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"Adolescent Literature of Witness: Testimonies from the American Margins."

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MEDIA REVIEW

ADOLESCENT LITERATURE OF WITNESS

Testimonies from the American Margins

LAURA NICOSIA

As a teacher-scholar committed to social change and progressive pedagogy, in my courses for pre-service English teachers I focus on the human dimensions of English as a tool to produce, receive, and circulate personal narratives and testimonies. I challenge my students to reflect upon their praxis by urging them to acknowledge pedagogies of power and their (un)intentional agendas. These students must learn to see themselves as *teachers* of English—wielding power, sanctioning or rejecting the canon and/or traditional teaching practices, and influencing their own students through the texts they choose.

If the twentieth century is an “era of testimony,” as Shoshana Felman asserts, then teaching through testimony (autobiography, memoir, personal narrative, oral history, primary source material, historical documents, eyewitness accounts), is ethically meritorious and professionally valid. This is so only if teachers (and by extension, their students) are trained in *how* to read testimony—by scrutinizing the forces that enable the witness to move away from potential victimization and toward the victory inherent to becoming a *writing witness*. Through the act of writing, the witness suspends forgetfulness, reclaims memories, and rebuffs denial. Such testimonies, born of traumatic witnessing, are politically transformative memorates that can enhance traditional, Western, canon-bound literary curricula. While many teachers fret over the idea of adding more into an already crammed, albeit ethnocentric curriculum, students will come to an even deeper understanding of their world by reading non-fictional testimonies.

Who Are These Future English Teachers?

With a population of over fifteen-thousand students, Montclair State University is the fastest-growing university in New Jersey. Nearly twenty percent of the students are part-time, over sixty percent of undergraduates are female, and thirty-nine percent are students of color. My classes exhibit these demographics. In addition, nearly a third of my “Teaching English Methods” students work full-time during the day and take classes at night. Others are older students or second-career adults. Most of my students are the first members of their families to attend college, with many being second-generation US citizens over the age of twenty-five.

Despite their differences, these students have pragmatic attitudes toward their academic programs. They desire quality texts that lend themselves to

They Cage the Animals at Night.

JENNINGS MICHAEL BURCH.
NEW YORK: SIGNET, 1985.

October Sky.

DIR. JOE JOHNSTON.
UNIVERSAL PICTURES, 1999.

Bread Givers.

ANZIA YEZIERSKA.
NEW YORK: PERSEA, 2003.

practical uses in a secondary classroom. With one eye on their academic work plans and the other eye on their professional time clocks, these students demand efficient and valuable course content and pedagogical experiences.

A Genre at the Margins

I regularly return to a core of testimonial texts as I prepare my syllabi for each new semester: *Bread Givers* by Anzia Yeziarska; *They Cage the Animals at Night* by Jennings Michael Burch; and *October Sky* (the film version of *Rocket Boys*, written by Homer Hickam, Jr.). These texts offer testimonies about class, gender, and/or ethnic conflicts experienced by youths as they struggle for personal and social agency and a piece of the elusive American Dream. They are ideal for secondary classes (English, history, or American Studies) at all levels, and appeal to a broad range of audiences. Consequently, they are valuable for use in post-secondary programs in teacher education and Young Adult Literature courses. The College Board has designated *Bread Givers* as a high school level Advanced Placement text. This book is often used for post-secondary courses in immigration literatures that offer exposure to the lives of minority women at the turn of the twentieth century.

Life-stories such as these are often marginalized in canon-laden secondary school curricula—reserved for the time when we finish our mandatory reading lists and have a few days to spare at the end of the quarter or year. Clearly, nonfiction and testimonial texts have “been the poor relation when it comes to curricular decisions. We have so much literature to share with students that ... we overlook the rich materials that come from the ‘real’ realm” (Morgan 69). Nevertheless, English instructors at all levels should recognize such primary sources as cultural artifacts worthy of analysis and critical scholarship, and should teach such texts without apology.

