Examining emotional rules in the English classroom: A critical discourse analysis of one student's literary responses in two academic contexts

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Current research suggests that emotional investment is essential for helping students critically engage in learning in the English language arts classroom. Yet, scholarship on the role of emotion in literary response has been limited, focusing chiefly on considerations of the merits of personal response—a focus that reflects dominant theories of emotion as located in the individual. Tethered to the personal, emotion has been conceptualized as a peripheral part of literary engagement—as something to be ignored, leveraged, or gotten beyond in an effort to move students toward more substantial textual engagement. This paper proposes that a sociocultural theory of emotion provides a new lens for considering how emotion engages students in literature learning. In this view, emotion is in the fabric of every classroom context, manifesting as “emotional rules” that have material implications for learning. Constructed using methods from Critical Discourse Analysis, the case study outlined in this paper demonstrates how emotional rules were perceived, taken up, and even transformed by one student, Nina, in two discussion contexts—a seminar circle and a literature circle—playing a central role in the work of literature learning in each context. Our findings advance scholarship on the relationship between response and emotion by suggesting that emotion cannot simply be invited in or left out of the literature classroom in the interest of moving students toward literary engagement, but instead is already fundamentally a part of literary engagement and must be noticed, interrogated, and sometimes disrupted in the interest of expanding interpretive possibilities.

I don’t think when [Glen] married Anney that it was his intention to abuse his daughters or abuse her daughters. I remember them describing him at first, and him being like very possessive and very quiet. And you know, I sometimes, I wonder what his childhood was like.

—Nina, age 16 (response to Bastard out of Carolina in an interview with Amanda)
Nina, a 10th grader, expressed these two, contrasting literary responses in grappling with Dorothy Allison’s (1993) novel *Bastard out of Carolina*. In both cases, Nina discussed Glen, a character who sexually abuses his young stepdaughter, Bone. The first response was shared with Amanda, a researcher in Nina’s classroom, in an interview where Nina discussed her interpretations of classroom literature. The second response comes from a literature circle where Nina and two peers discussed the novel outside the earshot of their teacher, DeAnn.

Current research suggests that emotional investment is essential for helping students critically engage in English language arts (ELA) learning (Dockter, Haug, & Lewis, 2011). Yet, scholarly conceptions of the relationship between emotion and response have thus far been limited. For instance, the role of emotion is rarely considered in responses like Nina’s first one—a response that appears rational, scholarly, and interpretive. On the other hand, responses like Nina’s second, with its intimate stance and intense affect, are seldom considered to be interpretive. Instead, they are viewed as emotional and personal and are judged in terms of the degree of their usefulness in moving students toward interpretation.

Common-sense assumptions evoked by Nina’s responses arise from conceptualizations of the role of emotion in literature learning that focus chiefly on the affordances and limitations of personal response—a focus that reflects dominant theories of emotion as located in the individual (Boler, 1999). For instance, New Critics and formalists see emotional/personal response as distracting from text-focused interpretations of literature (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1949). Conversely, simplified forms of Rosenblatt’s (1995) reader-response theory (like those forwarded by many textbooks and mass-produced teaching materials) see emotional/personal response as useful, but only inasmuch as it activates a reader’s interest in particular textual themes. Finally, sociocultural response theorists and critical literacy proponents suggest that emotional/personal response should be troubled because it may limit a reader’s ability to understand how characters are shaped by larger social and cultural forces (Appleman, 2009; Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Tethered to the personal, emotion is conceptualized in each of these paradigms as something to be disregarded, leveraged, or challenged in an effort to move students toward literary interpretation. Moreover, when viewed exclusively as personal, emotion becomes peripheral to the central project of literary engagement.

In this paper, we offer a theorization of the relationship between emotion and literary response that is fundamentally different and, consequently, poses new questions that we argue more fully explore how emotion engages response. Following other scholars in English studies (Lewis & Tierney, 2011; Micciche, 2007; Winans, 2012), we propose that a sociocultural theory of emotion that disentangles emotion from the personal provides a new lens that reveals the central role of emotion.
in engaging students in literature learning. Within this theory, emotion is not something that resides in individual students, nor can it be leveraged, ignored, or gotten beyond. Instead, emotion is always already in the fabric of every classroom context. Given this view, we argue that neither of Nina’s responses was more or less emotional than the other. Instead, although one response appeared more rational than the other, each was equally guided by emotional expectations or rules that Nina perceived to be at play in each social context.

By conceptualizing emotion this way, we suggest that scholarly questions must be posed not simply about the usefulness of personal/emotional responses to literature, but instead about how emotion always already guides, engages, and regulates students’ literary responses, and—in so doing—governs the kinds of literature learning that can be accomplished.

Using methods from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003), this case study demonstrates how “emotional rules” (Zembylas, 2002) were perceived, taken up, and transformed by Nina and her peers in two discussion contexts. First, we examine Nina’s literary responses to a text in a whole-class seminar circle discussion, illustrating how she constructed these responses within an adherence to emotional rules that required rational, scholarly, and empathetic responses. Then, we study Nina’s responses in a literature circle context where Nina and her peers interrupted or “unstuck” (Ahmed, 2004) the rules for literature discussion that were relevant in the seminar circle. Our study was guided by the following questions:

1. What emotional rules did Nina perceive to be at play in each of the two classroom contexts?
2. How did Nina position herself within the emotional rules of these contexts?
3. What ideas, narratives, or discourses surfaced in Nina’s literary interpretations in each of these contexts?

Through this case study, we illustrate how emotional rules were central to literature learning in each context, allowing not only for different kinds of interactions and expressions, but also for different opportunities for interpretation and learning. Our findings advance scholarship on the relationship between response and emotion by suggesting that emotion cannot simply be invited in or left out of the literature classroom in the interest of moving students toward literary engagement, but instead is already fundamentally a part of literary engagement and must be noticed, interrogated, and sometimes disrupted in the interest of expanding interpretive possibilities.

