

To Be a Co-Worker in the Kingdom of Culture

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In the introduction to his 1903 ground-breaking, seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E. B. DuBois states his conception of what citizenship would mean for African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century: “This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius” (11). In other words, African Americans desire to participate in the U.S. democratic, national culture as fellow citizens, and to develop whatever talents and abilities they have, without being killed or ostracized. With the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, many white Americans have declared that, in essence, DuBois’ call has been answered; now anyone can participate in the nation’s culture, anyone can succeed. At the same time, numerous researchers and activists point to compelling evidence that high levels of racial segregation and discrimination persist, affecting everything from child mortality rates, to access to education, to earnings, to life expectancy. Clearly there is a need for a national dialogue that addresses the distance between perception and reality. In *White Like Me*, Tim Wise describes some of the attitudes that make such dialogue difficult, citing a white citizen’s response: “Aw . . . all that stuff¹ is in the past. It’s time to move on and get with the program” (65). As White observes, such comments convey the extent to which many whites still see themselves as defining national culture:

And there you had it. *The program*; the one that he of course assumed was fair and just, and that he had a right to define, and that others had merely to agree to join. It never occurred to him, nor has it occurred to most whites, that black folks, among other people of color in this land, have every bit as much right as whites to not only join or not join a given “program,” but what’s more to set the terms of the national program itself. (Wise 65)²

When the “program” as it is, doesn’t work for whites, politicians often encourage them to blame minorities or immigrants instead of looking at root causes of the problem (loss of manufacturing sector to overseas labor, the recession, etc.).³

To foster a more constructive and inclusive dialogue in classrooms and develop national dialogue, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has developed an initiative called Inclusive Excellence that can help students create the connections needed to become “co-workers” in DuBois’ sense. Many students lack knowledge of their own and others’ histories, and unconsciously default to the mainstream’s simplistic, stereotypical, or hierarchical notions. Inclusive excellence upsets presumptions of both difference and homogeneity. It defines diversity in broad terms, encompassing both individual aspects (personality, learning style) and social ones (relating to geographical location, generation, social class, race, cultural, gender, or sexual orientation). It aspires to move beyond narrow phrasings of identity politics to allow for individual complexity and yet address social justice issues like achievement gaps, while placing multicultural, working class, gendered, LGBT perspectives on equal standing with “mainstream” perspectives reflecting the experience of middle and upper class whites, usually heterosexual and male. Inclusive Excellence intersects with Liberal Education for America’s

Promise (LEAP), a project that emphasizes critical thinking (inquiry, analysis, ethics, reflection, complexity, and synthesis) in ways that underscore the importance of understanding historical and cultural contexts from multiple points of view. Many educators and business leaders argue that as the world becomes more “global,” our students need to be equipped to deal with diversity, and to have the critical thinking skills emphasized by LEAP. “Business and community leaders [have] echoed what educational researchers ha[ve] documented – that learning in an environment that engages such diversity provides all students with the cognitive skills, intercultural competencies, and civic understanding to help them to thrive in work and citizenship” (Clayton-Pederson).

Understanding culture and participation in expansive ways – from oil paintings to “our mothers’ gardens” -- a central premise in teaching according to Inclusive Excellence is equity rather than equality. In the U.S. we’ve tended to emphasize equality: if one person gets a bottle of water, then everyone should get that. But a focus on equity aims to provide what is appropriate for diverse needs and implicitly to encourage the development of diverse kinds of skill sets for each individual. Though we’re accustomed to thinking of equity when it comes to developmental differences, say, within a family – a nine-year-old and a five-year old have different needs but demand “fairness” -- individuals of the same age have different ways of learning, skills sets, and interests. In terms of learning, some students might do well with reading academic texts and writing papers, while others learn well from physical demonstrations or role playing. Varying methods of instruction and types of assignments is helpful for all kinds of learners. Most of us who do well with traditional academic modes still benefit from increasing the variety of instructional methods demonstrated to be high impact practices. An example often

cited as a model is the movement to make sidewalks and businesses more accessible to people in wheelchairs. Modifications like sloped curbs have benefitted everyone, from parents with strollers to people walking their bicycles.

However, coming to understand and value the diverse ways that people view the world, isn't simply an additive process (enjoy the Swedish meatballs and the collard greens) as the term *inclusive* might suggest; it can feel oppositional or require paradigm shifts: the Homestead Act was a boon for white immigrants but a tragedy for Native Americans. Anti-bias educators commonly describe several fundamental challenges in setting up inclusive dialogue: achieving critical consciousness of white privilege and institutional racism, developing communal models of survival and success, and providing participatory, culturally relevant teaching. *Gods Go Begging* (1999) by Alfredo Veá is one of a small number of texts that model multicultural interactions in a way that can catalyze the transitional work necessary for shared understanding. Tapping into the traditions of jazz and the blues, Veá's approach aligns with recent research on best practices in multicultural education, whether one is working with white students or students of color, working or middle class. That is not to say that readers will agree with all of the novel's social observations. Veá's presentation of youth culture simplifies at times and overlooks promising elements. However, by engaging the text's limitations as well as its insights, we can develop models of dialogue that approach literature as a part of, but not the end product of the discussion.

