



RIGHT TO READ

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(Re)envisioning and (Re)reading: Examining Problematic Texts

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When I entered the classroom in the late 1970s, the only text I was prepared to teach was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1885/2014). I was teaching in a largely African American community. I felt ill at ease sharing this text with my students. I know I was not alone in this. Often teachers wrestle with texts, especially canonical texts, that contain problematic content. So for this issue about Remembering and (Re)living, I turned to two educators who have written widely about problematic texts in light of contemporary culture.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (@ebonyteach) and Debbie Reese (@dbreese) graciously agreed to answer the questions I posed about how to approach classic texts and to offer resources for locating alternative texts and/or texts with more diversity. How I would love to have them both in the same room for an extended conversation! I encourage you to follow them on Twitter so that you can continue this conversation about a critical issue.

What do you feel is the best way for teachers to approach classic texts that include problematic language or use cultural references that are racist?

Ebony: One of the most commonly used texts in the high school curriculum, Harper Lee's *To Kill*

a Mockingbird (1960/2010), is rightfully praised for its enduring critique of racial segregation in the United States. However, if we are to retain the novel's significance for future generations, it is essential that we connect our students' contemporary experiences in today's world to the long-ago world of young Scout Finch and Maycomb, Alabama. Before we pass out copies of *Mockingbird* (or any other novel about race), I propose that every teacher ask himself or herself three key questions:

1. *What kind of students do I have?* Students' positioning and location within their schools, communities, and the larger society must be taken into account when exploring themes within novels that are complex and controversial. What are students' individual and group interests and aspirations? What is the demographic makeup of the group? Does the classroom dynamic emphasize competition, community, or both?

I've taught this novel in two very different high school settings. The first was in a magnet high school in one of the nation's largest cities. More than 90% of the seniors at this school matriculated at a four-year college or university upon graduation. Students were highly motivated, expected to do well, and for the most part encouraged each other to achieve. The students were also racially, culturally, and religiously homogeneous, with more than 95% hailing from working and middle class African American homes. The rest of the students were of Mexican, Palestinian, Hmong, and Ban-

gladeshi descent. This was a school where most students were bidialectal and/or bilingual, and teachers and students for the most part engaged in a classroom dialectical dance that was replete with Standard English, AAVE, local catch phrases and references, African American rhetoric, and more. I taught ninth graders in this district for five years. I was a graduate of another magnet high school that was much like the one where I taught. That cultural familiarity helped me figure out how to position the text for student engagement and understanding.

The second school where I taught *To Kill a Mockingbird* was very different. It was a neighborhood high school in a university town with a very heterogeneous population and no racial or ethnic group as the majority of the student body. Students' socioeconomic backgrounds ranged from upper middle class to the working poor, and reading and writing abilities were present across the range.

It is important to perform this type of analysis of context before attempting to teach any classic literature, let alone literature about race. The ninth-grade students who were reading this novel at my second school were born in the 1990s. Today's ninth graders were born *after* 9/11. Even in my majority African American classroom over a decade ago, in a city where students had a compelling interest in the themes treated within the novel, there was a need to aid them in imagining the relevance of this timeless text for their contemporary world.

2. *How can I contextualize/historicize To Kill a Mockingbird for my students?* The best way to do this is to scaffold the novel with multimedia resources about race relations. Since the novel is written from the point of view of a character who is privileged by race and class (though admittedly not by gender or age), I would typically begin the *Mockingbird* unit by screening the PBS *American Experience* documentary on the 1938 Scottsboro trial (Goodman & Anker, 2001), "Scottsboro: An American Tragedy" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/>), or asking students to view it on their own. Students in both school settings were completely engaged with the story of the Scottsboro trial and were outraged by the outcome. The students at the more culturally diverse high school were even more appalled at the miscarriage of justice and could not believe that the two White

women who gave false testimony about the Scottsboro boys were never punished. They did find a hero in Samuel Leibowitz, the attorney for the Scottsboro boys, which prepared them for meeting Atticus Finch. After the movie, students created response journals to Countee Cullen's moving poem, "Scottsboro, Too, Deserves Its Song" (1947, p. 160).

In the middle of the book, it was time for students to move forward in their study of racial segregation in the United States. At that point, we paused for a single class period to watch segments from the first episode of the award-winning PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize* (Hampton et al., 2006). Again, student interest was high. We used deep viewing techniques that involve repeated viewing and analysis of multimodal texts (Paillet, A. W., Semali, L., Rodenberg, R. K., Giles, J. K., & Macaul, S. L., 2000), and students did an excellent job of relating the real-life events of the mid-1950s (including the Emmett Till trial) to Tom Robinson's fictional trial.

