

Southern New Hampshire University

How Does a White Educator Critically and Empathetically Teach Black Literature?

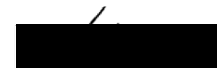
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Abstract

Currently in the United States, there has been social and political unrest, reviving a surge in racist ideologies. As an educator, I feel it is of the utmost importance for us to combat this civil instability with a more effective strategy of teaching multicultural texts. It is important for educators to find ways to empathize with people of all backgrounds and push against any socially set anxieties in regard to teaching multicultural texts, so to illuminate upon ways educators can find a semblance of reassurance and motivation to teach literary texts outside their racial and ethnic backgrounds, I am adding to scholarship by intervening textually in a critical reflective practice in which I engage important members of the Black community, both past and present, in a Socratic Seminar to answer questions I have formulated that will help me and other educators empathetically and critically teach Black literature. The methodological framework I use is autoethnography, which enables me to connect the oppression I have faced in my life to that of Blacks, and through a Critical Race Theory lens, I unveil some of the avenues White educators can take to empathetically and critically teach Black texts in American schools. Through the critical reflective practice in this paper, I expose, with the guidance of textual intervention, how teachers can build upon their knowledge and understanding of Black literature and how they can connect their lives and the lives of their students to the texts regardless of racial and ethnic similarities and differences. The objective of this paper is to further the dialogue about how educators teach and integrate multicultural texts in the classrooms and curricula across America, particularly in the English discipline, and expose teachers to ways in which they can disrupt any anxieties that have prolonged the neglect of the use of multicultural texts in their classrooms.

Introduction

Due to the current social climate in America, White educators should have opportunities to explore how they teach Black literature in a high school setting. Jeffrey Gross writes, “To try to avoid or teach around the politics of the literature requires a willful act of neglecting context and reality. Such an approach, in itself, is a political act of silencing and erasure” (34-35). White educators need to align the political discussions of our present-day climate and the ones of the past to ensure Black literature is taught effectively, critically, and compassionately. Although this paper will examine the link between White educators and Black literature, this problem extends beyond the narrowed focus: Educators along all parts of the spectrum must discover their own marginalization and connect that to multicultural texts. Being the cultural antagonist when trying to teach literature of another culture can be an extraordinarily delicate and problematic issue. How do we critically step back and reflect on what we are teaching, and how we can assure we are teaching the texts critically and empathetically? It is imperative, as educators, that we critically reflect on our own experiences, so that we can find ways in which we can effectually teach literature on many cultural levels: Teaching the voices of the oppressed as a product of the oppressors always has the opportunity to create a barrier even if we do not want said barrier to exist, so it is up to us, as educators, to forge a different path that supersedes any adversities that can stand in our way. White educators need to understand how to be comfortable with teaching Black literature because, quite often, not being Black can stand in the way. The importance in becoming passionate with Black literature and teaching it comes with finding some connection with one of the major themes of Black literature which is oppression. Just because an educator is not of a particular skin

tone does not mean he or she cannot teach literature based in different races, ethnic backgrounds, and/or cultures. Vincent Price pens, "...Black literature is sometimes seen as a field requiring scholarly or experiential expertise to teach. Such is the image that makes the literature difficult to introduce into and easy to leave out of today's American curriculum" (56). One of the goals of this paper is to expound upon and shed light on ways in which White educators can build on their own experiences to be able to disregard any past feelings of inadequacy when it comes to teaching Black literature and any other literature from different cultures. It is exceedingly crucial that educators step out of their comfort zones and push against any societal norms in education that has forced the curricula and the pedagogical practices of the past to infiltrate what we are teaching and how we are teaching. America is currently at yet another crossroads regarding social injustices. This precipice has the potential to continue the perpetuated systemic racism that has been haunting the nation since its birth, and the classroom is a vital part in addressing the issues and developing a discourse among the future generations in which solutions can arise to combat the detrimental subjugation endured by people of color and others who have been marginalized in our country.

Furthermore, the academic field of English calls upon its educators to connect with its students on so many different levels and is a place where educators have the opportunity to relate a vast array of texts directly to students' lives because it "should be a safe haven, a collaborative workshop for practicing modes of discourse, a retreat for the exploration of identity, and a forum for sometimes sensitive conversations about race, class, and society. By revolutionizing the literary canon, we are revolutionizing the English classroom" (Shipp 39). It is our jobs as educators, and particularly English educators, to create an open-ended dialogue with *what* we are teaching and focus on *how* we are facilitating said conversations. Many times, in the English

classroom, the vulnerability of our students is seen through the texts we choose to teach and learning from these experiences and from our students enables us to grow as educators. There is an influx of identities, and quite often, these identities intersect in ways that bound the students and teachers together. Additionally, we need to build on our understanding that the classroom is a place for all to learn, students and teachers, because “[t]eacher-dominated approaches need to make way for student-centered and productive pedagogies to create exploratory classrooms that pose real questions and real challenges directly related to students’ everyday and future lives” (Miller 911). This paper will help further my and other educators’ understanding of the power behind teaching Black literature and multicultural texts, which can be beneficial in changing the ways we, as educators, conduct ourselves in the classrooms: Shifting our thinking and going against the grain set forth by a system based on societal norms that have really been incumbering the nation’s progress towards a society, either free of or minimally damaged by injustices, will allow us even more opportunities to shift our pedagogical ideologies and create an environment in which critical thinkers emerge with a deeper knowledge of and compassion for all cultures.

I will argue that there are ways in which White educators can teach Black literature and engage students critically and empathetically in conversations involving the present-day socioeconomic and political climate of America; furthermore, I am going to explore a potential method for all White educators to ensure this happens in the classroom because, quite often, the opportunities are not there and/or White educators do not feel that they are prepared to teach Black literature, and this is an unfair disadvantage to our nation because right now the conversations about social injustices in our country

are at the forefront of our nation's collective consciousness. Without access to the education of Black literature and the political discussions that come to fruition during the engagement of discourse in the classroom, there is a risk of losing our chance to truly educate our youth and force the study and critique of the social injustices in our country: Lamar L. Johnson exclaims, "ELA teachers and literacy educators must understand that choosing eurocentric texts that omit the lived realities of Black people or misrepresent the multiple ways of being Black leads to anti-blackness and the devaluation of Black life" (109). Without a place for Black literature and multicultural literature in the curricula of the nation's educational system, the disservice to all cultures and racial and ethnic backgrounds is astounding. This past practice of our schools and their teachers and administrators has hindered and can continue to impede on the proliferation of ideologies that encompass the understanding and tolerance of people of all backgrounds.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

To effectively expedite this paper and expose the solutions to the problems I have addressed and retort the questions I will postulate, I will focus on one theoretical lens: Critical Race Theory. Sherick Hughes writes, "[Critical Race Theory] advances calls-to-action for researchers to work in tandem with community members in order to address issues of racial inequity" (154). The theoretical lens will allow me to look at issues of race in our country to appropriately consider and address issues we face as educators in regard to teaching multicultural texts and having conversations about race in our classrooms. The theory also influences questions regarding Whiteness: "Exposing and dismantling the usually invisible privileges of white people is a related major focus of critical race scholarship" ("Critical Race Theory"). Furthermore, while engaging in the discourse I will be having with important past and present members of the Black community, this lens will force me to closely review how race plays a part

in our society because CRT implies that “[p]eople do not have a race [...] they are ‘race-d’” (“Critical Race Theory”). We did not come to where we are as a nation because people were born into a particular race. Critical Race Theory asserts that people were inherently placed into a certain race due to the necessity of subjugation in regard to economic and political power, something that will significantly help further our discussion regarding White educators teaching Black literature in the classroom. The importance of understanding race through a Critical Race Theory lens examines how race is part of a structure, and because of this, it permeates the governance of our country and is stitched into the fabric of our societal norms. Now that the theoretical lens is explained, I will discuss the methodology of this paper in the next section.

