

RADICAL TEACHER

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#BlackCharactersMatter: If I'm Trying to Teach for Social Justice, Why Do All the Black Men and Boys on my Syllabus Die?

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A Teacher's Phantasm I

The school, empty of children, sits baking in late-August heat. Inside my cool, clean classroom, I am getting ready—hanging posters, sharpening pencils, finalizing the syllabus. I glance back and forth between the empty seats, to be filled with students I don't yet know, and the reading list, populated with characters I know well and love.

As I staple and straighten, the room fills—but not with students, not yet: the characters from the year's assigned reading appear, milling about the classroom in mid-book scenes and vignettes, as eager to get on with it as I am. There's Maribel, from *The Book of Unknown Americans*, meditatively tracing a finger along the students' composition notebooks, her own purple journal tucked under her arm while *The Namesake's* Gogol, not yet the architect he will become, inspects the view of the desert mountain from my window. Edmund Perry, of *Best Intentions*—though frozen in time like the others by literature but not, like the others, a fiction—is shooting rubber bands across the room and smiling, amusing shy Maribel.

There's eponymous Othello, spearing an errant sheet of loose-leaf with his sword and flinging it into the recycling bin. Iago is perched on my desk, sneering, picking his teeth. Matthew Harrison Brady and Henry Drummond are pacing small circles in opposite corners of the room, muttering under their breath their opening statements. Things have not yet fallen apart: Okonkwo is instructing young Ikemefuna in how to handle a seed-yam. Nwoye, uninterested in the seed-yam demonstration, is instead listening, enraptured, at Desdemona's knee as she sings "willow, willow." Tea Cake has gotten my checkerboard off the shelf of board games; he and Janie are not yet praying to survive their hurricane; they are playing. They are making eyes; their eyes are not yet watching God. The room is humming and happy, and I am filled with anticipatory joy—my own joy at rereading these books, and the secondhand joy I will derive as I watch young people encounter them for the first time.

But I am newly aware of a cloud over this teacher's phantasm. In June, when I close up shop for the summer, many of these characters will lay dead and dying on my classroom floor. Notably, the literary death toll will include every Black male main character.

That is to say: Black characters do not survive my class.

That is to say: If my students read only books I assigned them, they might conclude that the Black male body is a problem that needs to be resolved—through destruction or disappearance—in order for literature to end satisfyingly and well.

Best Intentions

The course I am describing is an English class I taught that was, at the time, required of all sophomores at the secular independent school where I have worked for the last 11 years. Though this particular course is no longer offered to students, my awareness of the way my syllabus

systematically disposed of Black bodies—and the dangers of such a syllabus—has remained with me. I now work in an all-school administrative role at that same school—I teach a single senior elective in the English department—and so I have many fewer opportunities to craft reading lists. On the other hand, as a director of curriculum and instruction, I have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to invite my colleagues to interrogate their own syllabuses and reading lists.

When I took my first job at this school as a teacher, I inherited a "world literature" curriculum for sophomores that I thought over-emphasized Europe and European colonialism. For example, students were reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Nectar in a Sieve*, lyric poems by Sappho, the funeral speech of Pericles, and a handful of haiku. Supported by my administration and fellow faculty, I endeavored to revise the curriculum. Eventually, the course I built for sophomores was no longer "world literature" per se. Instead, it was called (with credit for its name and central tenets due to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) "The Danger of the Single Story: Marginality and the Other in Literature."

I chose my texts, per my published course description, to reflect the experiences of: individuals who fall outside of socially constructed concepts and expectations of values and behavior or whose experiences render them in a middle space between groups. With an emphasis on literary works from voices not traditionally emphasized in the Western canon, students will explore how literature serves to both challenge and reinforce these social constructs. (Upper School Course Catalog, p. 10)

In that same course description, I also promised that students would "introspectively examine their own experiences, identities and positions in relation to socially dominant in-groups." Big promises.

In addition to the aforementioned texts, I assigned Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 B.C.), Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's *Inherit the Wind* (1955), Cristina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans* (2014), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), and a collection of nine one-act plays called *Rowing to America: The Immigrant Project* (1999). We began the year by watching Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of the Single Story," which I came to think of as the tuning note for the year. I also periodically assigned essays by Nancy Mairs, Mike Rose, and Richard Rodriguez, among others. My students read work in a wide variety of genres and styles, and they navigated many kinds of challenging language. My students read work *by* women, disabled people, people of color, immigrants. My students engaged with work that *included* woman characters, disabled characters, characters of color, immigrant characters (Henriquez's Maribel is all of the above, though I argue that she is hardly the model of agentic disabled person I would have liked to provide for my students). I am not shy about saying that I felt good about many of the changes I made to the course. I was proud of that course for the years I taught it. I made tweaks and adjustments, as I think good teachers do, based on current events; my own tastes; and the interests, talents, and predilections of my students.

But choosing a text for class, as enjoyable as it may be, is also an action fraught with meaning. In fact, a teacher's text-selection for her students is, inherently, a gesture informed by power—and as such, it has the potential to replicate or dismantle dominant discourses. Johnson (2013), operating on Butler's (1999) positioning of whiteness as an "occasion for agency, an opportunity to choose or fail to perform as expected" (p. 15), points out that a teacher's selection of texts for her class can constitute one of the "daily, tiny, ritualistic actions" (p. 16) that maintain whiteness. Of course, the inverse is also possible: might a daily, tiny, ritualistic selection of a *different* text be an opportunity to chip away at the hegemonic whiteness of one's classroom? Even for a white teacher?

If I honestly interrogate my well-intentioned reading list for its potential to "subvert or maintain [my, my students', my school's] white identity," (Johnson, 2013, p. 18), I must acknowledge not only the disproportionate number of deaths of Black protagonists, but also the segregated nature of the texts themselves: I must note that the texts with Black main characters also have non-Black characters in them, however peripherally (*Things Fall Apart*, *Best Intentions*, *Othello*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), but the books with non-Black main characters don't have Black characters in them at all (*The Namesake*, *Inherit the Wind*, *Antigone*, *The Book of Unknown Americans*). Of course, if a character's race is undisclosed (or even when an author falls short of outright declaring the character Black or otherwise "diverse"), white readers and moviegoers tend to assume the character is white—hence the racist outrage when Black actress Amandla Stenberg was cast as Rue in the movie adaptation of *The Hunger Games*.

