because she was very shy and soft-spoken, especially with adults, the sexual aggression against her perhaps caused her to sense embarrassment and thus hindered her from approaching her teacher on her own.

Other examples of sexual aggression became more evident as the popular girls attempted to shield or protect the boys from the consequences of their behavior. For example, on the following week, during lunch with an interracial group of girls, Jasmine shared that Davion and Juan were being sexually aggressive:

Mariah: Davion has been doing this to us (clasps her hands together, holding them in mid air, begins rapidly opening and closing them).

SW: What does that mean?

Jasmine: (surprised) you don’t know what that means?

Mariah: Humping.

Jasmine: Davion made Juan do it to me.

SW: What do you mean?
Jasmine: He humped me. You know. He told Juan to hug me. When we hugged, he pushed Juan against me like this (begins a back and forth sexualized movement).

Adrianna: I know what humping looks like it’s when two people (stands up and begins moving her body in a suggestive way, back in forth) Un, un, un, un, un. The girls begin to laugh.

SW: Did you tell your teacher?

Jasmine: No...

SW: Why not… (turns to all of the girls) do you think she should tell? The response is mixed.

Mariah: If she tells, then Davion will get suspended, after what happened last time. We want to just tell you and you talk to them.

Jasmine looks uncertain.

SW: Jasmine, I think you need to tell the teacher. (Fieldnotes, Interview, 2/10/11)

It was clear that the girls had a growing understanding of adult sexual discourses. First they engaged in colloquialisms such as “do it” and “humping,” as well as hand signals which refer to sexual intercourse. Secondly they knew these were exclusively adult discourses, for they assumed that I, as an adult, would understand the sexual references that they utilized. This led them to in a way, “teach” me about these discourses. It was clear that these discourses spanned across race, for all of the girls seemed to have awareness and lacked astonishment about any of the details shared by their peers, and instead found it amusing. Still, it appeared that she did not want to lose her status
association and friendship with Mariah, who believed that Jasmine should not report the infractions to Mrs. Thomas. Jasmine knew that the protective solidarity and status association with the popular boys were integral to her maintaining her status, and perhaps friendships. Given the complexity of these overlapping discourses, Jasmine decide to not follow Mariah’s advice:

After lunch, Jasmine approaches me. I ask her what she would like for me to do. I want her to be empowered to stand up against this inappropriate behavior. She asks me to tell the teacher. I walk over and tell her about what Jasmine reported. I notice that Mariah begins to inform Juan about what might be transpiring. He looks over at me with concern. Mrs. Thomas talks with Jasmine in private. Once finished, Mariah walks over to Jasmine. Jasmine looks at me, and then, turning to Mariah and says, “we have to talk. If someone does something bad to us, we have to tell, even if they get in trouble. Friends don’t keep each other from telling.”

(Fieldnotes, Interview, 2/10/11)

All of the girls recognized the inappropriateness of the sexually aggressive behavior from the popular boys. Yet, the girls would not report these acts and chose to instead deal with the matter within their peer world. Mariah wanted to invoke protective solidarity, asking me to handle the situation and leave their teachers out of it. She also invoked this protective discourse by informing Juan about Jasmine and my reporting to Mrs. Thomas. It was clear that Jasmine was uncertain about remaining silent about these acts, as suggested by Mariah. Jasmine who tolerated much flirting asserted her agency to seek the help of her teacher to end the escalating aggressions from the boys.
Children showing romantic affinity for their peers has been a common discourse during childhood, and it is not uncommon for children to in rare moments engage in risqué talk, touching, or kissing drawing from sexualized discourses. Similarly it is not uncommon for children to engage in physical play across gender, as a way to play along the boundaries of “innocence” and “sexuality.” The engagement in such play and risqué talk usually served as a way to rebel against the adult control. In this context, however, the risqué talk involved acts using highly sexualized discourses to position each other and reposition themselves within their peer culture. The boys’ objectification of the girls’ bodies and the girls’ complicity transcended children actively recycling gendered norms. Instead, it spoke to the problematic ways in which class, race, and gender worked in tandem to perpetuate unhealthy social behavior. The Girls of Color were expected to remain silent to the teacher about these actions, and thus retaining a sense of vulnerability to any future aggressions. Despite their efforts to resist the behavior by fighting back, their silence to their teachers, led to continued aggressions. Such aggressions and silence unintentionally created a message that reified historical racial and gendered discourses, or “controlling images” (Collins, 2000) of Girls of Color as assumed sexually available and submissive to males.

**Expressive Femininity**

Black women and girls have contend with what Collins (2000) term “controlling images.” These images were also dominant stereotypical images of Black womanhood, girlhood—femininity, which I contend impact the enactment of feminized discourses. I chose the term “expressive femininity” to include the multilayered and perhaps endless
ways in which girls choose to animate their interpretation of the dominant images of femininity. Dominant stereotypes and images of femininity have reinforced White middle/affluent masculinist images and expectations of standards of beauty, without considering the classed and raced intricacies created as a result of this norm. The pinnacle of femininity has been assumed to be a classless or raceless idea, creating binary dominant images, which are destructive to the psyche of women and girls. Mariah and her friends demonstrated expressive femininity through: a) beauty consciousness; b) skin consciousness; c) cheerleading; and d) speaking up.

**Beauty conscious.** Femininity was expressed through physical adornment using popular styles and dominant images. Mariah wore designer clothing every day to school. Urban and Hip Hop brand labels such as Roca Wear®, Sean Jean®, and Baby Phat®, and other designer labels such as Coogie® or Nike® made up her trendy attire. Her hair was styled in ponytails or braids with hair extensions, which gave it extra length. She often had different accessories to compliment her outfits. I noticed that other children, regardless of race would comment that Mariah’s hair was pretty. Like most of the girls and boys, the Mariah was highly observant of my attire and hair styles. However, she paid much closer attention. For instance, on our way to a restroom break, Mariah, noticed my knee-length boots, and she excitedly, informed me about going with her mother over the weekend for another shopping trip to purchase more boots for her. Her beauty consciousness somewhat put a ruffle in her teachers’ feathers. When Mariah was in first grade, Mrs. Thomas mentioned that she was consistently late during ‘parent drop-off.’ Her mother had explained that the tardiness occurred because she was styling Mariah’s
hair. When the teachers on duty informed Mariah’s mother that her rationale was unacceptable, the tardiness still persisted, but different reasons were given.

Similar to the previous discussion on “influence savvy,” Mariah recognized the importance of her appearance to not only keep the admiration of other girls, but also the affinity of boys, especially those whom she admired. For instance, Davion noted that Mariah and her friends are “pretty” and they “dress pretty every day.” Mariah had expressed romantic interest in Jasmine’s brother on multiple occasions and sought to use her beauty consciousness to attract him:

Mariah: Oh right and guess what? I was…when I soft my feet up, I got all fancy. I wore this to go see her and her brother—Jasmine and her brother. I dressed fancy just so I can go impress her brother. I was wearing this. I was wearing my high heel boots and I freshed my feet up and I put like on a hair ribbon and I dressed all fancy and stuff and I walked over there to the house over the bridge and I knocked on the door. (Gets up and walks around the room, with head up, bold steps, and sways her hips and pretends to knock on door). (Interview, 11/18/2010)

As can be seen in her conversation, Mariah’s acute awareness of a boy’s perceptions of beauty, prompted her to invest in her physical appearance in hopes of drawing his attention.

Skin color and ethnicity were also a part of the discourses of beauty consciousness. To be a Black girl with lighter skin complexion, of Asian, or Hispanic descent drew more attention from the Children of Color. Mariah possessed a lighter skin
complexion and during an interview she identified girls with such a complexion as being pretty. She, on the other hand thought of darker skinned people as not being “pretty.” Furthermore friends were considered the “hot girls” by the boys. They were slender in stature with medium to lighter complexions and they were mostly of Hispanic or Asian descent. She also preferred to date Black boys with a lighter complexion or other ethnic minority boys.

**Cheerleading.** Another aspect of expressive femininity was the use of body movements in the form of cheerleading. It was evidently established by boys and girls in this study that cheering was a “girl” activity. Although Mariah knew how to play football and could play well, as attested by Davion, she did not ever play at school with the boys. Instead, she played with her brother and the neighborhood children. Instead, the girls would gather on the playground and teach each other cheers, sometimes drawing a crowd of on-looking girls. Jasmine was involved in a cheerleading program on the weekends, attended by another classmate, Alex. Jasmine later mentioned that she would be starting in a program as well. The cheers ranged in complexity from routines learned from the cheering programs, their local communities, to newly self-choreographed dances. Often these cheers involved the girls in engaged in synchronized and rhythmic dance routines, while others appropriated from adult or popular discourses with some form of exaggerated body movements, such as their swaying bodies, shaking their hips and “popping,” a sensual movement where one slightly bends over to rapidly shift one’s behind back and forth. In one routine choreographed by Mariah, she used the lyrics to a hip-hop song “Bottoms Up” by Trey Songz and Nikki Minaj:
At first the girls appear shy, and chant the words rather softly. It appears that they recognize the adult content of their cheer. Mariah, then, encourages them to dance:

Mariah: Okay, Come on!
All girls: “All around the world, do you hear me? Do you like my body and I’m Nikki.” The girls move their arms and sway their hips, pointing to themselves, announcing “All around the world, Do you hear me?” They sway their bodies, as if to appear seductive and use their hands to highlight this movement as they chant “Do you like my body?” (Fieldnotes, 10/26/10)

At another time when the girls performed the cheer, they took off their jackets, as led by Mariah. When they performed it, their faces, and voices were much more expressive and animated, as well as their body movements during the choreography. Often a boy would interrupt their cheering to begin a game of chase. The girls sometimes would retaliate. These games consistently involved the popular boys and girls. The girls used cheerleading and popular culture to express their femininity by positioning themselves as subjects of desirability. On the other hand, the cheering was an avenue for the girls to engage in and learn Black culture and musicality (Gaunt, 2006). Although girls who were not Black engaged in these cheers, it served for Mariah as a way to express her embodiment of race and gender. Furthermore, it created a space for to cultivate her assertiveness, as she led the other girls.

