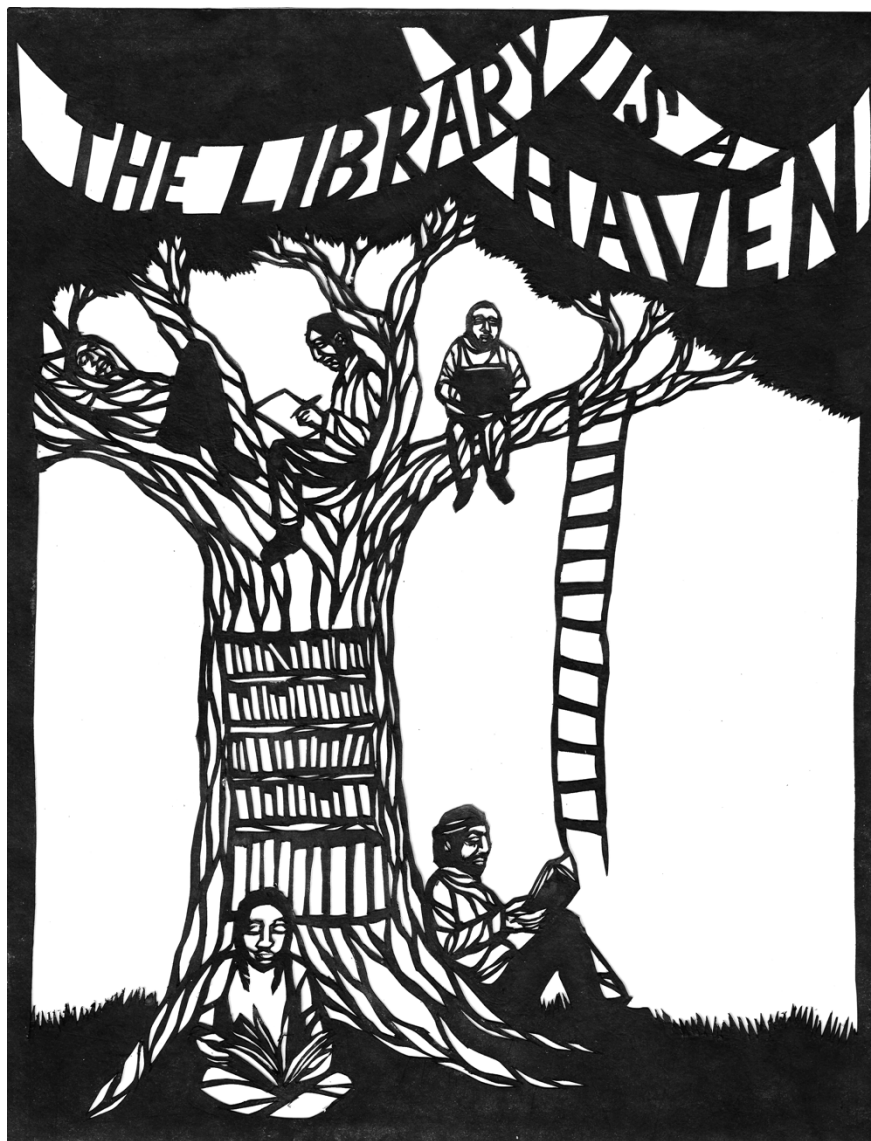


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

*Teaching Note*  
Representation in an Age of Genocide

by Gregory Shafer



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*Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question; unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; through others through the difficulty of rightly framing it.*

– W.E.B. Dubois (54)

**I**nformation is a funny thing. It only works if it is freely available to the people of a society. Education is always ideological, but we must be critical thinkers to see its manipulation.

I make these statements as classes across the nation begin to assess the Israeli slaughter of thousands of innocent Palestinians and the incredible failure of media to cover this obvious act of genocide. As bombs reign over schools and hospitals in Gaza, American students are being warned that any acts of “anti-Semitism” -- any words that suggest Israel is culpable for stealing land and expunging indigenous people from their homes -- will result in severe punishments.

