

# Youth Violence and the Language Arts: A Topic for the Classroom

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*I came to the corner and looked down the street and I saw a little boy about eight years old with a gun in his hand pointed at someone and that made me realize that the streets aren't a safe place anymore and that you always have to watch your back where ever you go and whatever you do.*

—Cindy, 15

Alienated from faltering families, schools, and neighborhoods, young people in all parts of our country are becoming increasingly violent, turning to gangs, deadly weapons, the drug economy, and still more heinous forms of criminal behavior. All of us read about it in the news; for many of us it is an immediate issue in our classrooms. We learn of drive-by shootings, of weapons found in school, and of assault and even murders committed by children barely in their teens.

While gangs and drugs are not new, in the 1990s perhaps it doesn't even shock us anymore to learn that more teenagers are killed by firearms than by all natural causes combined; that three times as many African American adolescent boys die in homicides than automobile accidents; that more and more children in rural as well as urban areas report carrying handguns. As crime has become a major political issue, a national outcry has arisen for increased policing, more prisons, mandatory sentencing, and treating juvenile offenders as adults.

But these "easy" answers are shortsighted and ineffective, as law enforcement officials themselves point out. While the number of Americans in prison doubled between 1980 and 1990, giving our country far and away the world's highest incarceration rate (for black men in America it is five times higher than in South Africa under apartheid), violence, especially among the young, has only increased. What is truly disturbing, even ironic, about the lives of these young people is that their antisocial behavior represents a desperate—if misdirected—attempt to secure their most basic human needs, to establish for themselves even an illusion of safety, respect, and belonging.

To understand this fundamental irony of the 1990s youth violence crisis, it is necessary to enter into the experience and perspective of many of our children, to understand the way that intersecting lines of poverty, racism, and shattered family life condition their lives. That investigation can and should be part of language arts teaching, to be conducted with all of our students and in many of our classes. I am convinced that by read-

ing relevant literature, especially contemporary biography and autobiography, by examining film, essay, and even music lyrics, and, perhaps, above all, by listening closely to our own students' words in discussion and writing all of us can come to better understand and better address the violence in our lives and in our country.

To begin I will describe some of what my students and I learned this last year in a lower-division college survey course in African American literature that focused on an exploration of America's crisis of youth violence. Having been a high school teacher far longer than a college professor, in teaching this class (of half African American and half white students from Detroit and small towns in Michigan, ranging in age from freshmen to seniors), I emphasized actively involving all my students. High school teachers I have been collaborating with in our area are also integrating the same materials and themes into their teaching, and the second part of this article describes their efforts.

## NATIVE SON

One of the most important and powerful texts for exploring the causes of violence with these students turned out to be Richard Wright's *Native Son*. A hard-hitting and graphic novel, *Native Son* allowed us to examine ways in which racism and economic inequality are tied to violence, crime, and mounting racial hostility.

In the first section of the novel, Bigger Thomas, a teenager in Chicago's black ghetto, attempts to establish his authority amongst his circle of friends by planning the robbery of a white store owner. This scene became a pivotal one in our discussion when Chet, an African American freshman from Detroit, argued that while the robbery was clearly wrong, it nonetheless served as a positive psychological step for Bigger in that it allowed him for the first time in his life to reject the submissive and docile role that Wright's white society would prefer to cast him in. Andraya, also African American, was able to appreciate this line of thinking. She later wrote:

I think for Bigger to rob Blum, a white man, was the ultimate sin yet the ultimate high at the same time. To go through with the plan would show that Bigger wasn't letting the white man control him totally, which, in essence, would be Bigger's only way of showing his hatred of the white man.

As we progressed with Wright's work, these insights became even more disturbing. Students compared the first section of the novel where Bigger's frustration and anger are tied to his limited options as a black person to the second section where murder leads him to feel free and powerful for the first time in his life:

And, yet, out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power. *He* had done this. *He* had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the

*In his own classes and those of three high school colleagues, the author details how English teachers can address violence.*

most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his own actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight. (225)

Why should murder lead Bigger to feel free and powerful? The students groped toward understanding the oppression that produces Bigger's anger and alienation. Wright shows how violent criminal behavior lets Bigger step outside of the powerless position that the dominant society expects of him. His job as chauffeur to the Dalton family becomes a role that he can play, while his inner life and thought becomes, for the first time, independent and self-directed. Ironically, it is only when Bigger enters into a life of crime that he is able to realize that he might have control over his own destiny.