**Theoretical and Empirical Framing**

**A Sociocultural View of Emotion**

Historically, emotion has been viewed either as bodily sensation or as cognitive and related to thought processes, judgments, and attitudes (Ahmed, 2004). Both definitions have conceived of emotion as natural and located in the individual,
while at the same time experienced somewhat universally (Boler, 1999). For instance, the physical sensations and cognitive experiences of “falling in love” are often assumed to be individual, personal, and—simultaneously—universally experienced (Jaggar, 1989).

By contrast, this paper relies on a sociocultural view of emotion that challenges notions of emotion as personal and natural. In recent years, sociocultural theories of emotion have proliferated in an array of fields, including philosophy, anthropology, sociolinguistics, social psychology, and cultural studies (see Wetherell, 2012, for a comprehensive review and critique of these lines of research). Within this multidisciplinary “affective turn” (Clough & Halley, 2007), the meaning of emotion and how it is studied vary widely. Wetherell (2012) explains that for some—philosophers such as Deleuze, Spinoza, Whitehead, and Bergson—“the turn to affect becomes a decisive shift away from the current conventions of critical theory, away from research based on discourse and disembodied talk and texts, towards more vitalist, ‘post human’ and process-based perspectives” (p. 3). Literacy scholars working in this area have importantly focused on the body itself as central to, rather than representative of, literacy learning (e.g., Leander & Boldt, 2013; Perry & Medina, 2011).

The project of our research is different, however, focusing on emotion as it moves among bodies and texts and sticks or becomes sedimented in social contexts. We affiliate our work more closely with recent studies in composition and English studies that consider how emotion is guided by teachers and texts in literacy classrooms as they aim to teach critically (Winans, 2012), how it is mobilized by students toward transforming texts and signs (Lewis & Tierney, 2011), how students’ responses are interpreted by teachers as having particular emotional resonances instead of others (Trainor, 2005), and how teachers’ own displays of political stances specify the appropriateness of particular forms of emotion in the classroom (Lindquist, 2004).

**Emotion as Circulating and Sticking in Social Contexts**

In conceptualizing emotion as circulating and sticking, our work is guided by Ahmed (2004), a scholar in cultural studies, and Micciche (2007), a rhetorician who takes up Ahmed’s work toward theorizing emotion in writing pedagogy. For these scholars, as emotion circulates repeatedly in particular ways in specific contexts, it accumulates, binds, and sticks. Our focus in this paper is on the sticking or sedimenting of emotion in classroom contexts and how that sedimentation can be disrupted.

We use the phrase *emotional rules*, as articulated by the educational philosopher Zembylas (2002) and employed by the English studies scholar Winans (2012), to help us conceptualize how emotion sticks in classroom contexts. Drawing on Hochschild’s (1979) sociological work on emotional labor and “feeling rules,” Zembylas (2002) defines emotional rules as norms for emotional displays or expressions that are acceptable and appropriate in a specific social context. Winans (2012) contends that in the context of the literature classroom, emotional rules “inform
and guide our attention” (p. 155), fostering “habits of (in)attention” (Boler, 1999) that motivate certain explorations and inhibit others.

Our use of the phrase emotional rules is different from its earlier use in socio-linguistic scholarship (e.g., Abu-Lughod & Lutz, 1990; Bamberg, 1997; Harré, 1986; Stearns & Stearns, 1985) that examined how emotional rules for social interaction are embedded within grammatical, lexical, and discursive structures particular to specific cultures and historical periods. Emotional rules, as we use the phrase, are informed by macro-level discourses and cultures, but do not originate or reside in them. In our work, emotional rules are constructed and negotiated, and come to stick in specific social contexts.

Like Micciche (2007), Lewis and Tierney (2011), and others who conceptualize emotion as circulating and sticking, we use the term emotion rather than feeling or affect to avoid conflating our work with studies of bodily sensation. This is not to say, however, that we are not interested in emotion as embodied. Instead, our paper focuses on how emotion is embodied in language, discourse, structures of participation, vocal features, and in some cases, the positioning of the body.

Emotional Rules in School Contexts and Literature Classrooms

Boler (1999) argues that children learn the self-regulation of emotion based on myriad social rules forwarded by governing bodies and institutional forces. She makes the case that schools are a primary place for such “pastoral” regulation of emotion. Likewise, Zembylas (2002) argues that emotional rules regulate the work of teachers, who are encouraged to express empathy, calmness, and kindness, and in turn police students into similar dispositions.

Zembylas (2002) explains that “emotional labor at school or in a classroom is not easily identified or recognized, mainly because emotional rules are disguised as ethical code, professional techniques, and specialized pedagogical knowledge” (p. 201). Below we examine emotional rules that are frequently propagated in the ELA classroom—sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly—through typical approaches to literary response.

Several dominant frameworks for teaching literature have prevailed in the ELA classroom. Each of these has assumed emotion to be an individual, psychological component of response.

First, approaches grounded in formalism or New Criticism ask students to focus on aesthetic appreciation of literary texts by studying the literary devices employed in literature. The emotional rules of New Criticism are explicitly voiced by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1949) when they argue that although readers may experience personal or individual emotion in responding to literature, that emotion constitutes error in interpretive judgment and ought to be ignored—a concept known as “the affective fallacy.” New Critical approaches, therefore, forward emotional rules that ask students to voice only emotionally distanced interpretations supported by textual evidence. Other kinds of emotion in the formalist or New Critical classroom are seen as anti-intellectual, overly personal, and irrelevant.

Personal growth and reader response models of English pedagogy (Dixon, 1975; Rosenblatt, 1995), by contrast, have often been interpreted as encouraging
students to explore and voice personal connections between their experiences and those represented in texts. In these models, readers’ responses are viewed as individual, unique, and valid, often regardless of the level of attention paid to the text at hand. Affective personal connections to literature that illustrate students’ positive growth in understanding themselves and others are highly valued in this model, while emotionally distanced responses based on the text alone are less valued. This model of literature pedagogy, then, is guided by emotional rules encouraging affective displays—particularly those in which students express sympathy, understanding, and acceptance of others rather than anger, frustration, sadness, or any other negative form of affect (Eagleton, 1985–1986).