My reading list, then, is a curated reflection of whiteness as the (objectionable, and phony) default—a "given... natural... simply a site of being human" (Yancy, 2008, p. 45). Of course, as a woman, I recognize this dynamic in the study of literature: even though she was writing more than 40 years ago, Showalter (1971) names a problem that persists, specifically that "the masculine viewpoint is considered normative, and the feminine viewpoint divergent" (p. 856). I have never had a female student tell me she can't relate to Gogol, or Othello, or Bertram Cates, on the basis of his gender—but I have had multiple male students chafe at the supposedly boring or inaccessible *Antigone* because she is a girl. Being a woman disqualifies her from being universal. As a woman with chronic illness and some degree of disability, I doubly recognize this dynamic: don't most readers simply assume that characters in literature are healthy and able-bodied unless the author instructs them otherwise—usually by rendering the character either saintly or monstrous? Or by making the plot of the book the disabled's quest for able-bodiedness?

I'm ashamed to admit that I should have caught on to this oppressively white-normalizing pattern in the books that I assigned. In my assigned reading list, if a character was non-white, he was announced as such, and his race was what the book is about. Meanwhile, we (mostly, at my school) white readers sat around and read the books through supposedly unraced, white eyes. Yancy (2008), reflecting on his own experience among white students in an African American literature class, argues that white readers

reading Black texts "without auto-critique, without thematizing their own whiteness ... completely sidestep the opportunity to identify and call into question the inertial 'business as usual' performance of racism" (p. 53).

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Dead Men Walking

There were many ways that non-Black characters ended up in the books we read—including death (Desdemona, Roderigo, Ashoke, Arturo, Brady), but also vindication and wrongful domination (Cassio, Drummond, the District Commissioner), damnation (Iago), relocation and reinvention (Alma, Ashima, Rachel Brown), and maturation (Gogol, Mayor). These characters had presumed futures my students and I found satisfaction and pleasure in imagining taking place after the book's ending. In fact, my students sometimes wrote creative and compelling "next chapters" for the books we read, imagining Iago's ultimate punishment, or Gogol himself becoming a father, or Maribel and Mayor reuniting as young adults and making a life together.

My students didn't write "next chapters" for *Othello*, *Okonkwo*, *Edmund Perry*, or *Tea Cake*. They couldn't. Despite my intentional effort to provide my students with "a balance of stories" (Achebe, 79), I presented my students with a decidedly unbalanced set of stories. It was impossible to write next chapters for the Black male characters; for the Black male characters in the books I assign, all storylines lead to death.

Is this silliness? A manufactured problem? A guilty, gasping outrage at the sad and tragic fates of imaginary characters in books? Aren't there real-people problems that deserve my serious attention and self-critical outrage? To all but the last of these questions, I say no. To the last, I say yes, undoubtedly. To explain both of my answers, let me present my dead-Black-characters problem, which I argue *is* a pressing, real-people problem, a problem related to *other* real-people problems in which I am complicit, this way: my students, who were very much alive, impressionable, and mostly white and affluent, received, by virtue of reading assigned to them by a white teacher, an unrelenting literary imagery of the Black male body as violable, disposable. My assignment of these fictional Black male deaths was set against—no, embedded in—a larger culture that legitimizes the often-bloody destruction of decidedly nonfictional Black male bodies.

I am not trying to get credit for being “woke” (Hess, A., 2016). I understand the eye-rolling at prolific Tweeter and ultra-self-aware white actor Matt McGorry (Davis, A., 2016) or at white rapper Macklemore, criticized for using his own white privilege to secure a platform for (and profit from) his track “White Privilege II” (Horn, L., 2016). Yancy (2008) asks, “When whites take it upon themselves to define what is and what is not a racist act, is this not tied into the very power of whiteness?” (p. 50). It is, and I know that I risk “re-centering” (Yancy, 2008) my whiteness here, in a semi-academic discussion of imaginary Black characters’ deaths, even as “tomorrow, a Black body will be murdered as it innocently reaches for its wallet” (p. 229).

Nevertheless, I am sincerely attempting to “name my whiteness” (Yancy, 2008)—that is, to acknowledge the lie of which I have been a beneficiary since (and before) my own birth: that my whiteness is a depoliticized default permitting me to ignore or transcend race and simply be myself, individual and unraced. Furthermore, I want to acknowledge my own classroom as a “site of/for performing whiteness ... a racialized social formation shaped by the dynamics of whiteness to remain invisible through its normative hegemony” (Yancy, 2008, p. 43-44). The uniform deaths of my Black characters look quite troubling to me if I refuse, as Yancy (2008) calls on me to refuse, to “talk about racism as it [is] performed within the body of the texts without any attention paid to [my] own white privilege” (p. 44). To this point: I led my students in discussions of these characters’ Blackness—in every case, to some extent, the characters’ Blackness was central to the text, and to our discussions—without acknowledging my/our whiteness, a performance that “signifies the very real power to ‘remove’ [ourselves] from the complicity involved in maintaining the normative structure of whiteness” (p. 44).

The class is behind me; the students who were enrolled in it are off at college somewhere. The problem of my reading list is, on the surface, resolved—that course is some other teacher’s responsibility now. But the necessity of interrogating my teaching—and the ways I am complicit in maintaining the normative structure of whiteness—remains. Here, I will examine the deaths of my Black male protagonists as well as, in generalized terms, my students’ discussions of those deaths in that context.

Doing (and Undoing?) Whiteness

Elisabeth Johnson (2013) offers a two-year case study of a white 10th-grade English teacher she calls Nicole Phagan that she argues disrupts and counters prevailing portrayals of white teachers as “deficient, resistant, naïve, and ignorant” (6). Johnson (2013) uses performance theories of identity to frame Phagan’s performances of whiteness in and beyond her classroom as both obscuring and revealing “possibilities for educators doing and working to undo whiteness and racism in schools” (p. 6). I want to examine these characters’ deaths—and the patterns of imagery, circumstance, and narration associated with the deaths—in order to examine how this self-selected reading list may constitute, however unintentional, a case of my “doing” whiteness in my classroom. Furthermore, I want to examine, and open myself up for others to opine, what changes are

called for in assigned texts and/or approaches to texts so as to begin, even if imperfectly, to “undo whiteness and racism” in the classroom.

The four literary deaths I will examine here are those of Edmund Perry, of Robert Sam Anson’s nonfiction book *Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry* (1988); Okonkwo, of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958); Tea Cake, of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); and Shakespeare’s eponymous Othello (1622). I thought initially that I would present the deaths in the order in which my students encountered them (Edmund Perry, Okonkwo, Tea Cake, Othello). Next, I considered grouping the deaths by type (two by suicide, two arguably in self-defense) or literary genre (three fiction, one nonfiction) or by their authors (two by Black authors, two by white).