In their reading of *Native Son* my students thus struggled to understand the causes of alienation and violence even more evident in contemporary America than in the 1939 of Wright's novel. Scott, a white pre-education student from a small town, proposed that Bigger might have suffered from an "Attention Deficit Disorder." (Does that sound familiar?) Other students took issue with Scott's interpretation, pointing out that this view simply located the problem entirely in an individual person and "took society off the hook" for Bigger's frustration and anger. Jamail, a freshman African American male student from Detroit commented:

I have lived as an observer of the system everyday in my neighborhood. It seems to me once you got in there was no way out. All the friends I have who were in the system are either still in, back to old crimes hoping not to get caught, or a few even dead. As a young black male, I feel the system is just another way of contributing to making the black male extinct. I have yet to see the system rehabilitate anyone I know.

Through open discussion in a mixed race classroom, Scott's viewpoint evolved. He later wrote in his journal:

Consider the high school freshman with a second grade reading level, who is told he cannot go to college. He hates school—he has no future goals—he knows he can't get a good paying job if he can't go to college. But, a-ha, he has an older brother who told him he can make \$400 a day if he sells crack after school. His brother has cool clothes, he has a cool car, he has a car phone, and he's only 19! I think I would choose to sell drugs too! But, you say, why doesn't he overcome these temptations, overcome this oppression, and focus his energies to finish school and go to

college? This is the "right" decision. Yes, maybe this is the right decision, but it takes a very strong-willed person, especially if that person is a 16-year-old kid, to pass up those material goods and the money. Especially when they can have it RIGHT NOW!

As the course progressed, student interest seemed to me exceptionally high, and discussions and writing were as energized as any I have seen.

## THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

We moved from an examination of violence in *Native Son* to a consideration of the creative and transformative power of nonviolence in the Civil Rights struggle. Our reading included a chapter on the Civil Rights era from Howard Zinn's high school reading level *People's History of the United States* and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s frequently anthologized "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1964). I was disturbed, though I guess not surprised, that many of my students, particularly the white students, had never formally studied this era of American history. For them, viewing videos from the *Eyes on the Prize* (1987) series came as a surprise and revelation.

The powerful footage in *Eyes on the Prize* of fire hoses and dogs turned on nonviolence protesters marks only what 1960s television was able to capture; as we discussed the images, they came to realize that anyone who seeks to understand violence in American needs to understand its history, and that includes slavery, lynchings, and ongoing police brutality. Among many things they learned from the series was the way that movement participants themselves bore the violence of southern police and jails and, nonetheless, created a powerful nonviolent solidarity as they sat, marched, and rode together, as they were arrested together, sang in their cells, and refused to cooperate with guards and jail authorities.

After learning about Martin Luther King, Jr., my class turned its attention to Malcolm X, whose experience as a street hoodlum, incarcerated felon, member of the Nation of Islam, and African American leader offered a paradigm for rethinking America's violence problem. While my African American students had a sort of knee-jerk identification with Malcolm X at the outset, after reading his story many of them began to recognize the commitment and determination entailed in a desire to follow in his footsteps.

Since I don't believe in collective or racial responsibility, such guilt was at first hard for me to understand. Yet, we teachers should recognize that for those of our students who live in relative safety and prosperity, learning about the experience of others in different circumstances may lead them to take personally the unfairness and inequalities of our world. When this happens, teaching about violence and the conditions that produce it is likely to prick students' consciousness and lead them to ask, why didn't I know about this? What can I do about

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it? These are questions that ought to direct our teaching rather than arise as its outcome.