Not Without Its “Dangers”

Teaching testimony is problematic. Exposing students to the stories of those who bear witness to trauma, catastrophe, injustice, or violence involves encountering realities that cause many readers to doubt or flatly refute the atrocity that is placed before them with a type of vicarious amnesia. Both scenarios of rejection problematize the witness’s authority. Complicating matters further is the fact that all three texts use the voices and experiences of adolescents, rarely recognized as reliable narrators or believable witnesses.

For many readers, rejecting adolescent epiphanic testimonies based upon a perceived or pre-conceived bias of the unreliable narrator, is easier than acknowledging the violence humans are capable of committing upon other humans—especially acts committed upon children. Felman asserts that refusal to accept knowledge, even disturbing knowledge, is “not a passive state of absence—a simple lack of information: it is an active dynamic of negation, an active refusal of information” (“Psychoanalysis and Education” 417). Therefore,

readers should approach these texts with a willing suspension of disbelief.

I preface class discussions by acknowledging that these texts contain disturbing elements of physical violence, emotional cruelty, social oppression, and religious and ethnic intolerance. However, I assure students that while these texts bear witness to personal traumas, the witnesses lay claim to a qualified but certain victory by telling their stories. Through the transmission of their testimonies, both the witnesses and readers come to wisdom. One of the most compelling reasons for offering testimony is the psycho-social function of epiphany. Unless the witness testifies (with even flawed or incomplete knowledge), he will “not know the meaning of [his] knowledge” for he “does not know what [he] knows,” just as an audience cannot learn what has not been offered (Felman, “Psychology” 425). In order to be integrated, transmitted, and made socially useful, catastrophic life experiences must be communally shared. As Laub offers, “[R]epossessing one’s life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which [one] has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival” (85).

Bread Givers

I have taught this text in all levels of secondary classes, from freshman through senior years, and currently use it in my course “Teaching English Methods: Secondary.” Along with offering a collective witness to the claustrophobic and oppressive life in the Lower East Side Manhattan tenements at the turn of the century, Anzia Yeziarska testifies to the personal traumas of a young girl’s hunger for autonomy and freedom, for access to an education, for the right to desire more than what her lot in life prescribed, for the right to express herself, and for access to the bounties of the American lifestyle.

At first, students protest that this text is fiction—not testimony. Granted, even some critics have classified *Bread Givers* as a thinly veiled, fictional autobiography, “an expression of the difficult search for autonomy faced by women” (Kessler-Harris xiv). To relay her story while protecting a vestige of her own selfhood and anonymity (and of her family members), Yeziarska chose to offer her witness in an informal style by using a literary mask—the character of the young Sara Smolinsky.¹ In her introduction to the text, Alice Kessler-Harris argues that:

Anzia’s voice reflects a historical moment in the 1920’s when many educated women questioned the rigid boundaries of family and insisted as fiercely as Anzia on pursuing their own ends. At the same time, because she is an immigrant, coming from a working-class culture that attempted to channel women’s aspirations into narrow frames, the voice anticipates the frustrations of our period and our tormented debates as to the human costs exacted when women combine family and career. (xv)

Yeziarska’s defense mechanism of speaking through the mask of Sara is

¹ In Yeziarska’s writing, the sentence structures are informal and short, repetitive, filled with interjections and questions to the reader/listener. In many ways, it is closer to an oral narrative than to a written tale: the mindset of the witness comes from the thought processes of an orally-based Jewish Orthodox culture.

what has helped her “escap[e] the predicament of being—and having to become—a witness” (224). The transformational aspect of her testimony therefore becomes its most potent healing force.

As the youngest daughter (she is ten years old at the beginning of the text) of a recently emigrated Orthodox rabbi and his family, Sara testifies to the collision of values between the Old World and the New World, between the tantalizing elusiveness of the American Dream’s social mobility and the patriarchal hierarchy of the sexes within Jewish Orthodoxy. Sara struggles to reconcile her desire for autonomy with her guilt over abandoning her family and culture in order to pursue an education and a career. She reveals:

I hate my father. And I hate God most of all for bringing me into such a terrible house.

More and more I began to think inside myself, I don’t want to sell herring for the rest of my days. I want to learn something. I want to do something. I want some day to make myself for a person and come among people. But how can I do it if I live in this hell house of Father’s preaching and Mother’s complaining....