Critical literacy and other sociocultural approaches to literature pedagogy question the focus on the individual that is forwarded in reader response approaches, instead urging teachers to help their students understand their identities—as people and readers—as located in their social and cultural histories (Appleman, 2009; Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). In moving toward the sociocultural, these approaches forward yet another set of emotional rules. For instance, in asking students to take on the perspectives of others, these approaches require students to withhold initial judgments and weigh their interpretations against those of their peers through democratic practices and dialogue. These practices carry emotional rules related to rationality, egalitarianism, fairness, and political correctness (Janks, 2002; Lewis & Tierney, 2011)—what Ellsworth (1989) calls “right and tasteful” emotions.

In this paper, we focus on how emotional rules in Nina’s ELA classroom guided and sometimes limited literary interpretations. In our analysis, we locate these rules in their broader circulation in pedagogies of ELA, noting how they stuck and were disrupted in the two classroom contexts in this study, allowing for discourses to emerge that invited or disinvited particular literary engagements.

Methods

Nina

Nina was a White, middle-class student, and one of several focal students in a larger qualitative study of response to literature across academic contexts. We selected focal students who represented a range of reading interests, abilities, and levels of engagement. Nina was selected as an example of a high-achieving student with deep investments in a range of reading activities (e.g., school reading, leisure reading, and participation in an after-school book club). As we began examining transcripts of Nina’s literary responses, we became interested in Nina’s markedly different responses to literature in her literature circle context and the seminar circle discussion, wondering how these responses might be guided by different emotional rules.

Academic Contexts

Data for this paper are from two academic contexts in which Nina was a participant, both at Creekside Junior/Senior High School, a school that served two pri-
marily white, middle- and working-class communities. Amanda and Megan were researchers and participant observers (Spradley, 1980) in both of these contexts, while DeAnn was the classroom teacher.

**Seminar Circle Discussions**

We focused on six observations (digitally recorded and transcribed; see Appendix for transcription notation) of seminar circle discussions during a one-month unit on *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). The novel tells the story of a young girl, Scout, who grapples with life in a racially divided Southern community while her lawyer father defends an African American man who is falsely accused of raping a White woman—a woman who was actually sexually abused by her own father. We chose to analyze data from this unit both because the unit took place simultaneously with the literature circle unit and because the two units focused on texts that pose similar questions related to social class, race, and sexual trauma. Nina was one of 16 students in this context.

**Literature Circle Discussions**

During the month-long literature circle unit, students met twice weekly for 30 minutes per meeting. Students were assigned literature circle roles (Daniels, 2002) intended to help them organize their talk. Nina worked with two other female students, Biz and Jenny, to discuss *Bastard out of Carolina*. Allison’s novel is about a young girl, Bone, growing up in rural poverty in 1950s South Carolina. Bone is sexually abused by her stepfather—abuse that is overlooked by her mother, who struggles daily to provide for her family. The three girls were grouped based on their preference for this novel. Nina said she saw herself as a social and academic equal with the other girls and felt comfortable talking with them. All three study authors occasionally listened to discussions and asked clarification questions. However, on the whole, these discussions were student-facilitated and minimally monitored. Data examined from this context include five discussion transcripts.

**Interviews**

We interviewed Nina on three occasions in order to triangulate our data and validate our findings. We asked Nina general questions about her reading preferences and responses to texts read inside and outside of school. We sometimes revisited episodes from transcripts of Nina’s participation in the discussion contexts, reading aloud episodes and asking Nina to “think aloud” (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1984) about her textual interpretations and social elements of her participation. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed.

**Coding and Analysis**

**Why Critical Discourse Analysis?**

Our coding and analysis were guided by methods from CDA (Fairclough, 2003). Some scholars question CDA’s focus on language and discourse for studying emotion. For instance, scholars in cultural studies (Clough, 2007; Massumi, 2002) contend that a move toward the affective requires a move away from the discursive.
Such a move seems appropriate and necessary in scholarship that centers on the body itself in social research. Our work, however, centers on the role of emotion in social contexts driven by discussion, and is necessarily focused to a certain extent on language and discourse.

At the same time, we agree that studies that employ CDA typically foreground language and text, perhaps at the expense of other means of expression. Therefore, we have attended to critiques of the linguistic focus of CDA by using ethnographic and paralinguistic detail to consider some of the nonlinguistic ways that emotion is embodied. Fairclough (2003) notes that CDA allows for the study of nonlinguistic elements, explaining that the elements of discourse are “not purely linguistic categories but categories which cut across the division between language and ‘non-language,’ the discoursal and non-discoursal” (p. 25). We note, however, that while the literature discussions we examined were not spaces for a great deal of physical movement, our lack of video data that would allow for a fine-grained examination of gestures and facial expressions is a limitation of this study.

Critiques of CDA by those who do study emotion in language were also important for our methods. Trainor (2005), for instance, argues that CDA can identify political discourses but does not allow for a full understanding of how emotion persuades people to appropriate those discourses. Trainor recommends that scholars consider extensions of CDA that allow for a fuller examination of how and why people take up various discourse positions and not others. We have addressed Trainor’s recommendations in this paper by including interview data in which we asked Nina about her own perceptions about emotional rules that guided her responses.

**Our Use of Critical Discourse Analysis**

CDA provided us with tools for examining three means by which emotional rules came to stick and were disrupted in the social contexts of our study: in patterns of interaction among participants; in participants’ positioning of themselves within those interactions; and in topics, themes, or storylines that were evoked as participants positioned themselves and interacted with one another. A closer look at Fairclough’s elements of discourse will illustrate our thinking.

In Fairclough’s (2003) CDA, discourse has three main elements as it functions in social practice: genres, or ways of acting; styles, or ways of being; and discourses, or ways of representing. Fairclough uses discourse in two different ways. First, he uses discourse as “an abstract noun, meaning language and other types of semiosis as elements of social life” (p. 26); this use of the term references the broader project of CDA—the study of language as social practice. Second, he uses the term “as a concrete noun, meaning particular ways of representing the world” (p. 26). This might include, for instance, the pervasive American discourse of meritocracy. To be clear, discourse as a concrete noun is the use to which we refer in our analysis of genre, style, and discourse.