## RAP MUSIC

A vital contribution to our examination of race and violence in contemporary America was the rap music that several of my African American students suggested we look at. While rap's reputation for glorifying violence and objectifying women must be considered, I learned through my students that it would be a mistake to lump all rap together and fail to recognize the relevant social critique made by many rap artists.

One song my students brought to class, "Trapped" by the group 2PAC, tells a story about a young man who dreams of escaping the ghetto but finds himself unable to evade the path that leads to violence. Like *Native Son*, "Welcome to the Ghetto" by Spice 1 also speaks of a frustrated anger at a racist society.

Based on my experience with this class, a powerful beat, vivid rhyme and images, and an energized street perspective make rap one of the most important contemporary forms of poetry for English classes to examine. Teachers need to take care in its use, as language may be strong and inappropriate for some classrooms. (Contemporary film about inner city life offers another powerful media for teachers to use in exploring our violence crisis; see sidebar for further suggestions.)

## STUDENTS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH VIOLENCE

Regardless of the age level of students we work with, exploring literature addressing issues of violence may come close to home. Victimization of robbery and assault, rape and sexual harassment of teenagers, and abusive home environments cut across all racial and social lines. Indeed, bullying and harassment are all-too-common even in many of the buildings in which we teach, and students are often more aware of such situations than teachers.

While some students will be reluctant to bring their feelings out to the teacher, others may not. When my classes address such issues, I am surprised by how often students will hare with me—via their journals, in person, or even with the whole class—that they have been the victims of one or another form of violence. I am also disturbed by how rarely they have been able to seek help and counseling. Even though my class is a "literature" class, I have felt it essential to address these concerns as they arise.

Thus, I have invited speakers from the women's shelter and the local YWCA sexual assault program to visit my classes, speak with all my students about developing respectful relationships, about safety issues, about the survivor process, and provide them with information about resources in our community.

## STUDENTS IN HIGH SCHOOLS

The approach I have taken to examining issues of youth violence in my university class has drawn exten-

sively on what I know from high school teaching. Over the last semester, I have also been working with a number of my former students who are now English teachers and interns currently teaching in high schools in our area.

Made famous by a song about a sweet and innocent hometown gal, the city of Kalamazoo, Michigan, may appear at first glance to be a comfortable town of tree-lined streets, churches, and universities; yet our community is increasingly experiencing the "big city" problems of crime, drugs, and gangs. Our county now has the highest juvenile arrest rate in the state.

The scene Cindy describes in the quotation that heads this article took place only a few blocks from my home. Less than two weeks after I finished writing this, a student who had dropped out from the high school I described below was shot and killed. About ten days later, two college students were brutally murdered in the robbery of a video store three blocks from the school. Many white families have fled to the suburbs or placed their children in private schools and, as a result, our two large high schools are about 50% African American and a majority of students from very low-income families.

## STUDYING VIOLENCE AND READING *MONSTER*

In working with a racially mixed group of lower-track high school sophomores at one of the downtown high schools two of my former students, Amy Kruzich and Christine Bundy, have developed a unit for exploring the causes of violence and the perspectives of inner city youth. The centerpiece is the powerful new book *Monster: The Autobiography of an LA Gang Member* (1993) by Sanyika Shakur, aka Kody Scott. Scott, who entered gang life at 11, portrays the brutal battle for territory, the idiosyncrasies of the criminal justice response, and the breakdown of community that drew him away from middle school and senior high. He writes from jail where he is currently serving a sentence for armed robbery. For teachers and students who wish to understand gang life, this text is a must read.

While views about gangs differed widely, these at-risk high school students found Scott's story compelling. Some of the most "difficult" students had considerable street knowledge about gang life and, perhaps for the first time in their educational career, they became the class experts, able to inform classmates and their teachers on a number of the issues raised in the text.

Students spent several weeks examining and arguing about the influences on Kody's life and the choices that he makes. After being repeatedly beaten up for his lunch money, Kody determines never again to be a victim. Students understood the intensity of Kody's decision, his sense of honor and the conflicting allegiances his decision creates.