I’d want an American-born man who was his own boss. And would let me be my boss. And no fathers, and no mothers, and no sweatshops, and no herring! (66)

What my students find most compelling, and perhaps disturbing, about this text is also that which problematizes the delivery of its testimony: they react viscerally and indignantly to the manner in which Sara’s father (Reb Smolinsky) responds to her quest for the American Dream.

Frequently, my students react venomously to his treatment of all females in the text. Regardless of age, many students refer to Reb as “lazy,” “abusive,” “slothful,” “unlikable,” “contradictory,” “overly pious,” and so on. On occasion, students extract Reb’s aphorisms and preachings from the text and employ Yeziarska’s testimony as an attack on Jewish Orthodoxy. While his speeches are oftentimes incendiary, some students experience knee-jerk reactions and judge Reb based upon their own cultural baggage without considering how their judgments may be reactionary, biased, or uninformed. Potentially volatile passages from the text necessitate maturity and benefit from a close reading of the whole text. For example:

Rage flamed from his [Reb’s] eyes as he thundered at me, stamping his feet. “Pfui on your education! What’s going to be your end? A dried-up old maid? You think you can make over the world? You think millions of educated old maids like you could change the world one inch? Woe to America where women are let free like men. All that’s false in politics, prohibition, and all the evils of the world come from them.” (205)

I remind my students that while they are entitled to their opinions, beliefs, and cultural standards, the testimony within *Bread Givers* is not intended to make them hate Reb or Jewish Orthodoxy. In the text, Sara responds to his

tirade with a central epiphanic revelation, “I no longer saw my father before me, but a tyrant from the Old World where only men were people” (205). Despite traumas of starvation, wracking poverty, gender discrimination, and her father’s intolerance, Sara forgives him and works toward their reconciliation in their latter years. She wonders, “How could I have hated him and tried to blot him out of my life? Can I hate my arm, my hand that is part of me? Can a tree hate the roots from which it sprang? Deeper than love, deeper than pity, is the oneness of the flesh that’s in him and me” (286). My students are troubled by this statement while also recognizing that it brings forth the most vital questions of testimony’s healing powers.

Should today’s readers of this testimony be any less forgiving? The totality of Yeziarska’s testimony must be heard; pulling excerpts out of context corrupts the validity of the witnessing. Once my students begin to protest and rail against Reb, it is time to backpedal and foster reflective awareness of the class’s reactions. I challenge them to reflect upon their own status as witnesses to Yeziarska’s testimony, to examine their responses to the text, and to assess what is happening in the class.

To facilitate this metacognitive reflection, I pass around the 1975 and the 2003 editions of *Bread Givers* and ask the students to interrogate the messages of the paratextual documents in each edition. In small-group discussions, they examine the Foreword, black and white photographs, movie stills, and back cover of the 2003 edition, and prepare a dialogic listing and qualitative analysis of the perceived testimony in each. Invariably, students notice that the newest edition articulates a more academic testimony that integrates personal history and memoir with archival-quality primary documents. The revisioning of Yeziarska’s “fictional autobiography” into a testimonial novel yields a hybrid genre that introduces students to the power of testimonial literature and illustrates how testimony, in all its forms, is an act of reciprocal impact and power. The images and preface mediate the text and frame the novel’s elements with an aura of authenticity that yields validation and renders believability.

To make this analysis of *Bread Givers* practical for their secondary teaching careers, students create a one-week unit plan for a hypothetical high school English class. They must create five days of class lessons, assignments, homework, assessments, and include corresponding New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards. Additionally, I require the use of an electronic discussion board to enable students to speak with their peers, to solicit support, and to cultivate ideas for their unit plans. During the fall 2005 semester, as I moderated the online discussions, I noticed that students talked about the testimony itself more than they discussed the unit plan assignment. They wrangled with the text, argued over it, and reassessed what it means to be a good daughter, father, Jew, Torah scholar, wife, and American citizen. They were transformed by Yeziarska’s testimony and offered personal stories of self-discovery. Students confessed to their own experiences of being first-generation American citizens facing issues of assimilation and dealing with the conflicts that arise with their elders regarding these calls for change.