After we finished reading the book, I tried to bring in one of my favorite *California Newsreel* documentaries, the late Marlon Riggs's *Ethnic Notions*, but my comfort level as a first-year teacher in a district with very few teachers of color made me abandon deep viewing of the video after a single class period. However, as a culminating project, I asked students to conduct Internet research on a topic related to the novel that they wanted to know more about. Today, with the proliferation of social media networking sites and multimedia software, I would invite students to create a multimodal project for the unit. I would also have students read Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2014 feature in *The Atlantic*, "The Case for Reparations," which brings the history of racial segregation from the South to the North, which is important for understanding the scope of historical and contemporary discrimination. This bridges to a final question.

3. *How can I illustrate the contemporary relevance of To Kill a Mockingbird for my students?* W.E.B. DuBois (1903/2007) famously stated that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line. In the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, racial/ethnic relations continue to be at the forefront of

local, national, and world news. These events should absolutely be brought into the classroom! For instance, while teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the autumn of 2005, the following major events occurred:

- The devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina opened up yet another round of discourse about race and poverty in America. Adolescents were acutely aware of these conversations, which extended into popular culture (hip-hop icon Kanye West’s charge that former President Bush didn’t like Black people, etc.).
- An initiative that ended racial affirmative action within the state [Michigan] was approved by voters that November.
- Rosa Parks, the “mother of the Civil Rights Movement” and trigger for the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, passed away. Her funeral was televised all day on our metropolitan stations [Michigan]. Students talked about it at school the next day.

Debbie: One evening when my daughter Liz was in third grade, she said, “Mom, I don’t get it.” I looked at her, sitting on the bed, reading. I noted that she had *Caddie Woodlawn* (Brink, 1935) in her hand. Realizing she was reading a problematic text, I asked, “What don’t you get?” She started telling me about the scalping and fear of Indian massacres. Calmly, I asked to see the book and told her we’d talk to her teacher about it. Later that night, I asked Janice, a friend knowledgeable in children’s literature, for help. I’d been calm with Liz, but inside I was seething and needed help putting my upset into words that would be productive. Janice was dismayed that Liz’s teacher had assigned such an old book. She suggested that old books like that be used in a specific way. One group reads one chapter, another group reads another, and so on. In each chapter, children should read critically, noting biased portrayals of Native peoples. I like Janice’s suggestion. Part of what she said is that reading a book cover-to-cover invites readers to identify with the characters, location, etc. Once you’ve embraced the story or characters, it is difficult to be critical from within that embrace.

Many people have written to me, saying that when they’re reading *Little House on the Prairie* (Wilder, 1953) to their child (this is usually a parent), they pause to tell their child what is wrong with the depictions or the attitudes of characters in the book. That might work in that setting, but what to do in a classroom of children when you have one or two who are Native? I invite people to walk through this in their own minds. Here’s what I see. The teacher is reading aloud from *Little House on the Prairie* and comes to that part where she’ll read, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” What will the teacher do? Walk over to the child and say, “She’s not talking about you, dear?” Intellectually, we might think we’ve done well, but what about the emotional costs to this child? What is going on in that student’s head and heart? Might there be some dissonance? Someone he/she likely trusts and respects has just read out loud a horrible sentence. It’ll happen three more times. When read-aloud time is over, everyone will set the book aside and do other work, perhaps a spelling test. But consider, how might a Native child perform on that spelling test, having just heard that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian?”

Studies show that Native students drop out at alarming rates (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2014; Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008). Scholars posit that the dropout rates are due, in part, to Native students’ lack of engagement because the curriculum does not reflect their cultures with accuracy or integrity. Thoughtful analysis of our history of racism and bias must be taught in schools, but unless careful thought goes into how literature is used to accomplish that, I think more harm is done to those very demographics that struggle in our schools.

Can you suggest resources for teachers who seek alternative texts or additional texts?

Ebony: We need more than just books about historical and contemporary racism. Many of the images of Black children and teens in youth literature show them in trouble or suffering. I expressed concerns about the positioning of Black child characters and other characters of color in a recent American

Library Association publication aimed at diversifying librarians' and classroom teachers' criteria for text selection:

Stories of oppression and inequality are important ones that must be told and retold. Nevertheless, those of us tasked with presenting these texts to young people would do well to consider the impressions of African American children and youth they might be left with if the majority of the Black American characters they encounter are enslaved, suffering under Jim Crow, living under duress during the Civil Rights Movement, and/or struggling to survive the nation's postmodern inner cities. If there are few (or zero) young African American detectives, doctors, crime fighters, superheroes, brave soldiers and knights, or princesses in our stories, what ideas about the humanity, the diversity within, and the inherent worth might young people from other cultures take away from their readings? What might Black kids and teens themselves come to believe about their inherent worth? How does this affect the development of young readers' imaginations, dreams, and aspirations? (Excerpted from Thomas, 2013).