**Speaking up.** Mariah participated in reinforcing dominant forms of femininity as well as the highly sexualized discourses in her peer worlds, but she also used her agency
to speak up about her alternative perceptions. She used these perspectives to challenge the girls’ social position, evident during the following episode:

Riley and Raell begin to do a handclapping game, chanting “Girls drink Pepsi to get more sexy…”

SW: Wait a minute… What is sexy and what do you guys know about sexy? I know you don’t say that around your parents!

Children start laughing mischievously.

Raell announces: “Sexy is when you are thin. You have long blond hair… You wear make-up and you have blue eyes… and you wear shorts up to here.” Points on the side of her thigh right below her bottom.

SW: Oh, it is? Is that what the rest of you think?

Adrianna, Alex and Lauren smile and agree. Adrianna smiles and agrees, but there is an air of uncertainty about her…she seems to disagree but is afraid to say anything. She contemplates for a moment and then seems to look as if she has an idea.

Mariah pauses from eating, and stands up. She proclaims:

“Wait a minute, wait a minute… uh un. Being sexy is when you are smart and you have your head together. You have a career and you make your own money.”

The girls follow, exclaiming, “Yeah!” (Interview, Fieldnotes, 11/1/2010)

In this interaction, Raell presented the dominant construction of sexiness by describing an image of an assumed White female, evident in her depiction of a woman with “blond hair,” “thin,” “blue eyes,” who wears very short/revealing clothing. Mariah used her
popular status to speak up and refute the dominant construction of sexiness, thus empowering herself and the other girls. By challenging the dominant image presented by Raell, the other girls were able to assert an alternative by agreeing to it. Because of her influence, Mariah knew that when she spoke up, she would be heard.

**Conclusion**

Mariah was sophisticated in balancing and negotiating the competing school and peer cultural discourses that were central to her popularity with Children of Color and her capacity to work productively with children across race. Her influence savvy allowed her to maintain her popularity and respect from her peers and teachers. It also gave her insights about the popular Children of Color that other children were not privy to, thus giving her social capital among her peers. Because the saliency of race influenced the constructions of friendships and status, Mariah grappled with her sense of racial/ethnic solidarity and status through her use of intersectional shielding. Her utilization of intersectional shielding presented a challenge for when she had to deal with boys engaging in highly sexualized discourses with her and her friends. Although she sought the best intentions for the Children of Color at school, her use of shielding inadvertently allowed for the continued reproduction of highly sexualized discourses. Lastly, Mariah was able to create a space at school for her to have friendships, much of which garnered around expressing their femininity as raced and classed performances. Still this space allowed her to cultivate a sense of acceptance in a racially segregated peer cultural world.
Summary

In this chapter, I explored the prominent discourses in the figured world of this second classroom and situated the three Black girls among these discourses. Adrianna, Mariah, and Raell engaged in these Discourse in various ways. Each girl worked from a sense of agency to attempt to change or disrupt the prominent classroom discourses and were positioned at the intersection of race, class and gender in their efforts to negotiate and develop this agency. Their case studies provide a glimpse of the complexity of the peer cultural world, the discourses that shape it and the intersection of multiple identities constructs. For instance, Mariah was able to cope with being a racial minority through her popularity with the Children of Color while Adrianna and Raell both were rejected from the groups in which they desired to belong. Raell wanted to belong with a group of select White girls while Adrianna was seeking belonging with the popular Children of Color – boys or girls. Interestingly all three girls indicated that they wished that race not be a factor in determining friendships, and yet they recognized that their peer world was divided along these lines. While Lindsey acted as a gatekeeper among White girls, the popular Boys of Color seemed to carry more weight into entry into becoming a popular Girl of Color. All three girls operated within the prominent discourses in different ways, yet what we find are girls in the process of constructing themselves, within the figured world of this particular social space.
CHAPTER FIVE: THEORIZING THROUGH INTERSECTIONS

Introduction

In chapter four I presented the analysis of the data related the ways in which the three girls in this study were situated within the larger sociocultural discourses of the classroom and their peer cultural worlds. Specifically, I explored their perceptions of difference – of race, class, and gender – and the ways in which they were positioned within discourses as well as the way they took up unique interpretations and perspectives within them to actively position themselves and others as they constructed and maintained their peer worlds.

As was apparent in the case studies, each girl brought particular and unique interpretations, strengths, and perspectives to these discourses. Their perspectives were imbued with the sociohistorical, political, familial, and personal worlds that were a part of their experience. For instance, each girl signaled their connection to their family as they discussed or interacted with their peers. On the other hand, there was evidence of larger sociohistorical/political dynamics at play in the three girls’ discursive work. For instance, the saliency of race, class, and gender demonstrated that children were appropriating discourses from the adult world and society (Corsaro, 2005).

In this chapter I look across the cases in order to begin to theorize the ways in which these three Black girls discursively constructed, maintained, and/or resisted the workings of class, race, and gender within their peer culture and within the classroom.
discourse. A cross-case analysis allows me to identify specific, shared discursive patterns, as well as demonstrate the often unique and different ways these girls took up or were positioned within these sociocultural discourses. I situate this theorizing across case within the literature in order to explicate the commonalities and distinctions of their experiences within their peer cultural worlds.

**Children’s Discourse within Peer Cultural Worlds: Theorizing Intersectionality**

Children are shaped by multiple, influential contexts as they grow and develop. Their interactions with their peers are shaped by socio-structural relationships of power and micro level, interpersonal spheres of influence. Studies of the experiences of children, however, have not always taken up this concept of multiplicity or the particularities of their lives, their identity locations, or their sociopolitical/sociocultural histories. For instance, Rizzo’s (1989) important work in children’s friendship formation processes, neglected to take in consideration how children as classed, raced, and gendered beings are taking up roles informed by these identity constructs. Only recently have early childhood studies looked seriously at gender (Connell, 1987; Davies, 1989; Blaise, 2005). Few studies have examined the ways in which race influences children’s lives and identities (Holmes, 1995; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) or have looked specifically at the experiences of Black children or Black girls (Goodwin, 1990; Scott, 2002, 2003). In the majority of studies on children, when race does come to play it is often a result of Children of Color not fitting into the norm or as anomalies, deviations or from this norm such that their behavior is read through the lens of deficiency (Boykin, 1986; Hale, 2001).
In regards to studying the experiences of Black children, race has often been centered at the exclusion of other important identity locations such as class and gender. For example, in Corsaro’s (2005) study of Black children and faculty within a predominantly Black Head Start Program his observations centered race while ignoring the influence of class and gender. Conflating race with class and gender makes it difficult to see the ways in which Blacks are shaped/influenced by different socioeconomic class-based cultural contexts (hooks, 2000; Jackson, Jr., 2001) and the ways in which patriarchal perspectives and power shape relationships, roles, and expectations (hooks, 2000). As hooks (2000) maintains, class does matter. On the other hand, as she maintains, “class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings (1994, p. 177).

Recently, studies have begun to examine the influence of socioeconomic class as it frames class consciousness and affiliations across race. For instance, in her study in a school located in Los Angeles, Goodwin (2006) suggested that class seemed to be the central definer for friendships, and not race. The interracial make-up of friendships among a group of girls in her study provided important insights in regards to the ways in which certain identity locations such as race or class become more or less salient within certain contexts. However, maintaining that race doesn’t matter as much as socioeconomic class runs the same risk as erasing class in favor of race – the risk of missing the more complex and nuanced interpretations of the ways in which race and class intersect in children’s lives, identities, and peer cultures. The same misinterpretation
or uncomplicated interpretations occur when gender is not taken into consideration in any analysis. Within the effort to better understand the human experience embedded within the structural relations of power and oppression, it is important to not eliminate the presence of any identity location. Race cannot be eliminated because gender seems to be at work, nor can class be eliminated for the sake of a racialized analysis alone. Given the continued prominence of race, class, and gender in the construction of sociopolitical power as well as interpersonal relationships, all of these factors must be considered if we are to arrive at a closer approximation of the way in which they shape opportunity and identity. In short, the saliency of one particular identity construct, i.e. class, does not erase the existence or pertinence of others.

In my commitment/goal to examine the intersection of identity locations –race, class, and gender, I do not wish to minimize the role of race in a racist society and its effects on the daily lives and interactions or trajectories of groups of people. What I do believe is that the diversity of humanity has been complexly constructed through multilayered, cross cutting socialization experiences regarding race and other identity constructs. I also do not wish to minimize the idea of a shared consciousness or of cultural experiences that are undergirded by race as a social, political, economical, and communal phenomenon. However, in articulating children’s lives at the intersection of race, class, and gender, we can begin to see nuanced readings that move beyond the uncomplicated and often overgeneralized interpretation of children’s experiences and behaviors that arise out of interpretations or analysis that take up only one category of
their experience – for instance, analysis that see them only as raced or only as working class or only as female.

**Black Girls at Work at the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender**

As I looked across the cases of the three girls, analyzing their experiences as a whole, I recognized that they were expressing, acting on and engaging in subtle and overt discourses at the intersections of race, class, and gender. I also began to see the ways in which they used their agency within a peer world or peer worlds informed by, yet distinct, from adult worlds in their efforts to understand, belong, and/or resist being positioned in certain ways. In this section I explore the ways in which these intersections informed their perceptions and the discursive moves they made in positioning and repositioning themselves in relation to their peer and school discourses. Specifically, I present four discursive patterns of behavior and awareness categories; the use of social face, the growth of an Endarkened girl consciousness, complicated femininity, and a reconciliatory consciousness.

**Social Face**

I am not trying to be racist but, you see there are a lot of White children in my class and they don’t talk to me or try to be my friend. Lindsey was trying—I knew her in first grade, but now she is more friends with Amber. We are getting better now.