So much for information on the Palestinians and the history of racism they have endured. But this is only part of the story. This is only part of the Dubois unasked question. Happening alongside of this campaign of misinformation is an equally vexing attack on the writings of other marginalized groups in many conservative states. In January 2023, Florida sent a letter to the College Board rejecting its proposed Advanced Placement African American Studies course, citing concerns about six topics of study, including the Movement for Black Lives, Black feminism, and reparations. Governor Ron DeSantis said the course violates the so-called Stop WOKE Act, which he signed last year.

So many “unasked questions” in a time of genocide and racism. So many questions that cannot be asked because powerful forces control a narrative that removes vital language from a nation’s lexicon. Will mainstream American media include words like *genocide* in its reports on the brutal bombings in Gaza? In fact, they won’t -- are not allowed to use such provocatively revealing words despite their obvious truths.

## Challenging Students of Flint

In his book *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison talked of the failure of the white world to see him beyond an abstraction. “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (3). In my class at Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan -- a class comprised of African American, Middle Eastern, and White students -- I challenged the writers to explore and think critically about media representation in much the same way I did six years earlier during the water crisis in our city. To begin the assignment, I talked at length about the concerns I had about not only the unrelenting bombing of innocent Palestinians but the skewed way the media covered the entire war. I explained my own observations about the failure of media outlets and academic institutions to provide a balanced perspective on the issue

of Palestine and Israel, and provided resources on the history of the Zionist movement. How many knew that Palestinians had lived in Israel for hundreds of years before the migration of Jews? How many knew that the violence in Israel involved what many believe to be the stealing of land from indigenous people in much the same way that whites stole land from indigenous people in America?

As part of this unit, I showed them several short histories of the region and read excerpts from scholarship, including Rashid Khalidi’s *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine* and Ilan Pappé’s *Ten Myths about Israel*. In doing this, I invited students to consider the failure of media to represent people of color and to consider their own memories and feelings concerning the Flint water crisis and the way they and their city were depicted by mainstream media. Finally, I asked, “Would you be interested in critiquing the media and its presentation of marginalized groups. Would you like to have a voice in speaking to the way you and other marginalized groups have been portrayed by powerful media outlets? I think this is an issue that started with Flint and the water crisis and continues today with the massacre of Palestinians.” In posing these questions, I followed in the paths of Freire, Bakhtin, and Giroux, who have argued that schools are always political and should be safe places to contest cultural and political norms, liberating students to “rewrite their experiences and perceptions through an engagement with various texts, ideological positions, and theories” (Giroux 176).

Indeed, in answering these questions, many students were excited to expose the injustice in the way media had defined them as Flint residents and defined other marginalized groups. Many had followed the months of bombing in Gaza and felt solidarity with the Palestinians, who were being subjected to the “same racism we endured in 2016.” One Middle Eastern student claimed the media was pro-Israel and were promulgating a biased view of the war. “I was here during the water crisis and now I see what is happening to Palestinians,” she said. “The media creates a vision of people of color that helps to keep us down -- that limits us in the eyes of society. We are not people. We are not individuals. How else can you explain the way they celebrated the rescue of Israeli hostages, while hundreds of nameless Palestinians died. We are disposable.”

In arguing this, she reminded her peers that while media outlets discussed the poison water and the toxic damage done to black and brown children in Flint, most felt marginalized and invisible during the crisis. Most knew that white neighborhoods would never have been asked to tolerate water that turned colors and made their children sick. Most of the white victims would have been interviewed and been given names. Other students added to the discussion, wondering why they were depicted in such a monolithic way -- why Flint was seen as a helpless place that seemed congruent with countless images of minority cities that could not get their lives together because of something *they* failed to do. “I think of the images” argued a student, “and I know the entire world

sees us as poor and incompetent, waiting for white people to save us from ourselves.”

In many of the discussions that followed -- as we began to explore the media coverage of Gaza and the Israeli offensive -- students reinforced the idea that Flint was a thriving city, filled with centers of higher learning and newly renovated condominiums that were victimized by the incompetence of a *white* governor who knew he could save money by treating people of color differently. For my students, representation was paramount. The desire to take charge of the narrative and become active change agents was integral to their motivation. As David Kirkland reminds us, “teachers are human rights workers, and our classrooms are progressive vineyards thirsty for liberation’s laborers. Classrooms are never neutral sites” (Kirkland).