Occasionally, students took their peers to task and prompted corrective exchanges. One undergraduate teacher education student responded to a posting about Reb's behavior with the following:

I am going to take issue with your characterization of Reb. To be sure he is not a likeable character, and it is heartbreaking how he destroys the lives of his daughters one by one, but I sense that you are taking this too personally, which is also not entirely a bad thing. Reading good stories should affect you to the deepest part of your being. However, I feel in reading and absorbing literature it is better to stay away from judging the faults of the characters. . . . I think your [sic] mad at him, but instead of being mad at him ask yourself the questions how and why it is he acted so badly to his family? Ask why did he hold so much power over his wife and daughters? Ask about the great contradictions of his learning of the Torah and his actions, especially towards material wealth? For critical thinking, Reb Smolinsky is a gold mine of questions, great for classroom discussion; his failings are the failings of humanity and this makes him a wonderful character to read. Again I am not saying his character acts well and is to be admired, but it is also important to always remember your [sic] reading the reflections of the author, and although she wrote a powerful story, it is her story your [sic] reading. If Reb Smolinsky had written his story it would have surely been very different. (Student 1)

The postings that followed this one reflected the student's desire to discover more about Orthodox Judaism and to consider the possibilities that Reb and Sara were not so very different from each other.² Another student responded:

Some of the similarities between Sara and Reb are that they are both strongminded, willing to block out the world in order to succeed at what they are trying to accomplish. They are "hard hearted." Their studies are extremely important to them, and at times they felt that family had to be pushed away in order to achieve what they felt they needed to do. It's clear that Sara is a product of Reb's parenting and though she feels betrayed and hurt by his stubbornness, the traits that she acquired from him are the reasons why she was able to break free from some of the traditions that imprisoned her. (Student 2)

In order to pursue these lines of thought, some students researched Jewish Orthodoxy and culture, while others researched the tenement experience for more contextual data. I suggested that they visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (or go on the virtual tour) for "first-hand" experience and for viewing primary materials and artifacts.³ The museum's website recreates the historical contexts for Yeziarska's life. It offers thorough educator lesson plans, 360° virtual tours of tenement apartments (fully restored and furnished), views of cultural artifacts, images, art, and music of the period.⁴ Most pre-service English teachers incorporated the tenement site within

² The students researched and investigated these social-religious areas of their own volition—the challenge was not assigned. This most genuine kind of critical thinking—student-led inquiry—is an example of the passionate responses prompted by testimonial literature.

³ The official website for the Lower East Side Tenement Museum is www.tenement.org. The site is interactive and geared toward both student-users and instructors. The museum itself is affiliated with the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

⁴ In the past, I brought my secondary school students on field trips to this museum. Without question, they found the experience gripping. After touring the apartment buildings on Orchard Street (only two blocks away from where Sara's family lived), we walked down to Katz's Deli for corned beef sandwiches and blintzes. Later, if time was available, we made pilgrimage to the Holocaust Museum in Battery Park. Immersion in the environment combined with the readings, the discussion board participation, the co-curricular research, make for *bona fide* learning and yield more powerful, reflective, and informed writings.

their own unit plans and constructed a fully-integrated model upon which to base a series of multi-media lessons for their own classes.

They Cage the Animals at Night: A Memoir

Jennings Michael Burch's memoir testifies to the traumas he experienced as a young child growing up in the foster-care system of mid-twentieth century New York. This first-person narrative is told through the now-mature voice of the author as he wrestles for a sense of closure. Felman asserts that "to testify, likewise, before an audience of readers or spectators—is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to appeal to a community" (204). It is imperative for the writer to be a witness to an Other; however, it is more important that he testify to the horrors he experienced for himself—to prevent further erosion of his memory and to refuse "enslavement to the fate of [his] victimization" (Laub 70). Telling his story is cathartic.