While *Gods Go Begging* speaks to a wide variety of student audiences, my approach is oriented towards the fairly typical Midwestern university where I teach; approximately ten percent of the student body at the university is made up of students of color, many of whom

come from urban areas (Beloit and Milwaukee), but the majority of white students come from rural and suburban areas that are predominantly white. However, a large percentage of both white and minority students are the first in their families to go to college and share a lack of academic preparedness and rigor, characteristics often attributed exclusively to minorities. As Thomas Frank explains in *What's the Matter With Kansas?* (2004), political rhetoric can obscure these connections. He documents the toll that conservative policies have taken on middle America, describing the economic difficulties and subsequent shrinking of rural populations, such that small-town America has become ghost-town-America, not because of government policies or actions, but because of deregulated capitalism, “. . . that, at its most unrestrained, has little use for small-town merchants or the agricultural system that supported the small towns in the first place” (62).

Frank asserts that those most affected by these kinds of societal changes repeatedly vote against their own economic interests, and maintains that the culture wars are key to this phenomenon. The right, he says, succeeds by mobilizing a politics of resentment that works in terms of images, rather than economics. “Class is about what one drives and where one shops and how one prays, and only secondarily about the work one does or the income one makes” (113). The liberal elite is held responsible for the social woes because the right-wing doesn’t talk about economic issues; they traffic in images that blame latte-sipping liberals for manipulating our culture and supporting women, blacks, and homosexuals who are contributing the erosion of the family, fairness, and so on. “Our culture and our schools and our government, backlashers insist, are controlled by an overeducated ruling class that is contemptuous of the beliefs and practices of the masses of ordinary people. Those who run America, this theory holds, are

despicable, self-important show-offs. They are effete, to use a favorite backlash term. They are arrogant. They are snobs. They are liberals” (115). In contrast, the right depicts themselves as hard-working, church-going, beer-drinking, family-oriented, authentic Americans. In order to mobilize sentiment around the idea of doing away with social safety net programs, the right has ramped up images of race. Even before Reagan’s “welfare queen” images,⁴ the right has used stereotypes that disparage black communities especially in conjunction with social safety net programs, thus mobilizing resentment against both the communities and the programs.

In this social context, where a certain percentage of whites are not only *not* sympathetic but actively encouraged to blame minorities and immigrants for the country’s ills, we see the circumstances we need to negotiate in coming together in respectful, constructive dialogue. When I introduce the idea of inclusive excellence in my predominantly white classes, to get buy-in and foster community, I emphasize the expansive sense of diversity that encompasses personal as well as social differences. I detail the critical thinking skills associated with LEAP, and bring in articles touting benefits, both academic and worldly, of understanding an issue from multiple perspectives.⁵ I require texts like *They Say/I Say* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein that conceive of academic writing as dialogue, and call for listening and representing others’ work fairly. We also engage in activities to set ground rules and get to know each other as a means for highlighting class diversity, exposing differences that might be obscured by shared racial identity and initiating connections across race, gender, sexual orientation, and other assumed barriers. Expanding the idea of diversity to incorporate multiple types of intelligence, interests, and expertise, also helps students who don’t generally feel competent in English class, to feel that their alternate strengths are still visible and worthwhile.

In teaching literary content, I begin by situating *Gods Go Begging* within a dialogue about American identity, looking at various representations of our nation in literature beginning with Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" where working class artisans find work a source of satisfaction and self-expression, each offering their own unique contribution to the nation as a whole. We then look at the omissions and complications of Whitman's ideal as industrialism intensified, via documentaries, immigrant narratives, poetry and songs, to explore from multiple perspectives the search for America, the difficulties encountered, and ways in which culture becomes a resource. Veal's text focuses these concerns and models multiple cross-cultural dialogues in such a way that whites' perspectives don't dominate or function as a center.⁶ The main character, Jesse Pasadoble, is a Latino Vietnam veteran and public defender in San Francisco, struggling with PTSD and relationships, mentally tacking back and forth between the 1990s and his combat experiences in the 1960s. As the novel opens Jesse has three clients to defend: an adolescent African American boy accused of murdering two women who were just about to open a restaurant, a white-supremacist accused of incest, and a Vietnamese immigrant who refuses to communicate. In the discussion that follows, I'll highlight central themes that the novel raises, and then explain how these are congruent with contemporary best practices for inclusive excellence.