Attempting to explain Kody's violent "down for anything" actions, one student described the requirements of gang patriotism in this way: "Kody got to do whatever he have to do to respect his flag." To the stu-

dents it was clear that the adults didn't know, understand, or appreciate Kody's world. In discussion one student pointed out: "Kody has respect for his mother, but still he goin' to stand up for what he believe in." Melinda wrote:

He felt he had to join a gang to survive and to fit in with others. Kody found the closeness of the gang appealing and decided to be part of it. His mom was always working and the gang became his family.

The emphasis these students placed on Kody's sense of honor and his need for respect fits closely with the analysis of the academic experts like urban anthropologist Elijah Anderson (1994) who argues:

At the heart of the street code is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated "right," or granted the deference once deserves. . . . Many of the forms that dissing (disrespecting) can take might seem petty to middleclass people (maintaining eye contact for too long, for example), but to those invested in the street code, these actions become serious indication of the other person's intentions. (82)

Scholars on the effect of violence on young people maintain that children raised in an unsafe environment develop a form of "hypervigilance" where ambiguous stimuli are treated as threatening. The students in this class would understand hypervigilance; they could sympathize with Kody's sense of a constant insecurity, his turning to the gang for safety.

These students understood how important it was that the gang offered Kody respect and a family that could partly substitute for an absent father. Some felt that an eleven-year-old Kody could not be held responsible for his decision to join the gang. Others insisted that Kody always had a choice. I observed one class discussion where it was obvious that the passion of the debate over Kody's freedom to choose versus the pressures of his environment was tied to the difficult decisions that the students themselves were making on a daily basis.

## USING OTHER LITERATURE

In working with these teachers I was intrigued by the way that *Monster* was integrated into the existing literature curriculum. After *Monster*, the teachers turned to the familiar play *Twelve Angry Men*. Coming to the play after examining contemporary issues of gangs and violence helped both teachers and students see the relevance of the more traditional work. Also, teachers used first-hand testimonials of people struggling for peace, tolerance, and equality, works like *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, *Night*, or *I, Rigoberta Menchú* that include violent scenes but experience them from the point of view of the victim, can be used in the same way to examine alternatives to violence.

We can also consider teaching about violence with many of our traditional works. For years teachers have

segued from *Romeo and Juliet* to *West Side Story*; connecting these works to the current crisis of gangs and violence would seem only natural. In the past I tried to interest students in *Macbeth* by emphasizing the violence of the early scenes. A more effective and humane reading of the play might seek to reflect critically on issues of violence by examining Macduff's agonizing over the loss of his family, Macbeth's own dehumanization as he wades further into killing, and the problematic code that seems to equate manhood and violence throughout the work as well as in society today.

Examining the mass media has also been a tradition in language arts teaching; perhaps doing so in the 1990s is more important than ever. As many other teachers have done, I have had students keep video logs where they could record incidents of violence that they had seen on television. This simple form of documentation has made them more aware of what they are exposed to and led to important discussions about how the media affects us.

Directly addressing issues of violence and gangs in high school students' lives is an approach supported by Linda Christiansen in her article "Building Community from Chaos" in the hopeful new book *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (1994). Writing out of her own classroom experience, Christiansen examines ways for English teachers to address the increasing anger of students frustrated by wasting time on meaningless assignments in low-track classes, their hostility toward school and toward each other.

These connections did not always have to be immediate and direct as those made in *Monster*. For instance, Christiansen found one of the most effective texts to be *A Thousand Pieces of Gold* by Ruthann Lum McCunn. She writes:

Students saw their own lives reflected back at them through Chen whose anger at losing his job and ultimately his family led him to become an outlaw. Chen created a new family with this group of bandits. Students could relate: Chen was a gang member. I had stumbled on a way to interest my class. The violence created a contact point between the literature and the students' lives. (51)

Building on this connection Christiansen seeks to have her students build empathy, think critically about violence and its causes, and find ways for students to become active in working against it.