In preparation for this text, I alert students to the symptoms of vicariously experienced trauma. Laub argues that: "For the listener who enters the contract of the testimony, a journey fraught with dangers lies ahead. There are hazards to the listening of trauma. Trauma—and its impact on the hearer—leaves, indeed, no hiding place intact. As one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself, and that is not a simple task" (72). Students often believe that they could never be so affected by a text. Invariably, however, some readers reveal that they literally threw the book across the room in fits of anger and expressions of frustration at the atrocities Jennings endures and transmits through his witnessing. Readers see through the eyes and feel through the heart of one little boy as he is repeatedly pummeled by the American orphanage system of the mid-twentieth century. With sufficient discussion regarding their active positions as witnesses, students learn how to navigate these emotional batterings and "to integrate these pitfalls of the witnessing into the fulfillment of their . . . human task, and how to bond with the narrator in a common struggle to release the testimony which, in spite of inhibitions on both sides, will allow the telling of the trauma to proceed and to reach its testimonial solution" (Felman xvii).

To protect his own sense of self and to survive as a victim of abuse, Jennings successfully adopts a defense mechanism—an externalized representation of all his vulnerabilities and repressed tenderness: Doggie. This stuffed animal becomes the key to his psycho-emotional survival and his only dependable friend and confidante. Doggie is the embodiment of ideal love and of what the reader comes to understand as an externalized projection of Jennings' precarious innocence and endangered childhood. How he came to receive Doggie from Sister Clair while in a group home is one of his few tender memories and the source of the text's title:

She removed the animals one at a time. She placed each animal in the arms of the one who most wanted that particular animal. The others' arms remained outstretched and wanting.

"Don't you want one?" she asked. She was looking directly at me. I nodded my head. I did. I hadn't realized I had wrapped both my arms around my own body as though I were hugging all the animals.... She smiled broadly and placed a fuzzy brown-and-white dog with black floppy ears in my arms. I cradled the dog to my chest and tucked his big nose under my chin. I walked back to the bed. (23)

Every evening, all stuffed animals are returned to the communal toy closet where the nuns keep them safely tucked away until the next day when the children would receive them again. Jennings speaks with Sister Clair:

"Sister, why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Cage the animals at night?"

"Well... "She looked up and out through the barred window before answering me. "We don't want to, Jennings, but we have to. You see, the animals that are given to us we have to take care of. If we didn't cage them up in one place, we might lose them, they might get hurt or damaged. It's not the best thing, but it's the only way we have to take care of them." (56)⁵

Burch's testimony is difficult to read. It is excruciating to watch this little boy as he is abandoned by his mother, victimized by the system, and abused by both the clergy who is charged to care for him and by his foster families. The reader "is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (Laub 57). Even those families and people who are kind to Jennings are only temporarily present in his life during this crisis-filled period. Burch's story testifies to the devastating effects insecurity and violence have on a child.

Since the vehicle for this testimony is a first-person memory of a young and troubled child, the reader must come to terms with the function of memory and the unreliability of the witnessing. Besides the problematic nature of testimony as recollection, this text offers remembered dialogue. Granted, some of Burch's recollections may be so painful that he cannot forget those things his mother said as she left him in the care of the Church-run orphanage—the all-too painful, "I'll be right back" (Laub 76).

Other exchanges, however, have been reconstructed to witness the essence of the Jennings' testimony. In spite of the fictional elements, his reconstructed work is powerful testimony. So-called flawed memories do not affect the power of testimony. According to Lacan:

Freud's argumentation properly reverses the burden of the proof—"In these elements that you cite in objection to me, the

memory lapses and the various degradations, I continue to see a meaning, and even an additional meaning. When the phenomenon of forgetting intervenes, it interests me all the more... *These negative phenomena. I add them to the interpretations of the meaning. I recognize that they too have the function of a message. [...]* What interests Freud... [is] *the message as an interrupted discourse.*" (qtd. in Felman, "Psychology" 417)

Thus, when Jennings is first abandoned and plagued by a strange sense of guilt, he ponders whether "Mom was mad at me for something. If I had done something bad, it must have been terrible. I couldn't remember what it was" (9-10). The unknown reason for his abandonment does not weaken his testimony. Rather, it attests to his sense of innocence and his inability to comprehend the complexities of adulthood.

