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Speaking Silence Fluently: Encouraging Student Understanding of Counterhegemonic Strategies in African American Literature

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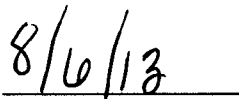
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"Speaking Silence Fluently: Encouraging Student Understanding

of Counterhegemonic Strategies in African American Literature"

(TITLE)

BY

Kathleen S. Decker

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

This thesis suggests that while mainstream multicultural education claims to promote both diversity and equality, it fails to adequately address, let alone improve, the living conditions of minority students. It further suggests that when teachers help students read through the lenses of critical multiculturalism and critical whiteness studies, students can better see that both canonical and non-canonical African American authors deliberately employ nuanced strategies to resist white supremacy. Specifically through the use of purposeful and discreet silences, these authors serve to promote new and actively counterhegemonic ways of thinking in the classroom.

Each chapter pairs two texts—one canonical and one lesser-taught—in order to expose the ways in which white supremacy is typically downplayed in the canonical texts by mainstream multiculturalists. Such educators also tend to ignore certain worthy non-canonical texts because, although their authors also deploy strategic silences, their exposure of white supremacy is in other ways more overt. Further, the thesis suggests that uncovering silences in the canonical works allows the authors' resistance to white supremacy to become more pronounced, and therefore, more of a threat to hegemonic social structures.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my husband, Dr. Brad Decker, for his continued and multifaceted support throughout this process. I would also like to thank my children for their patience; like I did for each of them, I spent countless hours giving life to this paper. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my dear friend, Heather Nelson, for her willingness to contribute to and engage me in fascinating conversations related to my topic.

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Introduction

Multicultural education, with its origins in the 1960s, did not thrive until nearly twenty years later, when new curricula and teaching methods emerged in public schools. The lofty goal—nothing short of ending racism in schools—missed the mark in many ways. However well intentioned the efforts, “multicultural education has been criticized for a simplistic and naïve view of wider social and cultural power relations” (May 2). According to mainstream multiculturalism, teaching an array of diverse texts constitutes an advance toward racial equality. However, the ongoing, widespread pedagogical and institutional neglect of larger social structures that impede racial equality has led to major criticism of the concept: “In short, multicultural education has had a largely negligible impact to date on the life *chances* of minority students, the racialized attitudes of majority students, the inherent monoculturalism of school practice, and the wider processes of power relations and inequality which underpin all these” (May 1). This essay will argue that countervailing, counterhegemonic undercurrents do exist in African American canonical texts, but are downplayed for the sake of providing students with a more pleasant educational experience; this experience commonly includes encouragement to appreciate what amount to merely embraceable Others, in the forms of authors, characters, and ultimately, actual people.

As a high school teacher of American literature for the past ten years, I have witnessed my school’s students, including African Americans (who make up about 50% of the school’s population), consistently struggle to become engaged with canonical

minority texts. Carefully selected for its inoffensive palatability by and for primarily non-African American readers, certain canonized African American works have dominated students' curricula since their early days of grade school. Multicultural education, seemingly liberal and benevolent, was introduced during the course of my students' lives, yet the widespread implementation of minority texts has done little to inspire both white and minority students to understand their identities and the material conditions of their lives within a larger social context, a context that continues to evince the ongoing effects of our country's white supremacist legacy. In response to proponents of multiculturalist philosophy, Doris Sommer writes, "Learning and teaching to read literature in ways that acknowledge difference can be the most basic training for the democratic imagination. Yet children usually learn one-sided approaches that ask them to identify with favorite characters, without also asking what interferes in the process" (6). The ill effects of multiculturalism's invitation to embrace racial and ethnic Others on an individual level directly correspond to many students' refusals to accept that racism and oppression continue to affect their lives. It is a common belief among students, both African Americans and others, that the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, and certainly the election of an African American president, indicate that the collective struggles faced by some minority groups are over. The widespread belief that oppression is a condition of the past has helped to create apathetic learners who easily become disengaged from schoolwork, including the study of canonical African American texts. As critical multiculturalist Richard Morgan suggests, "if a student cannot relate to racism as it affects himself, then he may not understand it completely and choose not to actively participate in its elimination" (edchange.org). Students who have been further

desensitized to the ongoing forces of oppression through multicultural teaching methods are not only disengaged, but, even more dangerously, they are also convinced that the struggles for equality lie dead and buried in the past. Fortunately, new and more critical approaches to canonized texts can inspire students to think in both broader and deeper ways. Presenting literature through a critical lens allows students to hear the discreet silences intentionally employed by certain minority authors who actively resist white supremacy.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. has been asking important and challenging questions about the philosophy and its praxis, nearly since its conception: “Multiculturalism itself has certain imperial tendencies. Its boundaries have not been easy to establish. We are told that it is concerned with the representation of difference—but whose differences? Which differences?” (1038). As Gates implies, to suggest that multiculturalism needs to look at and celebrate differences automatically suggests that those differences, and even the notion of culture itself, belong only to members of other races and cultures. Instead of celebrating diversity for the sake of diversity, a critical approach to the theory contextualizes the airiness of mainstream multiculturalism by incorporating recognition of social, political, and economical factors that cannot be separated from race. Removing historical and contemporary context from race, and assuming that racism is simply an individualist perspective that can be cured through liberal thinking, is a major problem of the philosophy as it is usually practiced in our classrooms: “The paradigm of multiculturalism actually excludes the concept of dominant and subordinate cultures—either indigenous or migrant—and fails to recognize that the existence of racism relates to the possession and exercise of politico-economic control and authority and also to

forms of resistance to the power of dominant social groups” (Carby 64-65). Dismissing the ways in which white supremacy thrives ignores the fact that minority students have not fared any better since its inception. But with limited funds, many public schools lack the ability to adopt new supplemental materials that better serve the student population. Rather than suggesting large amounts of money be spent on new texts, I suggest that presenting canonical texts with the notion that strategic silences exist within them can lead students to think more critically about how they have typically viewed marginalized, minority characters—as nothing more than pitiful Others in need of help.

If strategic silences exist, and if those silences demonstrate the resistance certain African American authors have toward hegemonic society, why, then, do most educators practice the more liberal, mainstream form of multiculturalism? John Higham wonders about the same question when he writes:

Multiculturalism has remained for two decades a stubbornly practical enterprise, justified by immediate demands rather than long range goals: a movement without an overall theory... Still, it is troubling that twenty years after those convulsive beginnings, multiculturalism has suddenly become a policy issue in America’s colleges, universities, and secondary schools without yet proposing a vision of the kind of society it wants.

(204)

Imbedded philosophies can be difficult to purge from educational systems, particularly when they are seemingly goodhearted and beneficent. Who does not want students to read and discuss diverse texts? Who does not want a nation free from the ill effects of racism at an individual level? The idealistic philosophy and its praxis, however, do very

little to challenge what students think they know about race and culture, and instead do much to reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate white supremacy. While multiculturalism seems to know what it is *for*, it does not hold the same passion for what it is *against*. The dangers of such a philosophy, especially when presented by teachers who have not had professional development to make them aware of its maleficence include “a celebratory multiculturalism of spaghetti and polka; a multiculturalism that trivializes culture and is more concerned with the affirmation of difference than with what students need if they are to gain some degree of broader social access” (May 261). In sum, critical multiculturalism recognizes that racism and the white supremacy that engenders it still exist, affecting some lives for ill and some for the better (at least in material terms). In addition, minority-authored literary texts do reflect these realities, and they can be studied in ways that help students perceive and understand them—such hitherto “silent” features in them should not remain unvoiced.

In addition to studying texts and the minority lives they reflect through a critical multiculturalist lens, there is also value in approaching whiteness with a critical gaze. Critical studies of whiteness benefit all students, regardless of race, by recognizing and clarifying unearned white privilege and cultural hegemony. With regard to unearned privilege, Bree Picower writes, “In a white supremacist society, many of the privileges that flow to Whites are invisible, unearned, and not consciously acknowledged...these privileges, ideologies and stereotypes reinforce institutional hierarchies and the larger system of White supremacy” (198). Addressing whiteness, then, and hearing the ways in which certain minority authors comment on whiteness through strategic silences, can help students question why all other races and cultures are measured *against* it, and how and

why it has successfully maintained itself as the unmarked norm, even in an increasingly diverse population. Regarding cultural hegemony, students and teachers, through the literature they read, can discover their own unconscious hegemonic understandings, and attempt to counter them. Teaching students not only to think differently, but also to “increase their understandings of *how* their beliefs and values are formed and *why* other people think differently” then becomes a primary pedagogical focus (Thein 55). If whiteness continues to go unnoticed, as it has since the days its status as a conscious, self-declared badge of racial pride became untenable, changing hegemonic structures and institutions becomes an impossibility. Without scrutinizing what it means to be white, the subjugated Other will continue to remain just that. As Kendra Coulter suggests:

People can continue to operate according to the hegemonic limitations on thought and action using allotted channels for resistance, or scholars and citizens, through analysis and struggle, can denaturalize hegemonic processes and fundamentally challenge the very existence of the thoughts, practices, institutions, traditions, omissions, negations and silences that constitute elite, hegemonic rule with counter-hegemonies. (15)

Of course, merely studying whiteness itself does not pose an imminent threat to white supremacy. However, learning via minority-authored literature about the ways in which hegemony imposes limitations on students themselves, particularly headstrong teenagers who like to think they have complete control over their lives, can spark an interest in the roles they play in society and their capacity to promote significant social change.

Pedagogically, then, I claim that certain minority writers, through their use of particular, discreet, and deliberate strategies, both play to and resist the dominant order's

aesthetic and thematic expectations. All readers who engage with such texts, but particularly those who make up the dominant culture, experience satisfaction and frustration at the hands of the writer. I also suggest that traditional multicultural education's gatekeepers tend to choose those canonical minority works that more easily cater to "readerly" expectations, even if those expectations are nothing more than supposed. And while I am not challenging the study of certain historical figures, I am both challenging the static and uncritical way in which certain figures and literature are presented to students, and also suggesting that certain kinds of unjustly disregarded texts could be effectively studied as well. Encouraging students to embrace merely a pathetic Other, or to individualize the Other, thereby ignoring explanatory context, creates apathetic readers who actually continue to find ways to distance themselves from the figures about whom they read. Romanticizing and mystifying heroic minorities contributes to the same dilemma, a missed opportunity for students to think critically about what they think they *know*. The reading through a critical multiculturalist lens of canonical texts already found in schools and certain less "comfortable" texts gives teachers the capacity to reengage their student population and develop more active readers.