The study of genre is the study of types of communication linked to a particular setting. In our work, examining genre illuminated the role of emotion in the patterns of interactions among participants. Following Fairclough, our study
of genre included a close examination of linguistic and nonlinguistic features that indicated norms for participation and interaction in each context—for instance, topic control, participant structures, norms for politeness and etiquette, and norms for affect and positioning of the body.

Style is studied through the examination of how linguistic and nonlinguistic features are used by people in social contexts to position themselves in relation to others in a particular context. Our examination of style allowed us to see how emotion was relevant in Nina and her peers’ positioning of themselves within the patterns of interaction in each context. Coding for style meant studying a range of linguistic and nonlinguistic features that Nina used in positioning herself in each context—features such as intonation, pronunciation, stress, modality, metaphor, intensifiers, and register (word choice associated with various statuses and identities) (Fairclough, 2003).

Finally, the study of discourse is the examination of clusters of themes or ideologies that emerge in specific social contexts. Studying discourse meant looking for ideas, narratives, or storylines that surfaced as Nina and her peers positioned themselves in their interactions within each context.

Although we treat genre, style, and discourse as separate categories for coding, they function dialectically in our analysis, together illuminating the emotional rules at play in each context as well as the ways those rules guided interpretation. As Fairclough (2003) explains, “The distinction between the three aspects of meaning and between genres, discourses and styles, is a necessary analytic distinction which does not preclude them from ‘flowing into’ one another in various ways” (p. 29).

Coding and Analysis
We began coding by dividing each transcript into “episodes”—what Lewis and Ketter (2004) define as “a series of turns that all relate to the same topic or theme” (p. 123). We identified 40 episodes involving Nina in the literature circle and 11 in the seminar circle. Our data set included far fewer episodes from the seminar circle than the literature circle; however, we note that as one of 16 students in the seminar circle, Nina had less opportunity to participate than she did as one of three in the literature circle.

Next, we coded each episode for genre, style, and discourse. Then, we worked to pinpoint emotion in genre conventions, noting, for instance, how patterns of turn taking were linked to restraint, or lack thereof. Next, we looked at how features of style illuminated the role of emotion in Nina’s positioning of herself. For example, we found that Nina’s word choice and register positioned her as more or less academic, “literary,” and distanced in various instances. After examining these connections, we looked for alignments and inconsistencies between genre conventions and Nina’s positioning of herself in each context. We noticed, for instance, that Nina’s use of a distanced academic and literary register tended to wane when typical turn-taking conventions were abandoned in favor of excited, overlapping, and spontaneous discussion. Finally, we examined connections between when and how discourses were evoked and particular genre conventions and uses of style. We found, for instance, that topics that might be deemed risky in seminar circle
discussion often emerged in the literature circle as genre conventions allowed for free-flowing conversation and as Nina adopted less academic registers. In the section that follows, we present representative excerpts from our analysis of episodes—supported by interview data—that illustrate our findings.

Findings

Emotional Rules in a Seminar Circle Context

Nina’s Perceptions of Emotional Rules in DeAnn’s Classroom

In her classroom, DeAnn made an effort to reject models of literature instruction that are dominated by initiate-respond-evaluate (I-R-E) models of recitation (Mehan, 1979) and New Critical approaches that value one correct interpretation. By moving students into a seminar circle each day and sitting among the students, DeAnn worked to relinquish interpretive control. She frequently asked students not to raise hands, to speak freely, and to answer one another rather than direct their responses to her. Although DeAnn asked the majority of seminar circle questions, she typically asked authentic, open-ended questions with multiple possible answers (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) rather than questions with predetermined answers.

DeAnn relied on a critical literacy framework in her classroom and encouraged students to take on this stance. For instance, DeAnn led students in activities in which they practiced working with critical literacy tools such as taking on the perspectives of other people or characters, noticing how sociocultural differences affect characters’ choices and actions, and rethinking and revisiting initial responses through dialogue and discussion.

Despite DeAnn’s goals of dialogism and critical literacy, Nina told us in an interview with Amanda that she believed that English classrooms on the whole, and DeAnn’s class in particular, were places with specific norms for expression and interpretation. She explained:

It almost seems like there’s certain things that you have to take away from a book when you read it in class. Certain like lessons or just certain feelings that you’re supposed to take away from the book and that’s what either the class or the teacher sort of guides you toward. It’s sort of like a perception that you have to learn about the book. It’s something that you’re supposed to take from the book . . . . It’s like you’re supposed to only I think interpret it so far.

Although Nina was asked specifically about her perceptions of DeAnn’s class prior to this response, her answer suggests that those perceptions intermingled with her past experiences in English classrooms. In Nina’s estimation, the rules for responding to texts in literature classrooms included restraint in the form of limiting interpretations to particular lessons or feelings, and acquiescence to the teacher’s moral and emotional agenda for learning. Nina’s response illustrates how emotional rules become stuck as they are repeated in particular kinds of contexts; the emotional rules to which Nina adhered in DeAnn’s classroom were based not only on the genre conventions DeAnn aimed to establish in her classroom, but
also on Nina’s accumulated experiences of emotional rules in English classrooms in general. Our analysis of Nina’s participation in seminar circle discussions of *To Kill a Mockingbird* illustrates how Nina’s literary interpretations were shaped by her perception of these emotional rules.

**Following the Rules in Responding to *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Nina’s seminar circle responses were typically text-centered and interpretive, while simultaneously focused on discourses related to race, gender, and social class equality—discourses that DeAnn valued in her critical literacy stance. Additionally, Nina typically only responded directly to DeAnn’s questions rather than to her peers’ ideas, looking to DeAnn for validation. The following excerpt illustrates Nina’s typical participation. In this excerpt, DeAnn had asked the class to consider tensions that might exist in the social worlds of characters in the novel:

*Victoria:* Well (. . .) I guess this is really obvious, >but at home Scout< ↑reads ↑a ↑lot (. . .) and >at school she’s< not ↑allowed to show anyone she can read. >She has to be really< ↓restrained. She can’t read.

*DeAnn:* >And when you look at that part of the question, is it difficult for her to be a member of ↑both societies<? With Scout, you see that very blatantly, right? Like >the first day of school she flips out<. What else? ((Nina raises her hand)) Nina?