In order to begin bridging this imagination gap, I launched my blog, "The Dark Fantastic," this summer (<http://thedarkfantastic.blogspot.com/>). This blog is intended to provide criticism and resources of race in the imaginative genres, primarily yet not exclusively focusing on literature, media, and digital cultures of youth and young adults. I also recommend *The Brown Bookshelf* (<http://thebrownbookshelf.com>), librarian Edi Campbell's *Crazy Quilts* (<http://campbele.wordpress.com/>), and author Zetta Elliott's *Fledgling* (<http://www.zettaelliott.com/>) for more resources.

Debbie: Last summer, the We Need Diverse Books campaign published a series in which they paired a well-known book like *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909* (Markel, 2013) with a book that was similar in theme but that focused on a non-majority culture. It went like this: "If you liked *Brave Girl*, read *Fatty Legs* by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton [2010] next because both are about young girls who stand up to grown-ups and refuse to cave to injustices." That summer reading series is a good place to expand our knowledge of titles that could be used in a Reader's Advisory session. Here's the link: <http://weneeddiversebooks.tumblr.com/tagged/Summer-ReadingSeries>.

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My work is specific to Native peoples of the Americas. At my site, *American Indians in Children's Literature*, teachers will find my lists of recommended books, backed up with in-depth discussions of books I like and those I find problematic. Many people write to say that such critiques are especially useful at helping them see bias and error that usually go unnoticed or unremarked upon by reviewers in mainstream journals. My list of best books can be found here: <http://americanindian-sinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/p/best-books.html>.

How can we, as educators, become more knowledgeable about teaching literature that accurately portrays other cultures?

Ebony: The best teachers, librarians, and youth mentors are constantly learning! Join the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), attend the conferences, and engage in social media. There are a ton of resources that can help, but we could always use more. We need more bloggers who review African American children's and young adult literature, as well as kids' and teen media.

Debbie: In 1965, Nancy Larrick called attention to the all-White world of children's books. That world included stereotypes and biased portrayals of Native people and people of color, but those portrayals are all around us today. Generally speaking, we were all socialized with the same television shows and movies, the same toys and games, and even the same products in the grocery store. Immersed in a world that so pervasively stereotypes "other," it can be difficult for anyone to see the stereotypes at all. That pervasiveness also makes it hard to step outside that space and look critically at what we believe we know about other cultures.

When multiculturalism took off a few decades ago, there was a rush to bring out stories about different cultures. The frameworks, however, were limited to material culture such as foods, clothing, and traditional stories. In that particular

framework, there is no space for Native peoples as sovereign nations. Our status as sovereign nations that engage in diplomatic negotiations with leaders of other nations is the single most important thing to know about us. Most people know there is a federal government in the United States, and that states have their own governments, as do cities and towns. Native government structures are not generally taught—but ought to be. I imagine people are taken aback when they are pulled over for speeding by tribal police on a reservation and have to pay a fine to a tribal court! Teachers can read more about sovereignty on my site at <http://americanindian-sinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/p/we-are-not-people-of-color.html>.

The Internet gives teachers a way to become knowledgeable more readily than in the past. Teachers can visit websites of tribal nations and learn history from their perspectives. Lisa Mitten, former president of the American Indian Library Association, maintains a website of links that teachers can use: <http://www.nativeculturelinks.com/nations.html>. The Internet provides depth and breadth when researching other groups, as well. Of course, teachers must remember to approach their Internet research with a critical eye!

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas is an assistant professor in the Division of Reading/Writing/Literacy at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. A former Detroit Public Schools teacher, Dr. Thomas's program of research is focused on children's and adolescent literature, the teaching of African American literature, and the role of race in classroom discourse and interaction. Dr. Thomas has published her research and critical scholarship in journals and edited volumes and is the coeditor of *Reading African American Experiences in the Obama Era: Theory, Advocacy, Activism* (Peter Lang, 2012). She is currently a 2014–2015 National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow.

Debbie Reese established *American Indians in Children's Literature* in 2006 to share her research with those who don't often have access to professional and academic journals. Dr. Reese is tribally enrolled at Nambe Pueblo, and her articles and book chapters are used in education, English, and library science courses in the US and Canada.

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