Methodology: Autoethnography

I decided upon this methodological route because I want to critically reflect on my life as whole, as an educator, and as a person who has dealt with subjugation, something I hope will shed some light on my personal connection with Black literature and Black culture. Esther O. Ohito asserts, “Autoethnography, a member of the narrative research family, focuses on a researcher’s lived experiences as a route to illuminating aspects of a culture or society” (252). As a researcher, my lived experiences are important, and by taking an autoethnographic approach, I can reflect on my encounters and use them to further my understanding of other cultures and how I can find empathy to utilize during facilitation and instruction in the classroom. Samuel Jaye Tanner uses autoethnography in a similar way in his article “Storying a white teacher.” He decided to expound upon his Whiteness when it came to teaching at both predominately White and predominantly Black schools: “This work is meant to challenge monolithic and overly

simplistic understandings of racial narratives while still accounting for the nuanced ways that my whiteness was forged and activated during my work in education” (422). Growing up as Jewish kid, he was ridiculed by White kids and eventually saw his Jewishness conform into Whiteness, so he could fit in with other students at school (426). When he started teaching, he realized race was really at the forefront of the problems he was facing: “Serious considerations of race became necessary to me to continue in my profession” (426). He started to see how race was integrated into the curricula and pedagogical practices in schools in an unjust manner; however, he was able to use this to his advantage and is now a scholar of Whiteness who hopes to change the educational system: “My hope in sharing these stories and interpretations is to complicate conceptualizations of whiteness with the ultimate goal of undermining white supremacy by more carefully troubling and accounting for whiteness in US schools and society” (432). His approach allowed him to take from his past life and his inner struggles with race and incorporate it into a discourse on race in schools, particularly the profession of the instructor. I am taking a similar path but will be using literature to answer questions, as he used a dramatic approach. His article evidences how a procedural approach of autoethnography can significantly further the conversation of how we, as educators, can change the way in which we view and discuss race in schools, and how we can change the pedagogical practices and curricula across the United States. Although our directions cross in a similar way, our paths differ too; however, the outcome of his method and the result of mine involve getting to the bottom of the racial issues that plague our society and our educational system. With a better conception of the importance of my methodology, I will now focus on the exercise that will cover the second half of the body of this paper.

Textual Exercise: Round table

Along with the autoethnographic approach, which has found its place all throughout scholarship and is a similar approach used by many members of academia, I am going to take it a step further and will add to academic scholarship by developing a roundtable discussion in the form of Socratic Seminar in which I invite fourteen members of the Black community from different political, social, artistic, and literary backgrounds (e.g., music, film, literature, and political activism) to have an in-depth discourse with me, so I may ask them how I, a White male, can truly teach Black literature in my classroom while exposing the truths behind the centuries of suppression in America and making it relevant to understanding the present-day social climate and social injustices in our country. I want to find out how White teachers can empathetically and critically teach Black literature to high school students, and I want to know which struggles are the most important in the eyes of these prominent past and present members of the Black community: Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka, Harriet Jacobs, Stokely Carmichael, James Baldwin, Eazy E, Langston Hughes, Ava Duvernay, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Angela Davis, KRS-One, Ernest J. Gaines, and John Singleton.

Forecast: What Lies Ahead

To begin the body of this paper, I will be illuminating upon the importance of the autoethnographic approach. This will explain its significance in the scope of this paper and will help transition into the section I entitled *Autoethnographic Preface*: The reason for this section is to expose to the reader, and to the participants in my round table discussion, the subjugation I have endured in my life as a Deadhead. For those who are not aware of this terminology, here is a simplified definition: “Someone who loves – and draws meaning from – the music of the

Grateful Dead and the experience of Dead shows, and builds community with others who feel the same way” (Shenk and Silberman 60). This is something that I find to be extremely central to understanding the oppression Blacks (and other peoples for that matter) have had to tolerate. This link of empathy is imperative to better my grasp on how I, a White educator, can empathetically and critically teach Black literature, and it is the transition between the introduction of the paper and the textual exercise involving critical reflective practice and textual intervention I will be engaged in to critically reflect on how I have succeeded and failed as an educator in the United States in regard to teaching literature of different cultures and/or racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Importance of Methodology: My Search, Our Journey

As I begin to write using a methodological approach of autoethnography, the newest inked addition to my skin is healing on my right forearm: a sober and pontificating image of one of my personal heroes, a man whom I believe to be one of the greatest Americans to ever live: Malcolm X. Although I consider myself to be understanding of and knowledgeable about Black history and culture in America, I still wrestle with the fact that I do not think I am truly capable of teaching Black literature to my students. Is it because I am not Black? Is it because I cannot ever understand what it truly means to be Black in America? Am I naïve in believing I can make a difference in the classroom by teaching Black literature? These internal doubts and struggles are the main rationale and impetus behind this paper. It is time for me to really reflect on my instructional practices in the classroom and who I am as an educator, an American, and a human being. Even though I believe my philosophy of teaching – Education is a symbiotic relationship based on a foundation of knowledge, understanding, compassion, and love – is one of rigor, relevance, and altruism, I still have questions. After all, is not education a life-long process?

To be able to identify with others, one must understand one's own identity, so I am going to begin this exposition of self at the beginning. I was born during the middle of the Carter Administration and in a time in our country when things had seemed to settle down and revolution was taking a back seat to economic struggles and foreign relations. The most apparent issue I had with my identity growing up was the fact that I was adopted: Even though it was at the young age of three months, it still impacted my life and does to this day. Finding one's identity can be difficult for people; however, children and teenagers who are adopted are more apt to find obstacles in their paths: "The task of identity development may be more difficult for an adopted person because of the additional issues related to adoption, such as why he or she was placed for adoption, what became of the birth parents, does he or she have siblings, and whether he or she resembles the birth parents in looks or in other characteristics" (Romero 132-133).

When my adoptive parents finally told me that I was adopted and what this meant, I began to look at myself in a different light. I would spend time in front of the mirror and question why I looked the way I looked and from where I came. Family gatherings took on a whole new meaning to me, and for the most part, I felt separated from the proverbial herd. This is of *no* fault of my parents. They raised me right, and I have nothing but gratitude, respect, and love for them, as well as my biological mother – whom I met when I was thirty – because she made the difficult decision to be selfless and give me up. However, it caused an inner struggle with identity and forced me to find out who I was, which directed me on paths that I am grateful, to this day, existed. Using an autoethnographic approach will force me to bring myself into research, which will, in turn, give more purpose to the textual exercise I will be conducting when it comes to the round table discussion in the second part of the body of this paper. My life-long search for my own identity as a human being has caused me to truly reflect on where I have been and where I

will need to go in my life to be successful as a father, son, friend, colleague, teacher, and fellow human being. This methodology will ensure I am engaging in a critical reflective practice by committing to the textual intervention in the succeeding round table discussion with prominent past and present members of the Black community in search of answers that will provide me a new direction in which I will question my personal pedagogical practices and learn how to progress in my facilitation and instruction of multicultural texts. The next section will expound upon my struggles with identity and the suppression I have endured in my life, which will set a solid foundation with which I can build a well-considered discourse that is aligned with my connectivity and understanding as both a human being and an educator.

Autoethnographic Preface

During this identity search, I remember uncovering Black culture at a young age. I was taught the whitewashed version of Black history and knew some of the key players: Dr. King, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, and Booker T. Washington, but around fourth grade, I began to immerse myself in the hip hop culture and started to learn about more Black leaders like Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Angela Davis. Public Enemy and N.W.A were my favorite rap groups at that time, and they really got me amped up about the oppression Blacks had faced and were still facing in our country and in the world. The lyrics I was hearing, along with the history I had already learned in school, found themselves in the deepest crevices of my soul. I was beginning to see both sides of the fight: nonviolence and militance. I understood the need for both and was excited to learn about both: I was beginning to understand how and why some Blacks in America did not resort to a nonviolent method like the one we were taught in school because "... African American people must be admired for their stamina to survive the holocaust of racial slavery through cultural and ideological resistance;

some of them also developed militancy by defining slavery through engaging in armed resistance, forming maroon communities, killing their masters, and burning their properties without fear of torture and death” (Jalata 110). This struggle frustrated me, and I found myself asking more questions: Why would people judge others because of the color of their skin? How could this country, the land of the free, allow this to happen? What does it feel like to be Black in America? What can I do to stop this? Is there a God, and if so, why does He not stop this? Luckily, even though I went to a private school at that time, it was the most diverse private school in Nashville, TN – University School of Nashville. My classmates were from many different racial, cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. I was fortunate to have had this experience, and in addition to my parents’ upbringing, I was a well-rounded, middle class, White kid who was learning compassion and tolerance for other people in the world. That being said, my friends, teachers, and parents were helping me, in some form or fashion, answer the internal questions I was pondering at such an early age, which helped forge the next transitional path in my life, becoming a Deadhead.