--Mariah

The three girls in this study were in the process of developing their understandings of race, racism, and the nature of raced relationships. While each had
different perspectives on this, all three of them had a very clear understanding that race played an important role in structuring relationships and friendships and they all exercised agency, though in different ways, in negotiating the way in which they were positioned within this dynamic. For instance, the girls recognized that their friendships with their White peers were inconsistent and they actively worked to develop more consistent play groups, while still remaining “friendly” with their White female peers. In short, the three girls in this study utilized awareness of racial dominant discourses and of being the minority within their school and used this knowledge to navigate their peer worlds.

In negotiating the raced nature of relationships within what they recognized as the larger social discourses of race and racism, the girls used a ‘social face’. Goffman (1959) first described social face as the ways in which people present a face or image of the self in social relationships, interactions, and encounters. Thus, in any face-to-face interaction there may be a multiplicity of goals and levels of meaning. Drawing from the Jim Crow era, Morgan’s (2002) description of ‘social face’ within the African American community implies a kind of mask that African American’s put on in encounters with the White world. During Jim Crow, in putting on a social face, Blacks engaged a linguistic style and language that communicated to Whites that they accepted their social position, when in reality their responses possessed a hidden verbal and nonverbal language that only Blacks understood. This language, or social face, was a way of developing an oppositional identity to the Jim Crow positional identity and a way of ensuring survival in the raced political context while maintaining human dignity and agency.
Du Bois (1903) also spoke to the idea of social face, describing the way in which Blacks negotiated multiple contexts while anticipating responses to possible positionings, as an aspect of “double consciousness.” As they navigate through double worlds, classes, with double lives filled with double words and ideals, qualitative differences are made in the development of Black identities. In these varied encounters, Blacks might appear to accept their positional identities, while using their imagination and language to construct an oppositional one.

There are three aspects of social face important to this study. The first is that a social face implies a well-developed understanding of the particular political context of race, racism, and raced relationships. For instance, Blacks in Jim Crow racism understood that failing to respond discursively in a way that signaled to Whites that they were of a lower status, could result in physical and/or sexual assault, and even death. Black people would respond to Whites as if they accepted their social position, but their responses contained a hidden verbal and nonverbal language that only Blacks understood. As Morgan (2002) maintains, these responses were ways of “surviving” for Blacks communicating that they knew “their place in front of white people” (Morgan, 2002, pp. 10—11). This discursive positioning or, social face, was a way of developing an oppositional identity to the Jim Crow positional identity. Holland et. al. (2003) maintains that such ‘awareness’ of one’s positional identity in relation to a situated context can be the critical and necessary support and justification for resisting a dominant discourse.

The second important aspect of taking up a social face within this study is the acquisition of a repertoire of responses or alternative discourses in recognition of the
specific political context or the dominant discourses. For instance, one of the ways in which Blacks took up a social face with Whites during Jim Crow was through pretending to agree with dominant racial politics. Similarly, Black language use (Black English; Ebonics; African American Language; etc.) within the United States often conveys multiple meanings on multiple levels. Black language has functioned as an “oppositional way of speaking, a kind of counterlanguage, that allowed for the communication of simultaneous double meanings” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 19). These kinds of responses reflect the historical and on-going struggle and survival against oppressive conditions.

The three girls within this study, held very pronounced perceptions and beliefs concerning race, racism, and raced-relationships, though they also recognized that discussing or acknowledging race was taboo within the colorblind discourse of the classroom and school setting. Because racist acts can occur intentionally and unintentionally in daily interactions, colorblind discourses can be a challenge in the daily lives of Adults and Children of Color as it presents such a benign and liberal face. Colorblind discourses, however, help to maintain structural dominance and inequality through the practice of racial nonrecognition and the belief that race is something that is seen, but should not addressed or considered (Crenshaw, 1991). As Lewis (2005) contends, colorblindness enables all members of the school and peer culture to “avoid confronting the racial realities that (surround) them, to avoid facing their own racist presumptions and understandings, and to avoid dealing with racist events (by deracializing them)” (p. 34).
The third aspect of social face suggests how of issues of class become minimalized in racial affairs. It became clear in this study that race and gender were salient, and more overt discourses that structured and informed the peer worlds. However, these prominent discourses showed how class worked in tandem. The saliency of race points to how class was significantly less of a unifying factor for consistent friendships across race and gender. All three girls pointed out that regardless of their gender or class, that being Black or identified as Black contributed to their lack of friendships with White peers. The way in which the girls were positioned and positioned themselves around race mirrors the larger social context where emphasis on race and gender at micro and macro levels allows for class-related issues and struggles to persist, often untouched (West, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1994).

In this section I describe the ways in which the girls engaged in social face given their perceptions of the politics of race, racism and the nature of raced relationships in the new ‘colorblind’ racialized and racist discourses (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). While each participated in the different discursive practices of the multiple kinds of social faces described below, they were each more prone to a certain kind of social face over others given their perceptions and experiences in regards to race, racism and racial identity work.

**Playing nice.** Because race, class, and gender were not explicitly discussed or troubled in the school or classroom discourses, this fostered a context where it was not very visible within the peer cultural world either; in effect, the larger dominant discourses around race reproduced dominant discourses concerning these constructs within the peer
world. Within this context, the girls understood that attending to race directly would be seen as problematic or make others uncomfortable. Recognizing this, all three girls “played nice,” by not mentioning or invoking issues of race around their White peers and White adults. While the girls ‘played nice’ in front of White peers and adults, they communicated a different awareness and perspective to other Black children and Children of Color and to me.

While each girl took up the social face of ‘playing nice’ in a different way, Mariah seemed to most often draw from this discourse in positioning herself as a Black girl within the classroom and peer cultural discourses. As the quote from Mariah at the beginning of this section indicates, she had a fairly nuanced understanding of the larger discourses of race and racism. She understood that in pointing out the fact that Black children were a numerical minority or in discussing her perceptions of how her White peers engaged her she was transgressing norms of silence and colorblindness and was running the risk of being seen as problematic or a racist. In another instance, Mariah expressed concern over losing her “good girl” persona if her parents and Mrs. Thomas found out about the conversations on their perspectives about their peer culture regarding issues of race, their friends, and interests in boys. She not only wanted to please adults, but believed that she had to maintain positive academic and social behavior in order to be successful in navigating school and peer world as a Black girl. Mariah had both a structural and interpersonal understanding of the dynamics of racism. She points to the school’s racial composition as being a challenge to develop friends. However, her comment about being perceived as racist for even discussing race, points to the dominant
discourses of “colorblindness” that have gone undisturbed in the school and peer culture and are complicated for her as well. Mariah attributed race as a hindrance in her ability to make and maintain friends with White children. Thus, she associated Lindsey’s preference to be friends with Amber as motivated by the racial discourses in their peer world. However, even though she perceived race as a factor in structuring relationships, she seemed reluctant to point this out directly. As can be seen from her quote, she moved quickly into ‘playing nice,’ in saying that they were ‘getting better now.’

Another example of Mariah ‘playing nice’ was when she exchanged a toy for an item from Amber’s lunch. However, Amber immediately gave the toy to Connor upon his request. This exchanged occurred in front of Mariah. Instead of showing anger, she pointed out to Amber that she could have given the toy back to her, implying that she recognized that Amber did not value the item. During this occasion, Mariah decided to position herself as a friend by trading with Amber. Within children’s peer culture, “sharing” or exchanging food, and “forbidden school items,” such as toys is a way to express friendship or to initiate a friendship (Rizzo, 1989; Scott, 2002; Corsaro, 2005). Instead of becoming angry or invoking race as an explanation for Amber’s behavior, Mariah chose to “play nice,” but used her agency to call attention to Amber’s actions and to suggest a more considerate way to have handled the situation.

Playing nice took the form of silence on racial issues around their White peers or adults in other ways. The Black girls saw themselves aligned with other Children of Color and were much more vocal in their discussions of race with other ethnic minorities, than they were when they were in a heterogeneous racial group. It was not uncommon for
the girls to refer to other ethnic minority groups using the phrase “like me” and using “we” when referencing their racial minority status. Adrianna included other ethnic minority children when discussing her status as minority, mentioning that “we” were the “only ones.” That is, she saw a binary relationship in the social groups of children that consisted of Children of Color and White children.

For Raell, the silence around race, led to complicated shame she possessed about her father’s Black racial identity and his obese physical appearance. Because she did not want her White peers to know about her father being Black and overweight, Raell ‘played nice’ through not only a verbal silence about race, but one that ‘e-raced’ Black aspects of her racial identity in order to be accepted by her White peers.

**Naming through gaming.** Although the Black girls in the classroom recognized their minority status in number and while they adhered to an implicit understanding not to talk about race, they demonstrated their agency in naming “race” within the school and peer discourses through children’s games and “handclapping game songs” which indirectly provided a space for them to name race and assert their gender power. Gaunt (2006) asserts that these games are examples of “the realm of female practices and discourse” and that “meanings and ideas in handclapping games, as in any folk practice, can be read within the frame of local relationships” (p. 63) and in this case raced relationships.

One of the expressions from a game the girls often played was “I like a Black boy and he likes me, so step back White boy.” When asked what was meant by this statement, Mariah whispered that she would “like Black boys” and “the White girls like White
boys,” and that she “cannot go against” a Black boy. Because her White peers were present and because she understood that the norms within the school and overall peer culture were to maintain a silence around race, she whispered the answer to me. Raell engaged in the similar game with another White girl, except that she sung the phrase “I like a White boy and he likes me, so step back Black boy.” Because Raell rejected her Black heritage and sought to align herself more with the White girls, she used the game to position herself more as a White girl. Here, the girls were able to counter the dominant expectations of play and talk by explicitly naming race and identifying and even reinforcing the racial segregation of their school and peer culture.

