



LAYERED LITERACIES

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and Judson **Laughter**



Reading, Race, and Responsibility

This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/the-alan-review-columns>. There, we include the complete texts of the responses we received when we asked Sharon Flake, G. Neri, and Nikki Grimes how race matters in their work.

We dedicated our last column (Fall 2014) to Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis and hoped that the killings would stop. But, sadly, as we prepared our column for this issue, we were mourning the death of yet another young, Black male—Michael Brown.

Does race matter?

Ask the mothers of Trayvon, Jordan, and Michael. Ask the residents of Sanford and Jacksonville and Ferguson.

Ask White and Black members alike of the police forces involved in these deaths or members of the National Guard troops called in to “keep the peace” in Ferguson (eerily reminiscent of Little Rock in 1957 and Los Angeles in 1992).

Ask President Obama, who learned the hard way not to reveal what he really thinks about Henry Louis Gates’s mistaken arrest in 2009.

Ask young, Black men themselves, youth like Shane Flowers, who put together a powerful video of protest images after Michael Brown’s death and wondered, “Am I next?” (vimeo.com/103678910).

Look in the mirror and ask yourself, as educator Leigh Patel encourages us to do in her blog (decolonizing.wordpress.com/2014/08/24/an-august-of-ice-bucket-challenges-and-armored-militia/). She wonders why (White) people will participate in

something like the “ice-bucket challenge,” a campaign to stamp out Lou Gehrig’s disease that went viral over the summer of 2014, but not acknowledge and fight against the debilitating, “human-made” disease of racism. This and similar videos and blog posts offer ready topics for intentional dialogue with all students, bringing viral pop culture into the classroom and offering space for constructive reaction.

Yes, race matters, especially if you are young, Black, and male.

We understand race as physically, socially, legally, and historically constructed around many demographic categories that hold concrete and tangible consequences for *all* youth of color. For this column, we collate many voices speaking to, speaking for, and speaking from youth of color in the midst of an unprecedented period of racial awareness and tension. Most recently, we witnessed this in the anger and heartbreak of Ferguson and Staten Island.

Out of this anger and heartbreak, we must realize we not only have the opportunity to talk about race in our classrooms but a *responsibility* to do so. As biology teacher, Michael Doyle, exhorts in his blog post, “Dear (White) Teachers” (<http://doyle-scienceteach.blogspot.it/2014/08/deat-white-teachers.html>):

Those of us who teach in public schools, who earn our living using public dollars, are obligated as civil servants, and more importantly, as human beings, to carry the discussion of what it means to be public. For us to be people. I teach young adults in a public space. Their space. My space. Our space. Race has been criminalized in our public spaces. Has been for a long, long time. That’s *our* problem.

We may be advised—if not banned—from talking about race in our classrooms, as teachers in Edwards-

ville, Illinois, were at the start of the 2014 school year (http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2014/08/opinions-of-teachers-lead-district-to-stop-discussions-of-ferguson.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-TW). But if we have learned anything from Ferguson, it is that silence, like colorblindness, helps to maintain a volatile, insidious racial caste system that, as sociology professor Michael Eric Dyson suggests (www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/michael-eric-dyson-obamas-remarks-on-ferguson-are-tone-deaf-and-disappointing/2014/08/22/f93ec7e2-2981-11e4-8593-da634b334390_story.html), can be characterized by

[d]ecades of police aggression. The repeated killing of unarmed black people. The desperate poverty of black citizens. The bias in the criminal justice system. The raging social inequality. The intended or inadvertent disenfranchisement of large swaths of the citizenry. The dim prospects of upward mobility that grow bleaker by the day . . . [and having to] . . . use extraordinary measures, including protests in the streets, appearances in the media, and appeals to local and national leaders to amplify their grievances, just to end up where white citizens begin.

Our silence implicates us in holding up this system. In this column, we provide resources to help you break the silence, lose the blinders, and get started reclaiming your classroom as the public *raced* space it is.

First we feature youth activist, author, and English teacher educator sj Miller and his Padlet bulletin board, titled *I Am Michael Brown* (padlet.com/sosefit/s8sb13vvnv519). sj explains how the creation of the multimedia board was “a personal response to Michael Brown’s death,” motivated by feelings of rage:

I was incensed by the tragic killing of Michael Brown. When I cannot put words to rage I tend to express it across modalities. I want to turn my rage into action and so I will use this to teach my students how they can also move from rage to action. As I listen to their responses to these images, songs, poems, and TV newscasts, I hope this lesson becomes a source of growth for all of us. I need it to.

Padlet (padlet.com) is a free application that allows users to create an online bulletin board to display information about any topic.

Included on sj’s board are a timeline of events surrounding Michael Brown’s death; powerful photographs—Michael Brown and his family members, scenes from the protests, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” images; clips from TV news segments and newspaper coverage; lyrics and video to Lauryn Hill’s song,

“Black Rage” (Hill released and dedicated the song in support of Ferguson); discussion questions; extensions for teaching and activism; and much, much more. With the photograph of Michael Brown’s body lying in the street as its central image, the online bulletin board provokes viewers to emotionally engage with Michael Brown’s death and its aftermath through multiple media and to consider how media and social media influence our understandings about and participation in race matters and social activism.