Since I teach a wide historical range African American literature, my thesis examines a chronologically arranged array of highly teachable works from several periods. My first chapter covers two slave narratives, Douglass' *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. I focus on the ways in which strategic, counterhegemonic silences can be uncovered in both texts when examined through a critical multicultural lens. I suggest that, while Douglass is

likely more canonical because his resistance to hegemony is a bit veiled, his purposeful silences actually give agency to American slaves, rather than encouraging the pity for them that many more mainstream pedagogical approaches seek to elicit. Additionally, I examine Jacobs' narrative to demonstrate that while she too uses her own forms of strategic silence, her counter-hegemonic tone is less discreet, thereby making her text less popular to the traditional multiculturalist approach.

Chapter Two centers on the poetry of two Harlem Renaissance writers, Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, and the ways in which both deliberately employ strategies to counter white supremacy. I suggest that Hughes, like Douglass, is more often taught because of the ways in which his resistance to hegemony can be downplayed. Brown, on the other hand, blatantly challenges systemic racism, making his works less popular in most classrooms. While Brown still employs techniques that require unpacking, including strategic silences, his language more forcefully confronts hegemony than that of Hughes. As with Douglass and Jacobs, both poets also reverse the lens of racial scrutiny, revealing workings of white supremacy that continue to parallel forces impinging upon students' lives today.

The final chapter examines August Wilson's 1986 play, *Fences*, and Amiri Baraka's 1964 drama, *Dutchman*, both of which offer trenchant social critique that is more specific to the lives of African American men, both before and during the Civil Rights era, and in ways that resonate with today's continued targeting of black men. Again, Wilson's play, more canonical in part because of its veiled resistance to white supremacy, finds its way into the traditional multiculturalist curriculum much more easily than does Baraka's, which launches intense disdain into the self-congratulatory face of

white America. However, that is not to say that Wilson does not also prominently oppose society's hegemonic structure. His strategies, when uncovered, suggest that he adamantly resists the metaphorical embrace for which some readers assume he is asking. Baraka's play, with its more obvious counterhegemonic tone, is not often taught because of the difficulty in downplaying his angst for the hierarchal society in which we continue to live. But again, his art deserves close analysis, in part because, as in all of the works considered here, intentionally embedded silences that actually call for audience response and action can be given voice.

Chapter 1: Empowering vs. Empathizing: A New Approach to Teaching Slave Narratives

American literature lends itself to being taught chronologically; typically the high school course begins with historical accounts from settlers during the colonial period, and these are often followed by a unit on slave narratives. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is widely taught to give readers the perspective of slavery through the eyes of the slave. As this autobiography is often students' first experience reading history through the lens of the oppressed, it serves as a critical opportunity to encourage them to *unlearn* what they think they *know* about hegemony, oppression, and race. Taking a critical multiculturalist lens to the text will enable white readers in particular, but to some extent all readers, to take an introspective look at themselves and “shift the multicultural gaze from studying others to looking at the ways in which the dominant culture, in effect, *creates* the category of ‘other’” (Hyttén, Adkins 439). A traditional approach to teaching Douglass—whereby students are encouraged to pity his early life, root for his possible escape, and celebrate his freedom and marriage—makes sense; an autobiography written by a former slave inherently sets up predictable expectations for the teacher and the student, and reading the narrative through a traditional multiculturalist lens allows for these expectations to be met.

Bringing in modern-day examples of oppression can certainly aid students in evoking a feeling more than mere pity, but teaching non-canonical slave narratives in combination with modern-day examples of oppression can produce an even more efficacious result. By introducing students to lesser-taught, more obviously counter-hegemonic slave narratives, teachers can guide students into a new frame of thinking—

one that calls them to act. While Douglass' text tends to be the go-to nineteenth-century multiculturalist narrative, likely for its explicit depictions of the trauma faced by slaves, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* more actively resists hegemony through its use of direct address and pointedly sarcastic tone. Implementation of silences, the use of direct address, and the suggestion of communal agency are techniques commonly and egregiously downplayed in the reading and teaching of canonical slave narratives; shifting the emphasis from that of a pitiful Other to a close reading of strategic and purposefully placed rhetorical techniques challenges white supremacy by shifting the power away from the dominant culture and recognizing the agency of the oppressed.

Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: The Multiculturalist's Go-to Slave Narrative*

Explicitly calling his book a narrative, Douglass implies that he gives his reader the entirety of his experiences from his early days as a slave to his eventual escape and marriage. His prose, intentionally ornate, fancifully decorates his account as he strives to convince white readers of the horrific ills of slavery, and of his qualifications as a reporter and interpreter of them. Douglass' brutal depictions of what he witnessed as a child and what he experienced as a man are heart-wrenching. At the end of the first chapter, Douglass follows the traditional structure of a slave narrative by describing early on the first time he witnessed a slave being tortured. It happened to be his own Aunt Hester, who had recently disobeyed her master's orders by leaving the house: "After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook...He

commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood came dripping to the floor” (52). By including such a graphic scene in the first chapter of his book, Douglass makes it easy for the reader to perceive abuse of abject slaves, via this and similar scenes, as a central focus of the narrative. The dehumanization of slaves thus transports readers to a catastrophic period of American history. Unfortunately, it is these blatant examples of dehumanization that tend to dominate lessons in the classroom, resulting in missed opportunities to uncover the far more discreet messages that Douglass strategically plants throughout the text. Exposing students to the unimaginable behavior of some slaveholders is certainly achieved through the reading, but, in my tenure, getting beyond mere exposure to his demeaning life experiences has proven difficult. Because the conditions and behaviors are so far beyond any experience with which students can identify—something many have (unfortunately) been trained to establish when they read literature—and based on where most function as readers and thinkers, the emotional response to Douglass’ accounts is typically underdeveloped, or, at the very most, little more than *merely* an emotional response.

It could be supposed, then, that Douglass’ narrative is a staple in the multiculturalist curriculum because so many of the horrors that he describes seem nearly incomprehensible. Invoking a reader’s sympathy and, to some extent, even pity, safely brings minority literature into the classroom, with little perceived need to recognize parallels to, and thus to challenge, today’s hegemonic structural inequities. Readers are instead compelled to embrace and to individualize Douglass and the other victims about whom they learn. Of course, students in my classroom are not for whom Douglass originally intended his message, a fact that in itself deserves pause for classroom

discussion. In addition to considering the ramifications for today's realities of such older texts, students should be also encouraged to consider Douglass' intended audience, and his agenda, as an exercise in identifying and hitting one's contemporary target audience. For example, he describes his fascination with abolitionist magazines, yet there is limited call-to-action on the part of the reader. In fact, his mention of *The Liberator* appears only in the last few pages, and although he describes the abolitionist paper as food for his soul, he places no responsibility on his audience to push for change. He leaves the reader with, "From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren—with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide" (151). He allows his audience to rest content with determining the degree to which he has been successful in his fight for abolition, rather than participating actively via his text in the fight to end slavery. Again, though, Douglass *seems* to do and to encourage very little to threaten the dominant culture's position. In addition, the racism throughout the text is easily readable as individualized rather than systemic, with the wrongdoing belonging to a select group of morally deficient slave owners, traders, and breakers. Making these individual encounters the focal point of the lessons on Douglass' narrative excludes consideration of his strategic textual silences, a strategy that also deserves to be heard, in part because doing so can shift students from a distanced (that is, pitying) and individualizing (that is, context-free) conception of the oppressed Others in the text.

Douglass can be credited for deploying a distancing strategy that involves the use of silence as a way to even the playing field of power. When privileged readers read minority literature, they tend to seek readily accessible experiences foreign to their own.

Certain texts readily provide such access, giving a sense of satisfaction to the reader (and again, Douglass' text can be, and often is, read this way). But when a minority author deprives his readers of information about common identities and experience among the members of his group, the end result is often frustration rather than satisfaction. Frustrating readers in order to limit the power that they feel over a text may seem contradictory to a writer's fundamental goal of providing access to depicted experience. But, for certain minority authors, only when the reader acknowledges and appreciates this feeling of blocked angst can a more authentic reading experience take place. Despite the seemingly accessible nature of his narrative, Doris Sommer credits Douglass for his ability to deny "readerly" satisfaction by not giving away his entire story: "Is Frederick Douglass, for example, merely prudent when he refuses to tell secrets, or is he also provocative, counting on our curiosity to heighten the interest of his story and to increase the worth of the author who can resist demanding readers?" (166). Sommer points out that in addition to piquing the curiosity of the reader, silence can also be used as a form of agency for victims of trauma. By not revealing everything a victim has experienced, he can reclaim a piece of dignity stripped away by an oppressor; when victims give away all of their secrets to a cultural outsider, they continue to be powerless. In this way, silence becomes an active voice, bigger than mere secret keeping, and a way for the victim to make readers fear the silences will not break: "Anxiety happens when we miss the links between phrases, feel surprise at pieces of language that don't fit our world-picture, worry that the silences won't give up their secrets with time" (Sommer 171). Because they contribute *strategically* to readers' frustrations, Douglass' discreet silences deserve "writerly" attention and analysis.

At one point, Douglass criticizes the underground railroad, suggesting instead it be called “upperground,” vocally blaming liberal whites for their desire to be acknowledged and praised in their admittedly valiant efforts to help slaves escape: “I see and feel assured that those open declarations are a positive evil to the slaves remaining, who are seeking to escape. They do nothing towards enlightening the slave, whilst they do much towards enlightening the master” (138). Douglass’s discreet message to well-intentioned whites is hard hitting; as a former slave himself, making white abolitionists feel guilty for their efforts to help slaves takes guts. It is because of their own desire for public recognition that he chides them, laying on a heavy and often deserved dose of guilt and shame. Ego and arrogance, questionable qualities that he suggests are more often associated with the dominant culture than with the enslaved, work directly against the silences necessary to the health of the escaping slave, and, as a result, blatantly detract from the “do-gooders” intentions. Focusing on this portion of the text, as opposed to a more graphic one, can push privileged readers to question their own seemingly benevolent behavior toward African Americans, rather than simply sympathizing with the Other and his noble struggle for freedom. In addition, the passage empowers minority readers, giving them the agency to better recognize and to reject the hidden, self-aggrandizing agendas that often lie beneath veiled benevolence. At this point of the reading, students can be encouraged to think of scenarios, whether real or hypothetical, where either they themselves treated someone with superficial kindness in an effort to counter society’s depictions or stereotypes of a certain group (but also to pat themselves on the back for doing so), or whether they have been the recipients of such an unwarranted and likely unwelcomed metaphorical embrace.

