

Humanities and the Social Studies: Studying the Civil War through the Third Space

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The mood in our class is barely-contained restlessness among my squirmy eighth graders—a group of students eagerly anticipating their winter break, but willing to give me some of their attention during our final meeting before the mad dash to the airport, ski hill, video games, or the mall. My students drop themselves into their seats around our large table. They secure their overfilled backpacks under their feet, arrange their materials in neat piles in front of them, and take on an attitude of “scholarly demeanor.” My plan on this day involves one last visit to Gettysburg, and, though my students are too kind to tell me straight out, I know that we have dwelled too long in this haunted place. The Civil War, this frustrating, never ending, bloody, dark era in American history, must surely make these dreary winter days seem even longer for my students. But the Civil War ... the temptation to linger on it is always strong. I cannot help myself. Silently, I vow to limit our time studying this unit next year. We will move on to other revolutions and lighter times more quickly, next year. But right now, before we separate for winter break, I surrender to Gettysburg, dragging these young minds with me.

Because of its enormous significance to American history, I want my students to gain a rich understanding of the Battle at Gettysburg; I also would like them to make a strong emotional connection to it. I want my students to engage with the Battle of Gettysburg on many levels—to become tangled up with the past. My goal is to guide them toward an in-depth understanding of this event—the larger historical context in which it occurred, the ideology that drove many Confederate soldiers into this battle (an ideology grounded in the spirit of the Enlightenment and the Revolutionary War), the events that caused both Union and Confederate soldiers to converge at Gettysburg, the dramatic stories of people who participated in the war or waited anxiously at home, and how this battle

shaped events following the Civil War. And through these historical investigations, I have woven a strand of study that encourages students to make emotional connections to the characters and events, engaging their imaginative and literary powers to enter the world of their history studies by engaging in literary activities such as reading and writing stories, poems, and diary entries from the perspectives of the historical figures we meet along the way. This weaving together of diverse content strands, discourses, and skills is my work as a humanities teacher.

So on that restless day before winter break, our final work at Gettysburg goes something like this:

Me: Imagine that you are a 7th grader. You are standing on a hill called Little Roundtop, at

Gettysburg, and you are gazing over this beautiful landscape. You have a notion of what happened here, but you have not yet studied the Civil War as we have together this year. So when you stand there, what do you see?

Student: Pretty hills, a curvy landscape, markers along the way, lots of people wandering around. I might think about the Gettysburg Address and wonder what it means.

Other students share similar responses....

Me: Now you are an 8th grader who has just completed a unit of study about the Civil War and Gettysburg. You are standing on that hill, full of all the knowledge and understanding you possess. You are looking over this beautiful landscape at Gettysburg, but what do you see? What do you see? Write about that.

And so we write about that. When I hear pens dropped on our table or chairs pushing back, laptops closed and feet shuffling to the printer, I look up. Nory, who has been waiting to catch my eye, shoots her hand in the air. Here is what she wrote on that day:



Eighth grader Nory talks with fellow students after reading aloud her poem about Gettysburg. (Courtesy of Trace Schillinger)

Gettysburg
 Men died here.
 Lee failed himself here.
 Armistead died
 On a hill,
 A little hill.
 In Western Pennsylvania.
 Lee walked here.
 Garnett rode here.
 Longstreet cried here.
 Chamberlain charged.
 On a hill,
 A little hill,
 In Western Pennsylvania.

The fact that Nory has produced a poem in response to a question about our history work comes as no surprise. In fact, many of my students express their learning about history through the genre of poetry. Someone once said that the best way to become a poet is to read poetry, so we try to write poetry together almost every day, exploring both the genre and the content of the poems we read. And Nory, because of her passion for and skill with poetry, functions in a way as our class poet, a role she takes on with great pride. In fact, before the year is over, she will have detailed our history studies with

a prolific series of moving, historically detailed poems. She is our chronicler, our Walt Whitman.