In response to Jennings' story, students experience the full range of the stages Laub identifies as "listening defenses": shock, paralysis, anger, fact-finding, and a need to make amends (72). I urge my students to be aware of and to embrace the flood of their responses. To satisfy their collective need to obtain closure through what Laub terms "foreclosure through facts," students do research on single-parent families and poverty, recent DYFS investigations, local news stories regarding the foster-care system, adoption stories, and so on. They are responsible to cull their research into a piece of process writing (sometimes research-supported essays; at other times, problem-solution essays or persuasive essays). Burch's testimony, they realize, sheds light on the problems that still plague the foster-care system in New Jersey and across the United States.

October Sky

Many public secondary schools have adopted *October Sky*, the film version of Homer Hickam Jr.'s memoiristic *bildungsroman*, *Rocket Boys*, as a core text in their curricula. This film interrogates what it means for an adolescent boy from a West Virginia mining town to discover his dream and to challenge the capitalistic hegemony that owns the town, the mine, and the miners. This text embodies the pursuit of the American Dream, albeit a dark version. This is a gritty testimony of desperation born within a town that perceives its own demise as the supply of coal dwindles. Felman reminds us that when cultures are forced to "confront the horror of [their] own destructiveness, to attest to the unthinkable disaster of a culture's breakdown, and to attempt to assimilate the massive trauma and the cataclysmic shift in being that result[s] within some reworked frame of culture... [the] literature of testimony is... not an art of leisure but an art of urgency" (114). *October Sky* bears witness to the collapse of a mine, the dissolution of a town, the loss of an economy, the disintegration of a family, and the pursuit of a young boy's dreams.

During the fall of 1957, as the Soviet satellite Sputnik soars overhead, the race for space and the Cold War reach their zenith. Far below the

⁵ Students invariably come to believe that Doggie is merely a literary metaphor—a writerly construct to symbolize Jennings as an innocent child. As we finish discussing the text, I offer my own testimony that I met the author and saw Burch Doggie carry in a brown paper bag. The author visited my high school classes. Doggie was worn and bedraggled, but he was real. I share a photo of the author and Doggie as proof. For many, seeing the photo validates Burch's testimony and lends even more credence to his tale.

orbiting satellite, the town of Coalwood dismisses fears about Soviet invasion; they have more immediate and local concerns. One young character remarks: “I don’t know why they’d drop a bomb on this place, be a heck of a waste of a bomb.” In general, the citizens concern themselves with more down-to-earth issues such as the mines that support the community and the formation of a union to combat the increasingly antagonistic policies of the corporation that owns Coalwood and the coal it unearths. As the coal supply diminishes and the miners die of black lung disease, accidents, and cave-ins, the town’s sons struggle to find a future—any future that doesn’t contain coal. Seemingly, the only way out of Coalwood and a dead-end job in the mines is earning an athletic scholarship (particularly for football) or the elusive academic scholarship that accompanies co-curricular events like the National Science or Westinghouse Fairs.

Most of my students have little first-hand knowledge of the 1950s and no familiarity with coal mining other than recent news stories of mine accidents. Nevertheless, students are familiar with “national security issues,” “changing economy bases,” “imminent threats,” “the haves and the have nots,” and “terror alert statuses.” Students draw parallels between how the citizens of Coalwood saw Sputnik as a spying device or a weapon of mass destruction and how today’s surveillance and Patriot Act provisions diminish personal freedoms while also creating paranoia over invisible enemies. Montclair’s students understand the protagonist’s desire to escape mining by going to college. They recognize that for immigrants to the US and for their children, education is an escape from economic stagnation. Many students assert that, by attending college, they expect to escape their parents’ dead-end or manual labor jobs and to attain a higher level of economic stability than their parents.