The beginning of the novel foregrounds the possibility of cross-cultural healing but immediately raises the question of whether this is realistic or sustainable in an unjust world. The very first chapter of the novel follows two women, one African American, the other Vietnamese, united through their husbands' deaths in the Vietnam War. Though the men fought on opposite sides, they died at the same moment, and through documents left behind, the women find each

other. Together, the two women have transmuted their grief into dreams, drawing on Vietnamese and New Orleans' creole cultural traditions and thus, as the novel notes, colonial French influence, to open a restaurant on a hill in a working class area of San Francisco. The scent of their food, which intermingles influences, momentarily quells drug trade, halts gang fighting, interrupts domestic violence, and evokes sensory memory for the community. But days before the opening, a young black man from the hill, seemingly devoid of feeling, shoots them both. The rest of the surrounding community contemplates the meaning of their deaths, and one person mutters, "Rock breaks scissors . . . Stupid kills beautiful." In other words, the destructive aspects of humanity trump the creative ones, which, in this case, embody a generative mix and resolution of cultural influences. Defining the conditions that create "stupid," and testing whether this is inevitable (is hope realistic) is one purpose of the novel.

The opening directs our attention to the nihilism weighing against any efforts to create change (both with the shooter and the community's reaction), and the necessity of attending to the ways in which oppression impacts the psyche. In this situation disappointment turns back on the members of the community themselves.

In their most secret hearts, some people on the hill began to resent the women themselves. They whispered among themselves that Persephone Flyer and Mai Adrong had reached too high. They had overreached. The women had erected an amazing fortification to fend off attacks of loneliness, pessimism and failure.

"You can't tempt God like that," they said. "You can't raise a temple that high."

“Fire from heaven will strike you down,” said an old retired minister. “His fire will strike you down.”

. . . ‘You see’ – a mother would wave a finger at her two young daughters – ‘you can’t go getting about your raising. You can’t go being what you ain’t.’”

No one on the hill would admit it, but what they resented was the death of hope. (25)

Initially, many students might understand this self-blame as a “pathology” of urban areas, but researchers like Jean Twenge in *Generation Me* argue that the current generation exhibits a widespread sense of powerlessness when it comes to creating social change. Paul Loeb in *The Soul of a Citizen*, attributes this sense of impotence to “learned passivity.” Urban educators, like Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Shawn Ginwright, detail findings similar to Veá’s. Within the novel, under diverse circumstances, similar reactions recur. Other characters—in particular, U.S. soldiers in Vietnam—voice the same kinds of sentiments, so that we come to see this reaction as an effect of *systemic* disregard.

Seeking to break the cycles that foster passivity, Veá suggests ways in which art can offer a sustaining vision in his use of a blues—jazz sensibility applied to the situation of U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War. Veá’s approach to the blues parallels Ralph Ellison’s sense of the blues as a way of processing experience rather than as a specific musical genre. Ellison understands the blues as a cultural means of coping with a reality that might not be amenable to immediate change, where the representative individual excavates the brutal experience, rather than dismissing it, trying not to think about it, or other frequently ineffective strategies. Through the use of tragic-comic humor that implicitly affirms the representative individual (and thus, the

community), the blues affirm the individual's power to survive the situation, even if only to wake up and encounter it the next day (Werner 68-71). Because many students are no longer familiar with the blues, I usually schedule a class session before we get to the novel, to explore the sustaining effects of the blues and their importance in our national culture. To work with music also draws on additional intelligences that students possess, making the classroom more inclusive in its functioning.

In the novel, the US soldiers drafted into the Vietnam War are of a wide array of ethnicities, but all of the same social class. "They didn't draft college kids, and the boys with the lowest test scores in boot camp were stuck in the infantry. It was always the sons of the poor who ended up on hills like this" (103). Because they're the sons of the poor, they're seen as expendable. Amos Flyer, a sergeant and the husband of Persephone, draws on blues-phrasing to sum up the situation: "There ain't no justice out here, man, there's just us" (95). What this means becomes clearer as, prefiguring the urban neighborhood in San Francisco, all the support systems of the military underfunction when it comes to protecting the lives of the boys on the hill, as does the social contract when it comes to the boys in the city. Furthermore, the consequences of poor decisions or poor planning don't impact those insulated by privilege. During the war, Intelligence officers provide dubious information and leave the consequences to the enlisted men. As Cornelius, one of those disregarded draftees, reflects:

They were never right, and they never stuck around to see what happened when they were wrong. Last night they had fallen all over themselves in their mad dash for the safety of the choppers, all the while assuring field command on the hill that there were no NVA units in the area larger than platoon strength. The

chicken-shits left behind most of their equipment, two half-full cups of warm coffee, and three battalions of seasoned North Vietnamese regulars with mortars and heavy armor just beyond the treeline. (102-103)