With this poem, Nory highlights the events and people with whom she has connected while studying Gettysburg. She has captured key historic details in this poem—she includes the names of significant figures, she demonstrates an understanding of the geography and topography of Gettysburg, and she refers to crucial moments in the battle. As she reads the poem, her voice and her words express a deep emotional connection to the story of Gettysburg and to the place itself. As I listen to this poem, generated in response to our history studies, I reflect on the figurative space in which Nory is working. Is she working in the disciplinary realm of history or literature? Or is she working in another, undefined, space? My students and I often find ourselves in this undefined space. Strange, yet appropriate if you are an eighth grader who mostly lives in undefined spaces, seeking concrete answers while simultaneously questioning every answer tossed your way.

As the school year progresses, I silently note the times when we enter this space

where the disciplines of literature and history become entangled—not in the traditional sense, where one discipline is taught alongside another discipline, like teaching *The Crucible* alongside a study of the Puritans. But rather, I make note of the times when our Humanities work looks like a hybrid discipline where the lines of disciplinary literacies become crossed, the content woven together, the experience enriched, and the work itself redefined. Maybe the point of a course titled “Humanities” really is to function as a hybrid discipline. Elizabeth Moje et al. consider how hybridity theory, a concept that emerges out of social and critical theories, describes the ways in which people integrate what seem to be competing discourses, social practices, literacies and knowledges in productive and generative ways.¹ It’s become clear to me that each single discipline can be enhanced by the inclusion of another disciplinary literacy that values diverse subjects, ideologies, and methods.

As a humanities teacher, I am required to possess and model fluency in the disciplinary literacies of both history and literature study, and I am required to negotiate the competing and contrasting methods and values inherent in each discipline. Negotiating these methods and values within one course often causes an uneasy balance within the subject humanities, because of the division between the two disciplines. However, I have observed how powerful it is when we merge these disciplines, creating a third space, a generative space, with its own rules, its own literacy, and its own discourse. Edward Soja’s description of “Thirdspace” seems to reflect what that space looks like when it is created in my classroom:

Everything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and unconsciousness, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending his-

tory. Anything that fragments Thirdspace into separate specialized knowledges or exclusive domains—even on the pretext of handling its infinite complexity—destroys its meaning and openness...[Thirdspace is] a complex totality of potential knowledges but rejects any totalization that finitely encloses knowledge production in permanent structures or specialized compartments/disciplines.²

I think that Nory's poem characterizes work created in this third space. It is in this space, somewhere between the experiences provided by the study of history and literature, that my students deeply grasp the difference between a pretty hill in a town called Gettysburg, and the haunted, hallowed Little Roundtop where soldiers witnessed General Pickett leading his frightened, doomed soldiers in a tragic charge. However, at what point, exactly, does this sort of awakening happen for students of history, at what level of their understanding? My challenge as a humanities teacher is to figure this out—where the disciplines of literature and history interact and how they inform each other.

I believe this third space is truly a discrete subject, the subject that we call "humanities." And in this space, we construct new ways of learning and imagining the stories of human experience. This space combines traditional history studies with a student's (informed) imagination, an imagination that is developed and nurtured by our studies of literature.

Through literature we learn to make emotional and imaginative connections to the subjects we study. I often wonder how much we undervalue these kinds of connections when studying history, because that the ability to truly connect with a subject results from a deep knowledge of that subject, a knowledge that is gained when we involve ourselves in the rigorous work of using our imagination in an informed way, and expressing our imaginings effectively with language.

An English teacher understands the value of a developed imagination.

Reading is an imaginative act. Writing is an imaginative act. As Jeffrey Wilhelm asserts,

Literature is transcendent: it offers us possibilities; it takes us beyond space, time, and self; it questions the way the world is and offers possibilities for the way it could be. It offers a variety of views, visions, and voices that are so vital to a democracy. It is unique in the way it provides us with maps for exploring the human condition, with insights and perceptions into life, and with offerings for ways to be human in the world.³

The study of literature allows us to connect with these views, visions, and voices in a way that a history textbook, often a second level interpretive document, cannot. Teachers of literature also understand the value of providing the historical context of a piece of literature to help students understand and talk about a literary text. The poetry of Walt Whitman, for example, has an emotional impact on me as a reader—many of his pieces inspire me to consider the tragedy of war, the loss of young soldiers, and the important sacrifices they make for their causes. Yet I connect much more deeply to his poems detailing moments and battles from the Civil War, when I approach my reading with a knowledge of this war in general and the specific battles that inspired specific poems. These are the stories Whitman's poems inspire me to reflect upon.