*Nina:* <°They also lived in a very racist ↓to:↑wn°? But she can’t be racist because of her ↓fa:↑ther? And what he’s ↓do:↑ing?> She can’t show a preference for African American people who live in ↓to:↑wn because people get ↓on ↑her ↑about ↑that? She sort of has to be careful about what she says or does because she doesn’t say the (. . .) n-word (. . .) when everyone else does.

In this excerpt, Victoria voiced an interpretation of tensions in the novel that DeAnn appeared to appreciate. Although DeAnn’s response bolstered Victoria’s, and she intended in this response to encourage further discussion of Victoria’s ideas, Nina interpreted DeAnn’s response as a request for different or more correct answers. Nina’s response did not build upon or “uptake” (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) Victoria’s prior comment, but was instead an alternative answer. Paralinguistic features of Nina’s response, such as markedly softer phrases and a higher-pitched, questioning tone at the end of statements further suggest a hesitant quality and a worry about the correctness of her interpretation. These features of Nina’s response reflect her perception that seminar circle discussions are grounded in emotional rules aligned with formalist or New Critical approaches.

It is also important to notice that in providing an alternative answer—one that might be more correct—Nina responded by focusing on tensions related to race in the novel. This response typifies Nina’s propensity to respond to issues and problems in texts through discourses focused on race, social class, and gender inequalities—discourses that aligned with DeAnn’s critical literacy goals. This discursive focus reflects Nina’s perception that emotional rules in this classroom required the use of empathetic, social justice-oriented stances in literary interpretations.
Nina’s use of two key registers in her seminar circle participation reified her adherence to emotional rules she perceived to be relevant. First, Nina used a register that we refer to as “academic.” In this register, Nina used formal, elevated, academic language, which positioned her as emotionally distanced, intellectual, and able to discuss texts as constructed—a practice valued in formalist literature discussion. This register can be seen in the excerpt above in phrases such as “she can’t show a preference for African American people.”

Nina’s use of phrases such as “the n-word” demonstrated care in word choice related to discussion of race and gender—a second register in Nina’s repertoire that we refer to as “politically correct.” Paralinguistic features such as slow, deliberate speech and distinct pauses prior to voicing words or phrases within a politically correct register further emphasized this care. Within this register, Nina positioned herself as emotionally sensitive to and aware of race and gender issues represented in literature and in lived worlds. Together, Nina’s use of these two registers positioned her as intellectually, emotionally distanced, and—simultaneously—socially and politically sensitive.

Overall, analysis of this excerpt illustrates some of the ways that Nina’s attention in seminar circle discussions was guided by her perception of emotional rules related to the value of distanced, intellectual, scholarly responses that would please her teacher by evoking a sympathetic, politically correct stance toward inequality.

A second excerpt sheds further light on how Nina’s adherence to the emotional rules she perceived in the seminar circle shaped her interpretations of texts. In this instance, Nina offered an interpretation of Calpurnia’s social position as an African American housekeeper in a White household:

**NINA:** At the Finches’ house Calpurnia is definitely looked down upon because she is Black and like she’s the maid serving the house.

**DEANN:** Do you think she’s looked down upon when she’s at the Finches’?

**NINA:** No, not by the Finches? Because I think she’s treated very well, but (inaudible) she’s almost considered equal (inaudible) Calpurnia seems very strong and it seems like she just seems like the main caretaker of the family.

As in the previous excerpt, Nina used politically correct and academic registers to construct a distanced, scholarly interpretation that fit within discourses of detached empathy toward racial inequality. Likewise, this excerpt supports our earlier interpretation of DeAnn as seeking better or more correct answers when she questioned students; when DeAnn asked Nina to elaborate on her initial response, Nina revised her initial response, using a hesitant questioning style to compose a response that DeAnn might sanction. Already, these elements of Nina’s response illustrate ways that her interpretations were guided by emotional rules.
in this context. However, the revision that Nina made in her effort to follow these rules is worth particular note, because it illustrates how emotional rules blocked particular interpretations in favor of others.

In Nina’s initial response depicted in this excerpt, she pointed out Calpurnia’s role as “the maid serving the house,” suggesting that this position necessarily led the Finches to “look down upon her.” By contrast, her amended response focused on how Calpurnia is “treated” by the Finches, seemingly referring to whether or not she is met with respect and dignity within her position as the maid. Through this revised focus, the substance of Nina’s interpretation of Calpurnia changed subtly yet significantly; she interpreted Calpurnia not as someone who is subordinate based on her position as “the maid serving the house,” but instead as the “main caretaker” based on her kindly treatment by the Finches. This excerpt, then, illustrates how Nina’s interpretation of Calpurnia’s role in the novel was materially affected by the emotional rules she perceived to be at play in the seminar circle discussion context.

In further reflecting on her participation in seminar circle discussions, Nina confirmed that she believed she should only voice particular kinds of interpretations. She explained:

I don’t really ever feel that I can say completely what I think about something because I honestly think the way I perceive things may be a little bit weird or different . . . whenever you’re in an English classroom, whatever is going to be said is going to be judged and countered . . . So you try to find the most neutral statements as possible. Like not something too radical.

Although Nina did not indicate who she imagined might judge or counter her “weird,” “different,” or “radical” interpretations (or what such interpretations might look like), she did suggest that she saw these judgments as specific to the English classroom. Further, it is clear that Nina had a sense of the kinds of interpretations that were well accepted—those that were “neutral.” In sum, our analysis of Nina’s participation in the seminar circle discussion context and her own reflection on this participation suggests that Nina perceived certain emotional rules of rationality, distance, and political correctness to be at play in her English classroom. Moreover, Nina aimed to adhere to these rules, articulating specific interpretations that, to her, seemed “neutral” within this context rather than interpretations that she imagined might be viewed as weird or radical.