Douglass shares with his readers the importance of silence and listening in other ways. Through close reading of passages highlighting these concepts, privileged readers can gain an understanding of and an appreciation for the honed skills slaves relied on for survival, and minority students can again be made aware of an advantage that they likely yet unknowingly hold over their white peers. Although Douglass stresses the importance of literacy, he knows that he cannot rely on rhetoric alone to achieve his freedom. He is also forced to sneak and to trick his way into literacy, using tactics unknown to free whites. Limited access to educational resources continues to be an issue dominating social justice conversations today,¹ and this barrier is another area of the book that could do more than rouse feelings of sympathy and falsely individualized conceptions of literary characters. Douglass writes,

When I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. (87)

Douglass secretly plays on the egos of the privileged boys and gains what he seeks in return. Without understanding and playing up to what motivates the young boys, his goal of improved literacy would be unachievable. Douglass makes it clear that in many ways, the oppressed person is forced to know more about the oppressor than the opposite, and

¹ See *The Center for the Study of Social Justice* at cssj.utk.edu

to remain effectively silent about such skills, and thus, through his cunning guise, he reaps life-changing benefits.

The biggest, most commonly frustrating silence in the text occurs immediately following Douglass's escape to freedom. He understands the likely frustration, and he explains the necessity for his omission when he writes, "It would afford me great pleasure indeed, as well as materially add to the interest of my narrative, were I at liberty to gratify a curiosity, which I know exists in the minds of many, by an accurate statement of all the facts pertaining to my most fortunate escape. But I must deprive myself of this pleasure..." (137). Unlike the benevolent workers helping slaves escape via the underground railroad, Douglass, who has more to gain and ultimately more to lose by not telling the details of his escape, discreetly implies his disdain for those who seek public praise for their liberal acts. Rather than simply omitting the details of his escape, he acknowledges the desire both his audience and he share in revealing his route to freedom, yet he forces himself to stay humble for the sake of his brothers. More than satisfying his audience's curiosity, Douglass even suggests that he would benefit financially were he to disclose a full account of his escape, through book sales. Readers can choose to recognize the purposefulness of such discretionary skills and to appreciate them and their apparent meanings for Douglass' text, or they can miss the intentional implementation of strategy and leave such a text with a dismissive air or a shallow understanding. Either way, the author achieves an emotional response from his reader. However, again, when teaching slaves narratives, is an emotional response, such as that commonly displayed by students horrified into pity by Douglass' depictions of slavery-induced trauma, really enough?

Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: An Alternative or Companion to Typically Taught Canonical Slave Narratives

Through the use of direct address, which in the African American tradition demands a response,² Harriet Jacobs masterfully succeeds in giving her readers a much more active role in fighting oppression. Additionally, her bold tone, achieved through the laughing at and imitation of her oppressors, invites readers to question more actively the systemic levels of slavery, rather than discounting racism as merely individualized acts of bigotry. Her text inspires activism rather than falsely achieved pity, and thus serves as a bigger threat to white supremacy, making it a less popular option among the teaching multiculturalists.

Writing during the years just prior to the Civil War, Jacobs directly addresses her intended audience multiple times throughout the text, often specifically referring to white women in the North. Her first use of the strategy comes after her description of the slave auctions held every New Year's Day:

O, you happy free women, contrast *your* New Year's day with that of the poor bond-woman! With you it is a pleasant season, and the light of the day is blessed. Friendly wishes meet you everywhere, and gifts are showered upon you...Children bring their little offerings, and raise their rosy lips for a caress. They are your own, and no hand but that of death can take them from you. (16)

² See Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*

She immediately juxtaposes this imagery with that of the slave mother on the same day, who suffers from not knowing with whom or to where her children will end up nor whether she will ever see them again. Students could be reminded at this point that Jacobs is writing for, and hoping to inspire, an abolitionist Northern audience, particularly women readers. Using the shared bond of motherhood, Jacobs metaphorically points her finger at this audience and vividly creates such a disturbing image in order to encourage white female readers to disrupt the status quo. She attempts to show white women that they, too, are oppressed by the patriarchal society in which they live, suggesting that a de-individualized sisterhood among all women be formed. As Jennifer Larson suggests, “Jacobs charges women to seek community instead of domesticity...letting women explore the self in a more liberated context and allowing them to form a more unified front against patriarchal power” (755). In a similar use of direct address, Jacobs juxtaposes the lives of two young girls: “One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister” (28). Her image continues with the girls laughing and hugging, and Jacobs describes her sadness in knowing what the slave girl’s future will entail simply because “she drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink” (28). Jacobs again addresses northerners after painting such a morbid scene, with its barely veiled depiction of the sexual abuse meted out to black girls and women by so many white men: “In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right? Would that I had more ability! But my heart is so full, and my pen is so weak!” (28). By acknowledging her lack of power and suggesting that her audience has the capacity to make significant changes on her behalf,

Jacobs enlists their agency and suggests that they are not only part of the problem, but also that, by remaining silent, they are actively contributing to the institution of slavery. Jacobs' pointed questioning continues throughout her story, and the ability of her readers to defend slavery does not get easier as she proceeds. In a refusal of biological justifications for race-based slavery, she asks,

What would *you* be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man *is* inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north.... (40)

There is no denying her blatantly counterhegemonic attitude here, as she forcefully calls out the evils of not only slave owners, but also of people in the North who do not actively fight to abolish the institution. Jacobs removes racism from the individual level and suggests the bigger, systemic problems, making her story's characters impossible to read as merely pathetic and embraceable on the one hand, and as individualized bigots on the other.

While Jacobs disdainfully views silence on the part of those in the empowered majority whom she believes should be advocating for abolition, she, like Douglass, also believes in the power of silence on the part of the oppressed. Indeed, by naming her text "incidents" in the life, readers are led to expect absences in her story. Many of her silences, as they come in the form of complete omissions, do not allow readers to uncover them in spite of their best efforts. According to Foreman, "Control of the word in male

narratives often clears the metaphysical space for the physical freedom. This is particularly true in Douglass” (319). Literacy, and more importantly, rhetoric, are the keys to freedom in Douglass’s narrative. Jacobs, however, repeatedly depicts herself *withholding* her own literacy, in order to gain power over her oppressor. When her master, Dr. Flint, writes letters to her describing his sexual desires, he expects her to write a favorable response. Instead, Linda Brent (her pseudonym in the book) tells him, “I can’t read them sir” (31). As Larson points out, “This subversion of power, again active agency disguised as passive, rejects the standard of submissiveness” (748). Jacobs/Brent may be forced into submissiveness to some degree, but she constantly acts, however discreetly, in successful efforts to take control. Another example of Brent’s resistance to her master involves her choosing a suitor of her own. Mr. Sands, a white man, becomes her lover by choice. In this manner, Brent successfully takes some of her master’s power away from him. In so doing, Brent has been likened to the title character in the African American folk poem, “The Signifying Monkey.” The monkey, who manages to con his predators through rhetoric, proves victorious at the end of the tale by ultimately achieving his own freedom. Brent “evokes a kind of trickster figure in that she, lacking power, uses cunning to outwit the master...she is signifying because, in a dramatic inversion of power, she *takes* the power to remove this purity away from Flint and *gives* it to herself” (Larson 749). Knowing that she cannot beat the system, Brent nevertheless repeatedly inverts it by disguising her active resistance as passivity, and thereby gains power over her oppressor.

In addition to direct address and silences, Jacobs’ sarcastic tone and rhetorical imitation of lower-class whites add a few moments of comic relief to her autobiography.

In her chapter entitled “Fear of Insurrection,” she describes an event where poor whites are given the opportunity to carry their muskets and search the houses of free blacks and the quarters of slaves. She writes that knowing “nothing annoyed them so much as to see colored people living in comfort and respectability, I made arrangements for them with especial care. I arranged every thing in my grandmother’s house as neatly as possible” (55). Her awareness of the white hierarchy provides insight into the backward thinking of lower-class whites, and she tries to make her readers grasp as well a remarkably sophisticated understanding of the construction of race relations in her time: “They exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders; not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation” (55-6). Her suggestion that lower-class whites, similar to white women, are oppressed in the same fashion as African Americans by an elite white male class makes her approach to the concept provocative. For a female slave to exploit an intertwined conception of race and class, inferring that lower-class whites are victims of the same system as she, herself challenges the ultimate goal of upper-class whites, which is to encourage disunion among all victims of oppression in order to keep division strong, and thus conquering easy.³ When the men come into her grandmother’s house, they find a trunk filled with bedding and tablecloths: “One exclaimed, ‘Where’d the damned niggers git all dis sheet an’ table clarf?’ My grandmother, emboldened by the presence of our white protector, said, ‘You may be sure we didn’t pilfer ‘em from *your* houses’” (57). Imitating the dialect of the soldiers and

³ For more on the divide-and-conquer strategies in terms of social class utilized by elite white men, see Theodore Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race*.

presenting them as less refined than supposedly inferior black people again challenges readers to question the biological argument for the continuation of slavery. Jacobs offers criticism of whites, both northern and southern, throughout the text, and while she repeatedly shows the flaws of both groups, she brings into focus the strength of the African American community in the South, which again serves as a bigger threat to white supremacy than it does in Douglass' readily isolating narrative.

Rarely do slave narratives give authority to the southern African American community, making Jacobs' distinctly unique. While Douglass is forced to rely on individuals to aide him in his escape from slavery, Jacobs highlights a solid, well-organized family unit with fierce determination and the ability to undermine its oppressors. As Anne Bradford Warner notes,

The traditional slave narrative focuses on the brutalization and victimization perpetrated upon the slave in a life relieved only by individual kindnesses—not by a systematic operation of folk values aimed at interpreting and responding to slavery. For Douglass and other slave narrators, the cultural folk practices may temporarily relieve or protect the hero, but the slave community is rarely presented as having order and agency. (Bradford Warner 35)

To make her depiction of black community even stronger, Jacobs depicts the Flint's home as a place filled with deception, betrayal, and unchecked rumor. Mrs. Flint, for example, learns about her husband's infidelity and interrogates Brent for answers. Brent's ability to interpret her mistress's response shows her keen insight: "She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for

the poor victim of her husband's perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed" (31). Brent's ability to *read* whiteness, particularly in the home of her master, and to keep silent about that ability while dealing with white people, results in a general portrait of their homes and families that contrasts with that of honest, organized, loving, and sophisticated African Americans.