However, as I examined the texts, I recognized another chilling pattern. Taken as a set, the deaths of the Black male characters in my assigned texts constituted the final stage of a brutal, altogether recognizable process enacted on Black (not just male) bodies in America throughout centuries, a process by which they are dehumanized, blamed for their own demise, and then overwritten by an official or dominant narrative that erases the violence. This process is a part of American history—indeed, as Coates (2016) explains so clearly, it is the very premise of American history. This process is our history, but it is not historical if that word is taken to mean “in the past, not the present.” I will review how this ongoing three-step pattern was present in the texts I assigned, and I will demonstrate how each step was currently being enacted in the world outside my classroom walls, giving particular heft to the presence of the pattern within. As I discuss each text, I will employ the present tense not only because the present tense is a convention of literary analysis but also because my responsibility to interrogate my teaching is ongoing and never complete.

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Dehumanize Him

Three of the four deaths (Othello, Okonkwo, and Tea Cake) are accompanied by animal imagery, mostly canine, in the death or the circumstances preceding it. In Othello’s case, the animal imagery, deployed by Shakespeare mostly via Iago, is pervasive and overtly racist. In Act I, Iago likens the Moor to an “old Black ram” (Shakespeare, trans. 1987, 1.1.86) and a “Barbary horse” (Shakespeare, trans. 1987,

1.1.109) to arouse Brabantio's protective ire over his precious daughter, a "white ewe" (Shakespeare, trans. 1987, 1.1.87) —if Brabantio doesn't act to interrupt the coupling, Othello will "make a grandsire" (Shakespeare, trans. 1987, 1.1.88) of him, providing him with "courser for cousins and gennets for germans" (Shakespeare, trans. 1987, 1.1.111). At the end of the tragedy, having discovered the extent to which he'd been "wrought" by Iago, Othello slips into the third person to preface his suicide and instruct the survivors on how to relay his fate: "And say besides that in Aleppo once/Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk/Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,/I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog/And smote him—thus" (Shakespeare, trans. 1987, 5.2.351-355).

Okonkwo, too, is likened to a dog upon his death. Having committed suicide after discovering that his fellow Umuofians would not mount a resistance to colonization, Okonkwo has committed an "offense against the Earth" (Achebe, 1994, p. 207) and cannot be buried by his clansmen. His loyal, and brokenhearted, friend Obierika indicts the white colonial District Commissioner, saying, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog" (Achebe, 1994, p. 208).

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Tea Cake isn't just likened to a dog, he becomes one. Bitten by a rabid dog while attempting to rescue Janie from hurricane flooding, Tea Cake gradually descends into madness following the classic phases of rabies: fever, loss of appetite, hydrophobia, paranoia, violence, madness. Finally, in the space of one page of text, Tea Cake goes from being "like a child" rocked in Janie's arms (Hurston, 1990, p. 180) to being "gone. Something else was looking out of his face. ... He almost snarled" (Hurston, 1990, p. 181). He becomes a "fiend" (Hurston, 1990, p. 184) and bites his beloved Janie, forcing her to commit a wrenching act of mercy. Janie knows that "Tea Cake couldn't come back to himself until he had got rid of that mad dog that was in him and he couldn't get rid of the dog and live. He had to die to get rid of the dog" (Hurston, 1990, p. 187).

Likening Black people to animals is most certainly not limited to literature or even history, and that is why I am particularly horrified by my presentation of a suite of Black characters who, nearly to a one, are dehumanized in this way. Taylor (2016), in her analysis of the urban rebellions that punctuated the late 1960s, describes a conservative author's characterization of these rebellions as "outbreaks of animal spirits and of stealing by slum dwellers" (p. 72). Lest one protest that 40 years ago was ancient history, it should be recalled how Ferguson (Mo.) police officer Darren Wilson characterized unarmed shooting victim Michael Brown as a "demon" with "superhuman strength" who made "grunting noises" (Taylor, 2016, p. 4). That was in 2015. If one is inclined to forgive Wilson's dehumanizing rhetoric on account of his fear or adrenalin, then I offer instead a whole docket of text messages exchanged among San Francisco police officers in 2015 in which Black people are described as "savages" and "buffalo ... and not human"; it is suggested that all Black people should be "spayed"; and one police officer advises another to have a gun handy while a Black man pays a social visit to his home—after all, "it's not

against the law to put an animal down" (*United States of America v. Ian Furminger*, 2015).

Blame Him for His Own Demise

In all four of the literary deaths under discussion here, no person other than the Black male character himself is technically or legally responsible for the death. Janie's jury finds "the death of Vergible Woods to be entirely accidental and justifiable, and that no blame should rest upon the defendant Janie Woods" (Hurston, 1990, p. 188). In all three of the remaining instances, larger (white) forces or other (white) individuals undoubtedly drive the Black male character to a state of suicidal desperation, but the (white) hands of these who "wrought" the characters remain, technically, clean. Two of these deaths (Othello and Okonkwo) are certain suicides; as discussed previously, Okonkwo hangs himself and Othello impales himself. The reader can assume that the District Commissioner and his colonial cohorts will suffer no consequences for having driven one of the greatest men of Umuofia to a tragic and disgraceful end; as for Iago, the play ends with his fate in the balance. Cassio will enjoy the pleasure of selecting Iago's punishment—though it should be noted that Iago is guilty of more direct crimes than working over Othello, having murdered both his wife and the stooge Roderigo and having implicated and embarrassed the upright Cassio. I am not certain that the punishment that awaits him is as much (or more) for these crimes as for what he did to Othello.

The third of these deaths is that of Edmund Perry, the subject of Robert Sam Anson's 1988 nonfiction work *Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry*. Edmund Perry was a talented and charismatic young man who left Harlem under the auspices of A Better Chance foundation to complete his education at Phillips Exeter Academy. Stanford-bound, Edmund Perry died after being shot by a white undercover police officer whom Edmund and his brother were attempting to mug. Though the book begins with an account of the death that exonerates the police officer, Anson spends 200 pages examining not the events of that July night in Harlem but rather the circumstances of Edmund's life and education that preceded it—including the racism, institutional and interpersonal, subtle and overt, that Edmund experienced as one of a handful of Black students at the New Hampshire prep school.

By the end of the book, Anson has briefly examined counter-narratives (Edmund was murdered, Edmund was framed, the police covered up the truth) and rejected them. Nevertheless, one of the last lengthy interviews he includes is with one of his own friends, a Black man who followed an educational trajectory not unlike Eddie's, and who knew Eddie personally. This friend concludes his long discussion of Eddie's life and death thus: "Eddie didn't get killed. He committed suicide. That's what it was, you know. Suicide" (Anson, 1988, p. 207). Anson does not probe this statement further, so we do not know if the man believes that Eddie intended to commit "suicide by cop" or whether he was just so "wrought ... Perplexed in the extreme" (Shakespeare, 1987, 5.2.345) that he committed a dangerous act with no regard for whether he could lose his life in the process—

though I believe there is a world of difference between actively wanting to die and not caring whether you live.