A Shift in Philosophy: The Beginning of My Life As a Deadhead

Something changed in me: I had found a new direction in identity – The Grateful Dead. At the age of 12, my friend Sean let me borrow an album called *Skeletons from the Closet*. This compilation of Grateful Dead hits opened up Pandora’s box. I remember vividly putting the CD on in my bedroom and just lying back and taking in all of the musical notes and lyrics. The resonating sound of jubilation and spiritual euphoria ringed in my head and found its way down into my heart. I thought, “This is it! This is what life is all about!” Little did I know just how influential that moment would be, and that I would eventually become a Deadhead. Now, almost thirty years later, I: still listen to The Grateful Dead and many of the side projects; have two

sons, Ezra and Owsley, whom were born because of my profound connection to the band (I met their mother due to the fact that we are both Deadheads.); have seen 47 out of the 50 states, mostly because of the tours I have done with incarnations of the band following lead guitarist Jerry Garcia's death and other "jam bands" like Phish; don three Grateful Dead related tattoos on my body; and have an immense family all across this country that I consider to be deeper than blood in many ways, known as The Grateful Dead Family.

Fast forward a couple of years. In the summer of 1993, my father took me to see The Grateful Dead at Freedom Hall in Louisville, KY. This was really the first introduction to what came along with the music: a travelling circus of endearing freaks and misfits that encapsulated me. I remember spending just as much of the time in the concert listening to the music as I did soaking in the magical atmosphere around me. The saying goes, "There is nothing like a Grateful Dead concert," and man is that so true. I could not believe what I was seeing: People were dancing however they wanted, women's skirts were flowing in the air, smiles and hugs were in abundance, and there seemed to be this familial feeling in the air. The music brought us there, but the love and acceptance kept us in the moment. I could be whomever I wanted. I could dance in whatever way I chose, and no one was going to judge me. Then came the experience of the parking lot after the show: beautiful Volkswagen buses; an array of handcrafted goods; the smell of sage, patchouli oil, veggie burritos, and marijuana that permeated the air; a communal lifestyle of which I had never seen. I felt like I was home for the first time in my life. I knew, deep down inside, I had found my family. I would later learn I was not alone in feeling this: In her article "The Answer to the Atom Bomb: Rhetoric, Identification, and the Grateful Dead," Elizabeth Carroll writes, "Many Deadheads express a feeling of being 'outsiders' in their biological families and native communities, a sense of alienation that disappeared when they found the

Grateful Dead [...] The appeal of the Dead, for many, is the feeling of fitting in with a bunch of other misfits” (1). I am a part of a family that prides itself in being nonconformist and accepting of all types of people. Even though “most Deadheads are white and come from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds” (Carroll 1), we have no preset notion of who belongs and who does not in our subculture. For me, my place in The Grateful Dead Family is forever. I will never turn my back on it. I will never one day come to some realization that I do not need it. It is a part of who I am and also a part of who my kids are. My youngest son is named Owsley after Owsley Stanley who was a sound engineer for the band during the sixties and early seventies and also a manufacturer of some of the most well-known and well-liked LSD ever made. The Grateful Dead Family is synonymous with the word *family* in many facets of my life: “The term ‘family’ is used often in the Deadhead community, and, as such, its use resonates with meaning among its members and forms a basis for identification among Deadheads” (Carroll 3). Our community is way beyond just a group of people who like the same music, and our family does not just go to shows like, say, a Rolling Stones’ fan would. We identify with each other on levels way beyond the basics. I think these lines from The Grateful Dead song “Eyes of the World,” written by lyricist Robert Hunter, can put this into perspective: “Sometimes we live no particular way but our own / And sometimes we visit your country and live in your home” (16-17). We do not live like societal norms tell us we have to live. We are nomadic at times, and at other times, we find solace in domestication. Either way, we are spiritually bound to each other and are really the eyes of the world. That is the way I understand those lyrics and have taken it to heart whenever asked about how and why I am so connected to this band and the family.

Family and Subjugation – Am I Being Profiled?

Now I feel I need to shed some light on this paper's direction. The reason I have chosen to go in-depth about the search for identity and the connection I made to The Grateful Dead Family in this paper is because of the subjugation I and others in my family have had to endure in America. It is the way in which I am bridging the gap between me and Blacks in this country. Critics might say that my cultural identification is a chosen one and Blacks have no choice. I do not deny this is true on many levels; however, even though I did choose this in the beginning, it later became such an integral part of who I am as a human being that the choice in the matter dissipated. Whether or not I like it, I am in this family for the rest of my life. That is the way I see it, so that is the way it will be for me.

The first time I got pulled over and profiled was when I was sixteen. I was delivering pizzas for a local shop called Mama Taori's when blue lights came on behind me. I drove my Jeep into a vacant parking lot right across from some practice fields on Vanderbilt University's campus in Nashville, TN. I did not know what I had done wrong. I was maybe going a few miles over the speed limit but nothing so outrageous as to get stopped by law enforcement. Being so young and unknowledgeable about my rights as a citizen of The United States, I quickly got out of the car when one of the cops told me to exit the vehicle. They played "good cop, bad cop" with me: The "bad cop" began searching my truck without my consent, and the "good cop" took me to the back of the Jeep and started talking to me about music because I had an Earl Scruggs Revue tape playing, so he could relate. While my fourth amendment rights were being stomped on, I was racking my brain as to why I was getting treated this way, and then I saw it. It was right in front of me the whole time: a Steal Your Face Grateful Dead sticker that I had placed right in the middle of the top of my back window. "Oh," I thought, "I guess I know why they are

harassing me now.” Finally, they did not find anything illegal and let me go without any other noticeable confrontations, but I had finally gotten a taste of what it meant to be outside of the societal norm: “Because the Grateful Dead may be considered the natural heirs to the cultural change of the 1960’s by virtue of their beginnings in the Haight-Ashbury and their dogged determination to remain true to their original values, they are the natural meeting place for people whose values are inconsistent with the mainstream” (Kanzer 527). I now understood what it meant to live against the governed flow of America’s society. As much as it was frightening to know I was being marginalized, it was also exhilarating and an eye-opening experience. I quickly equated it to the marginalization I had been made aware of years before when I was learning about Black culture in our country. As I am writing about this, I still question how different the aforementioned interaction with police would have been and could be for a Black person in our country.

The Abuse of Power

The abovementioned example of subjugation was not the last and probably will not be the last I face in America. One of the scariest encounters I have faced with police – I have had quite a few and have sustained bodily harm because of a couple of them – came a few years later in 1998; I was nineteen. Four other Deadheads and I were making our way from New Orleans up to Asheville, North Carolina via Tennessee after a Halloween run of Widespread Panic shows at UNO Lakefront Arena. We took I-59 out of Louisiana and found ourselves in rural Mississippi. The station wagon was running low on gas, so we pulled off into some small town. I forget the name of it, but I suspect in that area of the country they are all pretty much of the same ideological collection. As I had a freshly broken leg at the time, someone else was driving my car, a young, White woman with dreadlocks. As we were driving through the town to find a gas

station, she ended up speeding about 5-7 miles over the limit. Once again blue lights came on, and we were motioned to drive the car into a vacant dirt lot, but this time there was no nonchalant approach to the vehicle. Immediately, we heard the police officers screaming, one on the cop car speaker and the other two with their voices: “Get out of the car *now* and get on the ground!” None of us really understood the urgency and began to make our way out of the car. They did not like our lackadaisical movements – as we were exhausted from a three-show run and just trying to stay focused on getting back to someone’s house for some rest and relaxation – and came upon us with 12-gauge shotguns drawn. The others quickly got out and got on the ground; however, I limped as fast as I could out of the car because I was in the middle of the back seat because it enabled me to rest my leg between the driver and the passenger. I finally made it, face down in the dirt, broken leg exposed and in pain, with a shotgun pointed at my head. It all happened so rapidly, and we were stunned. Once again, they searched my car and impeded on my and the others’ fourth amendment rights. Luckily, nobody in my ride had anything illegal on them, and the cops eventually directed us back into the car and told us to follow them to the police station, so the driver could take care of the speeding ticket. We barely had any time to reflect on what had just happened, but the ride to Asheville gave us plenty of time to do so. I could have been shot for no reason. I could have watched other members of my family get shot for no other reason than for being different. I do not know what would have happened if I had a different skin tone or someone in my ride was of a different racial background, but I can only imagine things would not have ended the way they did.

