

Pervasive Whiteness in American Public School Classrooms: A Proposal for the Integration of Texts by Black Authors into the English Curriculum

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Abstract

The 2018 United States Census reported the Berks County population as being 87.2% white and 7.2% black; however, one school district within the county is reported by the National Center for Education Statistics as being 96% white and <1% black. This district, with the highest disparity between white and black citizens, has an English curriculum that includes virtually no texts by black authors. In the environment that these racial demographic statistics suggest, it is unacceptable for the curriculum of English classes to focus exclusively on white authors because this exclusivity causes students to become comfortable in their own whiteness. This comfort causes discussions of race to become increasingly difficult to have in classrooms. Therefore, students are implicitly educated to avoid discussions of race and to accept the bended and white-washed perspectives with which they are presented. Therefore, this paper seeks to combat the misrepresentation of literature as an exclusively white medium, as it unfolds a proposal for the integration of texts by black authors into the English curriculums of predominantly white public high schools. Using this one Berks County high school as a case study, this paper examines the benefits of exposure to black character and culture through literature. The primary goal of this paper is to identify key texts in the subject high school's curriculum and to pair them with texts by black authors that espouse similar lessons. The proposal undergoes this process with ten texts, and suggests texts from Ellison, Walker, Coates, Myers, and several other notable black authors whose texts are fundamental to a complete education in English literature. As the necessity for change in the English curriculum of predominantly white classrooms is revealed, this paper proposes the changes that should be made and examines just how easy, and necessary, it is to make them.

Keywords: Literature, Race, Secondary Education

1. Introduction

In 2014, the total number of white students enrolled in public schools became the minority, making up only 49.7 percent of public school enrollment. The Department of Education projects that this majority-minority makeup of public schools will continue, as 2020 public school enrollment is expected to be only 46.2 percent white.¹ These statistics suggest a growing national diversity—that the majority of young Americans will no longer be white. However, the racial demographic statistics of the country's individual school districts counter its growing diversity among young student populations. The United States Census Bureau's 2018 census reports the Pennsylvania population as 81.8 percent white and 12 percent black.² Berks County, Pennsylvania is not too dissimilar, with the Census Bureau marking the county as 87.2 percent white and 7.2 percent black.³ However, the diversity of Berks County's population is not evenly distributed among its public schools. Reading School District, the least-white district in Berks, is a mere 23 percent white, with 65 percent of students being Hispanic and 12 percent being black.⁴ In contrast, the Oley Valley School District, the whitest district in Berks, is 96 percent white, 3 percent Asian, one (1) percent Hispanic, and zero (0) percent black.⁵ The Oley Valley School District's high school is comprised of 518

white students, 27 Hispanic students, 11 Asian students, 5 mixed-race students, and one (1) black student.⁶ It is therefore clear that the racial demographics of the Oley Valley School District are nowhere near representative of the national, state, or county racial make-up. Therefore, the Oley Valley School District is an ideal representative of a predominantly white educational space.

I graduated from the Oley Valley School District in 2016. In my thirteen years of study in Oley Valley, from kindergarten to senior year, I never had a black teacher. There were not any black teachers at the Oley Valley High School, and this remains the case. An average class in the high school is comprised of about 20 white students and a white teacher. This dynamic is concerning, considering the proven benefits of being educated in diverse classrooms: “Students can learn better how to navigate adulthood in an increasingly diverse society—a skill that employers value—if they attend diverse schools.”⁷ Not only can diverse learning environments benefit students in the workforce and future social situations, but diversity in the classroom also supports in-class learning, as “researchers have documented that students’ exposure to other students who are different from themselves and the novel ideas and challenges that such exposure brings leads to improved cognitive skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving.”⁷ Therefore, if being in racially diverse classrooms benefits students, the students at Oley Valley High School, whose classrooms are anything but diverse, are at an educational disadvantage because of the sheer whiteness of their community.