This is a deft maneuver. The book leaves readers with little question that Eddie was the aggressor and that the police officer discharged his weapon appropriately, not intending to kill Eddie but to defend himself. Nevertheless, to posit the “suicide” argument so late in the book, with no discussion, hanging there at the end of a chapter surrounded by white space on the page, turns Eddie’s action, no matter how reckless or illegal, into a wish to die. While I am persuaded that the police officer’s killing of Eddie was defensible, I am uncomfortable with the unexplained shift to suicide.

I believe Eddie, at 17, could both *want* to mug the cop and *want* to live to go on to Stanford and beyond—but that seems to be a contradictory Eddie that the book, at least, can’t tolerate. His marginality is so profound that he must choose: Is he the Eddie of Harlem or the Eddie of Exeter/Stanford? If one views the mugging as the final act of his Harlem self, a kind of recidivism, which the book encourages us to do, reframing his assault on the police officer as a suicide turns it into a choice with inevitable consequences. Eddie chooses his Harlem self, and must die for it. “Bad” Harlem Eddie cannot live—only “good” Exeter Eddie can live.

Taylor (2016) describes the manner in which responsibility for the impoverishment, incarceration, marginalization, and even deaths of Black people has consistently been shifted to Black people themselves, implicating even President Obama in perpetuating the belief that “the various problems that pervade Black communities are ... of Black people’s own making” (p. 9). According to Taylor (2016), throughout the 1970s, a “Black man’s chance of being murdered was six to eight times greater than that of a white man” (p. 69), and even today, “Black people are incarcerated at a rate six times that of whites” (p. 3). Of course, many people respond to such statistics by invoking “Black on Black crime,” seeming to emphasize the first of those “Blacks”—the Black perpetrator—over the second—the Black victim. Miller (2014) argues that the very phrase “Black on Black crime”:

Implies an agentless government and society, mere spectators to an incomprehensible phenomenon carried out by some distinct foreign entity. But virtually all of the correlates of homicide—unemployment, poverty and concentrated disadvantage, trust and legitimacy, access to firearms, or even, as some have more recently claimed, abortion availability or lead in the water—are social risks which the state itself shapes, limits, expands, or diminished. The American state has successfully *limited* these very same social risks for much of the white population (para. 7).

Set against a social context in which Black men are more likely than others to be murdered, and in which it is generally acceptable to blame even unarmed teenage Black men for their murders, it strikes me as unconscionable to present only Black deaths in literature that are self-inflicted.

Overwrite His History

A third disturbing pattern surrounding the deaths of my Black male characters is the manner in which their lives, fictional or otherwise, are subsumed, eclipsed, and overwritten by dominant white narratives at the end of the book. Three of the texts under examination here—*Things Fall Apart*, *Othello*, and *Best Intentions*—end with a white character describing, summarizing, or characterizing the black character’s death. Of course, these ending passages—and the outrageously reductive summations of the dead characters’ lives and deaths—are quite intentional on the part of the authors. Nevertheless, the pattern is striking: when a Black character dies in my class, a fellow Black character doesn’t get the last word. A white person does.

Othello ends with the tragic hero’s suicide, prefaced by a monologue in which he instructs his survivors in how they should record and retell the facts of his life and death. The play could end there, really, but it does not. Lodovico speaks: there is the matter of Othello’s assets, to be inherited by Gratiano; the censure of Iago, to be carried out by Cassio; and the relaying of the news to Venice, to be carried out by Lodovico himself (Shakespeare, trans. 1987).

A more compelling example of this phenomenon is, of course, the District Commissioner in *Things Fall Apart*. Though readers have been privy to a complex, and often wrenching, view of Okonkwo’s life and demise, the District Commissioner reduces him to a “man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself” (Achebe, 1994, p. 208). The story of Okonkwo is the stuff of legend—but the District Commissioner thinks maybe he could eke out a “reasonable paragraph.” Furthermore, he plans to call his book “*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.” Achebe, I think, intends for this to land on our ears just the way it does—as a brutally reductive last word.

Best Intentions ends, perhaps surprisingly, in a quite similar fashion, despite the fact that it is nonfiction about a boy from Harlem, not a novel about a man from Nigeria. The reader of this text, after spending more than 200 pages learning about the nuances of oppression, discrimination, marginalization, and psychic distress, much of it experienced at Exeter, that informed Eddie’s thoughts and behavior to disastrous ends, learns that (at the time of writing, at least), Exeter has implemented a program intended to prevent the same things from happening to Black students at the elite prep school. Not unlike the District Commissioner’s book, the name of this plan is also tone-deaf and reductive: According to Anson (1988), the program is informally known as “Help for People from Distant Places” (p. 221). Harlem is 250 miles from Exeter—hardly a “distant place.” But this euphemistic title, it could be argued, lets Exonians off the hook. They need not worry themselves about the ways that the world as they experience it (and, in fact, construct it, as Exeter was and is a breeding ground for presidents) is linked to the fates of those in Harlem. Furthermore, the informal name of this program suggests that these people from distant places come to Exeter needing help, not that their experiences at Exeter render them in need of help.

As with the other patterns observed here, I take issue not with any single text but with the uniform presentation of, in this case, a white erasure of Black suffering. In 1980, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights set out to complete a comprehensive review of school textbook literature to examine the portrayals therein of members of a few, in the parlance of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “protected classes”: specifically racial minorities, older people, and women.

Among the Commission’s findings from its review of textbooks’ depictions of Black people were five prominent patterns: *Romanticism*, which encompasses a revisionist, gentle depiction of slavery and slaveholders; *avoidance*, which refers to a redaction of adversity, unfairness, violence, and oppression in Blacks’ lives; *bootstrap*, describing a near-exclusive celebration of the qualities of self-determination, grit, and ambition as Blacks’ keys to success; *oasis*, or tokenism; and *ostrich-in-the-sand*, the name given to distortion, oversimplification, and concerted refusal to acknowledge discriminatory acts and systems. The report does not specifically discuss portrayals of violence to Blacks; in fact, due to the aforementioned five patterns, violence to Black bodies was likely to be understated or ignored altogether by school textbooks.

The second half of the Commission’s review examines the effects of textbook depictions of racial minorities, older people, and women on students’ attitudes, behavior, and values. Among the Commission’s finding in this second chapter is a positive correlation between students’ exposure to diversity in textbooks and their development of positive racial attitudes. Notably, and perhaps disappointingly, the report makes only glancing reference to the effect on non-white students of textbook depictions, distorted or otherwise, of non-white people. The Commission’s report seems to presume an us-them perspective, where the students consuming the textbooks are assumed to be young, white males—*us*—and that the people being presented in those textbooks, in various states of distortion or erasure, are non-white, non-male, non-young people—*them*.