“What should we do?” I asked my students as we began to discuss this major writing assignment. In assigning this controversial topic, I wanted my class to recognize the way information works and the ideological elements of what many take for granted as facts. “Have we been inculcated to see Palestinians -- people who are dark -- as evil terrorists while also seeing Israelis as victims and heroes simply because of their long-term connection to America? And is there any consonance between this and the way Flint was characterized by a media that saw us as invisible?”

These are the first steps in introducing the issue of race, propaganda, and hegemony. In particular, I devoted much of a class to the idea of hegemony and what it means. I focused on cultural hegemony and the definition of a “hidden but pervasive power involving such an extreme domination of social life that we seldom recognize or question its legitimacy” (Howard 106). In introducing the definition, I discussed the way news organizations and educational institutions treat “truth.” Is there an unspoken acceptance of certain ideas that have become so entrenched in our collective minds that we cease to question them? In the same way, how can schools and media become complicit in advancing a truth that perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces injustice and racism. We need to remember that media are made up of people who bring their own biases, their own entrenched prejudices to the reporting and writing of a story. And yet, I added, some of these stories become our truth.

Marcus, a student in my class, failed to find a single discussion of *genocide* by the mainstream media, noting that the articles focused on Israeli fear of terrorism and questions of when the bombing should stop but never about the justice of the bombing. “I read of thousands of Palestinians being killed -- of schools being leveled, but they never use the word genocide,” added Marcus as he reviewed his research. Added a second student: When the Israeli kidnap victims were released, we knew their names. We saw them reunited with their families. And yet, with the Palestinians, we only see masses of people crying. There is no sense of humanity. What are the names of the dead Palestinians?”

Especially interesting was biased reporting by the *New York Times* about rapes committed by members of Hamas. When Marcus delved into the issue, he uncovered a pro-Israeli slant by the *Times* and the three writers who accused Hamas of rape. Indeed, much of Marcus’s report focused on Anat Schwartz, one of the authors of the story. Schwartz, Marcus told the class, had been part of the Israeli Defense Force and had written anti-Palestinian comments before becoming part of the dubious report on rape. Despite this clear bias, her clear animus against Palestinians was never a factor in the publishing of an obviously biased piece against Hamas and the Palestinian people. In considering Marcus’s research and the willingness of *the New York Times* to publish a story that clearly lacked objectivity -- that reduced Palestinians to rapists and thugs--one thinks of Malcolm X’s statement, “If you aren’t careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed and loving the people who are doing the oppressing” (Malcolm X At The Audubon, 1964).

After discussing hegemony, I introduced students to major stories since the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack. I also showed them images of other headlines, including the Treyvon Martin case, where Martin was shown hooded and menacing, despite the fact that he was the victim of aggression. “The image helps shape how we see Treyvon Martin,” I reminded students. A second image was of O.J. Simpson during his murder trial. In this case, Simpson’s facial image was darkened to make him seem more threatening, more dangerous. “So much can be communicated before a word is ever said or written, and I want you to be critical -- to investigate and see if the media is being fair to marginalized groups.”

## The Essays

While students were at first hesitant, they quickly became excited about the project. Many of my African American students had long questioned the media’s portrayal of Flint, Michigan and the constant references to dirty water, and wanted to interrogate the way the media create images of other marginalized people. “I have often thought that media people come to Flint to get an easy story about dirty water. I appreciate that but they need to show how resilient we are and how we have overcome the challenges,” said Sonia. “We are more than poor people who drank dirty water. We are not only victims.” Others were intrigued with the conspicuous lack of objectivity in reference to the Israeli bombing of Gaza, seeing connections to Flint. “The more that I read about this, the more I realize that this is about people being eradicated,” said Blair. “Palestinians are darker. They’re different -- like Black people and Native Americans. It’s easy to treat them differently and see them as monsters or ‘the other’.”