Platforms like Padlet offer students an arena in which to explore others’ reactions to such events and then construct their own response. Padlet makes multimodal presentations easy to build through combinations of audiovisual elements and text. Check out Padlet’s Gallery (padlet.com/gallery) to see examples created to facilitate discussions, notetaking, and the reading of classic texts like *The Odyssey*.

Next, we feature a YouTube video created by students at Roseville High School in Minnesota (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gy4u44FZk94) as audience response to Sharon Flake’s short story/poem collection, *You Don’t Even Know Me: Stories and Poems about Boys*. In the poem, as in the video, we meet various, young, Black men who are frustrated that their teachers, neighbors, and even friends often fall prey to the negative and limiting stereotypes and discourses that try to dominate their life narratives. There’s the geometry and physics buff whose teacher tells him he should be happy with a C. There’s the boy on the block whose neighbor is like a second mother until she sees him with his friends. Then he’s . . .

Just another black boy,
A threatening, scary sight,
A tall, black, eerie shadow
Moving toward you late at night.

There’s the boy who dreams of rebuilding cities, but his friend just wants to talk about basketball and tells him

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to “quit fronting” and “pretending that [you’re] better than you know [you] really are.” The repeating stanza of the poem has the boys collectively wondering . . .

. . . how could it be
That you’re around me so often
And still don’t know a thing about me?

Indeed, how could it be? Paired with sj Miller’s Padlet bulletin board, this video begs the questions: *What role do the media play in shaping our assumptions about youth of color? How can we use media to “talk*

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What role do the media play in shaping our assumptions about youth of color? How can we use media to “talk back to” negative assumptions and discourses?

We believe it is important for students not just to consume these media but to be active in creating their own responses, to “talk back to” what they hear and see. By engaging in critical media literacy in light of current events, students can explore the construction of media messages, learn about their embedded languages and biases, and discover how

people experience these events differently. We encourage you to share the video with students and invite them to write and publish their own “talk back” poems to the discourses that strive to limit their dreams.

You might also consider pairing the video with another powerful YouTube video, Daniel Beaty’s *Knock Knock* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTZrPVqR0D8), and have students write and perform their own “Knock Knock” poems. We also think teachers could make interesting connections between the videos and Nikki Giovanni’s poem, “Ego Tripping,” and Langston Hughes’s classic poem, “A Dream Deferred.” These videos might give teachers pause: Do you fall prey to the stereotypes that strive to define your students? Do you “know” your students?

Get to know them. And talk to them about race.

When we reached out to Sharon Flake to find out how race matters in her work, she responded:

Race matters. Our children are not fools; they see that it does as well. . . . That is why we must be open and brave enough to discuss such things with our young ones. To

speak up against racism and sexism when we witness it. And to create characters that cannot just speak to the issue, but do so in a wholly unique way that makes young people and adults alike eager to read such stories.

She is definitely raising race as an issue in unique ways. Get to know her work, and check out her website (sharongflake.com), which includes discussion guides for teachers wanting their students to engage with her works.

G. Neri’s graphic novel, *Yummy*, published by Lee & Low in 2010, tells the tragic story of Robert “Yummy” Sandifer, an 11-year-old boy who lived in the Roseland area of Chicago in the early ’80s. When Yummy, who has been initiated into a gang, accidentally shoots a popular neighborhood girl and sparks a national news story and police hunt, he must go into hiding and is ultimately killed by one of his own gang members. Yummy became the poster child for youth gang violence in America when these events led to his appearance on the cover of *Time Magazine* in September 1994 (content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19940919,00.html).

In writing the book, Neri drew from the multiple and varied aspects of Yummy’s story, as provided by the coverage of many Chicago news organizations, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun Times*. Neri explains, “I read everything about the incident, lots of detailed daily reporting, in-depth coverage, court transcripts. I talked to experts on the gang and did my own personal research with gangs in Compton. I even went to Chicago to see all the points in the story myself, including the spot where Yummy died.”

While we see exciting nonfiction teaching opportunities with this graphic novel, like a study of how to tell an authentic news story, it is the hard questions the novel poses that make it an important work to discuss with students. As Neri suggests in the Author’s Note, the book asks, “Was Yummy a cold-blooded killer or a victim?” Neri explains, “The answer is not black-and-white. Yummy was both. . . . he deserves our anger and our understanding.” We encourage you to use this book with your students to consider the questions it poses and what we need to “understand” about Yummy and the many youth who face similar life circumstances. We couldn’t help but hear Michael Brown’s mother’s words (www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8Lsn8xVc5U)

in our ears as we reread this book in the preparation of this column: “Do you know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many Black men graduate? Not many. Because you bring them down to this type of level, where they feel like they don’t got nothing to live for anyway.”