Mandatory Minimums – Is It a Black or White Thing or Both?

Besides being profiled by law enforcement, our family continues to be affected by mandatory minimums. I have lost more than enough remarkably bright and wonderful brothers

and sisters to the U.S. penal system because of drug charges, and many of them have done or are currently doing a considerable amount of time in prisons because of mandatory minimums, a law that ravishes the Black community as well. Since its inception, the law has wrecked people's lives and the lives of their families and friends and has done the opposite of what was intended: "The sentencing guideline system started in 1987. Congress established the sentencing commission and directed it to write guidelines to combat unjustified sentencing disparity from judge to judge across the country" ("Mandatory sentencing"). Instead of solving any problems with unjustified sentencing, it has allowed the judicial prejudices in regard to people of color and counterculture communities like The Grateful Dead Family. One of the major issues regarding the unjust use of this law is how drugs are weighed: There was a 1991 Supreme Court ruling that said LSD should be viewed as a "mixture," which allowed for stiffer sentences than those for other drugs. For example, a sugar cube laced with one dose of LSD weighs the same amount as a gram of raw LSD but carries the same penalty even though a gram of raw LSD can produce upwards of 10,000 doses, depending on the amount of micrograms per dose (Strauss 2). The ruling, in my opinion, was and still is an attack on The Grateful Dead Family, and it has wreaked havoc: Some Deadheads are doing *life sentences* for LSD and many of them see more time than perpetrators of violent crimes: "In short: LSD sentences are out of proportion – by a factor of 50 or more – with other drug sentences" because average minimum and maximum sentences for LSD in 1992 beat out that of attempted murder with harm, rape, armed robbery, and kidnapping, among others (Cauchon). (Side note: That referenced *USA Today* article was actually sent along with the tickets for The Grateful Dead show I saw in 1993.) The detrimental injustices created by our government against Deadheads is a straight correlation to the affects this law has also had on the Black communities because of the differentiations made between cocaine and crack cocaine.

Even staunch Republican Newt Gingrich has finally seen how devastating and wrong this was: “We absolutely should have treated crack and cocaine [...] as exactly the same thing. I think it was an enormous burden on the Black community, but it also fundamentally violated a sense of core fairness” (Duvernay 00:24:20-00:24:32). This devastating disparity still continues to harm the Black community.

Connections of Oppression

Both communities have dealt with and continue to deal with oppression, and my experiences as a Deadhead have tied closely to my longer love, understanding, and compassion for Blacks in America. Although I will never truly grasp what it means to be Black in The United States, I will continue to relate my own experiences with and feelings of oppression, so I will be able to more empathetically and critically teach all texts in my classes. With this understanding of subjugation by the powers-that-be in America, I will facilitate a round table discussion in this paper, so, collectively, we can come to some conclusions and answer the aforementioned concerns I have as a White educator teaching Black literature in an American high school.

Why Is This Exercise Important?

As educators, we often ask students to perform critical reflective practices, whether it be in the form of a survey, narrative, discussion, etc. By engaging in the textual exercise of the round table discussion, I am sure I will identify parts, if not all, of the activity that I could incorporate into other lessons for my students to perform as well. Furthermore, this commitment will remind me of what I ask my students to do, and it is important for me as an educator to empathize with my students and continue to find understanding in what *they* do as students in the classroom. The round table discussion is a prime example of critical reflective practice, which can most definitely be considered a form of professional development. We are often given

guidance by administrators and other teachers when it comes to areas of reinforcement and refinement and are asked to reflect on our lessons, professionalism, etc. that are being evaluated, so participating in a critical reflective practice, like the round table discussion I will be examining, can be beneficial to both teachers and students. As far as teachers are concerned, "...reflective teaching [...] includes dispositions such as open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility in addition to abilities such as analyzing, summarizing, and judging information" (McCabe, et. al 2), and I know this can go for students as well. It allows us, as educators, to take a step back and question how we can improve our understanding of pedagogy and in what ways we can change how and what we teach. The textual exercise of having a discourse with members of the Black community will give me a chance to critically reflect on my methods as an educator, and improve my understanding of Black literature and the ways in which I can embrace the fact that I can be, at times, naturally an antagonist while teaching Black texts, as well as how I can further incorporate my personal life experiences in relating my subjugation to that of other cultures to expand my empathetic approach to teaching multicultural texts in a high school classroom. Furthermore, the way in which I will be engaging the participants in this discourse is through a pedagogical practice known as textual intervention. In his book *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*, Rob Pope writes:

The best way to understand how a text works [...] is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then to try to account for the exact effect of what you have done. In practice – not just in theory – we have the option of making changes at all levels, from the merest nuance of punctuation or intonation to total recasting in terms of genre, time, place, participants and medium. (1)

When educators and students intervene in texts, as I will during the following textual exercise, they are able to cognitively and meta-cognitively understand texts. This practice places the reader in the driver seat of the text, which, in turn, promotes comprehension, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, and the pyramid of Bloom's Taxonomy can be ascended through this. That being said, I want to inform the reader that I will be engaging in an identity performance during my textual intervention. I understand my method will be biased; I will be playing with language and modifying the lexicon of the discussion participants in regard to the perspectives I have constructed of these people throughout the years by getting to know each of these members of the cohort through his or her literary, artistic, and/or oratory contributions to our society and culture. The following round table discussion has been arranged by posing questions I wanted answered, identifying participants whom I believed could answer my questions and come together as a well-balanced group, reading texts and re-reading texts by and about said contributors, and finally creating the discourse by answering questions with textual evidence by intervening with the texts and engaging in critical reflective practice. Now that the significance of the following exercise has been explained, the next section will clarify the way in which I formed the round table.

Contributors' Significance and Discussion Frame

I have asked this panel to allow me the opportunity to posit questions in hopes of answering my initial question of how a White educator can critically and empathetically teach Black literature. I am confident in my selection of this panel because I feel that I have invited a well-composed group of Black leaders both past and present. The members of this cohort vary in historical significance, artistic approach, gender, ideologies, and societal, political, and economic backgrounds. The importance of this discourse has implications on how we can change the

educational system in America, which, in turn, is one of the ways we can change the consciousness of the nation, forcing a paradigm shift in the very structural belief system that has haunted our country for centuries with its insidious suppression of Blacks and other cultures. An uneducated people exacerbate the problematic issues of the governance of a nation. Jeffery Gross asserts:

At many [schools] African American literature courses draw a range of students, from African American students who know all too well the pervasiveness of systemic racism from their lived experiences to some white students who, through ignorance and curricular design, whole-heartedly believe that racism is an artifact of the past [...] students have limited opportunities to learn African American literature, history, theology, and theory; these subjects remain underrepresented in the curriculum. (29-30)

To end systemic racism we must help the structure implode from the inside out, and to do this, we need to have a better understanding and willingness to teach multicultural texts in ways that celebrate other cultures, force us to comprehend the uneasiness of being antagonists even if we ourselves do not have ideologies aligned with our racial comparatives, and empathetically examine and analyze multicultural texts. There will be three sections of inquiries because of the intersectionality and connectivity of certain questions:

- (1) The understanding of Black literature and its relevance to historical significance and correlation to the present social and political climate in America
- (2) How we can, as White educators, find ways in which to empathize with Black culture and bring said empathy into the facilitation and instruction of Black literature in our classrooms

(3) In what ways can this change our pedagogical practices and the American educational system as a whole

I will begin the round table discussion by introducing and welcoming the participants. Then, the discourse will be arranged in a Socratic Seminar with a fluid dialogue that includes my methodological approach, a Critical Race Theory lens, and literary evidence in the form of paraphrasing and direct quotation through the pedagogical exercise of textual intervention, all culminating in critical reflective practice.