It might be easy to feel superior outrage at the narrow scope of this report—there is no mention of other groups that are protected classes: gay people, people with physical or mental disabilities, people of various faiths. Furthermore, my recollection of school textbooks, of which I was a consumer in suburban Maryland public schools between 1982 and 1995, suggests that the Commission’s having noted these patterns in 1980 didn’t result in offending texts’ being yanked from circulation. I remember a decidedly whitewashed presentation of American history, heavy on the George Washington refusing to cut down a cherry tree and light on lynching. I remember my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. D’Aiutolo, sighing and wearily rubbing her temples when I went off the approved list (George Washington Carver, Harriet Tubman, etc.) and chose Jimi Hendrix for my Black History Month project.

But, having had my recent epiphany about the uniform fate of Black male characters in the books I assigned, I must restrain my haughty outrage, or at least redirect it—at myself. I work at an independent (that is, private) school, and I am therefore afforded an immense amount of

curricular freedom and autonomy. I do not teach to high-stakes, mandatory tests, for example. Though I’ve cringed at the cliché of the Black man getting killed off first in horror movies, I fear I’ve created the literary equivalent for my students. And I cannot blame a textbook publisher or a school board. It is no one’s fault but my own that I presented my students with a pattern one could imagine being appended to the list of patterns in the Commission’s textbook review: this one might be called (if the review tolerated a slightly longer name for its patterns) *Destruction, or How to Solve the Problem of the Black Male Body in Your Syllabus: Dehumanize Him, Blame Him for His Own Demise, and Overwrite his History to Erase Your Violence*.

Stereotypical Black Men Or Full-Fledged Souls (in Trouble)?

Of course, the four texts—and four deaths—I have examined here were written by four very different authors from four vastly different temporal, geographic, and cultural locations. William Shakespeare wrote *Othello* in Elizabethan England from 16th-century source material courtesy of Cinthio, and Robert Sam Anson penned *Best Intentions* in 20th-century America from real-life source material. Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* in the late 1950s in Nigeria, 20 years after Zora Neale Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, reportedly in just seven weeks, while doing research in Haiti. Furthermore, despite the similarities I have identified in the three “beats” discussed here, I would be remiss if I did not explicitly acknowledge that the four authors had expressly different intentions and rhetorical goals in depicting—and dispatching—Black male bodies the ways they did in their work. Though there are numerous ways to group or ungroup these texts for such an analysis, I will examine them here in chronological order.

Despite having almost five hundred years to think about it, critics and scholars remain divided on a central question about Shakespeare’s *Othello*—that is, “whether it is a racist play or a play about racism” (Kaul, x). Like their academic counterparts, Black actors have grappled with the implications of playing *Othello*. Just as Nigerian scholar S.E. Ogude argues that *Othello* the character is “preeminently a caricature of the [B]lack man” and that a Black actor in the role is “an obscenity” (p. 163), the acclaimed actor Hugh Quarshie in 1998 delivered a lecture in which he argued that a Black actor in the role of *Othello* “[runs] the risk of reinforcing racist attitudes toward [B]lack people” (Quarshie, n.p.). In 2015, Quarshie went on to play the role, though it is notable that the production also included a Black Iago, potentially changing the racial dynamic of the play as originally written.

But what was the racial dynamic of the original play? What of that central question Kaul poses in his preface to *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*? Though I won’t presume to resolve decades of scholarly debate here, certain facts are incontrovertible: Shakespeare took his inspiration from Cinthio’s tale and—notably—added to the original story an Other at its tragic center: “While the character of ‘Disdemona’ is mentioned in the original, there is no reference to *Othello*, and Shakespeare’s source for the name

remains obscure" (Shaw and Shaw, 84). Indeed, well into the 20th century, writers persisted in questioning whether Shakespeare had truly written a Black man at all, arguing that the epithet "Moor" was applied in Shakespeare's time to "Arabs, Berbers, Syrians, and Negroes without regard for their wide racial differences" (Butcher, 243).

By the time of Quarshie's public consideration of the implications of a Black man's fulfilling the role, consensus seemed to have been reached that Shakespeare had indeed written an Othello as a Black—yes, like, actually Black—man. Of course, consensus on that point does not resolve the question of why Shakespeare wrote Othello as a Black tragic hero, what rhetorical or artistic aims he might have sought to fulfill in doing so. The viewpoint that the play is a play about racism, and not a racist play, is held by the likes of Shaw and Shaw (1995), who argue that Shakespeare:

uses the presence of the Moor as a tragic hero to confront the conscience of his countrymen. The play undoubtedly caused Elizabethans to reconsider their genetic place in the global structure, and their attitudes in the area of race relations. Shakespeare used the background of racial stereotypes and the social structure of Elizabethan England sensitively ... In the end, the character of Othello emerges as a distinct individual and not a particular type of Moor. (90)

I will return to Ogude to articulate the opposing viewpoint, which I find more compelling: that the play is fundamentally racist, that "Shakespeare was acutely aware of and indeed shared some of the deep-seated fears of his contemporaries about [B]lack people" (164); furthermore, the play "expresses as well as confirms the prejudices" of his time, including those that inspired Elizabeth's 1601 edict ordering "negars and blackmoores" out of the country (Shaw and Shaw, 87). As to whether Shakespeare pulls off rendering Othello as a "distinct individual," Ogude argues:

Othello suffers from an overwhelming inferiority complex, which is seen as part of his racial heritage, his lack of social refinement, the absence in him of the fine balance of reason and emotion that comes with true "education." Iago's suggestions have a tremendous effect on him because of his social and racial inadequacies. Shakespeare starts out with the proposition that the [B]lack man, even when favored with the hand of a white woman, feels inferior and undeserving. (163)

In her loving introduction to the 75th anniversary edition of Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the writer Edwidge Danticat calls the book a "masterpiece" and a "brilliant novel about a woman's search for her authentic self and real love. "For many decades and, hopefully, centuries to come, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* will probably be at the center of Zora Neale Hurston's legacy as a novelist" (xv). It may surprise some readers new to the book or to Hurston herself to learn that her "legacy as a novelist"—especially as a Black novelist—is hardly unanimous. Even as Hurston was rescued from obscurity by adoring luminaries like Alice Walker, Henry Louis Gates, biographer Robert Hemenway, and Danticat herself, there

remain in Hurston's legacy as a novelist traces of tension surrounding her depiction of Black characters.

Indeed, no less than Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison accused her of minstrelry, of creating Black characters designed to "humor a patronizing white audience" (Cobb-Moore, 26). Spencer describes Wright as Hurston's harshest critic, citing his charge that Hurston's characters were caught "in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro life: between laughter and tears" (19). This charge is ultimately not so different from Ogude's assertion of what Shakespeare was giving Elizabethan audiences with his stereotypical Black man, Othello—minus, of course, the charge of minstrelry, which can be leveled only at a Black artist.