2. Racial Exclusivity as an Educational Environment

Students at schools such as Oley Valley are immersed in complete whiteness and are educated unknowingly into the toxic practices of whiteness every day. However, the average members of the Oley Valley community would not consider themselves to be racist. Instagram and Facebook posts from my peers and their parents often read “we are all just humans” and “I don’t see color.” Although comments such as these are well-meaning, they instead highlight the commenter’s ignorance and racism. Robin DiAngelo, in her essay “White Fragility,” explains why universalism, or the belief that “we are all the same,” is an indicator of racism:

Of course we are all humans...but when applied to racism, universalism functions to deny the significance of race and the advantages of being white. Further, universalism assumes that whites and people of color have the same realities, the same experiences in the same contexts (i.e. I feel comfortable in this majority white classroom, so you must too), the same responses from others, and assumes that the same doors are open to all.⁸

Moreover, racial universalism is frequently reflected in classroom curriculums, especially in English curriculums. White writers are almost always used to teach lessons on humanity, morality, and language, which DiAngelo’s book of the same name, *White Fragility*, explains in detail:

...consider the writers we are all expected to read; the list usually includes [Hemingway, Steinbeck, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Twain, Austen, Shakespeare]. These writers are seen as representing the universal human experience...we go to [Angelou, Morrison, Baldwin, Tan, Cisneros] for the black or Asian perspective; Toni Morrison is always seen as a black writer, not just a writer...But when we are not looking for the black or Asian perspective, we return to white writers, reinforcing the idea of whites as just human, and people of color as particular kinds (racialized) of humans.⁹

DiAngelo is clear that the absence of Black authors from the English curriculum is intentional and reflective of racist values in the literary and educational communities. However, English literature presents a unique opportunity for implementing diversity into all-white spaces. Black literature espouses many of the same key lessons as the writings of white authors, and integrating Black literature into the English curriculum would allow for diversity to be included, in some capacity, in the lives of students in predominantly white schools like Oley Valley.

3. Proposal of Changes to Case Curriculum

In my experience at Oley Valley High School, I read only two works from Black authors: Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Zora Neale Hurston’s essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” From my undergraduate experience studying English, I am very certain that I did not read enough Black literature in high school, and this lack of textual diversity put me at a much weaker starting point than my peers who had been exposed to non-white authors

in secondary school. To rectify this miseducation, I have constructed the curriculum I wish had been provided to me, replacing texts from each English course I took at Oley Valley High School with texts from Black authors that espouse similar lessons and cover similar topics.

3.1. First-year Curriculum

My freshman year at Oley Valley High School, I was enrolled in the most advanced English course for my year, English I CP, which was designed to be in preparation for college-level academics. There were approximately 15 students in my class, and my teacher was a tall white woman with black hair, shoulder pads, and an obvious crush on Gregory Peck. We read four novels: Daniel Keyes' 1959 *Flowers for Algernon*, Robert Cormier's 1974 *The Chocolate War*, John Knowles' 1959 *A Separate Peace*, and Pearl S. Buck's 1931 *The Good Earth*. We spent months with each of these books, analyzing each character and plot point extensively. In our study of Buck's *The Good Earth*, we were taught fundamentals of twentieth century Chinese culture, but the lesson was short-lived and concluded with a video on foot-binding practices. None of our conversations focused on the social experiences of non-white people or pushed us to consider non-white perspectives in a meaningful way.

Because the literature of my ninth grade English class was mostly white-centric mid-twentieth century texts, texts from Black authors could easily replace one or two novels without dimming the legendary perspectives of classic white male authors. For this proposal, the curriculum should replace Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* with Sharon Flake's *The Skin I'm In*. Cormier's coming-of-age novel focuses on education and peer rivalry, introducing motifs of bullying, competition, and morality. In his last moments as the narrator, Cormier's protagonist Jerry resolves what he has learned: "They tell you to do your own thing, but they don't mean it. They don't want you to do your thing, unless it happens to be their thing, too. It's a laugh, Goober, a fake. Don't disturb the universe, Goober, no matter what the posters say."¹⁰ While the bleakness of this novel's ultimate conclusion is meant to serve as an example of realism and the harsh brutality of life's problems, *The Chocolate War* may not be the best choice for predominantly white classrooms. In whiteness, the central theme of *The Chocolate War* becomes focused on universal suffering—the struggles the all-white cast of characters face in their quest for identity serve as an exaggeration of the struggle for belonging amongst peers that each reader faces. However, the novel is in no way representative of the heightened difficulty that students of color face. The novel's tag, "Do I dare disturb the universe?," implies that the reader's universe is previously undisturbed—poverty, discrimination, family, and other qualifiers of life are not in effect.