Rather than merely reporting on the harsh and readily accessible experiences faced by slaves, Jacobs' active resistance to oppression through the presentation of a strong African American cultural force makes her text less popular in multiculturalist curricula. Her repeated suggestion of communal agency highlights and threatens white supremacy, thereby encouraging students to rethink what they have learned about slavery in other contexts. From familial to spiritual, Jacobs makes a strong case to suggest the deep-rooted cultural context of the southern slave. While Douglass focuses on the ways in which slave families are often torn apart, Jacobs chooses to focus on the unifying aspects of her community, proving to be more counterhegemonic than Douglass. Readers, then, are encouraged to evaluate the life of the slave within a context of community, challenging the idea of the individual, pitiful Other.

While Jacobs has been accused of writing in the genre of sentimental fiction, one could argue that her final sentence, "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage," discourages the inclusion of her text in such a genre (164). By refusing to end her narrative romantically, Jacobs resists expectations of the former female slave, suggesting that marriage restricts one's freedom. In this way, once again, Jacobs can be seen as more actively resisting her assigned roles in society than Douglass,

proving her narrative to be more threatening than that of a male slave narrative to white supremacist and patriarchal society. Her lover, Mr. Sands, ends up betraying her and her children in the end when he marries a white woman and fails to follow through on his promise to set her children free. While she continues to profess her love for her children, she has no interest in a man completing her family unit.

In contrast to Douglass' graphic images of slavery, Jacobs' depictions of everyday life can more easily be applied to the lives of students than that of Douglass, allowing them to become more engaged with her text than otherwise might be apparent. Through her varied strategies, Jacobs also proves to be more readily read as counterhegemonic than Douglass. Her use of direct address and sarcasm, along with her suggestion that all women and lower-class whites acknowledge their victimized status and join the fight to end varied forms of oppression, defies readers' expectations in groundbreaking ways. Jacobs' narrative discourages the embrace of anyone, oppressed or not, who does not take advantage of her ability to make changes in the hegemonic structure; this challenge makes her story lesser taught, and, unfortunately, allows for the continued apathy of students through the continued teaching of particular historical texts in an already-male-dominated curriculum. Although Douglass, a former slave who manages to find his way to freedom, does give students the opportunity to read historically from the eyes of the oppressed, Jacobs' gender adds a new level of terror to the white man's superior status, and is therefore less frequently included in multicultural curriculum. Giving students the opportunity to read her story would result in a more engaged student body with a newfound understanding of the importance of activism.

Teachers can use both texts to discourage students from merely embracing a pathetic, individualized Other. Uncovering silences, considering authors' use of direct address, and analyzing communal agency will challenge students to rethink the ways in which authors employ discreet strategies. Through the rethinking of victimization and stereotypes, readers will develop a new understanding of hegemony and its goals. Readers of the dominant culture can be led to acknowledge their whiteness, and minority readers can gain a new sense of power in a racialized identity too often cast in terms of pity. Interpreted in such ways through the lens of critical multiculturalism, slave narratives can be read as dynamic documents with the capacity to propagate change well into the 21st century.

Chapter 2: Teaching Harlem Renaissance Poetry, Take Two: Developing Critical Ears in the High School Classroom

Along with the authors of slave narratives, writers from the Harlem Renaissance era are typically the first African American artists with whom most students become acquainted. Langston Hughes, the most celebrated poet of the period, can be found in almost every high school English literature anthology. And, while repeated exposure to Hughes' work holds the potential to create ample awareness of issues common not only to African Americans in the 1920s and 30s, but also to related struggles that continue today, the limited selections offered by most teachers, combined with the severe lack of historical context, do nothing more than enforce the conception of racism as merely a regrettable phenomenon that occurs between black individuals victimized by white individuals. Teaching a poet like Hughes through a critical and historical lens can offer students a new perspective while engaging them with familiar poetry. Additionally, I suggest that bringing lesser-taught works to the curriculum will help to develop critical readers capable of locating and analyzing techniques used by both canonical writers and those more clearly counterhegemonic. The poetry of Sterling Brown, for example, often exposes white supremacy and systemic racism in ways that demonstrate the more collective threat that African Americans pose to the white supremacist societal structure. Brown, likely not a favorite among mainstream multiculturalists for his resistance to a cozy metaphorical embrace, tends to be omitted from high school classrooms. Teaching Hughes and Brown, extensively and side-by-side, can awaken students to historical and contemporary forms of oppression, resulting in a new awareness of their own identities and, ideally, a feeling of responsibility to act.

Contextualizing Langston Hughes' Poetry

According to a study of the ways in which white pre-service teachers negotiate their attitudes about race and privilege, Bree Picower found that in order to protect white supremacy, however subconsciously, her participants relied on three specific strategies. One of these “Ideological tools of Whiteness” allows for individuals to distance themselves from other, “overtly racist individuals such as members of the Klu Klux Klan,” a relational strategy of identity formation by which they “maintained their position of innocence of racism because *they* did not make racist comments, had never personally discriminated against anyone and ‘had never owned a slave’” (207). In effect, teaching students that they have the ability to control the extent to which racism affects their lives detracts from their understanding of the actual, systemic levels of racism and, perhaps more accurately, rampant white supremacy, that fundamentally cause inequity. For example, Hughes’ frequently taught poem “Ballad of the Landlord” can easily be read as merely an argument between an African American tenant and his white racist landlord followed by a sentencing by a white racist judge. Many students already believe racism exists only at an individual level; teaching the poem this way allows for students to convince themselves that the prejudiced attitude of people like the landlord and the judge, who historically discriminated against minorities before the Civil Rights movement, went out of style in the 1960s. Students and teachers, both white and non-white, when approaching Hughes in this limited way, tend to validate and to rationalize their ideas on race based on how their attitude compares to other individuals they know, rather than seeing racism as a systemic dilemma that both transcends and structures individual beliefs. Mainstream multiculturalist education, then, perpetuates racism by encouraging

the idea that it exists only at the level of the individual, and that white individuals can sidestep awareness of their own embeddedness in white supremacist ideology and its resultant hierarchies by distinguishing themselves at an individual level from atomized white racists.

While critical multiculturalism does advocate awareness of larger societal contexts and forces, making discussions of minority literature meaningful to students does involve an aspect of association and comprehension at the individual level. For example, effective educators encourage students to connect with the narrator, and in Hughes' poem it is likely students would find ways in which they have felt like they were owed something by someone in a position of authority—a teacher who gave them an unfair grade, a parent who refused to buy them something to which they believed they were entitled—but the bigger issues of the poem, and the rich historical context to which the issues connect, are often glossed over for the sake of keeping the classroom comfortable and harmonious. While identifying and empathizing with characters is important, identifying, discussing and ultimately understanding the systemic racism that Hughes satirizes in this poem gets students thinking about the injustices that minorities faced, then and today. When Hughes' tenant talks back to the landlord after he threatens to evict him, the landlord informs the police: "He's trying to ruin the government / And overturn the land!" (23-24). The irrational fear the landlord feels leads to his overreaction and distorted police report. In the next stanza, "Copper's whistle! Patrol bell! Arrest." (25-27), the reader should take note that there is no dialogue exchanged between the police officer and the tenant. The landlord's word trumps that of the tenant to such an extreme that no questions are asked to verify the landlord's outlandish claims.

Similarly, the poem's ending, which is the newspaper headline following the tenant's sentencing, reads: "MAN THREATENS LANDLORD / TENANT HELD NO BAIL / JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL" (31-33). Again, the dialogue ceases to be, and the tenant serves his three-month sentence. Additionally, the newspaper, traditionally viewed as an objective medium, emphasizes the institutionalized racism in effect. The literal silencing of the tenant, juxtaposed with the "factual" headline in all capitals, serves two purposes: it eases the minds of white Americans, convincing them that the law is working for them by keeping them safe from black criminals; it also serves as a stern warning to African Americans by suggesting the likely outcome if they try to speak up about similar injustices. Reading into Hughes' silences here by questioning the objectivity of the news media with students does mean running the risk of a discussion based in ambiguity and feelings of discomfort, but it is a risk worth taking in pursuit of broader insight into hegemonic forces impinging on the lives of African Americans.

Bringing contemporary issues to the classroom, while keeping the focus on tenants and landowners, as well as a historical look at the rapid decline of Post-Civil War African American property owners, particularly those in southern rural areas, can aide class discussions about how discreet and seemingly fair laws actually enable white supremacy to thrive. Additionally, students can make connections between what land ownership does for families of all races:

Social science studies demonstrate that in African American communities, landownership promotes community well-being. Landownership has been correlated with increased civic participation, psychological well-being,

and an enhanced sense of community...land can provide a physical base
for groups trying to improve their collective lot. (Mitchell 36)

By becoming aware of the relationship between owning land and being part of a strong community, students are uncovering a silence purposefully maintained by the dominant culture, and they can then begin to question other, lesser-known forms of oppression. Several of my students have already been introduced to the court system by the time they are teenagers, providing them with a much clearer connection to the continued, systemic racism in the judicial system than is usually the case for many white students. But others, thanks in no small part to their white privilege, are completely untouched by the justice system and will likely remain that way forever. Making a real-world connection that transcends themselves allows students to see racist disparities on a grand scale, and it encourages them to think about how institutionalized racism seeps into other systems of government.