Despite the chronic poverty and fatalism that blanket Coalwood like the dust it produces, the protagonist challenges the suppressive school system. Administrators recognize the lack of opportunities that Coalwood’s sons face, yet they perpetuate its vicious cycles of oppression rather than dismantle it.⁶ They hesitate to give “false hope” to the boys who are fated to become miners, like their fathers and grandfathers before them. There are faculty members, however (such as Miss Riley, who later tragically succumbs to Hodgkin’s disease), who attempt to nurture academic inquiry and critical thinking despite the skepticism of those who work in the mines or who run the town. In my Methods classes, students respond viscerally to the overt socio-political agenda espoused by the Coalwood schools. While my students decry the lack of democratic educational opportunities, we examine how Homer and his friends (the so-called “Rocket Boys”) pursued informal educational opportunities with their self-instructed studies of rockets and trigonometry. Despite the physical and emotional abuses these boys experienced, the testimony the book provides is redemptive.

While most of my students are cognizant of oppression in its many

forms, this testimonial film speaks to the pervasively destructive power of class divisions and ethnic oppression. Homer Hickam may be white, but his family is firmly entrenched in physical labor. Many of his fellow citizens of Coalwood are immigrants (Poles, Russians, Italians) and Blacks: they are the people without agency—the victims of hegemonic power structures.⁷

Prompted by Sputnik, Homer sets his visions and dreams toward the heavens and refuses to acquiesce to societal pressures by descending into the mines. That is, until his father is nearly killed in a cave-in and Homer is forced to quit school and dig coal to pay his mounting medical expenses. Homer’s trauma is mirrored by the film’s camera work—low ceilings, black and white photography, dust and smog everywhere—and the filmic dialectics of outer space/mines, heaven/hell, suffocation/expansion, fatalism/idealism are fodder for rich classroom discussions. I draw a simple chart on the board with the title, “Dialectics,” and the headings of “Positives” and “Negatives.” As we watch, students identify and characterize various images and motifs from the film.⁸

Regardless of his nearly fatal injuries, Homer’s father, John, is the target of near-universal disdain in class discussions, as was Reb from *Bread Givers*. John accuses his son of stealing company property to build his experimental rocket prototypes and of co-opting company workmen; he calls Homer a “thief” in front of the men of Coalwood, dishonoring him and impugning his name. Finally, John gathers up all of Homer’s rocketry equipment and discards it curbside. Some viewers find this aspect of Hickam’s testimony melodramatic, regardless of its truthfulness. For others, this painful moment speaks for the futility of Homer’s dream to conquer space; his struggle to escape Coalwood is a “passage through death” (Felman, *Testimony* 111). It is excruciating to witness Homer’s father overtly favoring one son over another. It is in these on-screen moments that John appears to surpass the villainy of the Coalwood Mining Company. It is far more psychologically traumatic to be victimized by one’s father than by a faceless conglomerate referred to as “The Company.” One of my students pointed out that perhaps John Hickam is not an evil man. He mistakenly feels that he is protecting his son. While his actions confound our sensibilities, his intentions might be to shield Homer from possible failure. It is for these reasons that John repeatedly berates Homer and prevents him from dreaming. This theory rang true with several students.

Regardless of his arguably good intentions, John inflicts daily emotional and psychological abuse upon his son. This causes the audience to experience vicarious feelings of resentment and hopelessness. My students—as viewers and witnesses of this testimonial memoir—pity Homer when he descends into the mines and surrenders his aspirations to explore space. Homer rides the elevator down into the pitch-dark shaft, his spirit breaks, and he becomes part of the Company’s machine. One student turned her head away from the screen every time Homer donned his lighted pith helmet. However, over time, having read and analyzed a series of testimonial texts, students embrace what Felman asserts must occur in

⁶ This testimony does not speak for the issues of women in Coalwood and my students have responded to the lack of female witnessing in this text by doing independent online research on oral stories by Appalachian women.

⁷ In a strong subterranean counterpoint to Homer’s search for the American Dream, the Coalwood workers are beginning to unionize in order to find a voice and a source of agency. Prompted by class and social inequalities, violence is ever-present and when things go wrong down in the mines, volatile tempers flare above ground. To Homer, Coalwood is hell on earth.