It’s not fair. While, at times, Adrianna took up the social faces of ‘playing nice’ and of ‘naming through gaming’, her perceptions of race, racism, and the politics of relationships made it more challenging for her to ‘play nice’ or remain congenially silent around issues of race or what she considered ‘unfairness’. She often took up a social face of ‘unfairness’ which was channeled through her perceptions of the prevailing peer discourses in which she felt that she was not accepted as a Black girl. Though unfairness was invoked in contexts and events that may not have had anything directly to do with race, her voiced perceptions indicated that she believed that most of what she experienced as unfair was a result of race.

For instance, Adrianna did not have any difficulty expressing her perceptions of being treated differently because of her race. As mentioned in the previous chapter, she perceived that her White peers were mostly “mean” to her and associated their inconsistent behavior as a result of their racial differences. Adrianna asserted that, “I do
be mean, but…everyone be mean to me. That’s because I’m Black.” Although she did not discuss race around her White peers even when frustrated, she did not necessarily ‘play nice’ and her silence was not always a way of maintaining comfort with peers. For example, during a whole class read aloud, where I engaged the class in a discussion about race and acceptance, I noticed that Adrianna would raise her hand, but when I would call on her, she changed her mind and remained silent. Though I was left unsure about what Adrianna might have said in that moment, her conversations with me around race left no doubt that she believed that racism operated in pervasive ways in her life and in the larger social world. Given that she could not voice this perception within the color-blind discourse of the classroom, she chose to remain silent or took up the more general complaint of unfairness around multiple issues in order to express her beliefs. Fordham (1993) suggested that high achieving Black women and adolescents often engage in “silence” or “nice girl” behaviors, not in acquiescence to the dominant ways race and gender are constructed in schools, but as a way to resist the constructions of Black womanhood. Adrianna’s continued insistence that she was treated unfairly and her silence seemed to be more aligned with her attempts to aggressively challenge and resist what she perceived as an overwhelmingly negative and hostile world than they were efforts to deconstruct from within or to ‘play nice’, and maintain peace as Mariah was more likely to do in the use of her social face.

In using the idea of a ‘social face’ I do not always use it to refer to a positive strategy. Overall, I am using the idea of social face to refer to a ‘reading’ of the racial discourse within the environment and the ability to strategically create a social face in the
light of this reading. As can be seen, all three girls took up a social face in a way that represented their evolving, but often fairly sophisticated understanding of the discourse around race within the classroom and peer culture and what may be understood as a fairly positive racialized identity through “playing nice”, “naming through gaming” and asserting indiscriminant unfairness.

All three girls perceived that the saliency of race impacted their efforts to make friends with their White peers. They and their peers recognized race as social construct laden with meanings and implications for relationships (Holmes, 1995; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Unlike the Jim Crow era, their social face was situated within a context where “colorblindness” led to norms of silence around race. The girls recognized the expected behaviors at their school as racialized discourses and were able to speak back within these norms through the different positions and discourses offered within their social face. Their actions in “playing nice” and “naming through gaming” and in the assertion of unfairness indicated that the idea that the girls were learning to utilize a “social face” in order to appear to comply with dominant discourses among White peers and teachers and in order to remain in right standing according to the school norms. Overall, invoking a social face meant something different to each girl. Each was responding to their current understanding of the politics of race and racism within the larger social world and within their peer culture in their efforts, and each took up a social face differently according to the development of their own racialized identity. Each, however, was using a social face in order to achieve a sense of agency within the larger
sociocultural discourse of race and racism and the peer cultural discourses in which they were engaged in order to cope and deal with being a racial minority in their school.

**Endarkened Girl Consciousness**

The findings of this study reveal that the Black girls were engaging in an “Endarkened Girl Consciousness,” one that that was distinct yet overlapping with Endarkened Feminist perspectives (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). A number of characteristics or premises of Black and Endarkened feminist consciousness were evident in the girl’s interactions and in the way they positioned themselves in the classroom and peer cultural discourses. However, it is critical to note that these girls were not simply taking up an Endarkened or Black feminist consciousness as it has been explicated in the lives of Black women. What is interesting in this analysis is the way in which they, as young girls, were engaged in the patterns and processes that lead to a mature Endarkened feminist consciousness. Tracing the threads of a Black or Endarkened feminist consciousness through its beginning in the lives of young girls offers a way of thinking about the construction of girlhood as one that is informed by race, class, and gender, as well as one that is similar and yet distinct from adults. It centers on the unique “angle of vision” (Collins, 2000) that Black girls bring to understanding the realities. Dillard (2006) asserts that “…Black scholars are not white scholars who happen to be Black: We have fundamentally different ways of seeing and thinking about the world” (Dillard, 2006, p. 14). Likewise, Black children are not White children who happen to be Black.

The girls invoked an Endarkened girl consciousness connected to an Endarkened feminist consciousness in a number of ways. First, Endarkened feminism assumes that,
“Black women as a cultural group ‘theorize’ and embody extensive life experiences which, while diverse, shape a coherent body…” (Dillard, 2006, p.25). According to Collins (2000), the overarching purpose of U.S. Black feminist thought is to resist oppression, including its practices and ideas that justify it. Within this study Mariah Adrianna, and Raell, began to engage in self definition, self-determination, and talkin’ back through action as evidence of an Endarkened girl consciousness.

**Self-definition out of community.** Critical to Black and Endarkened feminism is the idea that Black women engage in the process of self-definition rather than accepting the definitions of the larger social world. Black women have fashioned their own ideas of Black womanhood, which resists the negative controlling images advanced by Whites. Additionally, in a Black and Endarkened feminist stance, Black women speak for themselves and determine their own agenda. Additionally, within an Endarkened and Black feminist perspective, Black women see themselves as connected to and emerging from their communities (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). Thus, the agenda within a Black or Endarkened feminist perspective is one of empowering community. Dillard (2006) contends that “self-definition forms one’s participation and responsibility to one’s community” (p. 18). Thus, defining oneself as a Black woman or Black girl defines one’s commitment to participating in a particular way within one’s community.

An Endarkened Girl consciousness was being taken up in different ways by the girls as they each engaged in acts of self-definition even as they were positioned by others in particular ways. They acted out a sense of solidarity and commitment to membership with other Children of Color in different ways as they continued to
configure their own self-definition and as they grappled with raced dynamics around friendship and belonging.

Mariah and Adrianna were involved in a process of self-definition that was displayed through their high self regard. This self-definition and high regard were evident in several ways. First, it was evident as they communicated their career aspirations, that they did not see their race, class, or gender as being hindrances in their attainment. Adrianna’s racaltude allowed for her to reflect on the political structural and individual influences on race, but also to develop a positive racial construction, situated across the African Diaspora. Mariah, on the other hand, was seen as a leader within the classroom as a whole and within her Black peer cultural group specifically. She displayed a confidence and facility with larger school and social discourses as well as, popular and Black cultural discourse, building her own self-definition largely around popular, Black cultural, familial and community discourses, which she actively brought into the peer cultural world of the classroom.

Being a numerical minority in their school perhaps created a context where the Children of Color were compelled to align with one another as a way of providing a space for them to enjoy friendships at school. On the other hand, being a numerical minority also presented higher stakes for developing friends with the Children of Color and for expectations of solidarity and responsibility to the community. Evidence of this solidarity was that the girls preferred to resolve issues within their peer world rather than get another Child of Color in trouble and particularly avoided alerting White adults if there were problems with other children. Another example of their commitment to
solidarity was the way in which they positioned themselves in the discourse on friendship. For example, although Adrianna and Mariah desired friendships with their White female peers, they placed a higher priority on friendships with Children of Color. Additionally, unlike the girls in Scott’s (2002) study, the girls were not concerned with friendships or romantic affiliations with their White male peers, seeking out the friendships and notice of Black boys and other Boys of Color instead. In their own particular ways, Mariah “made the most” and Adrianna “reached out” in spite of the gender, race, and class dynamics to make and maintain friendships with their White peers, but neither girl focused their attention on these efforts, choosing, instead, to aim their efforts at building relationships with other Children of Color. In short, then, it was evident that while classroom discourses and particular peer-cultural discourses exerted an influence on the definitions around race, belonging, and friendship both Mariah and Adrianna participated in a peer-cultural discourse that placed a high premium on Black identity, Black culture, and affiliation with and loyalty to the community of Children of Color.

Raell presented a different struggle for self-definition. Throughout most of the study she seemed to deny or reject her connections within the Black community, attempting instead to align herself with her White peers. Even within this, however, she was at odds with the images of Whiteness she brought from her relationship and interactions with her mother. Raell, like other biracial children seemed torn between the binary of Black and White with complicated perceptions of what this meant and conflicted understandings of responsibility to community. Raell recognized that she was
experiencing being positioned as a Black girl by her White peers, and actively sought to redefine herself through her attempts to befriend other White girls.

**Self-Determination and autonomy within a coalition framework.** According to Collins (2000), “U.S. Black feminist thought fully actualized is a collaborative enterprise. It must be open to coalition building with individuals engaged in similar social justice projects” (p. 38). That is Black women work to develop liberatory frameworks for themselves, but also see their work in solidarity with other groups of people who they recognized as historically marginalized. All three girls had a fundamental understanding of the racial dynamics in their peer world and in the larger social world. Although they recognized their own struggle as Black girls, they saw their struggle as one connected with other Children of Color at school.

Raell envisioned a different possibility beyond what she perceived as the exclusionary nature of her peer cultural, friendship world. She began position herself differently within the peer discourses. Raell sought more acceptances from her White female peers, to the point of engaging in the very discourses used to exclude her. Over time, she became aware of how her behavior pushed away her family and peers, and began to use her agency to attempt a different approach. For example, because she sought to gain the friendship of her White female peers, she pushed back against their exclusionary practices as she attempted to bring the girls together in a collective dialogue and in her attempts to take responsibility for her part in recycling rejection within their peer culture.
Mariah and Adrianna, for example, sought to create and foster racial/ethnic minority solidarity and supportive peer networks in choosing to join consistent peer groups with other girls of color (Hispanic and Asian descent) and multiracial girls. This was evident in their consistent play together, their sitting together in the class meeting area, and standing beside each other in lines.