One of Hughes' most commonly taught poems, "A Dream Deferred," can be found in many middle-school curricula, and it is typically celebrated not for its depiction of minority frustration and rage over entrenched systemic oppression, but rather for its seemingly resilient attitude on the part of the oppressed:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Young readers, such as those in middle school, can take from this poem a directive to remain determined in the face of adversity—to never let anyone stand in the way of their dreams, knowing the metaphorically graphic outcome. But by taking a critical and historical approach to Hughes’ apparently benign message, older readers are more capable of exposing the subdued significance of his word choice, along with his angry and eventually threatening tone. As Gohar explains, Hughes’ poem depicts how

The black American is cut off from his African roots to be abandoned in the American wilderness where he rots and fades like a raisin lying neglected in the scorching sun. The allusion to rotten meat is a signifier of black lynching in the American South where black bodies are left on the trees to rot. The reference to the spoiled candy symbolizes the false promises of assimilation and equality given by the white society to blacks to keep them submissive. The emphasis on the deferred dream motif is an indication of the institutional limitations to black ambitions...The deferred dream motif by the end of the poem gives way to a threatening note which indicates that blacks who have been dehumanized in America may explode.
(Gohar 21)

In order to promote appreciation of these more somber allusions, teachers can have students conduct research into lynching and other forms of Jim Crow-era oppression; playing for them and discussing Billie Holiday’s powerfully affecting rendition of “Strange Fruit” (1939), and showing them the many postcards available online that depict

large crowds of white people reveling in the picnic-like atmosphere of lynchings, can also help. After uncovering Hughes' silences, through close reading and analysis, and having been encouraged to grapple with a thorough historical context in which to place the poem, high school students—the majority of whom have read Hughes' poem multiple times in earlier grades—would gain a new appreciation and understanding for a writer whose works had previously been presented to them as more palatable and easily digestible affirmations of individualized pluckiness in the face of individualized bigotry than as a poetry that indicts the systemic nature of white supremacy. In other poems, Hughes demonstrates his agreement with W. E. B. Du Bois' understanding that African Americans are forced to live with a double-consciousness. As an emerging African American artist in an urban setting, Hughes demonstrated Du Bois' philosophy that “the African American is both seen as the other by white Americans and is forced to see one's self from the outside perspective of the white American...the paradox is the conflicting pull between assimilation with ‘white’ values and culture and identifying with and embracing the masses of his race” (Brox 17). Hughes' genius as a satirist shines in certain poems when he not only acknowledges the existence of this double-consciousness, but also refuses to make his characters choose one side or the other, thus problematizing the text for readers who bring certain expectations to it based on the author's race:

Authors who are relegated to the role only of authentic informers of a given identity-group are like characters who are not allowed to be round and alive. The readers/critics who try to control their actions will not let them step over their agreed characteristics, either ignoring whatever does

not fit their definitions or trying to relate it to their personas in a forced way. (Sanchez-Arce 143)

Hughes' characters, often capable of transcending choice, can stimulate a classroom conversation about reader expectations, dichotomous connotations of black and white, and the ways in which minority authors are forced to navigate responsibilities to their audience.

A typically canonized Hughes poem of this sort depicts a young African American college student assigned the task of writing an essay that defines him. "Theme for English B" clearly displays the double-consciousness felt by the poem's narrator. However, because of its seemingly embraceable vibe, the text's underlying grit can easily be smoothed over, making it a favorite for multicultural curricula. Celebrating differences while focusing on universalities creates an overly peaceful picture of minority experience. Perpetuating the romantic vision of Post-Reconstruction America through the lens of mainstream multiculturalism, the poem reads as a uniting one: "Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love. / I like to work, read, learn, and understand life" (21-22). While these lines, with their casual tone and lists of traits common to all, appear to be warm and fuzzy ones, connecting humans through innate wants and needs, one could argue that Hughes is actually going out of his way to satirize the professor's assignment through the student's *trite* response. Of course the student likes to do those things, and of course liberal white readers like to assure themselves that they can relate to the young, urban African American college student. However, the poem can also be read as a more searing depiction of a minority student struggling with his double-consciousness than as a universalist depiction of common activities, and thus as a subtle attack on his professor's

privileged ease in transcending the concept because of his race. As Brox points out, “The student poses the possibility that to be American, white or black, is to possess a double-consciousness. But by the end of the poem, the student recognizes the instructor’s ability to escape a double-conscious existence because he is white and ‘somewhat more free’” (19). The student directly addresses the instructor, suggesting that they are each a part of the other, but goes on to suggest: “Sometimes perhaps you don’t want to be a part of me. / Nor do I often want to be a part of you” (34-35). The previous feelings of embraceability and universality are now replaced with a push, suggesting—shockingly—that although he is forced to be a part of his instructor, he is not always happy about it. The student’s awareness of his double-consciousness, and his inability to escape it, does not keep him from exposing and resisting the forces that bring it about. Hughes forces readers to question their own identities through his direct address to the instructor when he tells him, “You are white - ” (31). He reminds his instructor of his whiteness a second time, just before the close of the poem. These reminders force a scrutiny of whiteness and its ability to go unnoticed, especially by whites themselves, as well as of the differences, rather than similarities, in racialized identities brought about by an overarching white supremacist context.

While challenging, a critical whiteness studies approach could serve as a tool of reengagement for today’s student population on topics like oppression and racism. “Theme for English B” holds the potential to start that conversation. According to critical whiteness theorists, “When whiteness remains invisible, all of our efforts to support the achievement of minority students are focused on what we can do ‘for them’ and we ignore what we, as white teachers, need to do ourselves” (Hyttten/Atkins 436).

When white students begin to realize that they benefit from unearned privileges solely because of their race, they benefit from a new—and perhaps disorienting—awareness of themselves; in addition, the typically more enlightened, though sometimes hazy, recognition of white privilege on the part of minority students can be further sharpened. Hytten and Atkins demand that whiteness “be studied, named, and marked so as to uproot it from its position of normativity and centrality. Only then can we conceptualize diversity in ways that are not assimilationist or merely additive, but instead aim to dismantle social practices and structures that perpetuate white privilege and white racism” (439). Again, seemingly benign poems with a message of universality, like the above ones by Hughes, can provide new complexities, awareness and understandings when viewed through a critical lens. Hughes’ poems are likely canonized because they deliver aesthetic value within a seemingly embraceable racial context. Students, with the help of their teachers, should be encouraged to revisit the same canonical pieces in an attempt to discover the silences beneath their surfaces. While expanding the selections typically offered can provide a bigger picture of the social issues that Hughes tackled, a heavily front-loaded historical context combined with a critical lens can aid students in grasping such large, systemic concepts as oppression, racism, assimilation, and double-consciousness.

Revealing Authorial Strategies in the Resistant Poetry of Sterling Brown

In addition to revisiting frequently taught canonical texts, adding lesser-known writers to the curriculum can serve as a way to enhance the pedagogical argument that canonical texts have in fact been chosen for the way white supremacy can be downplayed

in them. Sterling Brown, one of very few contemporaries of Hughes, fits the criterion of a poet whose resistance cannot be glossed over easily. Brown's visible resistance makes his poetry much less popular in multicultural education, and thus makes teaching his work an excellent approach to reengaging apathetic students. Brown, who also shared Du Bois' understanding of double-consciousness, advocated for the oppressed masses and took workers seriously. Although somewhat privileged himself, (his father being friends with Frederick Douglass) Brown refused multiple job offers at elite universities and attempted to depict life's harsh realities—particularly of African Americans in the South. In contrast to Hughes' depictions of forward-thinking progress of life for the urban African American in the North, Brown's poetry provides disturbing imagery that restricts the reader's ability to downplay the damaging effects of a hegemonic society. Brown's work does acknowledge the need to move forward, but it refuses to do so at the expense of dismissing the roots of folklore, arguing that untrained artists are just as valuable as their elite contemporaries. Brown's heavily weighted spirituals, purposeful southern settings, and the use of the vernacular, combined with his commentary on themes like endurance, tragedy, and the pursuit of freedom, could be reasons for the absence of his poetry from most school curricula.

Poems like "Strong Men," for example, immediately challenge the hegemonic societal structure, pointedly making any readers belonging to the dominant culture the enemy of the oppressed. The poem chronicles, through a graphic account, how the horrific dehumanization of slaves, followed by the constant promises and betrayals by whites to free blacks, has not only failed in breaking African Americans' determination to overcome, but also contributed to its intensity. By making white society the "they" in the

poem, Brown transfers the Otherness away from African Americans. Through the repetition of cruel verbs following each of the “Theys” in the first stanza, it becomes impossible to deny the poem’s counterhegemonic tone: “They dragged you from homeland / They chained you in coffles / They huddled you spoon-fashion in filthy hatches / They sold you to give a few gentlemen ease” (1-4). Since it is impossible to dismiss the racial tension—created entirely by the brutality of slave traders—Brown’s poem not only counters hegemony, but also the multiculturalist’s celebration of diversity, particularly the promotion of falsely individualized and universalized embrace. Satirically using the word *gentlemen* in the same stanza that depicts the horrific dehumanizing images, Brown again refuses to let the reader dismiss his strong resistance to white desires for universality. Interwoven into the poem’s descriptions of the ways African Americans have been victimized by whites is the recurring line, “You sang:” followed by vernacular refrains of endurance. The first refrain connotes determination for the sake of survival: “You sang: / Keep a-inchin’ along / Lak a po’ inch worm...” (12-13). As the poem continues, so does the singing, but the refrains build on each other and the image of the lonely inch-worm changes significantly: “You sang: / Me an’ muh baby gonna shine, shine / Me an’ muh baby gonna shine” (36-38). At this point in the poem, the inch-by-inch lonely struggle, posing little threat to the oppressor, is replaced by a celebratory tone and companionship, suddenly posing a significant threat, and reinforcing a unified resistance by the insistent direct address of the second-person pronoun. Continuing to build on the resistance to hegemonic influence, Brown increases the rhetoric when he adds the chant-like lines, “*The strong men keep a-comin’ on / The strong me git stronger...*” (39-40). Brown knows he is making his white readers

uncomfortable as the poem continues. When he goes so far as to depict the oppressed man repeatedly laughing—repeatedly laughing directly in the face of discrimination—the discomfort cannot be ignored: “Today they shout prohibition at you / ‘Thou shalt not this’ / ‘Thou shalt not that’ / ‘Reserved for whites only’ / You laugh” (57-61). According to Michael Chasar, “black laughter could go where the physical black body in many cases could not and thus could uniquely challenge white control of public space while also mapping or territorializing that space as a field for further political action” (58). Brown evokes whites’ terror of the subconscious through the sounds of black laughter, forcing the dominant race to acknowledge itself as the enemy.

While Hughes also uses laughter in his poetry, “it is comparatively veiled, and one can read these poems, as some people have, as general commentaries on the human condition rather than sorties in an ongoing struggle for social and political justice” (Chasar 73). It is far more difficult to categorize or dismiss Brown’s use of laughter as joyous or childlike, something white scholars immediately attempted to do at the emergence of poetic depictions of African American laughter:

Well into the twentieth century, scholars and laughter ‘theorists’ took great pains to show either that black laughter was different from white laughter by virtue of its childishness and innocence or that laughter itself had behavioral or physiological roots in Africa and was thus a primitive, immature, or uncivilized element in the Western world. (Chasar 63)

Attempting to categorize black laughter coincides with the dominant culture’s concern for maintaining hegemonic structures. Brown does not allow for the downplaying of white supremacy, however, and to label the laugh in “Strong Men” as anything but

threatening is nearly impossible. Similar to Hughes' use of all capitals at the end of his "Ballad of the Landlord," Brown concludes his poem: "Strong men.../ STRONGER..." (65-66). Unlike Hughes, whose warning was in part serving as a reminder for African Americans to keep silent about the ways in which they are oppressed, Brown's poem ends with a warning to the oppressors. White readers are clearly meant to feel uneasy at the close of the poem—a poem that forcefully resists any kind of embrace or celebration of diversity—and thereby serves as an example of poetry for a more critical multicultural education than that often practiced in the classroom.