Introduction to Round table Discussion

Me: Thank you all for taking this time to shed some light on the issues we face as a nation in regard to the subjugation of Blacks and how White educators can find comfort in teaching Black literature in a way that evokes empathy and critical thinking. I would like to welcome Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka, Harriet Jacobs (aka Linda Brent), Kwame Ture (aka Stokely Carmichael), James Baldwin, Eazy E, Langston Hughes, Ava Duvernay, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Angela Davis, KRS-One, Ernest J. Gaines, and John Singleton. It is a pleasure to have you all here today, and I thoroughly look forward to our discourse this evening. The questions I posit will be in three different sections: understanding Black culture and literature, finding empathy to teach Black texts, and changes we can make to education inside and outside the classroom. Let us begin the first section of inquiries.

Section I: Black Literature and Systemic Racism

Me: I think we and many others can agree on oppression being a major theme in Black texts, but what are some other prevalent thematic connections we should be making about Black literature?

Douglass: If it pleases this panel of distinguished men and women, I would like to commence this enlightening dialogue. As I ponder on this daunting query, I am reminded of the vestiges of

my past. The themes I have so rightfully observed in the texts of my people are comprised of brutal and peaceable accounts; however, it would delight me to initiate this portion of the postulated requests with a conversation about *the passion* of which our manuscripts possess.

Whilst I was in bondage as a chattel of the detrimental institution of slavery, I was thus engaged in an ever-growing zeal for the divine. The zestfulness of my burgeoning rapport with God was the impetus I required in finding a determination to break the edifices of my iron:

From the earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise. (Douglass 337)

It was this passionate direction that aided me in the direction towards freedom.

Brent: Frederick, I find your assertions to be advantageous and appropriate. I concur that thematic connections in our literature can be seen as both violent and nonviolent, and I recognize the value of your designation of passion. I, too, found passion to be a part of my journey as a slave in America. When I became a mother as a slave, passion is what drove me to ensure the welfare of my children: “I had a woman’s pride, and a mother’s love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each” (Brent 496). I do not think I could have weathered the inevitable storm of captivity and oppression if I had not had the fervor to safeguard the destiny of my children and the future of our liberation from violent servitude.

Me: So, *passion* plays a vital role in the themes of your literature? Do others agree with Ms. Brent and Mr. Douglass?

Baldwin: Well, it does, and I have seen it manifest itself in many ways throughout our people's texts. For example, in one of my short stories entitled *Sonny's Blues*, I articulate how Sonny's passion for music is a driving force in helping him deal with issues of addiction, something that has haunted the Black community for many years. In the story, Sonny's older brother finally goes to see Sonny play at a nightclub and realizes that his passion for music has helped him endure the battle he had with heroin: "Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. Yet, there was no battle in his face now. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth" (140). The thematic permeation of passion in our literature constitutes an understanding in terms of your questions because it is truly what lies at the foundation of our struggle.

Eazy E: Huh!?

Me: You don't agree?

Eazy E: Well, it's not that I don't agree, but all I have ever seen in *my* life is violence. It is *us* against *them*. Black against White. I mean, I guess it ain't all White people, but ya know, the ones that come into our hoods and fuck with us, like the motherfuckin' police. Violence is in our books, our music, and our movies. It's our history. It's like this:

... the police always got somethin' stupid to say

They put out my picture with silence

'Cause my identity by itself causes violence

The E with the criminal behavior

Yeah, I'm a gangsta, but still, I got flavor

Without a gun and a badge, what do you got?

A sucker in a uniform waiting to get shot (“Fuck the Police” 3.8-14)

We’ve had to take on these fucking cops for years. It ain’t no different than the slave masters.

Different time, same shit homie. We have had violence in our lives for years, and just ‘cause there ain’t no slavery like those crackers in the South had, don’t mean it ain’t still here. It’s just different now.

Singleton: E is right. But there is more to it. My main focus in creating *Boyz n the Hood* was to shine a spotlight on the violence Black communities across America were having to endure, both government forces coming into our neighborhoods and the violence we were, and still are, experiencing due to the fact that majority of Black communities in this country are drug-ridden and experience a high level of crime, mostly violent crime. There is a scene where Laurence Fishburne’s character Furious Styles takes his son Tre, played by Cuba Gooding, Jr., and his son’s friend Ricky, played by Morris Chesnut, to Compton to explain to them what he does for a living, which is help people get money to buy homes. His lesson is on gentrification and how Black communities need to keep everything in it Black owned with Black money (Singleton 01:03:33-01:05:10). While he begins to describe the meaning of it, some members of the hood decided to see what’s up: younger hoods and an older man. They are arguing about who is at fault for the degradation of their community and the violence that ensues on a daily basis. The older man says, “Ain’t nobody from outside bringing down the property value. It’s these folks [pointing to younger hoods]. Shooting each other and selling that crack rock and shit” (Singleton 01:05:06-01:05:19). Furious replies, “How you think crack gets into the country? We don’t own any planes. We don’t own no ships. We are not the people flying and floating that shit in here”

(Singleton 01:05:20-01:05:29). External forces, like our own government, have created a structure in which Black people are kept down.

Me: I would agree. In his article “Contesting the Mark of Criminality: Race, Place, and the Prerogative of Violence in NWA’s Straight Outta Compton,” B.J. McCann writes, “Absent other resources for income, many young African Americans [in the 1980s] became ensnared in the drug trade, peddling crack cocaine and other narcotics for drug dealers whose hunger for profit was no less insatiable or sadistic than that of a Fortune 500 CEO” (370). I understand that being violent is not something we are inherently born to be. I also know that the 1980s in America was the Reagan era, and the economic and political structure modified by that administration really created more of a hegemonic tyranny that gravely affected people of color and of the lower classes.

Singleton: We are not inherently violent, and the overall message behind *Boyz n the Hood* is that the violence needs to stop, but also that this is something that has been divisively attained by a government and country built on slavery.

DuVernay: ...and a country that is *still* involved in the enslavement of Blacks. First of all, let me preface this by saying how appreciative I am of Frederick, Linda, and James for starting this discourse with an encouraging angle, but I am right there with Eazy and John. I grew up in Compton, and at a young age “I remember police coming [...] into my backyard. My father, my recently dearly departed father, in his own backyard, watering the lawn, and police came back and wrestled him to the ground and were gonna arrest him because apparently, they said, there was a man running through the area, and they thought that was him, even though he was in his own backyard” (DuVernay and Winfrey 00:01:46-00:02:06). Growing up like this was one of the foremost motivations behind the creation of the documentary *13th*.

Me: Ah, yes. That documentary was extremely influential in exposing the prison-industrial complex and its unjust treatment and enslavement of poor people and people of color.

DuVernay: It was one piece. Michelle Alexander was also very influential with her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, and Angela and many others before me have been fighting this issue for decades.

Davis: We have, but I think what Mr. Richardson is saying is that your documentary was a comprehensive analysis. Something visually and auditorily tangible for so many Americans that have been in the dark about the severity of the mass incarceration in the United States.

Me: Well, that, and I think it came out at the perfect time. We are in this quote unquote post-racial age in America, but in reality, there is nothing post-racial about it.

DuVernay: Absolutely! This has been going on for centuries. The systemic racism in this country has not gone away, and it is so closely stitched into the fabric of American society that we need to address how it has manifested itself into different forms.

Me: Well, since we have shifted focus from thematic connections to this new form of slavery, let's discuss this even further because it really answers a few of the questions I have.

Davis: To add to the discussion of police and prisons in our country, I want to point at that the prison-industrial complex goes beyond the penal system in the United States. "In the US schools in poor communities of color are thoroughly entangled with the security state, so much so that sometimes we have a hard time distinguishing between schools and jails" (Davis 56). A security company called GS4 – who is immersed in that sector and is one of the largest private corporations in the entire world, behind Wal Mart and Foxconn (Davis 55) – has been immeasurably a part in making our "[s]chools look like jails; schools use the same technologies of detection as jails and they sometimes use the same law enforcement officials" (Davis 56).