There is here the altogether familiar pattern of a woman's writing being dismissed by her male peers as lacking "any claim to seriousness" (Spencer, 18). Story (1989) points out that "relative judgment in the case of Hurston seems to be determined by the gender of the scholar or writer; [B]lack male scholars hold one view of her and [B]lack female writers hold another" (25). More relevant to this discussion, however, than the gendered dimension to criticism of Hurston is that the "expressed aim of the literari of the Harlem Renaissance was to uplift the race by exposing [B]lacks, and whites as well, to great [B]lack art that would prove to be as good and aesthetically beautiful as its white counterpart" (Spencer, 19). In this aim, Hurston was out of step with her peers who wanted not images of "common folks working in the field" and "entertaining pseudo-primitives" bullshitting on the porch but a literature that would "dispel the stereotypes of [B]lacks as inferior" (Spencer, 18).

However, whereas some leaders of the Harlem Renaissance had come to view Black folk culture with "nostalgia or disdain" (Spencer, 20)—both of which imply distance—Hurston was immersed in it. She lived it. Simply put, she knew what she was talking, and writing, about in a way her critics—" [B]lack men who functioned as gatekeepers" (Story, 27) —did not. Perhaps, then, the gendered dimension is unavoidable. Per Story (1989), Hurston:

dared to see herself as a writer with talent equal to if not greater than her peers at representing the "folk" orally in writing. She was, essentially, more "downhome" than all the other Negro artists who 'were' the [Harlem Renaissance] and was not afraid to flaunt it. (27)

Further, Hurston knew that depicting the southern Black folk tradition with fidelity had its own redemptive potential, its own power to dispel stereotypes and lift a people. As Hurston collected folklore throughout the 1920s, Spencer explains, "she began to realize the potential of southern [B]lack folk to present a sympathetic picture of a cultural milieu that had been distorted by the neurotic racism of dominant culture into stereotypes of ignorance, superstition, sexuality, and laziness" (21).

As to the particular Black male body I have discussed here—Tea Cake—Danticat argues that he is a perfect example of the kind of rich, complex, realistic characters

that serve to counter those distorted stereotypes presented by the dominant culture. Tea Cake is, like other of Hurston's characters, "neither too holy nor too evil [but rather] extremely nuanced, reflecting human strengths as well as frailties" (xiv). Those descriptors sound like the ones that charitable readers of Shakespeare (like Shaw and Shaw) might claim he accomplished in Othello, even as they simultaneously assert that his "race and colour contributed to his downfall" (87) and that the play doesn't really work unless Othello is Black. That is, Shakespeare may give us in Othello a character who is nuanced and complex, but at least some of that nuance and complexity derives from his being racially Other. Tea Cake is, like Othello, nuanced and complex and Black; he isn't, like Othello, nuanced and complex *because* he's Black. That difference makes the three-beat treatment of the Black male body I have described here—dehumanize him, blame him for his own demise, overwrite his history—radically different between these two texts. So different, in fact, that I have come to believe that the biggest problem in the way I have taught them in classes like the one I describe here is twofold. The trouble as I understand it comes not from any text alone but rather that I have presented a suite of texts in which a repeating pattern is enacted on Black male bodies *and* that I have failed to properly contextualize the texts. I have failed to explore with my students the differences and similarities between the circumstances of their creation.

The trouble as I understand it comes not from any text alone but rather that I have presented a suite of texts in which a repeating pattern is enacted on Black male bodies and that I have failed to properly contextualize the texts.

Like Hurston, Chinua Achebe sought to "help his people rediscover their cultural heritage lost under the traumatic impact of colonization" (Madubuike, 142). Achebe did not attempt to do that via a perfect character. Per Achebe, Okonkwo is imperfect and contributes to his own undoing (Achebe and Bowen, 49). But his imperfectness—and his ultimate demise by way of the three beats I have described here—is not at odds with Achebe's desire to help Nigerians see themselves out from under the Western colonial gaze. Addressing the popularity of *Things Fall Apart* among Nigerian readers, Achebe says;

[M]y people are seeing themselves virtually for the first time in the story. The story of our position in the world had been told by others. But somehow that story was not anything like the way it seemed to us from where we stood. So this was the first time we were seeing ourselves, as autonomous individuals, rather than half-people, or as Conrad would say, 'rudimentary souls.' We are not rudimentary at all, we are full-fledged souls. In trouble, in trouble. There's no question about that. Life is full of trouble. (25).

Like Tea Cake, like Othello—and in the tradition of the ideal Aristotelian tragic hero—Okonkwo is neither too holy

nor too evil "[but rather] extremely nuanced, reflecting human strengths as well as frailties" (Danticat, xiv). Unlike Othello, though, Okonkwo's vulnerability and eventual downfall derive not at all from his Blackness. Though the students in my class read Okonkwo as Black—in fact, ever careful, they sometimes take pains to call him African American—"Blackness" doesn't and can't mean the same thing in Nigeria at the beginning of the 20th century as it does in the United States now. Per Achebe, even in 1991, "it does not occur to Nigerians to describe anybody as non-[B]lack!" (Achebe and Morrow, 21). Achebe explicitly aims to counter the prevailing image of Africa as "a gloomy landscape without human beings, an impenetrable jungle of forests with wild primitive customs and throbbing, crazy drums" with images of people like Okonkwo, people whose "ways of life do not need questioning or justifying ... real human beings" (Madubuike, 143).

Whereas Hurston is attempting to reclaim depictions of Blackness, Achebe is endeavoring to reclaim not Blackness but Africanness, and any teaching of Achebe's work requires that students understand that the terms are not interchangeable, that one is not a euphemism for the other. And yet, pointing out the similarities in these authors' acts of reclamation through fiction—and connecting the dots between African colonization, exploitation of African bodies and resources in Africa, the Atlantic slave trade, the exploitation of African-now-read-as-Black bodies in the creation of the United States and its economy, and the Jim Crow south—is likewise necessary to properly contextualize these texts.