## Nadia’s Essay

Nadia was born in the United States, but her parents were from Jordan, and she savored the opportunity to critique the media and what she argued were “lies and distortion due to a blind media.” Nadia started her paper

by suggesting that "One person's terrorist is another person's patriot." She went on to write that "the media is driven by a Zionist point of view that refuses to allow the word *genocide* to be used while bemoaning anti-Semitism." In her essay, she suggested that American society is so slathered in Zionist propaganda that it can write about anti-Semitism while Israelis bomb and kill 30,000 Palestinians. Indeed, Nadia's paper referred to an *Atlantic* essay titled "The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending"; Nadia noted that since the massacre of Palestinians had started in October 2023, *The Atlantic* had published three articles on anti-Semitism, seemingly missing the irony that their lament was being discussed while Israel was in the midst of destroying another race of people. "Ellison wrote about not being seen, and I can write with certainty that Palestinians are not seen by an American nation that is completely controlled by Zionist voices. What's hilarious and sad is how oblivious these Zionist voices are to their own entitlement. How else could a group bemoan its poor treatment while watching and participating in another group's annihilation?" said Nadia with disdain.

Nadia's paper brought a silent awe to the class. Most students eschew the political, but her passion turned heads and empowered others to think more deeply and critically about race, color, media, and representation. Jasmin later changed her topic and wrote about media and its representation of African Americans, arguing that much of the media tries to make Black people white by straightening their hair and changing their color to fit an appearance that satisfies white audiences. Jasmin's paper was fascinating. She examined the look of African American women in a series of commercials and one T.V. show, *Abbott Elementary*, and argued that stereotypes were both prevalent and disturbing. "It is easy to see how funny many of these representations of black people are to white audiences. They make being black a compromise. It's sad." Jasmin was also able to come full circle, making connections with the hegemonic treatment of Palestinians, suggesting that "neither African Americans nor Palestinians have any power when it comes to either their lives or how they are represented in the media and other places of power. They are included in the media but their representation is not their own."

Nathan volunteered next and wrote about the cultural genocide against black people, beginning his paper with an essay by actor Ossie Davis, who bemoans the many ways that the word *black* has become a word of derision, despite its seemingly neutral place as a color. Marcus began his draft by writing:

When we all think of *Black*, we think of evil, darkness, bad luck, dirtiness, and inferiority. Why is that? Why is white pure and heavenly. Why are angels white while darkness is associated with villains? Why do corrupt cowboys wear black hats? This is not an immutable truth. It is a product of years of information that has been given to us. Our representation has been constructed by media, by popular westerns, by television shows that make us pimps and drug dealers? This is the media at work, crafting our lives for us.

Nathan's paper was not the perfunctory examination of facts, but rather an effusive and sometimes angry exploration of media in its various forms. After reading his paper, he included a brief power point that examined the various ways that black has been socially constructed to make African Americans hate themselves. He also discussed the way Nat's Turner's life and eventual execution had been fought over by both Black and White writers who sought to produce their own truth about the slave and controversial rebel. "I leave you with this question: If African Americans cannot take control of their own identity -- of their own stories like Nat Turner -- how can we expect Palestinians to do anything about the lies told about them?"

In the end, my students seemed empowered to ask many of the questions that W.E.B. Dubois felt were unasked. To engage in true praxis, which involved the synthesis of critical thinking and action, students must be liberated to contest the wisdom and verities of established structures of power and authority. They must become active agents in questioning media and the representations that have been established for them. They must transcend what is given and create their own empowered image of themselves. bell hooks calls this "engaged pedagogy," arguing that we must restore students and their will to be fully self-actualized (Teaching 18). I agree with Baker Bell, Jones Stanbrough, and Everett when they argue that "Teaching Black youth to be critical of the mainstream agenda and to advocate for themselves by becoming authors of their own stories can be a powerful act of social activism and is essential for social transformation" (131). It also, in many ways, empowers students to ask those questions they never would feel able to ask as they wend their way through a very political educational world. Democracy and justice must be our goals as we invite our students to question power and find their voices -- their own identities -- in the process.

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