We’re big fans of G. Neri, a former teacher in South Central L.A. who has become well known for his varied and diverse works for young people, including the free-verse novella *Chess Rumble* (2008), which received a Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award; *Ghetto Cowboy* (2011), winner of a Horace Mann Upstanders Book Award; the young adult novels *Surf Mules* (2014) and *Knockout Games* (2014); and most recently, his picture book, *Hello, I’m Johnny Cash* (2014).

When we asked him why he works in such varied, layered media, Neri responded that he sees each project as a “living thing”:

[The story] knows what it wants to be and my job is to help it come into the world with its voice intact. For instance, with *Yummy*, I thought it was going to be a movie, but it wanted to be a graphic novel. *What* had to do with the *why*—the movie would have been rated R and skipped the audience who needed to see it: young boys getting sucked into gangs. Problem: they didn’t read but, like me, they loved comics. Boom. Telling this heavy story in comic format got a lot of non-readers reading.

We wonder how often writing in the classroom is allowed to follow this organic path used by “real” writers. Instead of assigning a multimodal project or a persuasive essay, perhaps students might benefit from seeing where the composition takes them, no matter the media. The teacher’s job, in such an instance, would be to prepare support and scaffolding for the student-selected medium.

G. Neri says the goal of his work is to “get non-readers reading.” The easiest way to do that, he says, “is to give them books that speak to them, books that make students say ‘This book is about me—this is my world.’” One way Neri does this is by using what he calls “urban speak”:

I write the way many of them talk—urban speak—and they hear a voice they can relate to that they rarely see in print. Because of that, I also hear things like my books are amongst the most stolen from libraries—something of which I am dubiously proud. My readers tend to be part of the minority majority—the silent many. As of 2014, kids are more than 50% “minority,” which means we gotta stop referring to ourselves as such. The minority majority may not be as

big on reading as a whole, but that’s largely because of the lack of books out there that speak to them. Once they find that book—watch out.

G. Neri sees his books as essential stepping stones on the bridge toward reading. As he suggests, youth of color who may be reluctant to read may become motivated when they see themselves and hear their voices in books. Perhaps we must begin to make specific spaces in the classroom for students’ voices to be captured in writing or other compositions. We trust that drawing on students’ linguistic funds of knowledge would only motivate them to pursue meaningful and relevant projects.

This motivation can lead young readers to other kinds of books. For online resources to assist you in teaching *Yummy* and other graphic novels, check out the “Graphic Texts in the Classroom” blog page for this book (classroomcomics.wordpress.com/2010/11/07/yummy-the-last-days-of-a-southside-shorty-by-g-neri-illustrated-by-randy-duburke/), the book talk interview with G. Neri, and the Teacher’s Guide at the Lee & Low website (www.leeandlow.com).

Finally, we want to make sure you know about Nikki Grimes’s blog, *Nikki Sounds Off: An Occasional Blog* (www.nikkigrimes.com/blog/). Nikki Grimes is an author and illustrator who travels the world to share her poetry and books. Her YA novels include *Jazmin’s Notebook* (2000); *Bronx Masquerade* (2003); *The Road to Paris* (2008); *Dark Sons* (2010); and *Planet Middle School* (2011). Grimes’s newest book for young adults, *Words with Wings*, received a 2014 Coretta Scott King Honor Award. She is also the author of many children’s books and coauthor (with R. Gregory Christie) of the popular *Dyamonde Daniel* series.

You might not be as familiar with her blog, which is why we mention it here. There, you can read Ms. Grimes’s thoughts on the Ferguson shooting, her lamentations over the lack of films based on children’s and YA titles written by authors of color, and her book

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recommendations (including Kekla Magoon’s newest book, *How It Went Down*, which Grimes describes as “exploring the complexities of race and gun violence in an even-handed way”)—all good stuff to support your use of Grimes’s works in your classroom.

When we reached out to Nikki Grimes and asked her how race matters in the writing she does for young people, she explained that she sees her books as being for *all* readers and warns against what she calls the “ghettoization of children’s literature”:

Consider the issue this way: Were I to suggest that only white children should read *Charlotte’s Web*, the average person, educator or not, would find that patently absurd, wouldn’t you? And yet, otherwise intelligent people regularly imply that books featuring characters of color should only be shared with children of color. Now *that’s* what I call patently absurd, and so should you. But here we are, discussing this very notion.

She also told us a story of one mother who would not allow her daughter to have a copy of *Meet Danitra Brown* because of the African American characters on the cover:

I address the issue whenever I have an opportunity to speak to the gatekeepers, namely teachers, librarians, and booksellers. These are the people who, in the main, along with a child’s parents, determine what books end up in the hands of young readers. A shift in their thinking is sorely needed.

We all have layered lives and identities and so should engage with books containing layered contexts and characters. It serves no one to prejudge which layers are appropriate for which readers. As teachers, we need to supply students with texts that reflect them and all members of society in authentic ways.

Yes, race matters.

And we repeat, we must realize we not only have the opportunity to talk about race in our classrooms but a *responsibility* to do so. We must not become gatekeepers who hold back from real discussions about real lives just because we’re not comfortable talking about race or we think it’s not appropriate.

It is appropriate.

It is necessary.

It matters.

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