And, of course, the stories of history themselves naturally inspire our emotions and imaginations, which provide exciting material to read, discuss, and analyze as we would the literary imaginings of authors. Joy Hakim, who writes about the benefit of reading history to inspire literacy instruction in classrooms, touches on this idea when she describes the ways in which true stories from the past inspire the imaginations of readers:

And history ... We aren't sharing what we all know: when it comes to critical reading, history shines. Hardly anything approaches it in its demands for analysis and think-

ing. Besides that, history is a natural with children. It's filled with adventures, battles, heroes and villains; they all just happen to be true.⁴

Perhaps my desire to examine this hybrid discipline, this generative third space, results from the desire to have my students experience learning history as I learn history. For me, it is crucial to understand the "structural lines" and the historical facts, but it's also important for me to connect with the subject matter in an imaginative and emotional way. For example, I recently studied the journey of Lewis and Clark for a course I was taking. After reading a general summary of Lewis and Clark, I read their diary entries about the expedition. What struck me as the most interesting subjects in these entries were the Native American women they encountered and observed throughout the expedition. Numerous references exist about these diverse women, but the references were brief and vague: "The squaws are chearfull fine loo'g womin not handom. High cheeks dressed in skins. ... Do all their laborious work & I may say perfect slaves to the men..."⁵ A reader of these diaries might be tempted to skim over these passages about women and continue investigating one of the larger stories highlighted in the diaries. But I wanted to discover more about the women. Were they truly like slaves to the men of their tribes? Were their lives simply hardship and drudgery? I wanted to connect with the women in some way to better understand and visualize their lives. This desire essentially shaped the research I conducted.

I needed to learn more about the Native American women mentioned by Lewis and Clark in order to envision them, yet there was not enough information in the primary source documents—the diaries. My next step was to locate more facts about their lives in secondary source accounts. Here is a sample of what I read:

Arikara women did the farming. Europeans, accustomed to seeing men in the fields, consistently misunderstood the native division of labor and labeled Indian women

“squaw drudges.”...What Clark, Tabeau, and other Europeans did not understand was the seasonal nature of woman’s work, their companionship in the shared labor, the elevated ritual status of Arikara women, because of their role as earth mothers, and the substantial demands made on men in trade, war, and hunting.⁶

With more information, I was better able to envision the women and their lives. Once I had attained enough information, I sought to represent understanding with poetry, which is the way I find easiest to express my perceptions. Poets like Tess Gallagher, Julia Alvarez, Adrienne Rich, Louise Gluck, and other women who create narratives about their lives through poetry, served as my models and guided me as I moved from the discipline of history, into the discipline of English (poetry), to produce a product I believe represents the third space—where both disciplines intertwine.

Arikara

Little sister, as you grow toward the sun of womanhood, remember the earth speaks. Listen.
The future of us depends on you. Watch carefully for the signs.
In what direction do the buffalo sweep across the plain?
How fast does the wind fly and what scent does she carry?
How much does the moon reveal of herself?
Whose spirit do you feel hovering around your shoulders?
Clear, plant, tend, harvest, feed, trade, preserve.
Attend to your sisters.
Share the labor. Share all labor.
Recognize and read the angles from which that warrior views you.
Nurture these men as they trade, hunt, fight, and die. They will die.
Pay attention to the details offered in the stories of the old ones.
Remember. We are one and

nothing can kill us but loneliness.

Again, I used my research, my informed imagination, and the language of poetry to more fully consider lives lived 200 years ago. And in this way, I found myself considering my own life as well. What is my position in society as a woman? What are some of the important values and details of my life? This kind of deep connection and study must surely be one of the larger values of historical study. In this way, working in a third space accomplishes what Bailyn describes as one of the ultimate goals of history studies, it “...provide(s) a way of getting out of the boundaries of one’s own life and culture and of seeing more of what human experience has been ...so that you know where you are and where we have come from and so you don’t fantasize about the past and make up myths to justify some immediate purpose.”⁷

This way of working with history represents the kind of investigation I hope my students will conduct when they engage with the subjects that interest them. When presenting history topics to students, it seems impossible to anticipate what questions or subtopics they might pursue. But allowing time and space for this kind of self-directed research is important if students are to connect deeply with their history studies. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust, who writes about the lives of Confederate women during the Civil War, articulates this desire to make a profound connection with her subjects of study, in order to more fully understand them:

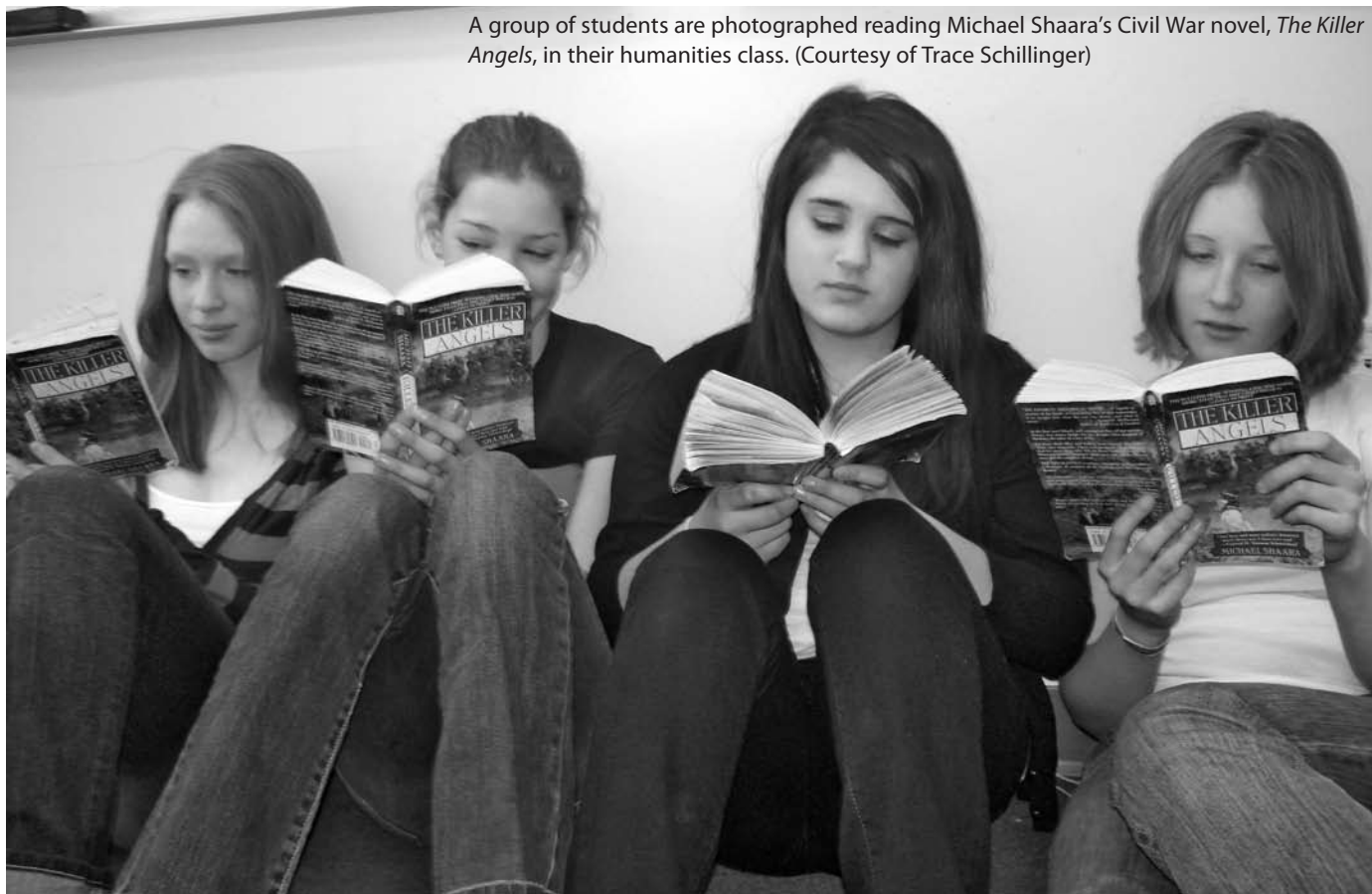
I hope to give a sense of how people are shaped and constrained by the world into which they are born, of how their choices are limited by the “taken for granted”-ness of their social universe. We need not forgive their rationalizations, but it is imperative that we understand them. I would like us to recognize that we too are subject to self-delusion, to the limited vision imposed by the social arrangements of our time. As we understand how

people in the past fashioned and maintained their beliefs, we can better evaluate, criticize, and perhaps change our own.⁸

The necessity for a connection with her subject matter expands the vision I have of how my students, too, will work with historical subjects. It is important to render embodied versions of the subjects we study, in order to accomplish the goals Faust outlines in the above passage.