**Talkin’ back though action.** A prominent characteristic and condition of Black and Endarkened feminism is that of resistance of pushing and ‘talkin back’ to dominant and oppressive discourses. Talkin’ back” refers to the ways in which those from an oppressed or marginalized groups assert their agency by engaging in discourses counter to those considered dominant (hooks, 1990, Collins, 2000). There are social repercussions to not playing nice within peer culture in school, which could lead to more ostracism (Rizzo, 1989; Ramsey, 1991), and to be perceived as aggressive can lead to further rejection (Hatch, 1987; Asher & Williams, 1987; Ramsey, 1991; Corsaro, 2005). In spite of this, all three girls used their agency to “talk back” to dominant discourses as they navigated both adult and peer worlds at school. For instance, though the girls engaged in the social face of ‘playing nice’ and maintaining silence around race in order to navigate their peer world, Adrianna and Raell also took action against what they perceived as a hostile environment for race relations. As identified in chapter four, Raell “spoke back” in what appeared to be a self-destructive manner through “acting out,” “catchin’ attitude,” and “getting out of place.” She decided to forgo the peer and school discourses and chose to position herself in opposition to them. In particular, she aligned herself at the margins to push back against the rejection she and Adrianna experienced
among her peers. hooks (1990) maintains that the margins are sites of resistance—a “location of radical openness and possibility” (p. 153) and it was in this marginal, open space that Raell used her agency to support herself and Adrianna when antagonized by their peers.

Adrianna, through “resistance” and “power over,” as discussed in chapter four, refused to accept the conditions of her peer and school worlds, even if it led to not following the school discourses. While Adrianna’s behavior was at times aggressive, it can be surmised that the norms and expectations of how to engage peers and schools were rooted in dominant discourses of White-middle class expectations of gender behavior, perhaps causing her behaviors to appear more pronounced. For instance, one of the features of these dominant discourses, as Cade (1970) suggested, was that “a man is expected to be an a aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lust, intelligent provider of goods,” whereas the woman was expected to be “a retiring, gracious, emotional, intuitive, attractive consumer for goods… a move to render (woman) as a subordinate being, a background figure” (p. 102) and this was something that was being reproduced in the classroom as girls strove to take on the ‘gendered’ roles they sensed were most desirable through the boys eyes – traits associated with ‘nice’, sexy, submissive and passive in the face of masculine aggression. Adrianna did not fit this ‘dominant’ gendered expectations and her behavior stood out even more as a result. Her peer world had appropriated these discourses and the school discourses rarely challenged them, however, Adrianna refused to compromise to them and, instead, distanced herself through her use of socio-emotional distancing to demonstrate her perception that she was being treated poorly by the peer...
and school world. While it has been recognized that Black children engage in “oppositional talk” and assertive behavior (Goodwin, 1990; Scott, 2002, 2003), perhaps being in the context of a predominantly White school exacerbated her behaviors and actually contributed toward this aggression as she sought a legitimate space for herself in a context that seemed to provide too few opportunities for friends.

Complicated Femininity

“Sexy is when you are thin. You have long blond hair… You wear make-up and you have blue eyes… and you wear shorts up to here.” (Raell)

“They want a hot girl…sexy girl…(with) a big butt.” (Adrianna)

“Being sexy is when you are smart and you have your head together. You have a career and you make your own money.” (Mariah)

Femininity for Black women and girls has a different history of construction than that of White women and girls. Throughout history, Black women have had to battle with images of Black women defined as a deviant form of White femininity (Davis, 1981; Collins, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Paul, 2003). Whereas White womanhood has been constructed as piety, domesticity, submissiveness, and purity, Black womanhood has been constructed in the dominant discourses as overaggressive, domineering mean-spirited, bitter, hypersexual, ignorant, lazy, faithfully servile and the list continues (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000; Richardson, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009). As young girls are socialized through their engagement in different discourses, they have to contend with the hegemonic and sometimes overt social positionings according to these controlling images (Richardson, 2002).
The assumed “racelessness” in the study of gender, renders the particularities of race and gender invisible in the lives of Black women and girls. As I have noted in previous chapters, the Black girls in this study had a different reality of femininity than those of their White female peers. Within this section I explore the ways the three girls in this study demonstrated a complicated sense of femininity, evident through: a) colorism and internalized racial bias; b) class and race mappings of femininity; c) responding to controlling images; and d) their struggle against sexual politics.

**Colorism and internalized racial bias.** Data from this study indicates that while there were lots of signs of racial solidarity within the Black girl’s behaviors and while positive racial images emerged in their talk and actions, internalized dominant discourses often emerged as well. All three girls grappled with dominant concepts of beauty through colorism. The findings in the study revealed that Raell had internalized White beauty standards as can be seen within her definition of “sexy” “Sexy is when you are thin. You have long blond hair… You wear make-up and you have blue eyes… and you wear shorts up to here.” Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) suggested that the ubiquitous functioning of race within the U.S. makes it so that children learn about racial messages from beyond the home, as these messages are entrenched and grounded in our history and social fabric. As can be seen, Raell associated being sexy with White masculinist dominant discourses of White standards of beauty—the type and form that is prevalent through popular culture and mass media.

Unlike the other girls who demonstrated a preference for Blackness overall, Raell, who was bi-racial, seemed to be struggling with internalized negative messages about
Blackness and the Black community in general. As previously mentioned, at one time when her father came to the school, Raell denied the fact that he was her father to one of her White peers. Within an interview with me, she expressed a sense of embarrassment that he was Black and shame in the fact that he was overweight. These two physical aspects were fused in her mind. At other times, Raell clearly expressed her preference for the White aspect of her identity over her Black heritage stating, “I don’t like being one of those “N” words…It’s Negro. Cause I am the Negro cause I have a lot of Black in me. So that’s all Black. It’s weird to me. It’s just weird to me.” Raell had internalized dominant discourses about the Black race and had begun to believe associated stereotypes (Collins, 2000).

In one conversation Mariah, who had a lighter complexion, made negative comments about children with darker complexions and identified them as not being “pretty” or “cute.” Her peer group, which consisted of ethnic minority girls, did not include girls with darker complexions. Adrianna, who had a darker complexion, stated that she liked her skin tone and identified children with darker skin color as “pretty”, but she also mentioned that she “wished” she was “light skinned.” Adrianna was torn between admiration of her dark skin and her desire to change in order to achieve a sense of recognition and belonging with both the boys and girls in the classroom. As can be seen, although both girls expressed the fact that they liked their skin tone, their comments in interviews and conversations revealed that they had internalized color bias (Kerr, 2006).
Class and race mappings of femininity. The intersections of class and race peer discourses influenced the girls’ engagement in a variety of expressed femininities. Mariah, as a popular Girl of Color, was able to shift her expression of femininity to be more congruent with White middle-class discourses. Through her “quiet,” “passive,” and “good girl” behavior, “pretty” and “girl” attire, and “girl games” such as cheerleading, she aligned with more dominant forms of femininity; forms often rooted in White middle-affluent class constructions of femininity that men and women across race and class have internalized (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000).

On the other hand, Mariah also engaged in feminine discourses informed by her Black, working-class background. Her style of clothing, hair, and cheerleading derived from aspects of Black culture, specifically working-class Black culture. In her study of identity and language across socioeconomic class, Heath (1983) found that working class families often bought items which helped them to perform their perception of a middle-class lifestyle. To wear a certain kind of jewelry or a certain designer clothing signaled status and material wealth to peers. Although Mariah was from a working-class background, she wore designer clothing to school every day and was very clear that the way in which a girl dressed was important to popularity, specifically as it helped her to maintain the appeal of the boys. As is more fully described in chapter four, she explained that being a popular Girl of Color was predicated on desirability from the popular Boys of Color. Because she was popular, she drew the admiration of girls, too, in that they wanted to dress like her and, like her, receive attention from their peers and, specifically, boys. Connell (1987) contended that femininity is often a performance in relation to the
hegemony of masculinity, whereby girls/women emphasize aspects of femininity according to male desirability. Whether they dressed to emphasize or deemphasize their physical attractiveness, women/girls are performing according to what they have internalized as the masculine expectation of femininity. As noted in chapter four, Mariah was “influence savvy,” carefully aware of her engagement with peers, as well as beauty conscious.

Femininity was complicated for Raell as well. She understood the requisites for popularity in the classroom, but did not have access to the material means to dress the part. In her attempts to “dress nice” she took to over-accessorizing her outfits by wearing multiple hair accessories and her mother’s and grandmother’s jewelry. For example, Raell would wear multiple rings and necklaces, bracelets, a headband and bows in her hair to coordinate with her attire. Because she struggled so much with her bi-racial identity, she seemed to be trying to change her social status among her peers by expressing popular or desirable gendered and class-based expressions through her clothing and accessories. hooks (2000) wrote about her experience in college and the experience of other girls from socioeconomically poor backgrounds within a predominantly affluent context, noting that they, “tried to blend in, or fought back by triumphing over wealth with beauty or style or some combination of the above” (p. 27) and this seemed to be what Raell was trying to do, though her attempts did not achieve what she was hoping for.

The dominant discourses of beauty and popularity also influenced Adrianna’s understandings of femininity through her growing desire to appear and behave according
to what Boys of Color perceived as a “hot and sexy girl.” These girls had a particular physique, “big butts,” and engaged in sexual behavior, or what she called “making out.” Adrianna’s discourse of femininity was informed by racialized discourses about the concepts of beauty that she saw evident in the popular Girls of Color and in the choices the popular Boys of Color made for ‘girlfriends.’ Like Mariah, Adrianna did not seek desirability from White boys (Connell, 1987; Davies, 19989; Blaise, 2005), but sought it from Boys of Color.

**Responding to controlling images.** Black and Endarkened feminist perspectives have underscored Black women’s varying responses to the images within the dominant discourse which seek to control and portray negative images of Black womanhood and femininity. Just as Black women respond in a myriad of positionings, such as deconstructing, internalizing, or accepting in order to reframe themselves along, (Collins, 2000) so did the three girls in this study. While all three girls had internalized, in varying degrees, White, middle-class dominant images of beauty and while masculine definitions of beauty shaped their perspectives, they also exerted agency in their resistance to these images.