### Emotional Rules in a Literature Circle Context

#### Interrupting Emotional Rules

In reflecting on her participation in the literature circle, Nina said that she perceived this context as less interpretively constrained than seminar circle discussions, explaining that she saw the overall goal of the literature circle as “getting to the heart of Bastard out of Carolina” rather than approaching the book with any particular stance. Nonetheless, initial literature circle meetings looked similar in genre, style, and discourse to seminar circle discussion. Early on, Nina, Biz, and
Jenny abided by their literature circle roles. In doing so, they sat at their desks in a small circle, rotated through their roles by asking questions in an I-R-E sequence, and used academic and politically correct registers to voice distanced interpretations of the text. However, after the first few sessions the girls began to abandon their literature circle roles, participation patterns, and seating arrangements—often sitting or lying on the floor during discussion. New registers were used and different discourses emerged. Moreover, the emotional rules previously established for literature discussion became unstuck and unbound, and different spaces for interpretation were opened up. The following excerpt illustrates how emotional rules were disrupted as the girls experimented with new ways of interacting and positioning themselves:

**Biz:** °Did you get to the part where they° (. ) like when she was talking about (. ) where they “trade o:↑ff”?  
**Nina:** Where they talk about ↑what?  
**Biz:** Where they are °masturbating° and they [trade o:↑ff?]  
**Jenny:** [Where they] trade off while ↓masturbating.  
**Nina:** Oh yeah! Oh! [when-]  
**Biz:** [They just] go in the room.  
**Nina:** Oh, at first when they trade off? (. ) I was like °bad thoughts°  
**Jenny:** °Yeah°  
**Nina:** Bad scary (. ) °homo, like incestuous, lesbian° [as-]  
**Biz:** [Yeah]  
**Jenny:** Eww-  
**Nina:** BUT DO YOU want me to read off my< ↓wonderful, thought- out discuss:↑on ↑questions?  
**Jenny:** Yeah. You should.

Although Nina was assigned the role of discussion leader in this literature circle meeting, Biz broke the genre conventions of literature circle roles by asking a question she genuinely wondered about—what others thought of the young sisters taking turns allowing each other privacy for masturbation. Paralinguistic features in this excerpt illustrate the tentative nature of this initial break with genre conventions. Biz spoke softly and with two marked pauses when she introduced the topic, avoiding use of the term *masturbate*. When Nina expressed confusion about Biz’s reference to “trading off,” she then softly used the word “masturbating.” As discussion ensued, Nina was also cautious in sharing her response, beginning her response with a question, pausing frequently, and whispering about her initial “bad thoughts” related to incest and homosexuality. Biz agreed with Nina, and Jenny began to share her thoughts, but Nina interrupted, speaking loudly, quickly, and somewhat sarcastically, suggesting that they return to the more distanced, rational, academic task at hand by reading her preestablished discussion questions.

It is noteworthy that Nina briefly deviated from her typical academic register in this excerpt, using the politically incorrect word “homo.” Likewise, she voiced
discourses that would not likely be supported by critical literacy by suggesting that two sisters separately masturbating might indicate incest or homosexuality. Further, Nina suggested that she found all of these ideas “scary” or evocative of fear—an emotion not typically sanctioned in classroom literature response.

This excerpt illustrates early negotiations in the literature circle in which the girls weighed their own questions and wonderings against the questions they believed they ought to be considering in literature discussion.

Transforming Emotional Rules
As the literature circle unit continued, Nina’s group more frequently abandoned their literature circle roles in favor of spontaneous discussion. In doing so, they became increasingly comfortable with breaking other genre conventions of literary analysis and critical literacy, establishing new genre conventions, and experimenting with new styles of positioning themselves.

In analyzing data from these later literature circle discussions for genre, we found striking differences in norms for expression in literary response. Unlike genre conventions for formalist literary interpretation or critical literacy—both of which value distanced, rational, sympathetic affect—the genre conventions that developed in Nina’s small group allowed for visceral reactions, vicarious voicing and direct address of characters, and expressions of anger, outrage, and confusion. The excerpt below, where the group members discussed a scene in which Bone masturbates to the thought of dying violently while forgiving her stepfather, demonstrates these conventions:

**NINA:** That thought is bringing her such immense [↑plea:↓sure].

**JENNY:** [Pleasure].

**NINA:** And you’re like (2) <"whoa:a">. You’re ↑eight ↑years ↑old! Like ↑you’re ↑like ↑ten!

**JENNY:** And how can ↓for:↑giving ↑him (.) like give you ↑plea:↓sure like that!

**NINA:** I think it paints ↑her:↓self in such a beautiful light. Like she’s such a no:ble, per:fect person, and ↓she’s been told that she’s the< DEVIL’S CHILD. And ↓re:↑member that one thing? Like she’s “as sneaky as a snake” and as [evil]

**JENNY:** >[and as] slippery too. And as bendy as one.< I was like ↑EW:↓W! Hey!

**NINA:** That’s (.) that’s ↓freaky as ↓hell. HELLO! MOM! Did you not see the snake! Did you hear the snake analogy! ↑Use ↑it! ↑What ↑else ↑do ↑snakes ↑resemble Mrs. what’s her ↑name! Like come on. Put two and two together!

In this excerpt, Nina expressed confusion, wondering how anyone—much less a child—could find sexual pleasure in the thought of torture. As paralinguistic features of this excerpt illustrate, Nina frequently raised her voice, spoke loudly,
added emphasis to her words, and ended her statements with exclamation as she posed angry questions directly to Bone’s mother, expressing confusion and disbelief in Anney’s lack of awareness of her husband’s abuse of her daughter. Within the newly emerging genre conventions of the literature circle context, Nina voiced responses that were differently focused and looked very unlike the succinct, measured responses she shared in the seminar circle. Instead, her responses in the literature circle included genuine doubt, vicarious embodiment and voicing of characters, and a pointed, visceral lack of sympathy for some characters.

In addition to genre changes related to affective and interpretive norms, this excerpt illustrates genre changes in turn-taking and participation structures. Although Nina and Jenny took turns speaking as they did earlier, in this excerpt they did so by collaboratively constructing an interpretation, sometimes overlapping in their speech and in their ideas, rather than moving back and forth between separate ideas or interpretations. Their talk included what Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) refer to as “uptake”—a genuine building upon one another’s ideas.