## DEVELOPING COMMUNITY

The stress on developing community is also the basis of the teaching strategy of another of my former students, Eva Kendrick, who now teaches English in an alternative school and works with some of the most endangered adolescents in our community. Kendrick begins the year by developing a contract with her students to establish her classroom as a neutral violence-

free zone. Since her students have failed to fit into traditional classrooms, she has them engage in extensive dialogue, writing, and discussion about what roles they believe teachers should take to make the class successful as a learning community. She invites her students' participation in decision making as she goes about creating a more democratic classroom environment. Her emphasis on the word *respect* seems to resonate with the students. By identifying vandalism as *disrespectful* to all members of the community she has been able to greatly reduce this behavior in her classroom. As trust is developed with her students, discussion and personal writing begin to reveal the issues of violence that pervade their lives.

After meeting her students, reading their writing, and recognizing the power their voices were developing in Kendrick's class, she, her students, and I went to a Michigan Council of Teachers of English-sponsored English teacher conference to speak to teachers on the problem of violence in students' lives. Eight of Kendrick's students, all either presently or formerly gang members, served as a panel addressing an overflow crowd of 130 classroom teachers. They were nervous, a couple huddling inside winter jackets they didn't want to remove. At the outset I was uncertain, fearful that the students might not be able to speak, unsure what was going to happen next.

Yet gathering strength from each other, one by one students began to tell about their own experiences and to analyze them. Individually and collectively they shared how they had been expelled from traditional high schools, how they had become involved with the juvenile court system and the role that violence played in their daily lives. They spoke of the decisions they had made to join gangs and the safety and security they hoped to find there. One student explained that what she got from the gang and nowhere else was "People watching my back. People there for me no matter what. People that I can count on."

Tyesha told us about three older students who continually harassed her in the halls when she was a freshman and how reporting them to the vice principal only made matters worse. She explained:

I got hemmed in corners of deserted hallways during and after school by groups of girls. It got to the point where I just couldn't take it anymore. So I'd fight, figuring they would leave me alone. But I was wrong . . . It got to the point where I was afraid to come to school. So I went and used my lunch money to skip school which caused my grades to drop and me to get kicked off the swim team because I didn't come to practice . . . I came to the conclusion that if I was in a gang maybe the girls would leave me alone . . . They helped me by solving most of the fighting problems by talking to some of the girls. I stopped skipping school and tried to bring my grades back up. My new friends

were there for me when my mother and family wasn't and when no one would help me.

I am sorry that I joined a gang. Not because of the trouble I got into, but because I hurt a lot of people. I did what I had to do to help myself. I am a gang member because I chose to be one and no one can change that.

These students told the audience about the prevalence of weapons and fighting in the schools they had attended—information that surprised a couple of the teachers who worked in the very schools these students were describing. As gang members they were able to analyze why gangs existed as articulately as any social scientist I have heard on the subject, and they offered specific suggestions for what schools needed to do to address them. Overall, they spoke from their hearts about their desire for respect and belonging.

The audience of English teachers was spellbound; several told me later that they had been on the verge of tears. Here were the educational throwaways of our community, school troublemakers who skipped and flunked out of classes, who—when they were given the microphone—were articulate, clearly intelligent thinkers with much to tell us about what our schools were really like.

In the weeks after their presentation Eva Kendrick was convinced that although the lives of these students remained troubled and chaotic, the opportunity they had to be heard at the conference was important to them, even transformative. She struggles to keep them together as a group and find other forums for them to speak. At a session on violence and schools at the 1995 NCTE Spring Conference in Minneapolis, Kendrick and I brought the students and joined them with similar youth from Minneapolis to tell their stories and offer their wisdom again.

## WRITING ABOUT VIOLENCE

But the opportunity for these young people's voices to be heard should not be limited to the occasional teacher's conference. The best place to start is our own classrooms. Having students write about the violence in their lives can be therapeutic, even lifesaving. This point is amply demonstrated in the case study of a teacher keeping a journal with two of her most troubled students.

Such teaching involves taking risks. Allowing students to write in their own voices and tell their own stories may mean we may receive writing that might make us uncomfortable. As teachers we have an important responsibility also to protect our students' privacy. Incorporating literature that addresses the current crisis of violence of gangs means we may need to rethink the canon and even the purposes of literature study. Listening to marginalized students may mean hearing things that we teachers might rather not hear, not only about students' families, or their experiences with

poverty, drugs, and violence, but also about our own classrooms, our teaching and schools.