For instance, both Adrianna and Mariah sought to deconstruct “the conceptual apparatus of the dominant group” by challenging the notions of “Barbie-doll femininity” (Collins, 2000, p. 27). Mariah resisted the construction of dominant discourses of White femininity by articulating an alternative description of “sexy,” using her social status and influence to bring a counter-story to the one presented by Raell. Here she saw her position as a Black girl in a leadership role as one of “responsibility” (Dillard, 2006) to
the girls around her. And, although she reified the objectification of the Black female body, Adrianna, invoked the size of a girl’s behind as a determining factor of sexiness, a Black masculine perspective of physical beauty, one she identified as having learned from her father.

However, even as they resisted racialized and masculine notions of beauty, it was clear that all three girls battled with internalizing dominant and controlling images. Raell associated being “Negro” as a weird and shameful identity. She had internalized the stereotypes available about Black woman and girlhood (Collins, 2000). Adrianna, through her silent solidarity with the Boys of Color and Mariah through her intersectional shielding acted in their own oppression by protecting Boys of Color who had been disrespectful and physically and sexually aggressive from institutional (school) repercussions. Their silence and protection within these experiences operated to disempower them in both the immediate context and in the long run. Richardson (2002) describes this protective stance within the Black community, cautioning that Black girls who act in these roles, are unintentionally grooming themselves in “mammy” or “superwoman” roles, where they are expected to serve and protect Black men at their own expense, instead of being groomed as empowered agents of change.

While Adrianna also struggled between images of Black and White beauty and with her sense of responsibility to protect the Boys of Color, her strong sense of herself as a Black girl and her evolving racialtude positioned her in a different way as a Black girl within the classroom and peer culture. As explored in chapter four, Adrianna was often aggressive with children. She asserted that, “I do be mean, but…everyone be mean
to me. That’s because I’m Black.” Her aggression and her desire to control were not just limited to the White children, but also extended to the Children of Color. While Adrianna’s use of socio-emotional distancing prevented her from understanding the contributions of her own behavior to her exclusion by the Children of Color, she also seemed to be using this strategy to protect herself from the racially segregated peer culture and to further justify her actions, anger, and frustrations.

hooks (1981) suggested that many Black women repress feelings of anger, rage, or bitterness to avoid being positioned as a Sapphire – or an angry Black woman - while others embrace this positioning in response to the derogatory treatment of Black women within the U.S. While influences outside of the classroom were also contributing to Adrianna’s aggression and desire to control, she focused her explanation on what she perceived to be an unfair and hostile racial environment within the classroom. The extent of her aggression and ‘meanness’ within her attempts at socioemotional distancing was consequently affecting the way that she was being positioned as an ‘angry Black girl.’ hooks (1981) suggested that such distancing has been used to avoid vulnerability, stating that “the ‘evilness’ of a given black woman may merely be the façade she presents to a sexist-racist world that she realizes would only exploit her if she were to appear vulnerable” p. 86). It appeared that Adrianna was caught in this dynamic – on the one hand experiencing a very strong desire to belong and be liked, while on the other hand, not able to take up the place of vulnerability that accepting some responsibility for her rejection would demand.
Struggle against sexual politics. Both Adrianna and Mariah held a strong sense of protective racial and ethnic solidarity, which also caused them to struggle with the sexual politics of their peer world. Throughout history within this country, Black women have long sought to encourage racial solidarity within the Black community, often through “protective” measures of Black men, and often at the expense of their own psychological, physical, and social well-being (Collins, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Collins (2000) discussed this slippery slope” between protecting Black men and “controlling” them:

…those proclaiming that Black men experience a more severe form of racial oppression than Black women routinely counsel African-American women to subjugate our needs to those of Black men. However, advising Black women to unquestioningly support sexual harassment, domestic violence, and other forms of sexism done by U.S. Black men buttresses a form of sexual politics that differently controls everyone…This general climate fosters a situation where some Black women feel that they must subordinate their needs to those of Black men in order to help Black men regain and retain their manhood. Yet at the same time, Black women’s daily struggles for survival encourage patterns of self-reliance and self-valuation that benefit not just Black women, but men and children as well…(pp. 153;157).

For the girls in this study, their struggle with sexual politics often came with sacrificing their own well-being at the sake of racial solidarity. Their efforts to maintain racial solidarity, on the other hand, lead to unhealthy behaviors through “silent
reinforcement,” and “protective solidarity.” In many ways, the girls were taking up the role of their more adult counterparts. The girls in this study dealt with the insidious influence of White dominance and within the complicated intersection of White and Black male patriarchy as sexual politics within the larger social world exerted its influence on the peer cultural worlds of the Children of Color. These politics which were engaged by Black boys, Davion and his friends, entailed flirting on a daily basis and led to sexual gestures and inappropriate touches. Mariah experienced a great deal of conflict in assessing what action she should take in this instance. She risked losing friendship and acceptance among the Children of Color if she reported Davion’s derogatory comments and his inappropriate action to Mrs. Thomas. As indicated by Collins (2000), disloyalty to a Black male peer can lead to social stigmatization by Black boys and girls. Thus, Mariah’s decision was conflicted and torn between the possibility of losing her friendship and status for breaking peer norms of not involving adults in children’s affairs (Thorne, 1993; Corsaro, 2005), but, of more serious importance to her was the consequence of revealing the inappropriate behaviors of another Child of Color. Out of a sense of solidarity, Mariah’s initial preference was to rectify the issue within the racial/ethnic community of Children and Adults of Color, and to not bring in institutional forces. She also attempted to persuade her friend, Jasmine, to maintain silence around the incidents, preferring instead for me to talk with the boys. Mariah did not want Davion, who had been previously warned by Mrs. Thomas and the principal about this behavior, to be suspended from school.
Adrianna’s sense of friendship aspiration and protective solidarity, compelled her to continue to seek out Davion’s friendship even in light of his continued rejections and aggression against her, as well as protect him from school imposed consequences to his inappropriate behavior towards her. As mentioned in chapter four, she did not want Davion to lose his opportunity to earn a green shirt by getting him into trouble. Her “racialtuide” and her desire to be accepted under any circumstances created a condition where she was committed to solidarity and resisted getting another Black student in trouble at the expense of her own well-being in school.

Black feminist scholars maintain that within these discourses of protection Black women often draw hostility from other Black women when they report abuse, harassment, or victimization from Black men (Collins, 2000; Richardson, 2002). This seemed true in this case as both Mariah and Adrianna recognized the social consequences of losing “friendship” or potential friendships with other Children of Color in reporting Davion’s denigrating remarks and Davion and Juan’s sexually aggressive behavior.

The protection of the boys from the consequences of their sexually aggressive, violent behavior was influenced by racial solidarity, but it is rooted in male patriarchy, in general. A significant body of scholarship has shown that children produce and reproduce gendered roles and expectations (Paley, 1979; Davies, 1989; Thorne, 1993; Gallas, 1998; Blaise, 2005). Davies (1989) suggested that the ways in which children position themselves along axes of power and gender are a part of maintenance efforts to suppress children’s interests that “deviate” from a heterosexist social structure. Blaise (2005), in her study of gender within an early childhood classroom, found that girls were
complicit in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. Similarly, Thorne (1993) noted that the saliency of gender in children’s peer interactions is contextualized and dependent upon a variety of other factors such as race. In summary, then, the three girls in this study were operating at the intersection of race and gender and often experienced conflicted positioning in their efforts to maintain solidarity around race while also maintaining safety and respect as girls.

**Reconciliatory Socioconsciousness**

The girls in the study seemed to engage in what I will call a ‘reconciliatory socioconscious’ understanding of themselves and their peer world. That is, in the development of their social perspectives around the expectations and roles of embodying gender, race, and class, they engaged in a continual process of reconciling the larger social discourses, the classroom discourses, and their peer cultural discourses. Their growing perspective indicated an awareness of the multiple sociocultural discourses and the meaning, demands, and even conflicts of these discourses. Thus, their perspectives and the positions they took up vacillated as they evaluated the insights gained from direct information from peers and from their experiences and as they attempted to reconcile these insights within their own socioconsciousness.

All three girls brought a unique perspective about the gender/race/class dynamics at work in their peer world, and each brought a unique perspective to the co-construction of their own positions and identities; however there was ample evidence that their attempts to negotiate the multiple meanings, demands, and conflicts of these discourses meant making difficult decisions, shifting back and forth, and giving and taking,
sometimes to their benefit and at others to their own demise and disappointment. There were a number of different instances in which the girls demonstrated a reconciliatory socioconsciousness through a) attempting to ‘git in where you fit in’; b) figuring out the color codes; c) fluctuations of racialtude; and d) testing and resisting.

**Git in where you fit in.** “Git in where you fit in” is a commonly used Black English colloquialism, suggesting that when a situation creates conditions where options are limited for gaining acceptance, one should fit in wherever one can without being too particular. The girls in this study were engaged in trying to ‘git in where they could fit in’, reconciling their desire for friendships across race within a racially and gendered segregated peer culture. Because the peer cultural context was mostly racially and gender segregated along the lines of Children of Color and White Children and between boys and girls, with class remaining a distant influence, it presented conditions for children to try to fit in where they were most accepted. Hence, despite any class similarities or differences, because there were fewer Children of Color in the school, the stakes were higher if one was rejected. According to Hallihan and Teixeira (1987) Black children tend to be more neutral in their preferences and “friendlier” to cross-racial peer relationships than their White peers and this was true with all the girls. Still, creating enduring friendships across race was a struggle for all of them within this racially dichotomized peer culture. Though her preference was friendships with other Children of Color Adrianna struggled but could not really “get in and fit in” among the Children of Color or the White children. While Adrianna focused her “friendship aspirations” on the Children of Color, Raell focused specifically on befriending White girls. However,
because both of these girls struggled to “fit,” they used their rejection to support each other on the margins, finding a place there together where they could fit in.