Douglass: These instances of America's present-day social climate are eerily parallel to the time of the slaveholding South. As slaves in the American South, the opportunity for education was naught. We did not even have schools to attend nor were given the privilege to read or write. Fortunately for me, my mistress, Sophia Auld, had begun to teach me how to read until Master Hugh found out and halted it immediately. She quickly ascertained how injurious to the structure of slavery education actually was: "She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other" (Douglass 341). I have a supposition to bring upon this cohort if I may: Education or the lack of education is another thematic connection we can make in Black literature.

Me: This is closely related to our present situation in regard to what Ms. Davis was discussing in terms of schools mirroring prisons.

X: I think schools, at least Black schools, are synonymous with prisons, and this is the very form of oppression that has enabled the suffering of Blacks to continue for centuries in America. The government, or the White government of the United States, needs us Black people to remain unintelligent and uninformed. They don't want us thinking. It reminds me of being in prison and learning how to set my mind free with the teachings of Islam. I remember thinking:

You let this caged-up black man start thinking, the same way I did when I first heard Elijah Muhammad's teachings: let him start thinking how, with better breaks when he was young and ambitious he might have been a lawyer, a doctor, a scientist, anything.

You let this caged-up black man start realizing, as I did, how from the first landing of the first slave ship, the millions of black men in America have been like sheep in a den of wolves. (X and Haley 187)

This way of reasoning has the potential to disrupt the White man's system, and he doesn't want *that*. So, I wholeheartedly agree with Frederick. Education is a major theme in our texts and in our history and culture for that matter. It is the one thing that can empower the oppressed more than anything else.

Coates: Brother Malcolm, if I may, I would like to amend your dialogue. The necessity of educating our people is one of the utmost importance. At Howard we had the Mecca:

I was admitted to Howard University, but formed and shaped by the Mecca. These institutions are related but not the same. Howard University is an institution of higher education, concerned with the LSAT, magna cum laude, and Phi Beta Kappa. The Mecca is a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body. The Mecca derives its power from the heritage of Howard University, which in Jim Crow days enjoyed a near-monopoly on black talent [...] The history, the location, the alumni combined to create The Mecca – the crossroads of the black diaspora. (Coates 40)

Whites are privileged in having this kind of philosophical and educational landscape all across America. The development of Black institutions is minimal in comparison. The lack of schools that perform at a high level and the disparity of higher education institutions and access to post-secondary schools has adversely affected our community for years.

Me: So, I think we can agree on passion, violence, and education as some of the more prevalent themes in Black texts besides oppression. We have touched on the following question a bit thus far, but looking through the history of Blacks' struggles in America, what are the crucial events and/or situations we should really focus on in the classroom?

Gaines: I know this is probably going to be the main focus, but slavery is such a part of our history past and present. In my novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, I closely examine the horrifying effects of the Jim Crow South. For me, this is the transitional connection between the slaveholding era before the Emancipation Proclamation and the present-day enslavement due to the mass incarceration of Blacks in America.

Davis: You actually examine the wrongful conviction of crimes in our community in the novel, and the death penalty, something that relates very closely with what we have been discussing.

Gaines: I do, and I think it is imperative that the judicial system and its blatant racist structure is part of the conversations educators are having in the classroom with their students. The book begins, “I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be” (3). Grant, the narrator and one of the main characters, knows he does not have to go to Jefferson’s trial because he knew that a jury of 12 White men were going to convict Jefferson of robbery and murder in the first degree (8) even though Jefferson was innocent of it. We are supposed to be tried by a jury of our peers, but this was not true back then, and I believe is still not true today.

Baldwin: It is just another example of having our bodies taken from us without any regard to our humanity. In my letter to my nephew called “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” I wrote:

... this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.

(The Fire Next Time 5)

The violence afflicted on our bodies and our minds by a racially driven structure wields a power struggle that necessitates the actions of bodily theft and thievery of the minds of our people.

Hughes: Yes, and we have to continue to have discourse about the societal, political, and economic ramifications of this pilfering and pillaging:

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed! ("Let America" 25-30)

The title of that poem is really cynicism at its finest. America has never been a land of opportunity for us: The empirical advent of this nation is the direct result of the fruition of a republic engrossed in lucrative servitude and has caused a continual tenacity by the White man to perpetuate this composition.

Baraka: Thievery is a softer way of describing how the system attacks people of color and poor people. This power structure has been continuing for centuries, and it greatly participates in acts of terrorism, something our government claims is an issue with groups like Islamic extremist, but in reality, it is perpetrated by the very establishment that hides in plain sight and lies to its people. It is unashamedly in clear view of the world:

Who the biggest terrorist
Who change the bible
Who killed the most people

Who do the most evil

Who don't worry about survival

Who have the colonies

Who stole the most land

Who rule the world

Who say they good but only do evil

Who the biggest executioner (Baraka 111-120)

This is something that goes far beyond the American government although they are in place to carry out the atrocities of their tyrannical domination and acts of subversion and subjugation.

KRS-One: The theft of us began in The Middle Passage, but it is a continual manifestation that finds itself in countless facets of the America system. We are either denied education or are thought to be uneducated altogether: “I’m stolen property, kicking the flavor to society / Police be clocking me, but logically they got to be / Cause they were taught that serious poetry would come from Socrates” (“Hip Hop vs. Rap” 7-9). The poetic justice of the streets comes out in our literature, films, and music. We are in a constant trench warfare against a structure of brazen oppression:

Having been enslaved and then survived it through linguistic resistance – amongst other forms of agency – black people in Africa have always learnt that it is possible to compose the features of one’s language and stylistic expressions and manipulate cultural symbols in such ways that one’s linguistic voice seemed to placate the plantation owners, while another subversive register embedded in specific language context undermined dominant power in places and ways that could not always be detected and suppressed. (Khan 36)

A lyrical expression like hip hop is in our DNA. The centuries of subjugation have intrinsically reinforced our ability to display a sense of poetic justice to the brutal injustices we have faced as a people.

Carmichael: Our history of enslavement is, as others have said before me, an intrinsic part of who we are, but the issue is really not about being free but rather forcing the system to stop enslaving us because:

... in order to understand white supremacy we must dismiss the fallacious notion that white people can give anybody their freedom. No man can give anybody his freedom. A man is born free. You may enslave a man after he is born free, and that is in fact what this country does. It enslaves black people after they're born, so that the only acts that white people can do is to stop denying black people their freedom; that is, they must stop denying freedom. They never give it to anyone. (Carmichael "Black Power" 2)

Me: If I may interject quickly... This discussion is unveiling some patterns in the history and the struggle of Black in America, and I really think the last question of this section goes hand-in-hand with the one we are discussing: What are the patterns that you see in the systemic racism that continues to plague our nation?

Coates: I see how similar the two really are, and I would like to continue with what Stokely was talking about. The systemic racism in this country is so fundamentally woven into all the talons of our society:

[...] In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – *it is heritage*. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor – it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be

casual wrath and random mangleings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. (Coates 103)

The way they do this is they use whatever resources they have to destroy us. In this day and age, the militarization of police has come to fruition in response to the oppressive structure of our country.

Davis: “What we saw in the police reaction to the resistance that spontaneously erupted in the aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown was an armed response that revealed the extent to which local police departments have been equipped with military arms, military technology, military training” (Davis 14). This issue definitely affects Black communities, but we also need to understand how it affects our country as a whole.

DuVernay: In my documentary *13th*, Michelle Alexander said, “Throughout American history, African Americans have repeatedly been controlled through systems of racial and social control that appear to die, but then are reborn in new forms tailored to the needs and constraints of the time” (01:24:31-01:24:46). The violence against our community by law enforcement is just a reaction to keeping control over a system that ensures we are never given rights we deserve, and since the laws have changed and do not allow for the type of slavery we are all familiar with, the processes by which we were to be enslaved have changed.

Me: This is all connected with the New Jim Crow, the mass incarceration of Blacks in America.