## CONCLUSION

It is time to stop blaming and demonizing young people for the violence in their lives. Indeed, it is not so much that we have a youth violence problem in this country, but that throughout our society we have endemic problems of family and community breakdown, of increasing inequality, of readily available weapons, of a harsh get-ahead-at-any-cost ethic, even of glorifying violent behavior itself. As families, children, and schools continue to be underfunded, levels of desperation rise. In such a world, violence in the lives of our children must come to us as no surprise.

Yet, developing sensitivity to what we read and see, heightening our awareness of the feelings and experience of other people is at the heart of both antiviolence training and good English teaching. Explore as far as we will into questions of what we as English teachers can do—as this article attempts to undertake—we must also recognize that in order to heal this country's culture of violence we need what Martin Luther King called “a revolution of values.”

In *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967), the last book he wrote before he was killed, King argued that such a revolution demands new and better priorities. One place to start, King suggests, is the schools:

We have been timid in trying to improve the schools . . . Much more money has to be spent on education of the children of the poor; the rate of increase in expenditures for the poor has to be much greater than for the well-off children if the children of the poor are to catch up . . . The United States is far from providing each child with as much education as he can use. Our school system still functions as a system of exclusion . . . The unrealized capacity of many of our youth are an indictment of our society's lack of concern for justice and its proclivity for wasting resources. (194–6)

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Zinn, Howard. 1980. *People's History of the United States*. New York: HarperCollins.

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

### Novels

Baldwin, James. 1974. *If Beale Street Could Talk*. New York: Dell.

Narrated from the point of view of a nineteen-year-old girl, Baldwin's novel offers a readable and compelling look at the iniquities of the criminal justice system and the effect on the families of young people who are caught up in it.

Greene, Bette. 1991. *The Drowning of Stephan Jones*. New York: Bantam.

This young adult novel, exploring the issue of homophobia and violence against homosexuals, is effective in generating class discussion.

Hinton, S. E. 1968. *The Outsiders*. New York: Dell.

The S. E. Hinton novels can take on a new life when connected to current topics of gang violence. They demonstrate that gangs are by no means confined to minority youth and are useful for thinking about the developments in the recent history of gang life.

Myers, Walter Dean. 1988. *Scorpions*. New York: HarperCollins.

*Scorpions* is an excellent contemporary young adult novel treating the youth violence crisis. Newbery Award Winner.

Walker, Alice. 1982. *The Color Purple*. New York: Pocket.

The power of this book comes from the authenticity of its language and the hope that it sets forth for overcoming domestic violence.

Welch, James. 1986. *Fools Crow*. New York: Viking.

To understand violence in America, one should probably start with the treatment of native peoples. This well-written and compelling historical novel, set in 19th-century Montana, examines the response of Native Americans to white encroachment, including the formation of retaliatory bands (gangs?). *Fools Crow* works well with high school students.

Wright, Richard. 1940. *Native Son*. New York: Harper and Row.

*Native Son* is one of the most effective texts I have used for examining the role of racism in the contemporary youth violence crisis.

### Autobiography/Biography

Haley, Alex. 1964. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine.

The film and popular culture continue to enhance Malcolm's reputation. There is no better text for examining America's racial dilemmas.

Kotlowitz, Alex. 1992. *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*. New York: Doubleday.

This best-selling biography of two boys growing up in a Chicago housing project could be used effectively in a language arts class.

McCall, Nathan. 1994. *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America*. New York: Random House.

McCall describes his life of violence and gangs growing up in Virginia. By reading *Native Son* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* while in prison, McCall turned his life around and is today a journalist for the *Washington Post*. *Holler* is powerful, inspiring, and easily accessible to students.

Rodriguez, Luis J. 1993. *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA*. New York: Touchstone.

This highly readable, recent biography addresses the rise of Hispanic gangs in California from an insider's viewpoint. It would be especially effective with students because Rodriguez

addresses the book to his son in an effort to keep him out of 1990s gang violence.