⁸ Fortunately, much of this analysis is a familiar exercise for Montclair State’s English Education students since they are required to take a class in Film Studies as part of their major.

order for testimony to succeed: “they [students/witnesses] have to learn how to recognize these hazards, how to integrate these pitfalls of the witnessing... and how to bond with the narrator in a common struggle to release the testimony” (xvii). Rather than skirting the responsibilities that come with “the viewing of videotaped autobiographical accounts” (Laub xvi), Methods students often decide to free Hickam’s testimony by teaching their own classes about the injustices of the mining industry .

As an activity, my students compose their own “Philosophy of Education” to be included in their professional dossier. Fueled by Homer’s testimony, many pre-service teachers vow, in their Philosophy essay, to never squelch a child’s dreams (by encouraging children to envision possibilities), to embrace democratic principles (by providing equal access to education), and to fairly wield pedagogical power in their future English classrooms (by encouraging critical thinking and by exposing their students to stories and voices that may otherwise go unheard).⁹ The impact of this testimony is immediate—its effects are far-reaching when one realizes how many future English students will benefit from this film.

When the students create their unit plans for this text, I require that they include at least one activity in which students research mining towns and the culture that spawned the Rocket Boys. One especially effective method of enabling the “birth of knowledge through the testimonial process,” is visiting the Homer Hickam, Jr. website, taking virtual tours of Coalwood and viewing photos of the Rocket Boys throughout their adolescent and adult years.¹⁰ In this site, students may also research the Cold War, Sputnik, and the unionization of the mines. Students have had great success writing supported problem/solution or controversial essays dealing with safety issues within the mines. Such an assignment is both useful and timely, considering the recent fatal accidents in several mining towns in West Virginia.

In addition to the Hickam site, there are a significant number of websites where researchers can read miners’ first-person stories and memoirs, and view historical photographs.¹¹ Two sites (maintained by the Appalachian Blacksmiths Association), contain first-person testimonies, accident reports, natural disaster information, maps, and government-issued documents. Two additional sites contain data, histories, photos, line drawings, and facts covering the history of the iron mines in New Jersey and New York: these sites are maintained by the miners’ union of Highlands, New Jersey, and offer personal testimonies of life in and around mines and mining towns. Recently, an article in *The Record* (September 16, 2005) examined the present-day dangers of abandoned mines in northern New Jersey. The possibilities for research and interdisciplinary work are extensive. From my experiences at both the secondary and college levels, students are incredulous at the persistent disregard for safety and health issues, even with today’s technological advances and OSHA regulations. Hickam’s testimony is not only a recollection of years ago; it mirrors social injustices as they exist today.

9 As a coda to our knowledge-gathering exercises, students identify other film memoirs and testimonies that would pair well with *October Sky* for possible inclusion in their future classrooms. Titles such as *Rudy*, *Remember the Titans*, and *The Price of the American Dream* are frequently mentioned as potential texts. As a thematic connection to canonical fiction, we discuss how to yoke *October Sky* with *A Raisin in the Sun* and even *Romeo and Juliet*.

10 www.homerhickam.com

11 <http://www.rootswest.com/~wvcoal/>

<http://www.appaltnet.net/aba/coalminers.htm>
www.historicironmines.com/life/history.htm
www.ironminers.com

Instilling a Sense of Potential

I concur with June Kuzmeskus when she claims that her goals as a teacher are

to raise students’ awareness of the human cost of racial and ethnic¹² injustices typically glossed over in their history classes or in the news... to inspire them to anger and compassion [and to] confront problems they feel they can’t speak of, that compel them, they think, to suffer silently.... Within this approach, testimonial literature has value for my students far beyond the classroom. It provides a much-needed signal not to give up on themselves or on others. (124)

12 To Kuzmeskus’ two reasons, I add those injustices based on class, sexuality, and gender.

Bringing students to these testimonials and exposing them to the traumas that others have experienced will yield active witnessing. Training pre-service English teachers with testimonial texts may empower them to create diverse, politically and pedagogically conscious curricula. At its core, witness literature is the sum of what happens while the reader experiences the text. Testimonies like *They Cage the Animals at Night*, *Bread Givers*, and *October Sky* give voice to stories that need to be heard. Teachers must heed the call to defy these cultural silences.

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