Davis: Yes, and “...at this moment in the history of the US I don’t think that there can be policing without racism. I don’t think that the criminal justice system can operate without racism. Which is to say that if we want to imagine the possibility of a society without racism, it has to be a society without prisons” (Davis 48).

DuVernay: “This is cyclical, and these systems transform, and they reinvent themselves [...] Shows up in another form. And we have a man named Glenn Martin in [13th] who talks about the fact that these systems are durable. They’re durable. They don’t break apart without a certain amount of pressure, and pressure has never truly been applied to these systems in a way that they would be dismantled, only reshaped and shifted to benefit someone else” (DuVernay and Winfrey 00:04:55-00:05:21).

KRS-One: This kind of oppressive violence and terrorism against us will not stop unless we change this system from the inside out:

Be an officer? You wicked overseer!

You hotshot, wanna get props and be a savior

First show a little respect, change your behavior

Change your attitude, change your plan

There could never really be justice on stolen land (“Sound of da Police”16-20)

The Europeans stole this land from the Native Americans, and they stole our bodies from Africa, so it is going to take a fundamental shift in the consciousness of this nation to really begin to move into a different direction. I think there are many people out there – Black, White, Brown, Yellow – who want America to live up to its supposed attribute of being a place of liberty, but we are all going to have to work hard at destroying the powers that be and destroying the myth.

Me: The myth? The myth that Blacks are three-fifths human?

Gaines: Yes, that is part of the myth, but:

A myth is an old lie that people believe. White people believe that they’re better than anyone else on earth – and that’s a myth. The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy

their myth. They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in. As long as none of us stand, they're safe. (Gaines 192)

Carmichael: It really is quite simple. We are subjugated because of the color of our skin. We did not make up race, it was made up by the White man, or the people who want total control of the world politically and economically:

If one was black one was automatically inferior, inhuman, and therefore fit for slavery; [...] We are oppressed as a group because we are black, not because we are lazy, not because we're apathetic, not because we're stupid, not because we smell, not because we eat watermelon and have good rhythm. We are oppressed because we are black. ("Black Power" 4)

And this racist terrorism has been haunting us for centuries. Get rid of the notion Black means inferior, and then we can start talking about equality, but until the White man gets that through his fucking skull, we are always going to be second-class citizens.

Me: I don't know if we are ready to move on to the second set of questions, but I think this could act as a good segue. I know we could continue on for hours, days even, and still not fully uncover all the ways in which Blacks have been and are continued to be subjugated in America; however, I do not think time will permit, so if it pleases this panel, I would like to transition into the next part. As a White educator who is fully immersed in Black culture and Black literature, I really want to know how I can improve as a student and a human being when studying this and as an educator teaching it.

Section II: Uncovering Empathy

Me: What advantages and disadvantages do we have as White educators teaching Black literature? How do we refine the advantages and reinforce the disadvantages?

Douglass: As a White educator, you have the ability to further the fight for liberty for Blacks in the United States. My dear friend William Lloyd Garrison employed his Whiteness in the Abolition Movement and was the impetus behind my becoming an agent of both the American and Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Societies (Douglass 303). In the preface of my slave narrative, he wrote:

Let the calumniators of the colored race despise themselves for their baseness and illiberality of spirit, and henceforth cease to talk of the natural inferiority of those who require nothing but time and opportunity to attain to the highest point of human excellence. (304)

He and other White abolitionists comprehended, to a great degree, the inexorable necessity of applying the formidable provisions they had attained to our fight for liberty, and under their auspices, many of us achieved freedom and were employed alongside the abolishment of slavery.

Baldwin: I agree with Frederick, and I would like to point out that you just being engaged in this discourse with us shows some initiative on your part; furthermore, your exercise in attaining knowledge about how you can improve can stand as a model to other White people:

In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation – if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women. To create one nation has proved to be a hideously difficult task; there is certainly no need now to create two, one black and one white. (Baldwin *The Fire Next Time* 97)

Exposing your modality while thus engaged in pedagogy can be extremely beneficial to your presentation and the facilitation of uncomfortable conversations in the classroom surrounding race. Unfortunately, our nation has made this a Black and White issue, but the more we work together to dissolve that notion, the closer we will be to equality.

X: I am in total agreement here. My views of what it meant to be “White” changed after my trip to Mecca: In America, I had dealt with race as the issue that divided the country, but during my pilgrimage as a Muslim, I began to see how other parts of the world regarded race:

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white.

[...] Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I [had] met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered ‘white’ – but the ‘white’ attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I [had] never before seen *sincere* and *true* brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.

(X and Haley 346-347)

So, by you being White and teaching Black literature is just one more way in which we can decimate the color line. You are exposing what it means to be anti-racist, so use that as another apparatus in search of your pedagogical practices, facilitation, and instruction in the classroom.

Me: Well, to no fault of this panel or of my own, really, my White guilt has imposed upon me during this discourse because “Whiteness as property contends that Whiteness bestows certain inalienable rights to those who have the advantage of owning that socially constructed racial identity” (Hughes, Sherick 155).

Hughes: It is understandable that these emotions taunt you: “Besides, / They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed—” (Hughes “I, Too” 15-17). We are all American and are all human beings. But I think you missed the point behind what you were saying: You referred to Whiteness being a “socially constructed identity” (Hughes, Sherick 155). You and I were born into a structure that had already been built. One that uses race to the advantage of the people who hold the power and the wealth. Blacks are not the only people in America that have suffered under this governance:

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
 I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
 I am the red man driven from the land,
 I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
 And finding only the same old stupid plan
 Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak. (Hughes “Let America” 19-24)

What I am articulating here is reminiscent of the early portion of our dialogue about systemic racism in America. We must *all* step back and look at who the perpetrators really are. Not all White people are inherently evil, just as not all Blacks or other people of color are inherently good. It is the system that needs to be destroyed and the people who control that system.

Carmichael: “We are against racists. Now if everybody who is white sees [themselves] as a racist and then see us against them, they’re speaking from their own guilt position, not ours” (Carmichael “Black Power” 6).

Me: So, I just need to release any White guilt I have because I am not a racist and not part of the problem?

Carmichael: In a sense, young brother:

We are in the black community. We have developed a movement in the black community. The challenge is that the white activist has failed miserably to develop the movement inside of his community. And the question is, Can we find white people who are going to have the courage to go into white communities and start organizing them? Can we find them? Are they here and are they willing to do that? Those are the questions that we must raise for the white activist. (Carmichael “Black Power” 10)

Gaines: I wouldn't say you are not *part* of the problem. This issue of race has been one for centuries, and I don't know if it will ever be alleviated. For example, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant's teacher, Matthew Antoine, was a mulatto, and “He hated himself for the mixture of his blood and the cowardice of his being, and he hated [Grant and other Blacks] for daily reminding him of it” (62). This ideology that race matters is so ingrained in our system that it is going to take an immense amount of effort on Whites over a prolonged period of time if we want to truly see equality in our nation and in our world.

Coates: Yes, and it is also important to point out that this idea of race is injected into our lives the moment we are born. Mr. Richardson, you are White. Although you may have different blood in you, like from Natives, you are White because our society has labeled you white, and this is a disadvantage when it comes to you teaching Black literature. It is unfortunate, and really no fault of your own, but it is the truth because:

... race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming “the people” has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as a one of hierarchy.

Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible – this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who

have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.

(Coates 7)

Me: Due to time constraints, we will not be able to get to our third set of questions, so we will have to extend this dialogue to another date. We do have a little of bit of time left for a couple members of the panel to answer this last question: How can we incorporate our own subjugation into understanding the oppression Blacks have dealt with in America, so we may better teach Black literature?

Davis: Revolutions happen a lot of the time because people find several different forms of struggles to bring together. Look at the 1960s in America. We had the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-war Movement. Members of both of the revolutionary movements came together in solidarity, so just because you have felt subjugated in a different way by the same oppressive system does not mean you cannot fight against other forms of oppression. I use the term intersectionality to describe this, and:

I think it's important to prevent the term "intersectionality" from erasing essential histories of activism. There were those of us who by virtue of our experience, not so much by virtue of academic analyses, recognized that we had to figure out a way to bring these issues together. They weren't separate in our bodies, but also they are not separate in terms of struggles.