**Figuring out the color codes.** As maintained above, Raell and Adrianna both struggled to fit in a peer world that, as has been shown in other studies, contained a formidable dichotomy along racial lines (Ramsey, 2004). They were often forced to the margins where they played with different children across race and class, but struggled to maintain a consistent friendship beyond a sometimes contentious one with each other. Interestingly, both associated their rejection by their peers with their embodiment of aspects of Blackness and both attempted to reconcile what they knew or did not know about race and class as they sought membership with their desired friendship groups. Raell understood her peer world in fairly complex terms. She seemed committed to the idea that the White girls in the classroom were not available to her even as she tried to reconcile this understanding. The idea that White children prefer other White children as friends was not just a perception in Raell’s mind, but a sophisticated reading of friendship patterns. For instance, in her study in early childhood classrooms, Ramsey (2004) found that White demonstrated a heightened and more consistent same race bias or affiliation with other White children at an earlier age than did Black children., Raell already perceived that, as a biracial child, she was not going to be easily accepted by her White peers. Additionally, Raell’s attempted to reconcile what she understood as gender and class-based differentials in the classroom. For instance, she recognized that girls who “dressed nicely” got into particular circles and Raell began to perform her perceptions of class through accessorizing her attire. However the dominance of race precluded her
attempts. Additionally, as highlighted in chapter four, after announcing that Alex was “rich,” Raell, explained that “She has all kinds of pets… she has a dog, a frog…” As she developed a class-conscious, she began to recognize that there were fundamental differences in material and experiential opportunities between her and other girls.

Adrianna was also attempting to reconcile raced and classed discourses in order to be accepted by the Children of Color. In her case, most of the Children of Color were working class and often she did not understand the classed, raced codes through which they operated within their peer world. For example, she did not understand how to play the rhythmic handclapping game songs or participate in the cheerleading. Both of these popular forms of play often contained content and movement from popular Black culture (Goodwin, 1990; Smitherman, 2000; Gaunt, 2006) and to engage in these acts was considered an expression of racial and gender prowess by the Girls of Color. Competency with these forms of play allowed increased access to working-class Girls of Color. Adrianna did not have this competence even though one of her major friendship aspirations was to become friends with Mariah who regularly participated in both the rhythmic hand clapping games and the cheerleading. Adrianna sought to reconcile what she perceived to be important peer cultural capital by seeking out help with the hand-clapping game with a White child. Interestingly, she did not seek out a Black girl to practice with, perhaps not wanting to demonstrate her lack of ability with peers who she saw as most valuable to her.

Mariah embodied the performativity of race, class, and gender through her attire. As pointed out in previous chapters, Mariah, despite her working class background,
dressed in designer clothing everyday at school. According to Miller (2009), throughout history, Black people have dressed to construct a material identity through stylish attire as an effort to counter their distressed socioeconomic, political, and social condition. Although her work primarily focuses on Black men, she highlights the ways in which Blackness has been performed and stylized, particularly among the working class and poor. She also points out the ways in which Black middle and affluent class families, post-slavery, adopted a different approach to dress – that of wearing quality clothing, but not to the stylized performance of working class and poor Blacks. This difference was mirrored in this study as Mariah’s dress as a working class girl was highly stylized and central to her performance of identity, while Adrianna, who was middle-class, wore quality clothing that was not necessarily designer, and she did not emphasize the importance of clothing as much as Mariah in her performance of identity.

**Racialtude in flux.** Chapter four explored Adrianna’s strong African-centered racial consciousness. As she attempted several ways to gain friendships with more Children of Color within her “friendship aspirations”, her sense of racial consciousness, as well as femininity, began to fluctuate. Although it may appear that she was confused, I argue that her seemingly contradictory actions and comments speaks to how she was trying to reconcile the discourses of her home, community, school and peer worlds. According to Adrianna’s logic, being Black, and being Black with dark skin and short hair led to social exclusion from both Children of Color and White children. Adrianna did not perceive that being Black was inherently wrong. She recognized that the negative associations with being Black, and being a Black girl with a darker complexion operated
within the worlds of White children and Children of Color. Though she articulated a formidable sense of ethnic solidarity and uplift most of the time, the demands of her peer culture were also compelling, leading her to question her beliefs and to pray for her skin color to be changed.

**Testing and resisting.** Adrianna and Raell often tested and resisted the school and peer discourse, as they sought to reconcile how to engage both successfully. Kantor et al., (1992) found that school and peer discourses influence each other and this dialectical relationship operated in the two girl’s reactions to the classroom culture as their sense of rejection from their peer worlds compelled them, at times, to reject the school world. Their rejection from their peers often seemed to influence the ways they engaged in classroom and academic life so limiting their full engagement in their academic experiences. For example, Adrianna and Raell both challenged Mrs. Thomas’ position in the classroom as well as classroom and schooled discourses that defined acceptable behavior and academic engagement according to White middle-class norms. Raell tested the boundaries of these discourses by taking advantage of the classroom restroom pass system and taking charge of a peer’s turn to be classroom leader, whereas Adrianna often resisted working with peers who she did not desire to befriend. In doing so, they often invested more time in social acts of resistance than in participating fully in academic behaviors. As Ramsey (1991) explained, rejected students are often rejected by both peer and school worlds. As Adrianna and Raell were attempting to reconcile how to be accepted within their peer world at school, their testing and resisting actions within the classroom community at large further heightened their sense of rejection.
Implications

This study focused on the experiences and perspectives of three Black girls as they negotiated their classroom and peer cultural worlds. While the findings are specific to this particular classroom and peer cultural context, their experiences point to a larger picture of life for Black girls who are a numerical minority in a school community and classroom and the ways in which they negotiate the dynamics of race, class, and gender within such spaces. Additionally, this study also has implications for the ways in which classroom cultural worlds can and should be reconfigured to better support Children of Color who are numerical minorities in the classroom. For, despite desegregation efforts that aimed at a balance of racial groups in schools, it is still not uncommon for Black girls or Children of Color to experience schooling as one of few or a numerical minority in their classrooms and in the school in general.

Within this study it was clear that the three Black girls were applying their understanding of racial, class, and gendered discourses in their efforts to negotiate friendships and belonging within the peer cultural world of the classroom. It was also clear that their efforts to do so were framed by the larger sociocultural discourses of the classroom and the world. While each girl demonstrated an admirable sophistication and tenacity in their efforts and achieved a certain level of belonging, their attempts to position themselves demanded a price. Each girl took up strategies that, at times, were a threat to their own well-being within a largely silent and invisible peer group discourse that was the result of the norms of silence within the larger sociocultural classroom discourse of colorblindness. This discourse of silence around race in the classroom led to
an ‘underground’ peer cultural discourse where the girls were left without the support or deliberate intervention of adults.

As a teacher educator and teacher, my commitment is to creating educational contexts where children’s lives are seen, understood, valued, and used as resources for engaging curriculum. Given this, the findings from this study have important implications for the way in which education research, school culture, classroom culture and peer cultural worlds must be reframed to better attend to the needs and better support Children of Color.

**Education Research**

Several implications for education research resulted from this study. In the following section, I point to the continued need to research a) considering intersections of identity; b) involving an often unexamined age, race, and gender group; and c) that specifically attends to the influence of peer culture in racial identity development.

**Research at the intersections.** It has common knowledge within the world of qualitative research that is less complicated to study one identity construct in isolation versus multiple. On the other hand, these narrow lenses often create more problems by not attending to the additional nuances and complexities of the phenomena or individuals studied. Often the experiences of Black women are missed or misconstrued because of the need to attend to the intersections of class, race, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). Specific examples from this study point to the need to look at intersections of identity constructs to highlight more complexity and avoid misinterpretation. For instance if I only focused on race, I would have missed the how gender influenced the Adrianna and
Mariah’s use of protective discourses with Davion. If I had only focused on gender, I would have missed the saliency of race in influencing Raell’s approach to making friends. Furthermore, if I had only focused on class, I would mainly see children playing within and across class as a harmonious group, without recognizing how gender and race further segregated them. These intersections are critical to engaging in research with humans to uncover how humanity operates as a highly complex network.

**Unexamined age, race, and gender.** The study of primary grade children, with regards to issues of peer worlds, friends, and identity, continue to be lacking within greater education and early childhood education research literature. As pointed before such studies involving Black girls are rare. This study suggests that issues of identity do not begin at adolescence, and that children are engaged in meaningful and sophisticated thinking and actions about their social world at an early age (Corsaro, 2003; Scott, 2002, 2003). Furthermore, by inviting the range of perspectives and experiences of Black girls, researchers are able to gain a more accurate and complete understanding about the social world, identity develop, educational systems and processes (Scott, 2002, 2003).

As noted in previous chapters, the politics of race within the U.S. compelled me to include Raell, as a bi-racial girl, as a Black girl within this study. According to Tatum (1997), as a biracial child enters elementary school years, he/she “now may have a better understanding of what it means to be part of two groups, but his or her monoracial peers may also have learned stereotypic notions of race and ethnicity” (p. 179). Raell was dealing with being positioned as a Black girl, but this point to some unique challenges she faced that warrant further study about the experiences of bi-racial children.
The influence of peer culture. This study suggests the heightened, rather dominant influence of peer culture on racial identity development. While the role of peer culture is often limited or ignored in the dominant psychological studies of racial identity, This study directs attention to the need to view how the peer world functions as an influence in children’s racialized self and social perceptions. Lastly, it points to the need to continue to understand how larger sociocultural discourses from family/community, media, and school/classroom are appropriated and/or filtered through peer cultural experiences (Corsaro, 2003).