The fourth text in my analysis is Robert Sam Anson's 1987 nonfiction text, *Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry*. Of the four, it is in some ways both the easiest and the most difficult to discuss in terms of what the author set out to do. After all, Anson was bound to the "truth" of the story as he understood it, whereas the other texts are works of fiction. Furthermore, much less has been written about this text or its author than the others. However, Anson did explicitly address why he chose to write this book in a *New York Times* review contemporary to the book's publication. Anson had a personal connection to Exeter, as well as a history of participation in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s (Coles). But beyond that, Anson is clear that what drew him to Edmund Perry was less the complexity of Eddie than the race angle:

I had wanted to do a book about race for a long time ... I've thought there's an enormous problem in race relations that's getting larger, and everyone was really pretending it didn't exist, and every publisher said it wasn't a commercial idea. So this story was a hook into it. (Coles)

In Anson's explanation, we see his desire to write about racism, which he doesn't call racism but rather "a problem in race relations," and which he claims "everyone" is ignoring, even as the very same *New York Times* that year reported that 3,000 people assembled to march through Manhattan to protest the death of a 23-year-old man who'd been chased by a group of white attackers into the path of a car that killed him (Smothers). It seems safe to assume that demonstrators, which included the family of the dead

man; members of the Black Veterans for Social Justice; and another, surviving victim of the attack and his lawyer were not ignoring a problem in race relations (Smothers). It seems safe to assume that the 70 people who, the *Times* reported, assembled that same day for a teach-in in the basement of Medgar Evers College and recited the names of Black people who had been killed in incidents of racially motivated violence in the previous ten years, including at the hands of police officers, were not ignoring a problem in race relations (Smothers). We can also see in Anson's words that in order to write the race book he wanted to write, he needed an angle that was satisfactorily marketable. Whatever else drew Anson to Eddie's story, the motivations he talked about when asked were intellectual and commercial.

Anson does go on to discuss Eddie himself in his remarks to the *Times* reviewer, though he (repeatedly) refers to Eddie not by name but as "this kid": "I don't want this one kid to stand as a totem for race relations, but there certainly was a lot going on in his life that is emblematic of the situation" (Coles). This brings us back to Shakespeare, to the idea that a Black man is inseparable from his Blackness—here, in fact, Anson talks about "this kid" not as a complex individual—though I must say that complexity is depicted in the book itself—but as an emblem for what he refuses to call racism.

Though I discussed these four texts chronologically in this section, I may as well have grouped them by the race of their authors. And if I had done so, I might have more expediently arrived at this insight: In my reading, despite the similarity of what I have described as a three-beat treatment of the Black male body in these texts, the Black authors sought to elevate a people by way of realistic depiction of an individual, whereas the white authors seem to explain a specific man's downfall by way of his Blackness. A twin insight: Certainly, when I was teaching this course, I did a wholly inadequate job of contextualizing these texts for—and with—my students the way I have done for myself here, in this writing.

If a Soul Is Left in Darkness

One of the first assignments I gave the students in this course when we began reading *Best Intentions* was to ask them to reflect on, and write about, the epigraph in the book, a quote from Victor Hugo repurposed by Martin Luther King, Jr.: "If a soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness." Their responses showed me that they had large holes in their understanding of race in America and also were eager to talk about it.

For one thing, many of my students were eager to relegate racism to the past. One Asian male student, responding to this quote, wrote about "men in the 1800s who trained their dogs to attack African Americans." I wondered if this student had seen the same photograph I have seen, which shows Black people running from police dogs. In 1963. Similarly, a white male student declared that "before the civil rights movement, many white people oppressed African Americans, and this oppression led to bad

living conditions, crime, and fear." In this student's understanding, "The African Americans rose up and fought their oppressors with civil disobedience, and occasionally violence." A third male student, also white, echoed the same understanding, one that fixes problematic "race relations" in the past: "An example of someone being put in a situation where they might be inclined to commit a crime is the way that most of America viewed African Americans for a very long time. African Americans were not given equal opportunities, and they were discriminated against, so they acted out." This understanding of racial injustice as history in the United States is not limited to male students. A white female student wrote about "racism in the 60s," during which time "people weren't raised to accept other races and it isn't fully their fault because somebody started the idea of hating people of color."

Not all students were so comfortable relegating racism and racial injustice to the past, like the white male student who asserted that "Blacks typically grow up in worse neighborhoods with more crime and are likely to be more impoverished." One white male student wrote about:

the large population of low-income African Americans who produce a near-endless cycle of teenage pregnancies and deadbeat dads which produce lower income for these mothers with multiple responsibilities, providing less tax overall to fund the district's schools, thereby holding back the potential education said teenage mother's children could receive and keeping them in the slums where they are likely to follow the same path as their parents.

A Black female student also wrote about cycles, albeit with more grace and knowledge:

One's location and upbringing normally play a large role in how he or she lives. The school-to-prison pipeline is one example of this phenomenon. The school-to-prison pipeline is when students are discouraged and pushed out of public schools only to lead lives of crime and end up in prison. This is due to a number of factors such as parental abuse or neglect, racism, and poverty. One will find that the school-to-prison pipeline is most acute in impoverished Black and Latino communities in major cities such as Chicago and New York. Because of the heavy crime, policing, and poverty in these areas, many children in these areas are gang members, drug dealers, and high school dropouts among other things. These factors, or the "darkness," are a result of the institutionalized racism that affects socioeconomic status, unemployment rates, and prison rates of people of color. While one's own conscience does play a part in his or her life, it is systems of privilege and hierarchies of power that are ultimately to blame.

Another female student, this one white, was also eager to connect the quote to specific, present-tense examples of "African Americans who have been weakened by the darkness of discrimination":

White people discriminate so strongly against African Americans and make them seem like criminals, when in reality the white men are far worse than the African

Americans. ... I think that racism is one of the worst things that has ever been created by white people, and that racism is a far worse sin than anything that an African American could do. However, there is a certain extent of which crimes committed could be worse than racism, such as murder. A situation that has recently happened that I think relates to [the quote] are the recent police killings involving [B]lack men, such as the events in Ferguson. Black men are given a stereotype of criminals and therefore policemen are led to shoot these men even when they could be unarmed and innocent. The real criminals in this case are the policemen who are clearly racist.

She was not the only student who wanted to write about what was going on right then. A white male student argued that "when we keep minorities in the lowest corner of society and use them as the foundation to the economic skyscraper, they cannot be forced to abide by the laws which suffocate their liberty." This student cited Henry Ward Beecher's quote that "liberty is the soul's right to breathe and when it cannot take a long breath the laws are girded too tightly around them," and then, fittingly, wrote about Eric Garner, "an unarmed man of color living in New York, [who] was choked by a police officer for the suspected selling of individual cigarettes," as being "the foundation of the skyscraper, which society needs to take responsibility for."

Many of my students were very committed to the ideas of meritocracy, reinvention, and self-reliance. Many students, replying to this quote, offered some version of the following: "Right now, many poor people become criminals because they think there's nothing else they can do. While I honestly can't blame them for thinking that, I don't see why it has to be told to them that they're just victims of bad circumstance, as if there's nothing they can do to climb out of the rabbit hole." Reflecting both his enthusiasm for the topic and his unsureness about me and our class, this white male student added, "I apologize if this paragraph is too political, but it's a topic that interests me very much."