Thomas, Anika. 1991. *Life in the Ghetto*. Kansas City: Landmark Editions.

A powerful picture book that would work well with a variety of age groups, *Life in the Ghetto* is written and illustrated by a 12-year-old girl and tells about the violence of her daily life in a poor neighborhood.

Tyman, James. 1995. *Inside Out: An Autobiography of a Native Canadian*. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Fifth House.

Twenty-four years old and in jail, Tyman writes his moving life story in order to explore issues of race, crime, and violence and to "seek acceptance for myself and all native people" (227). A national bestseller in Canada, this work also addresses issues of cross-racial adoption.

### Professional Resources

Carey-Webb, Allen. 1991. "Auto/biography of the Oppressed: The Power of Testimonial." *English Journal*. 80. 4 (Apr.): 44-47.

Carey-Webb, Allen, and Stephen Benz, Eds. (forthcoming). *Teaching and Testimony: Rigoberta Menchú and the North American Classroom*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Both the article and book demonstrate how to use testimonial in the classroom.

Commings, Scott and Daniel Monti. 1993. *Gangs: The Origins and Impact of Contemporary Youth Gangs in the United States*. Albany: SUNY Press.

A collection of sociological research on gang organization and behavior useful as a resource for teachers who work with gang-involved youth.

Clise, Michelle Durkson. 1994. *Stop the Violence Please*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

This powerful picture book will work well with younger or older students. It includes an appendix of vital information on the youth violence crisis as well as suggesting strategies for youth involvement to address it.

Garbarino, James. 1993. *Let's Talk about Living in a World with Violence*. Chicago: Ericson Institute.

This high quality activity book for students in grades 4-8 addresses issues of violence.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1991. *No Place to be a Child: Raising Children in a War Zone*. Chicago: Ericson Institute.

This study of children living in various war-torn countries including Rwanda, Israel, and Bosnia includes a disturbing chapter on inner city Chicago.

Goodwille, Susan, Ed. 1993. *Voices from the Future: Our Children Tell Us about Violence in America*. New York: Crown.

This is a disturbing collection of recent interviews with children across American who have experienced violence in their lives. Created by a group of dedicated teenagers, the book is a monument to what young people can do to learn about and address our violence crisis. Many selections could be used effectively in the classroom.

Kohl, Herbert. 1994. *I Won't Learn from You and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment*. New York: New Press.

This is must reading for teachers attempting to interrupt the cycle of school failure and violence. Kohl's essays invite teachers to enter into the perspective of resistant students and to transform their teaching to more authentically meet student needs.

Kozol, Jonathan. 1991. *Savage Inequalities; Children in America's Schools*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Kozol examines the enormous disparities of funding and resources between school districts from the point of view of individual communities and classrooms. *Inequalities* is a worthwhile book for students as well as teachers seeking to understand why many poor students are so alienated from their schools.

Prothrow-Stith, Deborah, and Michaele Weissman. 1991. *Deadly Consequences: How Violence Is Destroying Our Teenage Population and a Plan to Begin Solving the Problems*. New York: HarperCollins.

This book covers a range of issues including adolescents' perspectives on gangs; it also suggests ways schools can prevent violence. Prothrow-Stith is also author of *Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents* (1987, Newton, MA: Education Development Center).

### **Plays**

Geiogamah, Hanay. 1980. "Body Indian," *New Native American Drama: Three Plays*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Contemporary Native American literature is an important resource for us in addressing and overcoming violence. This effective play by the director of the Native American Dance Theater explores issues of poverty, alcoholism, and violence in a culturally authentic way.

*Romeo and Juliet* / *West Side Story*.

This classic pairing has particular relevance today and could be updated by adding *Monster*, *Scorpions*, or a contemporary "gangsta" film.

### **Films**

*Hoop Dreams*. 1994. Dir. Steve James. 176 min. New York: Fine Line Productions.

While not explicitly about violence, this fascinating recent documentary examining the lives of two African American teenage boys and their families hoping to escape life in Chicago's brutal South Side by playing basketball will both interest and educate.