"Slim Greer," another of Brown's poems, tells the story of an African American man who successfully "passes" for white until he sits down at the piano. He is then outted only by his ability to make sounds on the instrument that his white audience is incapable of making, suggesting that "In Brown's poetry, this sound is social and racially inflected and that black bodies making sounds are identified by white culture through the type of noise they produce" (Chasar 66). Brown's poetry itself, according to Chasar, is noisy—which could be the reason for its lack of a presence in the high school classroom. Black noise has the ability to invade white public space, thereby threatening the status quo. Brown disrupts the separation between black and white space through an intangible force that cannot be caught or disciplined.

Another of Brown's poems, "Southern Cop," also demonstrates a strong resistance to hegemonic society, and it does so by depicting an archetypal black-white encounter that resonates powerfully with such real-world encounters in our era. The poem sarcastically suggests that readers sympathize with a police officer who has shot and killed an African American male. The tone of the poem registers clearly in the first

few lines: “Let us forgive Ty Kendricks / The place was Darktown. He was young. / His nerves were jittery. The day was hot. / The Negro ran out of the alley. / And so Ty shot” (1-5). Youth, nerves, and high temperatures function, from a hegemonic perspective, as legitimate reasons not only for shooting and killing someone, but also as reasons to empathize with the officer. At the poem’s end, when Brown suggests the shooter deserves pity, the extent of absurdity is revealed: “Let us pity Ty Kendricks / He has been through enough / Standing there, his big gun smoking / Rabbit-scared, alone / Having to hear the wenchies wail / And the dying Negro moan” (17-22). It is again impossible to downplay the white supremacy that Brown exposes. The imagery that he creates cannot be ignored or misinterpreted. The poem also serves to demonstrate the ongoing effects of systemic racism in the justice system, and teachers of the poem can readily heighten student awareness of Brown’s sharply satiric point by asking for parallels in contemporary times (prompting them with names like Oscar Grant, Amadou Diallo and Trayvon Martin can also help).

Only a few years ago, the same scenario took place in my own community, resulting in the death of one of my school’s students. The fifteen-year-old sophomore was confronted by police after a neighbor noticed him apparently trying to break into a nearby house. The student, after refusing the officer’s request to get down on the ground, was approached by one of the officers with his weapon drawn. According to the officer, his gun fired accidentally, resulting in the teenager’s death. The animosity my students, African American and others, felt toward the city’s police department was tangible for the next several weeks. Even if my students were barely acquainted with the victim, this tragedy proved to be a monumentally binding one in which the majority of the school’s

student body—regardless of race—united as one intimidating force. Reading “Southern Cop” with students reminds them that nearly a century later, racism—and the ways in which power plays into it—continues to be undeniable. May suggests the importance of including the scrutiny of power structures alongside that of racism when he writes, “We need to incorporate a recognition of power relations in the process of ethnic ascription, since it is clear that when it comes to ethnicity—or any other identity for that matter—some have more choices than others” (27). May later points out, referring to multicultural education, “Educational reforms do not generally challenge fundamental power relations; social movements do” (115). Articulating with students the understanding that racism and power are inextricably bound challenges them to move their thinking from individual to institutional levels.

Unfortunately, the traditional approach to teaching African American poetry from this era has done little to challenge the minds of students, or the roles that they play in society. Instead, most poems, selected for their seemingly embraceable tone, are boiled down to a basic level, and lessons typically end with a cliché or simple theme that completely ignores important messages unable to be heard after only a superficial reading. Teaching Harlem Renaissance poetry through a critical multicultural lens will allow students to reconsider what they think they *know* about racism, oppression, and white supremacy. The urge to embrace or pity the Other will be replaced by an acknowledgement that whiteness is constructed, and that minorities have powerfully resistant and active modes of agency. As they come to grasp these concepts, students can more actively engage in conversations about today’s systemic forms of white

supremacy, and encourage and even partake in principled activism, rather than in individualized, falsely universalized, and, ultimately, belittling sympathy.

Chapter 3: Silence and Counterhegemonic Agency in Late-20th Century African-American Drama

As the chronological study of American literature progresses throughout the school year, canonical texts typically become more accessible to students than those written in earlier periods; since students are closer to the historical context in which much of the literature is placed, and as the language begins to read more like that which they speak, the last few months of the school year lend themselves more to combining in-depth analyses of texts with conversations about today's political, racial, and socio-economic environments than those studied earlier in the year. Taking advantage of the benefits that familiar recent historical events and common language provide can make it easier to uncover and to give voice to strategically placed authorial silences, particularly those in minority literature. In regards to the study of drama, while students can learn about standard silencing strategies used by all playwrights, such as asides and soliloquies, they can also be led to hear more discreet silences-within-silences employed by certain African American playwrights, and understood only by certain especially attentive and culturally informed audience members. August Wilson's 1986 award winning play *Fences* is often taught in high schools, likely for what amounts to an ostensibly stereotypical depiction of protagonist Troy Maxson, a bitter African American man who appears to be working against his children's dreams out of spite. However, this play can also be appreciated for presenting a critical gaze on whiteness, rather than a mere focus on what it means to be the racialized Other. Additionally, adding a lesser-taught work to the curriculum, Amiri Baraka's 1964 play, *Dutchman*, can offer students a more daunting example of the challenge of comprehending a complex, socio-historically situated black

male psyche—a skill some believe they have mastered all too easily after reading about Troy. Looking at the two plays' use of silences, both in relation and in contrast to the use of language and action, can push students to reconsider what they think they *know* about “the angry black man” archetype and encourage them as well to resist, and eventually to avoid, oversimplifying the characters that they meet in various kinds of narratives, as well as similar people in daily life. More broadly, they can gain awareness and understanding of the white supremacist forces that even today impinge upon and shape black men, even those who live in conscious, active resistance to it.

August Wilson's *Fences*: Keeping Hegemony on the Other Side

Set in 1957, *Fences* presents Troy Maxson, a 53-year-old garbage collector who has already given up on the possibility of radical change that most people around him are just beginning to feel. On the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement, Troy lacks the optimistic enthusiasm evinced by his wife and two sons. Because of his blatant and constant cynicism, too often, by the play's end, students view Troy as a one-dimensional, backward-thinking, resentful soul for whom they have no sympathy. Troy chides his older son Lyons for wanting to be a musician, goes out of his way to make sure his younger son Cory will never have a career as an athlete, and betrays his wife Rose when he has an affair and impregnates another woman. Focusing in an individualizing, mainstream multiculturalist mode only on Troy's language and actions allows students to easily typecast him as the sole source of blame for all of his family's hardships. However, shifting the focus away from what is literally said and done, to the countless ways Troy addresses the ongoing double-consciousness of being both African American and just

American, silences can be heard throughout the play that do not result in feelings of pity or empathy for Troy, but rather evoke awareness of a *grounded* aggression toward white society and a *valid* resistance to belief in the proposed African American opportunities many claim to be on the horizon.

At the beginning of the play, Troy and his best friend Bono sit on his porch engaged in conversation about their work as garbage collectors. Troy is agitated because only the white men are allowed to drive the trucks, while the black men do the lifting. He tells Bono that he has filed a complaint with his boss, and they discuss the possible outcomes of such an action. From the play's opening, Troy strikes many as a big-mouthed troublemaker; his truculent words and actions are immediately showcased as possible threats to his happiness. Act I continues with accounts of his drunken battles with Death, his baseball analogies, and sweet talk for Rose. However, while his literal speech may stand out to audience members and students, analyzing his use of figurative language can provide a better understanding of Wilson's deeper intentions with this protagonist. For example, Troy constantly references baseball—he warns his son not to strike out, he claims Death “ain't nothing but a fast ball on the outside corner” (10), and he refers to the chances that he takes in life as “stealing bases.” While little more than an annoyance to his wife, Troy's baseball metaphors actually serve as counterhegemonic strategies purposefully placed to construct a vision of America less hopeful, and thus more realistic, than the one the other characters claim to see. Rather than merely reading Troy as unreasonably pessimistic, which could encourage the always-marching-forward sense of American progress that students too often have, analyzing his metaphorical speech and the informed attitude that such language reveals shifts the critical reader's

dislike away from Troy and toward the dominant white culture that Troy admirably resists. As Susan Koprince writes, “Wilson contradicts the idea of America as a ‘field of dreams,’ using baseball instead as a metaphor for heroic defiance” (349). Troy, resentful for not making it as a professional baseball player in the major leagues, is constantly told by other characters that he “just come along too early” (9). Approaching the text with a critical multiculturalist lens, the problem no longer belongs to Troy for being born too early, but to society for opening its doors too late. The American Dream, seemingly available to everyone, proves instead to be elusive, racist, and to some extent, elitist. When teachers work with students to recast Troy in such terms (terms embedded for careful audience members by Wilson), those who believe in the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps philosophy are forced not only to come to terms with the impossibility of doing so, especially for most people of African descent, and particularly during the time in which the play is set, but also to continued forms of oppression today. Troy’s metaphorical speech thus holds the potential to disclose subtle and ongoing forms of racism, oppression, and white supremacy.

Troy rightfully resents not only the imposing restrictions placed on him during his prime years as an amateur player, but also the success of Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in the major leagues. While readers may assume Troy should be happy for Robinson, his scorn for the iconic, and notably less talented player can be decoded to demonstrate his resistance to embraceability. Robinson, and, one could argue, Rosa Parks a decade later, were chosen for leadership roles because of their likeability. Troy, unlike the others who surround him, knows this: “Unlike Robinson, Troy is no model citizen, and as an actual person, he would surely have increased tensions in the

racially charged environment of the 1930s and 40s” (Koprince 351). Troy’s confrontational attitude, first presented in the opening scene of the play, kept him out of the major leagues, despite his being a better ball player than Robinson. Troy sees, then, the silenced racism underlying white America’s supposedly non-racist embrace of Robinson. In sum, Wilson deftly uses the metaphor of baseball, that all-American sport, to show the broken, hypocritical promises of the American dream.