Another student (female, white) refused the logic of the quote on the basis of free will by invoking Black men:

I don't agree with this quote. I think that a lot of people that have come from darkness have used that to fuel their fire and make their lives better. Look at the music industry for example. Jay-Z was born in Brooklyn, NY, and had a single parent. His father abandoned him and his three siblings and he grew up involved in selling drugs and in violence. Now he uses that to his advantage to make music and now has a net worth of \$520 million. There are similar stories of other music moguls like Kanye West and G-Eazy but their families are not guilty for the situations that they encounter. No one but themselves is to blame for the crimes they commit. Also, most people, who start in the darkness, have the opportunities to rise up.

I found it interesting that a Black male student in the class, one of two that year, also initially refused the logic of the quote on the basis of a specific example: a white prep-school kid who admitted to an armed robbery spree in Central Park. "There are many examples of fortunate people

not trapped in 'darkness' causing 'sin.' For example rich teenagers such as 17-year-old Jesse Wasserman who mug people in public places just because. ... These people do not need to be worried about paying next month's rent." By the end of his journal entry, though, this student had written himself into a compassionate stance available even to the Jesse Wassermans of the world: "The reason why I believe that this claim still holds truth is because the 'darkness' in the quote is not entirely defined. I automatically assumed the darkness was poverty and disadvantage but 'darkness' could very well be the need for attention from a hard-working mother or father."

What Now?

I don't have a conclusion; I am still becoming. According to Johnson (2013), "people live in a state of becoming, so we never arrive at a fixed location of whiteness or social awareness" (Johnson, p. 13). But I have inclinations and ideas. I have starts. And I have questions, which I pose here for myself but to which I eagerly solicit and will accept responses from others who read this.

As discussed here and elsewhere, the experience of being Black, particularly in America, means, a disproportionate risk of death. I refuse to populate my reading list with books that minimize or erase the systematic injustices that permit and carry out those deaths, putting me back where textbooks were in 1980. It is important for my students to confront the life-threatening nature of being Black in America. However, I would like to add texts to the mix that include Black characters, particularly significant Black male characters, who survive the end of the book—why couldn't my students read Adichie's *Americanah* as well as *Things Fall Apart*, especially given the literary genealogy that connects them? As it is, I frequently make spontaneous book recommendations, but I must acknowledge that texts carry a significant weight when they are assigned, not merely suggested, by teachers.

I need to rethink, constantly, how I approach all texts as a white reader and how I lead my students in their understanding of these texts as their white teacher. For example, in that sophomore course, when a white student told me that she thought the use of dialect in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was "exaggerated," I should have done more than demur, "Well, I suppose I would defer to Hurston, who lived in Eatonville and was a great writer and an anthropologist, as to how realistic or exaggerated the manner of speaking is." I should have invited that 16-year-old white girl to examine why she, having never been Black in the Everglades in the 1930s, or a proven anthropologist and author, felt qualified and inclined to set her tastes equal to Hurston's—and then find her own superior, just as a white student of Yancy's (2008) somewhat more coarsely "positioned herself as the discernor of bullshit" (p. 228). I needed to push back, to ask my students where they were getting their information about pregnancy and poverty in Black communities. Why the only Black men they bring up by name are victims of violence or rap stars.

I need to keep examining my own whiteness and the ways that I enact that whiteness in my classroom, which will

mean naming it aloud with my students, even though “talking about whiteness with white students is not easy. It generates uncomfortable silences, forms of resistance, degrees of hostility, and a host of other responses that most of us would prefer to avoid” (McIntyre, A., qtd. in Yancy, 2008, p. 45). Johnson (2013) argues that “racial identities are performed in constellation with other identities and subjectivities, that is, gender, class, age, profession, in inseparable, in/visible ways” (p. 13) and encourages teachers to consider the “possibilities that emerge when [they] make constellations visible, that is, envision themselves and their students inhabiting multiple identities and subjectivities” (p. 13). In this essay, I have discussed my whiteness but also my being a woman and being a (sometimes-)disabled person. Perhaps I should share this paper with my students, as revealing and potentially inflammatory as doing so might be.

I need to consider all the above in relation to the school and wider community to which I belong. Our school demographics are approximately the same as those of other independent schools, where “white students make up 76% of the independent school population, while African American students make up only 10% of the independent school population” (National Center for Education Statistics et al., 2004, qtd. in DeCuir-Gunby, J.T., 2007, p. 26)—a number that is not zero. I have taught at this school for 12 years now and, in that time, I have taught just six Black male students. Furthermore:

African Americans are enrolling in predominately white, elite, independent schools in growing numbers. ... Studies have found that African American students at predominately white, independent schools often ... feel unrepresented in the curriculum. (DeCuir-Gunby, J.T., 2007, p. 26-27)

I will leave the contentious debate whether private schools *should* exist for another day, or another author. For now, I work in one that I love dearly, and in my classroom, I have living, breathing students—some Black—whom I love dearly. I need to consider, as do my fellow teachers, not only how we are underrepresenting our Black students in our curriculum, but also how representations of Black people in our curriculum may snatch Black students’ bodies through a white gaze and then return these students’ bodies to them as lascivious monstrosities, criminals, problems, or simply absences (Yancy, 2008). Independent school faculty are even more homogenously white than the students they teach. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2013), private school teachers nationwide are approximately 88 percent white, 4 percent non-Hispanic Black, and 5 percent Hispanic. Our school currently has no full-time Black male teaching faculty members. While reluctant to use the somewhat problematic term “diversity,” I do believe that organizations, institutions, and communities are better when more different types of people populate them—so how can I authentically contribute to that goal?

A Teacher’s Phantasm II

Janie Woods is back “in her room, the place tasted fresh again. The wind through the open windows had broomed out all the fetid feeling of absence and nothingness. She closed in and sat down. Combing road-dust out of her hair. Thinking” (Hurston, 1990, p. 192).

I am in my classroom at the end of the school year in June. Thinking. My dead characters lay all about, but they begin “to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing. Commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sing, singing and sobbing” (Hurston, 1990, p. 192-193).

The sobbing and the singing: This is the sound of the challenge that critic Wayne Booth once posed to a collection of fiction readers: “Name fictions that changed your character—or made you want to change your conduct” (Keen, 2007, p. 66). I must refute, and encourage my students to refute, that reading fiction is merely relaxation or escape. If these characters are going to continue to die for us, before us (and they will, as I cannot in good conscience jettison Zora Neale Hurston from my course on marginality and the Other in literature), we must face their deaths as more than plot points, even deeply moving plot points. It is my job, my mandate, to “connect the dots between reactions to fiction and options for action in the real world” (Keen, 2007, p. 146).

As Janie sits, Tea Cake is restored to her in her memory, and her love, and her thinking: “Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking” (Hurston, 1990, p. 193).

This is the promise I can make: not to undo all performances of damaging whiteness in my syllabus or my teaching, not to never assign another book with a dead Black male character, not to be a perfect teacher, but to never—*never*—finish feeling and thinking. And to point my feeling and thinking in the directions of justice, equity, and love.

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