Based on the demonstrated whiteness of *The Chocolate War*, Flake's *The Skin I'm In* makes the ideal replacement. The novel, published in 2000, is much more modern than *The Chocolate War*, and it is arguably more relevant as well. The protagonist, Maleeka struggles with belonging and faces intimidation from her peers—two themes also present in *The Chocolate War*. However, rather than facilitating the bullying and violence as do the educators in Cormier's novel, Flake's teacher, Miss Saunders, is an encouraging and supportive role model for Maleeka. Moreover, Miss Saunders' skin condition allows for Maleeka to feel more comfortable with her racial identity as a dark-skinned Black woman. Both novels seek to resolve adolescent unease and competition, but *The Skin I'm In*, being authored by a Black woman and having an almost all-Black cast of characters, is a more suitable text for today's students. Teaching *The Skin I'm In* in ninth-grade English would allow for students to be exposed to Black culture and the experience of physicality among Black youth, which would be exceptionally beneficial in introducing diversity to students attending predominantly white high schools like Oley Valley.

A second replacement that would be beneficial to the curriculum I received in my English I CP class is substituting John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* with the graphic novel version of Walter Dean Myers' *Monster*. Like Cormier, Knowles draws his readers into the experiences of youth. *A Separate Peace* uses Gene's lack of self-confidence and internalized fear to teach readers about consequences and morality. However, just like *The Chocolate War*, the whiteness of the characters in *A Separate Peace* coupled with the whiteness of the learning environment indicates to students at schools like Oley Valley that their experiences are universal. Moreover, the message of *A Separate Peace* focuses almost entirely on the consequences of our internalized emotion, insinuating that the biggest problems facing young people are internal, not external. While this may be true for some students, adolescence is even more difficult for students who face strong external challenges, like poverty or racial discrimination. Such challenges are directly addressed in Myers' *Monster*. The text was originally published as a play in 1999, but the graphic novel version that Guy A. Sims adapted in 2015 is even more poignant because of the impactful illustration. Just as *A Separate Peace* addresses fear and violence as motivators and the consequences of mistakes made in youthful ignorance, *Monster* does the same, except the protagonist, Steve Harmon, contends with racial discrimination and criminal charges. The paramount benefit of replacing *A Separate Peace* with *Monster* is the racial awareness that *Monster* would provide to white students. Steve Harmon is only sixteen years old, yet he is facing murder charges. The stark contrast between

the lives of students in an affluent, predominantly white high school and boys like Steve exposes students to the dramatically different experiences their Black peers in different communities may be having. Moreover, the illustrations of the graphic novel and the predominance of the novel's racial narrative introduce diversity into the curriculum and instigate meaningful discussions of race in the classroom, as Steve Harmon urges the reader to "Make me human."¹²

3.2. Second-year Curriculum

Upon completion of English I CP, I moved on to the subsequent English II CP course my sophomore year at Oley Valley. The same instructor taught both classes, and English II included four more novels: John Steinbeck's 1937 *Of Mice and Men*, Mitch Albom's 1997 *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Elie Wiesel's 1955 *Night*, and Harper Lee's 1960 *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The first change that would support efforts at increasing diversity and racial awareness is replacing *Tuesdays with Morrie* with Athol Fugard's play "*Master Harold*"...and the boys. Albom's novel recounts his visits with his wise mentor, Morrie, who is dying of ALS. The novel deals with the complex emotions of death and dying and with the relationships between student and teacher. While *Tuesdays with Morrie* is certainly moving and thought-provoking, the key lessons of self-reflection and lifelong morality are also key in Fugard's "*Master Harold*"...and the boys. In his play, Fugard centers themes such as racism, the education of a racist, and definitions of family. Moreover, in the exploration of these themes, the titular character, Hally, also learns about the morality of mentorship and the self-reflection that is necessary to combat racism. For example, in one scene, Hally reflects on old memories with Sam, who is the Black man his family employs:

HALLY. Strange, isn't it...
SAM. What's strange about it?
HALLY. Little white boy in short trousers and a black man old enough to be his father flying a kite. It's not every day you see that.
SAM. But why strange? Because the one is white and the other black?
HALLY. I don't know. Would have been just as strange, I suppose, if it had been me and my Dad...cripple man and a little boy! Nope! There's no chance of me flying a kite without it being strange.¹¹

Although Hally faces pressure to conform to the racist thinking of his parents and his peers, the personal nature of his relationship with Sam and Willie instills a stronger sense of morality within him. Fugard's play is a prime example of text that portrays mentorship and reflection, and the wisdom of Fugard's Black characters counters stereotypical narratives of Black people often taught in the classroom. Additionally, the exposure to Blackness in the historical context of the play, Apartheid in South Africa, adds depth to the English curriculum.