Through Troy’s inaction—especially his repeated promises but lack of effort in the building of a fence in his yard—Wilson discreetly voices Troy’s resistance to hegemony. Unlike the walled and neatly manicured baseball field, Troy’s unfenced yard is littered with scraps of lumber, and a ball of rags that he uses for batting practice hangs from a tree branch. The disillusionment of the dream for Troy manifests itself in the juxtaposed imagery that Wilson depicts. And although his son Cory has an opportunity to play college football, Troy’s repeated protests can also be read beyond the superficial conception of them as more evidence that he is a backward-looking and unreasonably embittered black male victim. His warnings to his son, perhaps influenced by the accommodationist philosophy of Booker T. Washington, show his distrust of, and obedience to, white society: “The white man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football no way... You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade” (35). Initially, Troy’s animosity toward his son is likely to be perceived as him selfishly keeping his son from finding the successes that he was denied. However, Troy’s hidden agenda, to protect his son from the promises that his keen awareness allows him to know will very likely be denied eventually, allows the reader to see Troy as his son’s

metaphorical fence, as a protector—the one keeping him from ultimately experiencing the same rejection that Troy faced years earlier.

Exposing students to Wilson's strategic silences can help them begin to understand and perhaps even appreciate Troy's decisions to keep his son from feeling not only the betrayal and heartbreak that he's certain Cory will face, but also, more importantly, the aggression that Troy now has toward white society in general. Troy's adamant stance on his son's future plans should not be read merely as feelings of envy and selfishness—which is an easy way for teenagers to view the restrictive father. By placing solid historical context within their grasp, and focusing on the less predictable and even contradictory reading of Troy, who fights for a promotion at work while restricting his own son from pursuing forward progress, students can analyze him from the perspective of a man trapped in “a variety of imaginary or real terrains, such as geographical, ideological/cultural, social, political, psychological, domestic, and so on” (Pirnajmuddin, Teymoortash 44). Understanding the spaces that Troy is forced to navigate requires deeper and more thoughtful responses to Troy's characterization. In his fight to find his identity and do what seems right for his family, he faces multiple struggles while embodying conflicting dualities. According to Amiri Baraka, Wilson's characters from several plays, including *Fences*, are “forced to confront the consequences of a double historical trauma: the brutalities of the Southern heritage and the injustice and inequalities of the North as they struggle to make a home for themselves, to achieve an identity, and to lead free and dignified lives in their new environment” (qtd. in Crow and Banfield 45). When presented with this idea of contextually inflicted dualities constantly demanding navigation, students can better understand the impact of historical events on

men like Troy Maxson, and thus more broadly on African American people, culture, and aesthetics.

Fascinatingly enough, reversing the gaze from the oppressed to the oppressor does not occur through the *victimization* of Troy. Instead, Wilson presents Troy as heroic, despite major flaws; the play, which ends with Troy swinging his baseball bat at a ball of rags tied to his backyard tree, amplifies what Wilson refers to as Troy's "warrior spirit." "Going out swinging," while technically an action, can also be read as a strategically placed silence. As a result of his bold statements and immoral acts, Troy has by the play's end ruined relationships with his best friend, his children, and his wife. He is lonely at work, after getting the promotion he fought so hard to get, and lonely at home, where his wife ignores him, if she is not attending church functions. Since he is seemingly defeated, the details of Troy's death are not exactly unexpected. Not only does he die while swinging for the fences, but Rose later tells her son, "Seem like he swung it and stood there with this grin on his face...and then he just fell over" (96). Again, this grin could be read as a resigned smile of satisfaction, brought on by Troy's realization that Death has come for him and he has accepted his fate, but a more critical interpretation suggests that Troy's behavior further illustrates the spirit of the warrior—one who should continue to be feared as a force—even after his death. "Wilson demonstrates that the national pastime has been stained by racism, that the Edenic promise of America is illusory, and that the traditional mythology of baseball must ultimately make room for a new and revolutionary mythos: that of the defiant African American warrior" (Koprince 357). As the family gathers for Troy's funeral, students should be reminded of Troy's incredibly insightful vision of the future. The reader learns

that Cory, the first to arrive, has joined the military and had to request a leave in order to be there. Lyons, Troy's older son, shows up next on a day pass from prison where he has been serving time for cashing other people's checks. Finally, Troy's brother Gabriel arrives after being granted permission to leave the mental institution to which he has been committed. The same brother is only hospitalized because half of his head was blown off in a war—a fact that continually troubled Troy, who now has a son in the military. Wilson's subtle strategy of having all three men's freedom limited, and at the mercy of some form of oppression, additionally pushes readers to rethink what they *know* about Troy Maxson, and about the half-fulfilled promises of what became the Civil Rights Movement. Troy is often deemed an abusive and self-sabotaging monster by most students when presented as the archetypal "angry black man," However, Wilson's dramatic silences allow for a much richer and humanizing read of a complex, understandably contradictory, and ultimately heroic man, when read through a critical lens with explanatory historical context.

Discovering Identities in Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*

Amiri Baraka's 1964 play, *Dutchman*, presents a black male protagonist facing a similar struggle with his racialized double-consciousness. The biggest difference between Baraka and Wilson, though, is the out-loud approach that Baraka takes to expressing his blatant and utter disregard for white supremacy. Due in large part to the intensely counterhegemonic tone, Baraka's play seldom finds its way to high school classrooms, and understandably so, as it confronts white supremacy much more forcefully than does a play like *Fences*. *Dutchman*'s setting, a moving subway train,

suggests forward motion. But by also setting his play underground, Baraka suggests a secret, “underground” revolution is on the way, and that white America should fear it:

Convinced that a revolution, not a gradual transformation, was needed in the United States, Jones founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem, from which he excluded white audiences. *Dutchman* had already been staged to considerable acclaim at the Cherry Lane Theater, a predominantly white theater in New York, but when it was done at the Black Arts Repertory Theater—that is, when it was done for an all-black audience—it seemed to take on a new, revolutionary meaning, more dangerous in the white view, more liberating in the black. (Barnet 629)

Dutchman more aggressively disrupts the mainstream multiculturalists’ ambitions to present an embraceable Other that seeks acquiescence and befriending of its oppressor than does Wilson’s play. In so doing, the play jeopardizes a self-serving, white-constructed harmony and unleashes a more accurately representative sound of embattled and frustrated black racial dissonance than Troy Maxson’s metaphors permit.

Baraka’s play focuses on only two characters: a twenty-year-old, middle-class, African American man named Clay, and a thirty-year-old white woman named Lula. When the play opens, Clay is alone on a subway train reading a magazine. Shortly after, the seductive Lula joins him in the same car and begins to tease him with her aggressive body language and fetish for apple eating. While Clay succeeds in resisting the temptress’ initial advances, the Eve-like Lula eventually lures him into her trap by creating a detailed fantasy. As they continue to flirt, Lula repeatedly forces Clay to consider his own identity and manhood, and she claims to have already figured him out: “You look

like you live in New Jersey with your parents and are trying to grow a beard. That's what. You look like you've been reading Chinese poetry and drinking lukewarm sugarless tea" (621). At one point, the details that she gives him become so convincing that Clay assumes they must have a mutual friend in common. The game continues and the conversation becomes more suggestive until several passengers join them on the train. Suddenly, just as their fantasy is about to be completed, Lula's flirtation loses all pretense to innocence, and she quickly becomes accusatory, calling Clay a series of racist names.

Lula begins throwing objects from her bag down the aisle of the train as she rants in a lengthy speech about change: "Change change change. Till, shit, I don't know you" (625). Lula's angst regarding change suggests that like the rest of white America, she fears black social and political agitation as a threat to her elevated status, and to her ability to "know" black men as a predictable and false type. In 1964, a period of radical change, aggressive resistance must ensue for the privileged Lula to retain her spot at the top of the social hierarchy. From this point forward, Lula's attitude toward Clay becomes downright abusive. She calls him an "escaped nigger" (625) before standing up and demanding that he join her: "Come on, Clay. Let's rub bellies on the train. The nasty. The nasty. Do the gritty grind, like your ol' rag-head mammy" (625). Clay repeatedly tries to convince Lula to sit down, but his efforts are unsuccessful. Lula finally breaks Clay's ability to be rational when she yells, "Clay. Clay, you got to break out. Don't sit there dying the way they want you to die. Get up" (626). The next line is Clay speaking: "Oh, sit the fuck down. Sit down, goddamn it" (626). After a physical struggle, Clay gets her to sit down and it is now he who does nearly all the talking until the play's end. Clay's dialect becomes more vernacular, and his language becomes more pointed as he

reveals the truer version of himself that acts the part of a black man who is allowed some degree of success because he acquiesces to white demands and conceptions:

Don't you tell me anything! If I'm a middle-class fake white man...let me be. And let me be in the way I want. I'll rip your lousy breasts off! Let me be who I feel like being...You don't know anything except what's there for you to see. An act. Lies. Device. Not the pure heart, the pumping black heart. You don't ever know that. And I sit here, in this buttoned-up suit, to keep myself from cutting all your throats...You great liberated whore! You fuck some black man, and right away you're an expert on black people. What a lotta shit that is. (627)

He continues on at length, telling Lula and the other passengers that murdering white people is all it would take to make black people sane. He has become a threatening force, denouncing white culture and suggesting that no white person has ever *truly* known a person of color. After his speech is complete, he condescendingly and insincerely apologizes to Lula and assumes their encounter has come to a close. Lula, however, has other plans and stabs Clay in the chest with a knife that she pulls out of her bag. She orders the other passengers to remove Clay's corpse and tells them to get off at the next stop. The play ends with Lula composing herself before another twenty-something African American man with a few books under his arm boards the train. She begins eyeing him, suggesting that the ghastly cycle is about to repeat.