I actually think that what is most interesting today, given that long history both of activism and all of the articles and books that have been written since then, what I think is most interesting is the conceptualization of the intersectionality of struggles. Initially intersectionality was about bodies and experiences. But now, how do we talk about bringing various social justice struggles together, across national borders? So we were

talking about Ferguson and Palestine. How can we really create a framework that allows us to think these issues together and to organize around these issues together? (Davis 19)

You talked earlier about the subjugation you have dealt with in this country because of being a Deadhead. Instead of viewing this struggle differently from the oppression Blacks have endured, or say the violent control over Palestine by Israel, find the commonality and use that to find the intersectionality between all struggles in America and in the world. That is how you can use your own experiences of oppression in the classroom and when you are teaching Black literature, or any multicultural texts.

Baldwin: I am in *total* agreement with Angela. We must find solidarity in our struggles and work together to attain a collective consciousness in the fight against oppression, no matter what form it takes:

Freedom is hard to bear. It can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in spiritual terms, but the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation. We are controlled here by our confusion, far more that we know, and the American dream has therefore become something much more closely resembling a nightmare, on the private, domestic, and international levels. (*The Fire Next Time* 88-89)

You are doing your part by digging deep into your heart and your spirit to empathize with others who have been harmed, and that is what is going to help you in your pursuit of more critically and empathetically teaching Black literature. America's subjugation of any peoples that do not go in line with its societal norms that perpetuate the power structure's dominance over the people is what we all need to focus on if we are to end this kind of harmful suppression.

Me: So, my fight is your fight, and your fight is someone else's fight and my fight too? We have all got to find ways in which the *system* has subjugated us and work together to overturn it?

Davis: That *is* it. That is what we all have to do.

Me: Well, I deeply apologize again for having to end this round table discussion now, and I hope we can reconvene at a later date to dive back into this extraordinary discourse. It has been an honor and a pleasure having you all here to help us get a better understanding of how all educators across America can learn how to teach multicultural texts more effectively in the classroom. The future of this country depends on our abilities to teach the younger generations tolerance and understanding, but also to expose them to the truths behind the system in America that has caused violent harm to disenfranchised peoples. I wish you all well and hope to continue this discussion in the future. Thank you and good night.

Conclusion

When I initially formulated the question of how a White educator critically and empathetically teaches Black literature, I had not decided on a theoretical lens or a methodology. That being said, I did not know, at that time, the ways in which this paper would cultivate. It is imperative White educators incorporate and link discourse regarding the social climate in the United States with the history of our past to properly allow for an effective, critical, and empathetic approach to teaching Black literature in the classroom. The critical reflective practice I engaged in with the help of textual intervention really forced me to ask the hard questions, receive some uncomfortable answers, and take a step back, as an educator, to reevaluate what I am doing in the classroom and in the fight against social injustices in our country. Not only did I learn more about the history, texts, and social and political commentary of the Black community in America, I learned more about who I am as a teacher and as a person: "Despite the ubiquity of

reflection in the guiding principles of many teacher education programs, it is, however, ‘a difficult process that requires critical thought, self-direction, and problem-solving coupled with personal knowledge and self-awareness’” (Korucu Kis and Kartal 637). The procedure was grueling at times, looking at oneself and having to come to terms with not being perfect; however, as educators, we must realize and model education being a life-long process. I do not think I fully answered any of the questions because they are really open-ended ones that could be interpreted in thousands of different ways by thousands of different people; nevertheless, I was able to comprehensively come to some solutions. I exposed a direction in which I am going to take as a White educator teaching Black literature, and that really was the purpose behind this paper. Educators must never stop asking these questions and never stop engaging in conversations around the postulations created during the course of the research for and composition of this paper.

Implications for Others

I considered myself to be very knowledgeable about the Black struggle in America and about Black literature, but through this exercise, I learned that even though I am well-informed on this subject, there is still a lot more I need to learn. I was introduced to authors I had not heard of yet, I dissected Black texts in ways I had never done, and I found a lot more similarities between the subjugation I have endured and that of the Black community. To use the method of autoethnography in close connection with the critical reflexive practice utilizing textual intervention allowed me to dig deep into my mind and heart and the texts and lives of the past and present Black figures I chose to engage in a dialogue:

Approaching texts as an ‘artisan’, as a ‘crafts/wo/man’, means that you treat them with respect – but also the no-nonsense directness and systematicness – that a skilled engineer

or dressmaker approaches their materials and the immediate task at hand. Materials and tools are to be chosen and decisions about how, when, and where to use them are to be made. (Pope 3).

Building the text as a “craftsman,” like Rob Pope puts it, forced me to closely examine the texts to find the answers to the questions that I formulated. I eventually found myself conducting the panel discussion with the Socratic method like I would in the classroom and found that to be extremely intriguing and exciting. Additionally, the Critical Race Theory lens tied all of this together in a way that forced me to break down the walls of race and figure out how we must understand that the application of race is something embedded in the system so profoundly that is *the* main part of the reason why systemic racism exists. The utilization of one’s own past as a bridge to understanding the lives of others is so invaluable in the field of education and in being a human on this Earth. Furthermore, this paper can, and I hope will, help guide educators – ones new to the profession, veteran teachers, and every instructor in between – in a way that will help them: become comfortable with being a cultural antagonist at times even if is unwarranted, find empathy to teach multicultural texts effectively and appropriately in the classroom, and critically reflect on their own pedagogical practices to find areas of reinforcement and refinement. Moreover, the textual exercise in which I engaged and the methodological framework of autoethnography is just as suitable a practice for students. I will be co-teaching a course in Black literature and politics this coming school year and have already begun the preparations for a similar exercise.

Limitations of Methodology and Exercise

I have been taught and teach, unless one is writing a personal narrative, never write in first person, so getting used to autoethnography was hard; it was the first time I had ever brought

myself into the research, and it limited the voice in the paper because I am only using myself with that methodology. In the article “My Skin Is Unqualified: An Autoethnography of Black Scholar-Activism for Predominantly White Education,” Sherick Hughes writes, “. . .it is not unusual for autoethnographers of educational research to challenge the complacent self along with their internalized dominant cultural claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy” (156). Using this method limited me in fully exploring myself because of the time constraints. Like I mentioned before, the objective of this paper is really open-ended; I could spend the rest of my life trying to fulfill it. However, I believe I have been successful in reaching my desired goal to date, but I do not think the research is ever done with oneself. Along with the restrictions of autoethnography, I also experience them with the textual exercise in the second half of the body of this paper. I set my sights high, but in the end, I had to dwindle down the participants, the length at which certain participants joined in on the discourse, the amount of texts I used, and the vigor in which the questions got answered. I had to revise my list of questions and ended up cutting out an entire section due to time constraints. I would like to continue to revisit this textual exercise throughout my career as an educator. The parameters set could not allow for a more thorough exposition, which I began to understand and sometimes regretted when I was deeply rooted in textual intervention and critical reflective practice. At one point, the thought of creating an entire book out of this crossed my mind.

Continuing the Resistance to Social Injustices as Educators and Academicians

Engaging in the process was extremely beneficial: The combination of autoethnography, Critical Race Theory, textual intervention, and critical reflective practice enthralled me and has helped create newer ideologies about pedagogy. After writing this paper and going through the procedure, I felt rejuvenated as an educator and as a student and scholar of Black literature and

history. It opened up doors I did not know existed in my life and in my profession. I want to continue to massage the initial question of how White educators can critically and empathetically teach Black literature. There are so many questions still left unanswered. I did not even have a chance to uncover the changes educators need to make to the educational system as a whole and the pedagogical practices in the classroom or discuss aspects of Black literature and culture we are missing when we just focus on race and oppression; moreover, I could have easily uncovered tons more about the thematic connections in Black literature, the systemic racism in America, the advantages and disadvantages of being White and teaching Black texts, and the ways we could use our own experiences with subjugation to find empathy when teaching multicultural literature. As the struggle against a system that oppresses many of us continues, so can the work of educators of all colors when exposing the social injustices to our students through all types of mediums and genres.

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