This excerpt also illuminates a significant change in Nina’s style. As in seminar circle discussions, Nina frequently used an academic register in the literature circle (e.g., “immense pleasure,” “paints herself in such a beautiful light,” “such a noble person”), and even employed language from literary criticism and direct quotations from the text. Nina’s use of this academic register suggests her continued positioning of herself as a serious, intellectual person, able to do the work of literary analysis in this context. At the same time, Nina layered her academic register with another register—one that we characterize as “street-smart.” In this register, Nina used straightforward, blunt language and profanity along with vocal qualities, such as clear, firm annunciation of words, that positioned her not only as a teenager talking with her peers, but also as someone powerfully able to cope with the fear and violence depicted in the novel. The tentative use of language that characterized her politically correct register was replaced by confidence in her use of a street-smart register. In the above excerpt, she firmly and pointedly stated that the situation was “freaky as hell,” positioning herself as righteously judgmental rather than calm, accepting, and sympathetic of (if disturbed by) the situation in the text.

Together, the new genre conventions and the new styles that Nina and her peers appropriated unbound and unstuck the emotional rules for literature interpretation followed in the seminar circle context.

**Experimenting with New Discourses**

As the emotional rules for literature discussion were disrupted, new discourses also began to surface—discourses that might have seemed risky and even inappropriate in a seminar circle.

The excerpts discussed previously hint at these new discourses, as Nina and her peers suggested, for instance, that Anney is an inadequate parent and an immoral person for tolerating Glen’s abuse of Bone. In the excerpt that follows, an even more overtly risky discourse emerged—one related to using violence to solve problems, enact retribution, and serve justice. Here, Nina, Biz, and Jenny discussed
their responses to one of their collective “favorite” scenes in the novel: a scene in which Glen is physically assaulted by Bone’s uncles:

NINA: When they found out that Bone has been beaten by Glen and they ↑kick his ↑ass?
BIZ: They got to that part.
NINA: Oh. I loved ↓that ↓part.
BIZ: I was so ↓happy.
NINA: That was my favorite part in the entire ↓book (. ) them beating him.

...  
JENNY: She wanted to take her to [her aunt’s]
NINA: [Go to] Aunt Raylene’s to get the shotgun. I was like “↑hell (. ) ↓yes”
JENNY: >I’m so mad he didn’t die<
BIZ: >↑Me [↑to:o]<
JENNY: >[I’m] so upset. Like I [never wanted]<
NINA: >[I wanted Uncle] Earle to like ↑run ↑him ↓over. >Oh! And whenever his like, or the one uncle kisses her on the cheek and [says I prom-]
JENNY: [Nevil]
NINA: Yeah. And he’s like I [promise] ((laughter))
JENNY: [I WAS SO EXCITED!] ((more laughter)) I was like ((slapping her hand on the table with each word)) <they better have his death> ↓in ↓this ↓book. And ↑then ↑it ↑ended! °I was so upset°
NINA: ↑Her ↓mother (. ) whenever (. ) Bone just got freakin’ RAPED by that [guy]
JENNY: [I know]!

...  
NINA: And the other thing that really upset me was whenever (. ) so she’s carrying, you know, she puts Bone in the car >and Daddy Glen starts ramming his head against it< and I’m like – yeah – ↑you ↓hurt ↓yourself. Die. DIE NOW.

As in the other excerpts from the literature circle context, in this excerpt the girls followed genre conventions that allowed for statements of affect and direct address of characters, as well as rapid-fire, overlapping speech and collective interpretation. Using new forms of style such as a street-smart register and loud, confident vocalizations, Nina again positioned herself differently in this context—as righteously indignant rather than distanced and intellectual. In this case, however, the indignation that Nina expressed showed not just outrage, but also an active, if vicarious, desire for violence. In a critical literacy classroom that values the posing and solving of problems through reason and dialogue, the voicing of a discourse of violence as a means to an end would seem to clearly break the emotional rules.
Nina’s more measured rationalization of Glen’s abuse referenced at the start of the paper is evidence of her awareness of the kinds of discourses that might be valued by critical literacy regarding Glen’s behavior.

The excitement and joy that emerged in Nina and her peers’ responses as they considered the idea of violence toward Glen is important. Although short-lived in the novel, the moment when Bone’s uncles nearly kill Glen is one of the only moments when anyone attempts to take action in ending Bone’s abuse. Nina and her peers might have felt a temporary respite from the infuriating, helpless feelings they expressed in other instances as they read about the cyclical and tenacious nature of abuse and oppression depicted in this novel; imagining Glen being beaten or killed might have allowed Nina to feel agency in the face of this helplessness. Larger questions are evoked by the responses that were voiced in this excerpt and the discourses of violence that surfaced—questions related to the appeal of violence in the face of oppression, and to how both those who are oppressed and those who are empowered can feel less helpless and can work toward systemic change through nonviolent means.

The evocation of this risky discourse in the context of this literature circle illustrates how, for Nina, a new context allowed for an unsticking of the emotional rules that bound the seminar circle discussions in which she routinely participated, opening up opportunities not only for different kinds of expression, but also for different interpretive possibilities.

**Discussion and Implications**

By conceptualizing emotion as circulating and sticking in social contexts rather than as located in individuals, this study challenges previous conceptualizations of the role of emotion in response and illustrates the central rather than peripheral role of emotion in literature learning and interpretation. Emotion was at play in each of the two contexts we studied; it was not more or less present in one context or the other, and could not be ignored, gotten beyond, or leveraged. Instead, emotion was part and parcel of each context and necessarily guided, policed, and shaped learning. Further, our findings suggest that the emotional rules that came to stick and were sometimes disrupted in these two contexts provided for markedly different discourses to emerge, as well as material differences in Nina’s literary interpretations.