My student Nory, by the time she has written her poem about Gettysburg, has already worked in the distinct realms of history and literature. She has done the paradigmatic work of a history student—reportage, facts, analysis, chronology, and logic, and the narrative work of an English student—stories, poetry, drama.⁹ The poem emerges in that third space, out of her work in both disciplines. Prior to drafting the poem, Nory produced an analysis of the people and events she refers to. She has read the letters of soldiers written home, and the diaries and news reports of people who witnessed the battle; she has studied Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. She has placed this battle in its historical context. She comprehends the structural lines of the larger story of the Civil War and the American experience. She can explain why both armies are at Gettysburg, what they hope to achieve, and what battles they have walked away from. She has also read the novel *The Killer Angels* and has reflected on the characters and the events as they are portrayed by Michael Shaara. She has read, discussed, and written about their motives, their relationships to the Civil War and other soldiers, their ideologies, what and who they have left behind them at home, and their reactions to the battle. She has even compared the literary, imagined version of some of these characters to historical record. She has also explored Walt Whitman’s poem “Pensive on Her Dead Gazing, I Heard the Mother of All” as another perspective on this battle. By the time she writes her Gettysburg poem, Nory has traveled on what Wilfred M. McClay calls “the mystic chords of memory,” a historical

A group of students are photographed reading Michael Shaara's Civil War novel, *The Killer Angels*, in their humanities class. (Courtesy of Trace Schillinger)



consciousness that allows the student to connect back to the stories and people of history in ways that go beyond simply memorizing facts or analyzing primary documents.¹⁰ I believe that working in the third space brings us closer to the kind of engaged, fully conscious, and meaningful work Maxine Greene deems crucial in classrooms:

There must be an answering activity if we are to perceive what presents itself to us; we must reach out toward the object or text or performance through an act of consciousness that grasps that which is presented. In our engagements with historical texts too, with mathematical problems, scientific inquires, and (not incidentally) the political and social realities we have constructed along with those around us, it is never enough simply to label, categorize, or recognize certain phenomena or events. There has to be a live, aware, reflective transaction if

what presents itself to consciousness is to be realized.¹¹

The school year sped forward, and before I fully realize it, we are sitting in one of our final middle school assemblies. Between good-bye songs and dance performances, Nory stands in our packed theatre with a spotlight on her, reading another history-inspired poem in a stirring, passionate manner reminiscent of our classroom experience. As I listen, I ponder ways to work my class more often into that third space next year. Now that I have identified it and begun to define it, I look forward to spending more time there, generating important work with students. 📖

Notes

1. E. Moje, K. Ciecchanowski, K. Kramer, L. Ellis, R. Carillo, and T. Collazo, "Working toward Third Space in Content Area Literacy," *Reading Research Quarterly* (January/February/March 2004): 41-68.
2. E. W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 56-57.
3. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, *You Gotta BE the book: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 39.
4. Joy Hakim, "Reading, Writing, and ... History," *History Matters/Online* edition, www.nche.net/page12/page13/page13.html (April 1996) National Council for History Education.
5. Landon Y. Jones, ed., *The Essential Lewis and Clark* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), p. 19.
6. James P. Ronda, *Lewis & Clark Among the Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 47.
7. Bernard Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994).
8. Drew Gilpin Faust, "What Do We Want History to Do?" *History Matters/Online* edition, www.nche.net/page12/page14/page14.html (January 1997) National Council for History Education.
9. J. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1986).
10. Wilfred M. McClay, "Acquiring Historical Consciousness: The Mystic Chords of Memory," *History Matters/Online* edition, www.nche.net/page12/page16/page16.html (Oct. 1996) National Council for History Education.
11. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

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