Dutchman, while filled with discreet, strategically placed silences, definitely does not resemble the veiled resistance to hegemony presented in *Fences*. Once Clay takes off his own veil, his speech cannot be read as anything but overtly, openly resistant to white

power and abuse, and the play's ending, with a multi-page monologue threatening murder to all white people, certainly suggests that neither Clay nor Baraka are interested in any kind of cross-racial embrace. The play should be credited, though, for doing more than simply blaming white society for centuries of slavery and oppression. According to Nita N. Kumar, *Dutchman* is "an attempt to dislodge the received opposition between various binary categories such as aesthetic/politics, black/white, individual/community, mask/face, and Europe/Africa by simultaneously occupying a radically altered perspective and privileging marginalized positions" (273). While the play seems to present a black and thoroughly anti-white perspective, reading it in terms of simple and rigid binaries does not allow for the uncovering of strategic silences that lie somewhere between the opposing poles. And while Clay's last words examine the double-consciousness that he faces as an African-American living in a white world, reading into his speech further shows that Clay himself may not have all the answers to the question of what it means to be black, nor of what it means to be a black man. "Clay, self-imprisoned in the white man's clothes, thinks he is achieving manhood but he is ensuring his own destruction. The white oppressor...knows that in white America the whites must murder the blacks (deprive them of 'manhood') or the whites will be murdered by the blacks" (Barnet 631). The middle-class persona that he wears throughout most of the play does shed instantly after Lula agitates him, and readers are given a brief look into the way Clay really thinks and feels. This glimpse, again serving to expose white power and rip off its mask of benevolence, disrupts any romantic notions of the contented, all-is-forgiven, forward-looking African American and, instead, reveals powerful agency that threatens the dominant culture's place in society. But, by limiting himself to rhetoric, the

bold actions behind Clay's words never present themselves, leading to his own demise. Clay's inaction serves as a silence worthy of notice. "Lula's power of speech is undercut by Clay's discourse about the power of action, which is further undercut by Lula's demonstration of real power through action" (Kumar, 278). Lula, representing white society, proves victorious over Clay, who represents the racially oppressed, because she is capable of performing the action that Clay merely threatens. Again, the full extent of white power over the lives of blacks is revealed, and as in a case as contemporary as that of George Zimmerman's 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, which teachers of *Dutchman* could productively discuss with students, white fear that results in the murder of an innocent and unarmed black man culminates in appallingly unpunished white freedom. Additionally, discussing and viewing the many videos of the 2010 murder of twenty-two year old Oscar Grant, coincidentally occurring on a subway platform, can be used as a contemporary image for students to further question the progress toward racial equality so many believe to be a non-issue today. The new independent film, *Fruitvale Station*, which reenacts the events of Grant's New Year's Eve murder, could also serve as a springboard to conversation about how black men continue to be targets of white supremacist abuse.

Another silence that Baraka employs entails depiction of the passive act of watching. The play opens with Clay and Lula seeing each other through the window of the subway, which serves as an obvious and literal act of viewing. However, as the play evolves, so does the more subtle and complex act of *perceiving*, as Baraka draws attention to just who perceives whom, and more significantly, to not only who is socially sanctioned to wield and give voice to a critical gaze, but also to who actually does so

more effectively: “Jones argues that blacks, by virtue of their status as outsiders in American society, are especially equipped to see what the white Establishment cannot see” (Barnet 629). Lula believes she knows everything about Clay, and she spends most of the play telling him about his own identity. But, because Clay’s vulnerable position in a white supremacist social order has forced him to learn more about his oppressors than she has had to learn about the oppressed, at the climax of the play he can dramatically divulge the morbid secrets that he and other members of his race have kept from white American until now. Clay has agency over Lula when he releases these silences and tells her, “If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors. No grunts. No wiggles in the dark of her soul” (627). Through Clay’s bold exposure of secretly held understandings of white people and the racial power that they wield, Lula’s assumed perceptions shatter, and he proves to be the master of perception. Again, though, given the white supremacist context that Baraka’s play makes visible, it is all but impossible for audiences to go on ignoring it: Lula regains the upper hand, stabbing and killing Clay with blithe impunity. As suggested above, asking students for contemporary examples of white power over black bodies can help them see the contemporary relevance of Baraka’s message. Baraka, while a revolutionary and active Black Nationalist at the time the play was written, attempts to rip off a smug, self-satisfied white mask to expose the abusive and horribly controlling power underneath it. His disdain for the ongoing fact and abuses of white supremacy, not for white people or individuals, drives the action in *Dutchman*.

Excerpts from Michelle Alexander’s best-selling book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* can similarly benefit students in

understanding the extent to which African Americans continue to be actively oppressed. Alexander describes America's caste system, and she repeatedly makes the argument that a recent form of ostensibly liberal but nonetheless white supremacist code, *colorblindness*, "prevents us from seeing the racial and structural divisions that persist in society: in segregated, unequal schools, the segregated, jobless ghettos, and the segregated public discourse—a public conversation that excludes the current pariah cast... We have become blind, not so much to race, but to the existence of racial caste in America" (241). Her critical take on the state of America's prison system, the so-called War on Drugs, and the permanent record and denied opportunities that follow so many non-violent, first-time offenders for life, would make a powerful, contemporary contribution to the discussion. Alexander's statistics regarding numbers of African-American prisoners themselves would shock students and spark important conversations. For example, she states that "If we hope to return to the rate of incarceration of the 1970s—we would need to release approximately four out of five people currently behind bars today" (230). She also adds, "If four out of five people were released from prisons, far more than a million people could lose their jobs" (230). When students make the connection between mass incarceration and American jobs, they are thinking critically, and more to the point, becoming more conscious of the ways that white supremacy disguises itself within the legal system. Additionally, students can write responses to the play or the more modern-day video and textual examples, helping them to better understand and articulate the current forms that white supremacy has taken. They can also be encouraged to make personal connections between the play's message(s) to white Americans and their own lives, either to people they know who have borne the brunt of racism, or, for white

students to examine the ways that their lives are impacted (and often eased) by that unconscious sense of privilege. Students could be asked to imagine what would be more or less likely to happen to them because of their race if they found themselves (even mistakenly) in trouble. Writing about and discussing the ways in which race affects students' lives, particularly pointing out the ways in which unearned privilege *does* in fact affect white students daily, saturates the classroom with purposeful talk of race, purges the pernicious "colorblind" philosophy completely, and leads to honest and critical dialogue.

Both Wilson and Baraka employ silences in order to expose and to encourage resistance to hegemonic white culture. *Fences*, typically canonized in the high schools for its less obvious threat to white supremacy, is nonetheless charged with counterhegemonic energy. However, because Wilson uses figurative language to deliver his warning about white culture, a traditional multiculturalist approach encourages students to view Troy Maxson as bitter and cynical without warrant. He is thus too often seen as one-dimensional, static, and selfish. If presented more carefully to students through a critical multicultural lens and within a strong historical context, Troy becomes a heroic figure with a warrior spirit who offers accurate perceptions of white America's ongoing habit of breaking its promises. Troy also becomes dangerous, not merely comical and cruel, as his message becomes more confrontational, and more directly insightful about the abuses of white hegemony. Baraka's *Dutchman*, while also successfully and artfully implementing silences, delivers its counterhegemonic message more deliberately and nakedly than *Fences*, thereby being excluded from most high school curricula. Baraka's reversal of connotations traditionally associated with black

and white are readily visible and impactful, but discreet silences worthy of uncovering exist amidst the more direct language. The threats to hegemony raised in his play thereby result in a higher level of unease on the part of the liberal white reader. Teaching either play in a critical multiculturalist mode can help students become aware of the ways in which African American artists, including playwrights, often reveal struggles still faced by many African American men. Doing so can also encourage understanding of not only how hegemony actively resists social change, but also how African Americans in general perceive, understand, and actively resist the daily incursions of *de facto* white supremacy.

Conclusion

As a veteran English teacher who serves a student population that is highly mixed in racial terms, I have observed with dismay that most deployments of multicultural education, while seemingly benign, continue to reinforce hegemony, specifically by perpetuating the currently subdued operations of *de facto* white supremacy. Mainstream multiculturalism's well-intended efforts to celebrate diversity too often do little more than create a student population content with the society in which they live, encouraging them to believe that racial progress has arrived and that everyone now has equal access and opportunities to achieve. By using both typically canonized African American literature and lesser-taught texts, new and critical approaches can demonstrate to students the importance of a more resistant and activist approach to the institutionalized racism and oppression that continue to thrive, albeit in more discreet ways. When practiced in mainstreamed modes, multiculturalism, in essence, serves as a dangerous educational strategy that continues to discreetly promote white supremacy. Removing power structures from considerations of minority-authored texts encourages students to think that social injustice and racial inequality are individualized problems of the past, leaving them largely blind to the institutionalized racism that is very much an issue in the present. Uncovering the silences in certain texts, and introducing texts that in their own ways are anything but silent, can reengage students in the art of literary interpretation by helping them to start thinking more critically about ongoing issues of oppression than they do now, and by challenging them to see themselves and others with fresh insight and fierce interest.

My juxtaposition of paired texts from several significant eras in African American history has demonstrated how both the seemingly palatable and the lesser-taught works can readily serve as examples of counterhegemonic perspectives, a stance that generally counters not only the overt racism of each text's era, but also the presence in each era of more liberal and seemingly benign embraces of the African American Other. By drawing primarily on the theoretical perspectives of critical multiculturalism and critical whiteness studies, each chapter also demonstrates via scholarly analysis that instruction focusing on the discreet strategies employed by particular minority authors can produce heightened student awareness of: the ways these authors have both played to and resisted the dominant order's aesthetic and thematic expectations; the ways in which white supremacist oppression continues to structure U.S. society and the personal lives and material conditions of African Americans; and finally, in a pedagogical mode, the ways that such realities are commonly and egregiously downplayed in the reading and teaching of canonical and contemporary works.

I have demonstrated how some African American authors seemingly welcome an embrace by largely white audiences by providing the sort of "racial" context such audiences clearly expect, and how some of these authors, like others who do so more overtly, also deploy such strategies as intentional silences, signifying, coding, and other purposefully distancing strategies to deter an uninformed and thus unwelcomed embrace by their non-black audience. As Doris Sommer points out in her study of minority-authored recalcitrance, "A variety of rhetorical moves can hold readers at arm's length or joke at their pretense of mastery, in order to propose something different from knowledge. Philosophers have called it acknowledgment. Others call it respect" (xi). Such

“particularists” continually push the dominant culture to reexamine what it has convinced itself is the truth regarding African American lives and identities; they can also reaffirm, and further articulate, the necessarily more informed perspective on these matters commonly shared among students of color. By perceiving the counterhegemonic techniques used by lesser-taught writers, as well as those embedded in seemingly embraceable canonical literature, students can gain an eye-opening understanding not only of the ways in which oppression and racism continue to impact their world, but also of the remarkably subtle and deft aesthetic strategies deployed by culturally resistant African American authors.

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