The rupture in the rules of literary interpretation that the literature circle provided allowed Nina to break the “habits of (in)attention” (Boler, 1999) that she had developed as a proficient student in her ELA classroom, and to explore different kinds of questions—not better or more authentic questions, necessarily, but different questions. Rather than glossing over the fear, violence, and despair depicted in *Bastard out of Carolina* as Nina might have done in a typical seminar circle response, she confronted those “outlaw emotions” (Jaggar, 1989), leaving open questions and contradictions that begged for further exploration.
Based on these findings, we argue that engaging emotion in literature instruction is not—as previous conceptions of the relationship between response and emotion have often suggested—about inviting in personal, emotional responses at key moments in order to move students toward deeper, scholarly interpretations. Instead, it is about noticing how emotion already structures response in the literature classroom in the form of emotional rules, and questioning and sometimes disrupting these rules with the goal of opening up new interpretive possibilities.

**Implications for Teaching and Teacher Education**

Following Lewis and Tierney (2011) and Winans (2012), we posit that ELA teachers must cultivate classroom spaces that allow for the disruption of emotional rules. The goal of cultivating such spaces is not to accept all responses uncritically, but is instead to allow students to experiment with new ways of interacting with others and new ways of positioning themselves within these interactions, creating spaces for a wider range of discourses and interpretive possibilities to surface.

Cultivating classroom spaces that disrupt emotional rules means helping students gain a conscious awareness of emotional rules they perceive to be at play. Our case study of Nina is a reminder that students often have perceptions of what teachers expect that are drawn as much from their past classroom experiences as from their current classrooms. For instance, although some of the emotional rules Nina perceived in her classroom were consistent with DeAnn's critical literacy stance, others were rules she perceived based on her past experiences in other ELA classrooms. Teachers might uncover and interrogate these rules with students by encouraging them to question rules they perceive to be at play in the classroom and to construct and reconstruct new rules for expression. Winans (2012) calls this work promoting a “critical emotional literacy” in students. She explains that such cultivation “requires exploring how emotions and emotional rules operate, especially in terms of identities and social norms, and in terms of guiding patterns of inattention” (p. 152).

Creating disruptions in emotional rules also means generating ruptures in our status quo classroom contexts. Although DeAnn aimed to engage students in dialogic discussion—a hallmark of a critical literacy approach to literary response (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Luke, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004)—this study demonstrates that even spaces that are intended to be democratic can become static spaces with sedimented rules that limit students’ abilities to experiment with a range of perspectives. Nina, for instance, saw perspective-taking as aimed toward experimentation with only a specific set of perspectives, not as inviting a consideration of perspectives that might fall outside of the realm of her teacher’s critical literacy stance. Moving to a different kind of context, with a different level of teacher guidance, allowed Nina and her peers to disrupt these rules by experimenting with new forms of interaction and new ways of positioning themselves. Other generative contexts that might disrupt the emotional rules of classroom literary interpretation include digital spaces, spaces for dramatic enactments, and student-directed discussions that encourage the voicing of characters and direct address of characters.
Although we have argued that Nina’s differing responses to the two texts she read were largely linked to the differing forms of interaction and positioning in each context rather than to differences in the texts themselves, we do want to acknowledge that texts matter in the construction and disruption of emotional rules in the ELA classroom. While we saw evidence that Nina was able to respond to *Bastard out of Carolina* both through the emotional rules of her ELA classroom and through new emotional rules that surfaced in her literature circle, the “outlaw” (Jaggar, 1989) nature of the text itself certainly played a role in evoking the responses that Nina shared in the literature circle. *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Bastard out of Carolina*, in fact, provide a useful contrast in texts that are typically taught and not taught in the high school English classroom. The books share much in common: both feature a young female protagonist; both grapple with issues of race, social class, and sexual violence; and both take place in a historical setting somewhat removed from students’ experiences. However, *Bastard out of Carolina* is a contemporary novel and a far grittier read, with graphic depictions of violence, honest and often unsettling representations of rural poverty, and characters that express a host of outlaw emotions in response to their situations. Although there is much for students to gain in reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the novel largely forwards the kinds of “right and tasteful” emotions (Ellsworth, 1989) that align perhaps too well with the perceived and established emotional rules of most ELA classrooms. Books that break these rules can themselves provide important ruptures in status quo emotional rules.

**Implications for Research**

This study joins other scholarship that argues for the central place of emotion—as it is socially and culturally theorized—in ELA learning (e.g., Lewis & Tierney, 2011). We examined the sociocultural role of emotion in one facet of the ELA classroom: literary interpretation. Further research might look at emotion and emotional rules in other facets of literacy and English instruction, such as writing, drama, or grammar and language use. Likewise, research might investigate how certain texts, genres for writing, and instructional activities invite or inhibit the circulation of various emotions.

With respect to further research on literary response and emotion, we urge researchers to closely examine an array of responses that seem surprising, frustrating, or otherwise “off base,” studying how those responses are grounded in emotional rules rather than focusing on their surface-level lack of adherence to the instructional goals of the teacher. For instance, in studying multicultural literature instruction, scholars have determined that White readers are often resistant to engaging with multicultural literature (Beach, 1997), or are inclined to overidentify with characters with whom they share little in common, universalizing complex cultural experiences (Dressel, 2005; Lewis, 2000). Further research in this area might reframe resistance and overidentification as adherence to or rejection of certain emotional rules, exploring how ruptures in these rules might disrupt or elucidate such responses.
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APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notation</th>
<th>Explanation of Notation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some [talk]</td>
<td>Square brackets indicate the beginning ([) and end (]) of overlapping talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[overlap]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(. )</td>
<td>Less than a 0.2-second pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.2)</td>
<td>Length of pause to the nearest 10th of a second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bu-</td>
<td>A hyphen indicates a sharp cutoff of speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under</td>
<td>Underlining indicates emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPITALS</td>
<td>Capitals indicate louder talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>°Soft°</td>
<td>Degree signs indicate quieter talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;Fast&lt;</td>
<td>Less than and greater than signs indicate talk that is slower or faster than other talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;Slow&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>A colon indicates an extension of the sound or syllable that precedes the colon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑Word↓Word</td>
<td>Up and down arrows indicate rising and falling intonation shifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(( ))</td>
<td>Double parentheses enclose transcriber’s notes on features of talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…</td>
<td>Ellipses indicate talk omitted from transcript</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Transcription notation conventions were adapted from Jefferson (2004).

NOTE

1. All names and places are identified with pseudonyms.

REFERENCES


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