

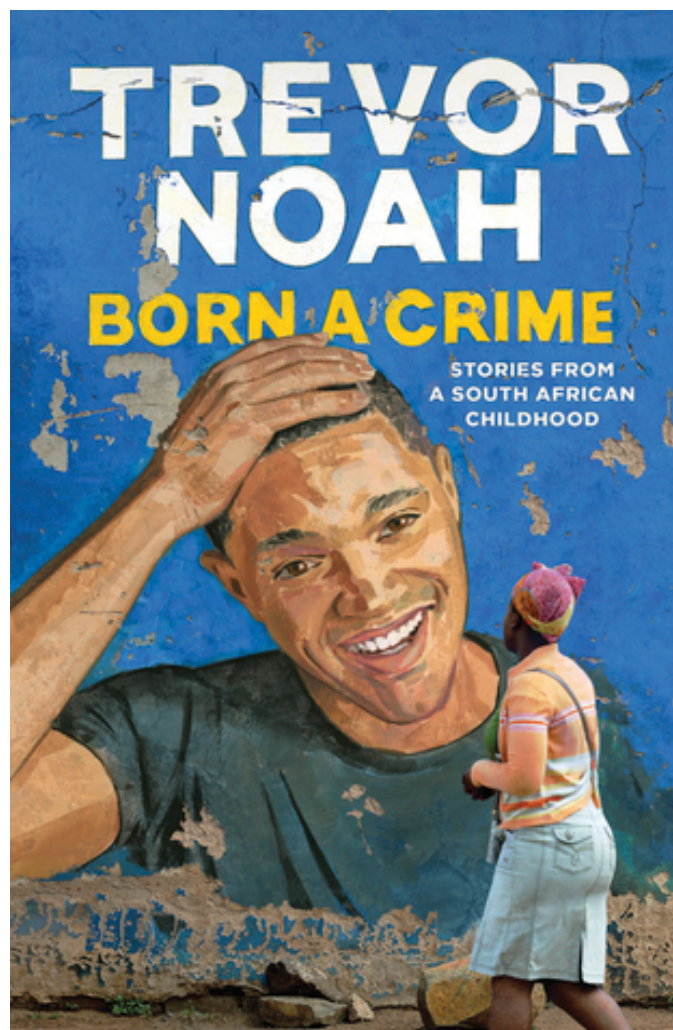
RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note

Teaching Middle School Students About Structural Racism with Trevor Noah's "Born a Crime"

by Salsabel Almansori



TREVOR NOAH, BORN A CRIME: STORIES FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDHOOD, 2019. ONE WORLD

The first chapter of Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime* grabbed the attention of the entire class. "Run," it's pointedly called, and it details the story that led to Noah, his mother, and his infant brother escaping a moving vehicle and running away after the driver threatens their lives upon figuring out that they are from a different tribe.

"What was that?! Why are we running?!"

"What do you mean, 'Why are we running?' Those men were trying to kill us."

"You never told me that! You just threw me out of the car!"

"I did tell you. Why didn't you jump?"

"Jump?! I was asleep!"

"So I should have left you there for them to kill you?"

"At least they would have woken me up before they killed me."

Hooked, my students couldn't stop talking about this outrageous event, which happened to Noah when he was around the same age as they were. Voices of shocked intrigue reverberated: *I can't believe they jumped out of a moving car! I guess it was safer than being killed by the driver.*

Tasked with teaching Grade 7 virtually, I struggled to engage my students while maintaining a political praxis that facilitates young people's understandings of social experience as fundamentally mediated by systemic power and privilege. My students were a gender, socioeconomically, and racially diverse group of students that came from an inner-city elementary school in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. Many of them had disabilities that impacted the ways they learned and experienced school, and some were refugees and new immigrants to Canada. I ultimately chose to use *Born a Crime* as a novel study when I found that there was a young readers' edition. I was delighted to learn that this edition was exactly the same as the original, except without the swear words, because I did not want to shelter my students from complex concepts that are often deemed too controversial. I knew that they weren't too young to learn the truth about systemic violence and resistance through story. At the same time, I did not want to get in trouble, especially since my lessons were streamed into students' homes, so a version of the book that was free of curse words was just what I was looking for. The novel study consisted of daily and weekly reflections and discussions, pop quizzes in the form of Mentimeter surveys, accommodations and modifications for students based on their diverse learning needs, and a final book report that was non-traditional in that students were allowed to choose between making a PowerPoint presentation, a short play, a survey, a portfolio, or a stand-up comedy sketch. Self-assessment and descriptive feedback were also key parts of the flexible evaluation of student learning.

The main strength of using the book as a novel study is that Noah artfully integrates humour and story to illustrate the implications of growing up biracial amongst systemic

racism and poverty. One student eloquently shared the following reflections in his book report:

Racism is another main theme in the book. The title "Born a Crime" refers to the fact that interracial relationships were illegal in apartheid South Africa. Trevor was a product of a white father and Black mother, so he was considered the "product" of crime from birth. Racism tries to separate people based on their skin colour and this was especially difficult on Trevor. He was not accepted by the white people because he was "too dark" and Black people found him "too white". Racism treats some people as superior based only on their skin colour and often treats non-whites with suspicion and guilt. Even after the end of apartheid in South Africa, race was still an important factor in where you lived, who you spent time with and where you went to school or worked.

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Chapter after chapter, I witnessed the jargony word *apartheid* become a regular part of my students' vocabulary. I read their reflections as they tapped into the complicated notions of power and privilege. I listened to my 12- and 13-year-old students' discussions as they brought Noah's life stories in conversation with their own experiences, knowing that implicating ourselves in systemic oppression is a task that has been challenging even for the students I teach at the university level.

While Noah's stories reveal the realities of racialized and classed oppression in post-apartheid South Africa, empowerment is at the heart of his narrative as he centers acts of resistance, particularly when discussing his mother. Storying these acts of resistance allowed my students to see that where there is oppression, there are always people who fight, who are agents of change and empowerment for themselves and their communities. One theme that my students consistently picked up on is the way Noah speaks of his mother in awe, love, and curiosity, even when he doesn't understand or agree with her decisions. Noah regards his mother as a rebellious and free spirit who opposed racist systems through her everyday actions, and in doing so expanded her children's understandings of the nuances of life under injustice.

The final theme that emerged most frequently out of their reflections was the idea of imagination as bounded my circumstance. "We tell people to follow their dreams, but you can only dream of what you can imagine, and, depending on where you come from, your imagination can be quite limited," Noah recalls. Opening reflections and imaginative possibilities, this quote created an air of cognitive and emotional dissonance in my class. One student wrote in her daily reflection: "Because my family came to Canada only two years ago, I sometimes feel like there is a lot I still have

to figure out. This quote makes me wonder how what I don't know and haven't learned yet could hurt my dreams and wishes for my future."

When I asked students at the end of the year via a Mentimeter survey, *What was the highlight of our class?* they overwhelmingly responded *Born a Crime*. This year, I teach at a different school, but I recently paid a visit to my former students, who are now graduating and moving on to high school. A group of them warmed my heart when they came up to me to share that they still have inside jokes from the last year, one of which involves Noah being thrown out of a moving car.



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