Changing a School Culture

Since institutions, such as schools, often work as sites of reproducing racism, classism, and sexism (Van Dijk, 1984, 1987; 1993; 1997; Wodak, 2001; Fairclough, 1992, 1995/2010), it is critical that scholars, teachers, and school administrators develop an awareness of this process as well as how to interrupt it. In situating myself with other scholars who believe that schools must create socially just conditions for children (Ramsey, 1991) I believe that school cultures and classroom cultures must change. Because race and gender were most pronounced in the organization of children’s peer culture, these issues must be dealt with in order to untangle class-based challenges. Kantor et al., 1992 concur that the school and peer discourses mutually influence each other. The findings from this study provide two primary implications for changing the school culture.

First, while the teacher in this classroom was committed to her children and expressed a respect and commitment to working with diverse children, her own
understandings regarding the politics and dynamics of race and class, in specific, in structuring relationships was limited. While her intentions were good, she needed help. Mrs. Thomas is not very different from many White teachers who have had few experiences across race and little opportunity for in-depth analysis and understanding of the nature of race, racism, and raced relations. She, like many of her colleagues need the support of school and district administrators to empower and encourage teachers to engage in pedagogies which attend to workings of race, class, and gender.

Although Mrs. Thomas used a behavior and character education program with racially and ethnically diverse students, the content of this program did not really allow for an exploration of race, class, and gender are factors within their peer worlds. Mrs. Thomas informed me that she and her colleagues would welcome to engage in a more critical pedagogy, but that they feared losing support from administration for trying out new ideas. It would seem that they needed to engage in their own personal work in the development of a critical consciousness as well as needed, support from administration to take up behavior and character educational systems from a critical perspective.

**Classroom Changes**

The findings in this study highlight the significance of classroom discourses in the construction of peer cultural discourses. Given the results of this study, I suggest three critical implications for changes in classroom context that will render discourses of race, class, and gender more integral and visible. First, this study points to the need to delve explicitly into issues of race class, and gender. Class, race, and gender must be taken up as the students and teacher co-construct their classroom community. A deliberate
attention to norms of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion, friendship patterns, etc. would allow for frequent discussions regarding who gets left out, how and why this happens such that discussions around difference become the norm and less taboo. Second, educators can work towards co-constructing a classroom space where the larger, assumed “norms” are problematized within a critical multicultural approach to classroom life. Such a critical multicultural approach could be transformative if teaching and learning were to focus on active participation and engagement by students and learners in the creation of more democratic, equitable, classrooms, schools, and communities (Banks, 1993; Kumashiro, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Tyson & Park, 2006).

Last, culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2000) as an approach to classroom management and instruction should also consider the specific workings of peer culture within a particular school and classroom. Culturally relevant teaching utilizes student’s cultural experiences in effort to “maintain it [student culture] and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture,” resulting from, for example, the ignoring or distorting of their history, culture or background represented in educational materials (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17). The influences of cultural differences on children’s peer cultural worlds will also influence their engagement within the classroom. Extending culturally relevant pedagogy to consider the ways in which the peer cultures influence the classroom community frames the children as more agentic in the construction of their social worlds and brings a previously invisible, but important social dynamic into an understanding of culturally relevant theories and approaches.
**Teacher Education**

White students in the United States tend to live in highly racially segregated neighborhoods, which limits consistent, substantial interactions of contact outside of their own race (Massey & Denton, 1993). Living in such racially isolation fosters a monocultural existence, where the dominant discourse is continuously recycled and perpetuated. Most, White middle-class preservice teachers, who represent the majority of the teaching population, come from these isolated contexts and operate from little understanding of the implications of their own racial identities which limits their ability to engage with social justice commitment in their teaching (Feagin & Vera, 1995; Fine et al., 1997; Lewis, 2001, 2005). This study suggests that revealing and supporting the ways in which White preservice teachers develop their understandings of diversity and multicultural teaching is essential to understand possibilities for providing more equitable classroom contexts. Seidl and Friend (2002) suggests that opportunities for preservice teacher to engage in prolonged “equal-status” experiences in predominantly working-poor and racially and ethnically diverse communities helps to them to confront their internalized ideologies and stereotypes across race and class, but to also experience the often ignored strengths within these communities. The process of becoming a critical multicultural educator goes beyond learning new strategies, but the confrontation of one’s identity and ideologies are necessary to become multicultural (Seidl & Friend, 2002; Seidl, 2007). In order to capitalize on students’ strengths, teacher who are committed to the education of all learners do not only learn about their students, but they also learn with their students (Seidl & Friend, 2002; Seidl, 2007). Thus a goal of teacher education
programs is to support preservice teachers in interrogating their long-standing perceptions and beliefs about diversity in order to aid them in becoming multicultural teachers. Finally, as preservice and practicing teacher increase their understandings of child development, this study emphasizes the need to connect the sociocultural aspects of children’s development and the influence of peer culture to think through children’s academic and social engagement in the classroom.

**Limitations**

Given that this is one of very few studies on primary grade Black girls within their peer worlds, there are several limitations to this study. First, given that the study was situated within a classroom ecological context, the fact that not all parents gave consent for their children to participate limited the data that could be collected and analyzed in pursuit of the understanding of the classroom social world. Next, although this limitation could easily speak to the strength of the study, my position as an adult caused an initial barrier to entry into the children’s worlds. Although I was able to gain rapport by positioning myself, as described in chapter three, as a “non-sanctioning” adult, still visually by virtue of size difference the children did not accept me as a peer, only a different adult, or at times a pseudo, non-threatening teacher, one who taught somewhere else, but did not possess the same power within their school. As a result, there was perceptions the girls and other children did not share with me and experiences they also did not divulge.

Third, my position as a Black woman made it particularly challenging to navigate an overarching racially segregated peer world. Despite the children’s cross-racial play,
and loosely connected friendships, my race served as a way to connect with Children of Color. However, it took more time and effort, and a strategic effort to demonstrate to White children that I was also interested in being a part of their worlds. The fourth limitation involves my decision to focus on race, class, and gender. I sought to begin with these intersections as an impetus to begin to look even more complexly at multiple configurations of the interplay of varying discourses. My political decision to focus on these constructs is not intended to minimize or ignore more dimensions of complexity in identities. Instead, it is my hope that this study is evidence of importance of such work. There were other identity constructs which further intersected within the children’s peer culture, i.e. faith/religion and sexuality, which also had mappings of race, class, and gender. Although data was collected regarding these discourses, the context of this particular study did not focus on these positionings.

The final limitation considers the transiency population of the school as a challenge in data collection. For example, three participants in the study, a White middle-class girl; a White working-poor boy, and one Working-poor bi-racial girl left the school. These shifting dynamics proved challenging in trying to understand the dynamics of the children’s peer worlds. Also, absenteeism and tardiness at times presented additional challenges when trying to conduct formal individual and group interviews.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I provided four theories that pointed to intersections of race, class, and gender for defining and understanding the navigational processes and consciousness of the Black girls in the study. In each theory, I discussed how the politics of these
intersections directly and indirectly inform their perspectives and positionings within their peer worlds. Next I discussed the implications of this body of research for classrooms, teacher education, and research. Finally, I identified the limitations of the design and implementation of this study.

**Conclusion**

I cannot be expected to respect what somebody else calls self-love if that concept of self-love requires my suicide to any degree.

--June Jordan, 1981

In her poignant, yet sobering comment about her political perspective as a Black feminist, June Jordan directs our attention to hegemonic demands classist, racist, and sexist society places on the Black women and girls: to be objects and not subjects (hooks, 1981) of our experiences, to be represented and spoken for without full inclusion of our perspectives (Collins, 2000). To be expected to apply belief systems and ways of being and knowing in the world that are not congruent with our histories and realities is part of the struggle facing Black womanhood and girlhood. In the study, I sought to capture and give voice to how Black girls make sense of and interact with the world of their peers within the context of schooling. This study clearly indicated that race, class, and gender were readily present as the girls sought friendships, status, and a sense of belonging at school. These intersections further pointed to the interweaving of both school and peer worlds. Their experiences have pointed to the validity of children as active agents and participants in their lives as well as the unique lenses that Black girls bring to their peer worlds as they theorize and adjust themselves within their peer culture. Adrianna,
Mariah, and Raell represent the need to continue to push back against universal or assumed White middle-class constructions of childhood. Regardless of intentions, to ignore the perspectives of racial and ethnic diversity of children will continue to reproduce flawed understandings of childhood and children’s social development.
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Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Children: Individual and Group

1. What do you like to do when you are not in school?

2. Tell me about your school? What do you think about it?

3. What about your classmates—Tell me about them.

4. What is your favorite thing about school?

5. Who are friends with who in your classroom? How can you tell?

6. How do you choose who your play with at recess or sit with at lunch? Why?

7. What do you think makes a good friend? Who in your classroom would you say is a good friend?

8. What do you think makes a good classroom?

9. What do you think your classmates feel about you? How can you tell?

11. Have you had a good or bad day at school because of something your classmate said or did? What happened? How do you feel about it now?

12. When you or your classmate gets upset with you or disagrees with you, what do you do? Can you share an example?

13. Tell me about a time when you did something nice for a classmate or your teacher—why did you do it?

14. Are there popular/cool kids in your classroom—who are they? How do you know?

15. How are you and your classmates similar/different?
17. How do you make friends?

18. What do you like to do when you are not in school?

19. Who are your friends? Who are your friends in your classroom? How can you tell?

20. What do you like about your life? Is there anything you would change?

21. Tell me about your friends at school.

22. Are there any kids who are unpopular/uncool in your classroom—who are they? How do you know?

23. What makes a kid popular/unpopular; cool/uncool?

24. How are things going with your friends?

25. How are things going with your classmates?

26. What is it like to make friends at this school?
Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Teacher

1. How do you define your identity?
2. Tell me about your own education?
3. Tell me about your students? How would you describe them?
4. What have you observed about the boys and girls interacting in the classroom and during lunch and recess?
5. How do children resolve conflicts that occur?
6. What ways do you see children position each other and themselves during instruction and non-instruction time—do you notice any differences?
7. In what ways do you notice that culture is a factor in students’ interactions?
8. How do you support children’s social development in your classroom?
9. Who are children who you perceive needs more social support in your classroom? Why?
10. What challenges do you think your children face at school?