To further support diverse curriculum in my sophomore year English II CP course, it would be beneficial to include supplementary texts with the instruction on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Harper Lee's classic novel is the only text from the first two years of my high school education with a Black character. However, in an exclusively white learning environment, the conversation on *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be difficult, and discussion of the novel often focuses on the white characters' experiences, rather than on the morality of the American legal system or the complexities of small-town racism. I was made well aware of this misrepresentation of Lee's novel when I asked my brother, a junior at Oley Valley, what his main take-away from *To Kill a Mockingbird* was; he responded: "Atticus Finch is a cool dude." Although Atticus Finch's upstanding morals and fight for justice are noteworthy, the novel is poised to create much more meaningful discussions on race than any other novel I was exposed to throughout high school. Therefore, to supplement *To Kill a Mockingbird* and bring attention to the experiences of Black people in America and with the United States' justice system, the curriculum should include selections from Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. Atticus Finch's declaration of the racial bias in the justice system is certainly impactful:

There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads—they couldn't be fair if they tried. In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins. They're ugly, but those are the facts of life...The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box.¹³

However, the sentiment Lee gives to Atticus' words would be more meaningful when paired with Coates' passionate letter to his son, which references the deaths of several Black men and women at the hands of police officers earlier in the year. Coates lays out the brutal truths of Blackness in America, and his personal accounts are well-suited to

move discussions of race out of the hypotheticals of historical fiction and into the modern-day realities and consequences of racial prejudice.

For students in an all-white classroom, the constant threat of physical harm that is dominant in the lives of Black Americans goes completely unrecognized. As Coates emphasizes the ease with which white America destroys Black bodies, he clarifies the very concept that is at the heart of Tom Robinson's trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "But the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen, and so that America might justify itself, the story of a black body's destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined..."¹⁴ In calling out the deadly consequence of American innocence, Coates provides the perfect match for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Rather than centering the perspective of the white savior, as Lee does, Coates' work provides insight into the experience of existing within a Black body in America, and his work brings the conversation of racial prejudice into the twenty-first century.

3.3. Third-year Curriculum

My junior year, I continued my journey through the advanced track of the Oley Valley High School's English department by enrolling in the Advanced Placement English class. However, the whiteness of the syllabus did not dim with the added challenge of a standardized test. Although the AP Language and Composition course did not focus on many novels, we did read several essays and historical arguments, including Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. While *Common Sense* is certainly central to the development of American identity, it maintains the concept of universalism that Robin DiAngelo describes in "White Fragility." Paine explains how the American Revolution would be beneficial to all colonists; he argues that all men are equal and that the cycle of oppression and independence is unavoidable in nature. While Paine's sentiment is sincere, his definition of who is included within the American identity is limited to white men. In an all-white classroom, the inclusion of *Common Sense* in the syllabus indicates the very hypocrisy of today's America: white men can revolt if their cause is just, but minority groups are not afforded that same privilege. Moreover, *Common Sense* alludes to a historical context that is exclusive to white patriots in colonial America, and the document is not representative of any other racial or social experience in American history. Therefore, *Common Sense* is not the most productive persuasive text regarding our nation that the curriculum could include.

In this course, the purpose of reading each literary work was to analyze the author's argument; therefore, replacing Paine's *Common Sense* with Frederick Douglass' *What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?*, which is a similarly passionate text, would fill the syllabus's need for a historic American argumentative document. Replacing Paine's work with Douglass' would enable introductions to Black history and American institutionalized slavery. *What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?* is persuasive and meaningful, and the text would allow students to engage with the racial contention that has occupied American history since the country's beginning. Douglass makes his case for the inequality of Black and white American citizens: "Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you this day rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The right inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me."¹⁵ With the goal of introducing American history into the English literature curriculum, using Douglass would provide exposure to Black historical figures and insight into historic racial conflict, and the text would also aid classroom discussions of race and Civil Rights.

3.4. Fourth-year Curriculum

Senior year of high school, I finished off my English education with Advanced Placement Literature and Composition. We read 16 major texts, including novels and plays. Upon reflection, I realize that this year was the most critical for the development of my knowledge of literature as an English scholar, and I am sure that it would have been beneficial to have been given the opportunity to read more texts from Black authors. During this year, my class read Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which is the only major text from a Black author that I was assigned in secondary school. However, were changes to be made to this curriculum, the expanse of knowledge and human experience that the course is designed to cover could be greatly strengthened.

One key change to make to the syllabus is to couple Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play *A Doll's House* with Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use," published in 1973. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* teaches themes of women's autonomy, the roles of women in motherhood and marriage, and societal limitations on gender. The protagonist, Nora, leaves her family, dissatisfied with her role as a wife and mother. While the play does incite though-provoking discussions on the expectations of women and historical gender roles, Ibsen's feminism is exclusive to upper-class white women. Published almost a full century later, Walker's "Everyday Use" is arguably more feminist than *A Doll's House*, and the Blackness of the characters introduces intersectional feminism to the curriculum. "Everyday Use" espouses lessons

of mother-daughter bonds, changing definitions of home and family, and the struggles of black women in single-parent households. Walker uses similar lyrical writing to describe setting and plot as Ibsen does in *A Doll's House*, but in Walker's short story, the characters come to terms with their identity in relation to the home:

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room...anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.¹⁶

Maggie, Dee, and Mrs. Johnson formulate their sense of cultural identity and womanhood by relating to their home and drawing closer together as a matrilineal unit. This centralization of the home as fundamental to identity is a direct contrast to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, in which Nora leaves home to seek re-identification in a freer context. While both texts are essential to the literary canon, pairing "Everyday Use" and *A Doll's House* as supplementary to each other would be beneficial for demonstrating diversity within literature and teaching feminism across racial groups and time periods.

Another change to the curriculum that could be applied to benefit diversity in the English classroom is replacing George Bernard Shaw's 1912 play *Pygmalion* with Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. The two texts are seemingly quite different—*Pygmalion* takes place in early twentieth century England and *Invisible Man* takes place around America's Civil Rights movement. However, central to both texts is the protagonists' formulation of social identity. Eliza Doolittle transforms, both in language and appearance, to occupy an entirely new social status. *Pygmalion* observes the divide in society between economic classes, and Eliza herself observes the changes in how she is treated as she undergoes this transformation: "You see, really and truly...the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will."¹⁷ Public perception and its effect on individual identity are also key themes in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. However, *Invisible Man* provides greater perspective to the English curriculum of predominantly white high schools because the construction of race is at the forefront of the novel. In predominantly white educational spaces, students can benefit greatly from gaining an understanding of how characters like Ellison's narrator establish unique identities within oppressive social structures such as race:

Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record...We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture. Why waste time creating a conscience for something that doesn't exist? For, you see, blood and skin do not think!¹⁸

Ellison urges his reader to understand how race and racial hierarchy were constructed and are upheld in American society. For students who are not asked to engage meaningfully with race on a daily basis, this text is necessary for a thorough examination of American society—of which race is at the heart.

4. Conclusion

Although my own education at the Oley Valley High School cannot be done over, there are critical changes to be made to the English curriculum of majority-white public schools. Introducing young adults to Black authors, Black characters, and Black culture allows for a more diverse and empathetic class of students. The changes outlined in this proposal encourage students to think critically about race and challenge their own racial biases. Predominantly white learning environments like Oley Valley implicitly support the racist ideals upon which education was segregated in the first place. Excluding authors of color, specifically Black authors, from the curriculum, lessens the legitimacy of the students' literary experiences. Without including black authors, the education suffers, and the students are educated into racism rather than empathy and awareness. Still, the confidence with which schools like Oley Valley embrace their white-washed curriculum suggests that predominantly white communities believe the education in their schools to be comparable to, if not superior to, schools with greater diversity. However, research and statistics from Pew Research Center support the assertion that diversity in learning environments supports empathy, critical thinking, and open-mindedness. The proposed changes to the curriculum are designed to foster these objectives, as Black literature allows students to engage critically with race. Students who are exposed to Blackness through literature are less likely to fall into complacent whiteness, as the mere exposure to Blackness prohibits the exclusivity of whiteness within

educational spaces. Students stand to gain a more well-rounded education, an improved racial awareness, and a higher level of empathy from a more diverse English curriculum, and the changes we need to make are simple, yet incredibly necessary.

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