Jesse, the main character, and the other “grunts” are defending a communications relay which aims to transmit information to and from South Vietnamese regulars implanted into the NVA along the Laotian border, in an effort to gain information about the supply lines. But, as the men say, suggesting a cross-national commonality of working class folks, “It never fucking works. Poor bastards always get caught and the CIA always leaves them twisting in the breeze, pretending it never happened” (103). Furthermore, the whole mission, which results in the deaths of Jesse’s friends and leads to decades-long trauma, turns out to be worthless; the communications station is only a decoy. As the chaplain says, if this kind of full-scale destruction happened in Central Park, there would be national mourning, but out here, in the war, it’s business as usual, and the culpable get promoted. “He [Amos] said that some deskbound full-bird colonel over at command came up with this bright idea. He said that the bastard’s probably calling his wife back home in Ohio right now, and is telling her about his promotion” (136). Because these tragedies haven’t been adequately acknowledged by those writing the mainstream celebratory histories, the “grunts” of society who most need to understand these experiences, gain little from the national narratives except the myths provided by those who want to “recruit” them, a point worth exploring with students.

In the face of such disgusting nonchalance, these comments evidence the way nihilism sets in. In a conversation with a religious superior whose air-conditioned office metaphorically conveys his distance from the war itself, the chaplain relays the men’s responses: “They say, ‘It

don't mean nothing.' That's their answer when things are beyond reason and beyond hope. 'It don't mean nothing.' And they're right! None of this means nothing. None of this hellhole adds up to democracy, and none of this means God" (126). The superior's response is cynical marketing—the closest he's been to combat is binocular vision. Just give them a rationale, he tells the chaplain.

You give them democracy and God! Now, that's the stuff of prayers. That's the stuff they can repeat on Veterans' Day and Memorial Day. You tell them their son died bravely and with a movie star's sneer on his lips One of these days they'll get a statue or something. The survivors will organize themselves into VFW chapters and tell stories to kids who'll ignore them. Now, get back to that goddamn hill. Do your job! Take part in their facile, foxhole philosophies. (127)

Against the backdrop of this contempt, *Vea*, through the activity of “supposing,” offers a way for the soldiers to understand their lives as significant, to envision an alternative future. When “supposing,” Jesse and the other soldiers imagine what would have to have happened for a different event in the present to be true or they contemplate what would happen if a particular historical event were changed. In this novel, the answer is always in service of a collective liberatory impulse that *Vea* imagines in terms of jazz, drawing again on Ellison. As with the blues, Ellison imagines jazz as a process, a way of reimagining possibility. As a jazz-oriented artist might begin with a well-known theme and then improvise off of that, so the novel begins with known history and offers a way of imagining potentialities that might not at the moment exist, a way to understand the effects of history but still envision alternative futures. “Unlike in a classical work, in which the composition dictates the arc of the performance, [jazz

improvisation] assert[s] the collective power of the composer/performer; with “successive rounds of improvisation . . . [an artist] shows that there are endless nuanced ways to communicate” (Crouch et al.). As Craig Werner explains, “Ralph Ellison defined the jazz impulse as a constant process of redefinition. The jazz artist constantly reworks her identity on three levels: (1) as an individual; (2) as a member of a community; and (3) as a ‘link in the chain of tradition.’ Nothing is ever a given. Who you are, the people you live with and for, the culture you bear: everything remains open to question, probing, reevaluation” (132).⁷

Gods Go Begging improvises conversations that model inclusive classroom dialogues. Veá emphasizes the connections between history and current social realities. In a brief interlude between battles, a fellow Latino soldier asks Jesse if he thinks there will ever be Mexicans on the moon, a question about future potential (hope), given the symbolic importance of the U.S. space program at that time (1968). In answering, Jesse and other soldiers, “suppose” what historical conditions would have to be changed in order to lead to mexicanos in space. They contemplate what would have happened if the Puritans who “abstained from just about everything that was any fun at all” had landed in the Yucatan and Cortez had landed on Plymouth Rock (115). As is evident in the men’s humorous commentary, the blues inform the improvisation: “‘They should have abstained from long ocean voyages,’ said Jim Earl, while exhaling a thick curtain of smoke. The other Indians grunted” (115). The men “suppose” that when the religious pilgrims reached the Yucatan, they would have been repelled by the native women and lacking military power, isolated themselves. They’d end up with a “huge self-mortification theme park on the island and a body of water to keep the dreariness and the Protestant work ethic away from the shores of Quintana Roo. The Mexicans would have established a Border Patrol to keep those stern, pasty-

faced people at bay.’ ‘Keep those bastards from taking jobs away from the Mexicans!’ exclaimed Mendez” (116-17). One can appreciate the release of the imagined reversal of position that undercuts “normal” assumptions of white superiority. The men also suppose that if Cortez had landed at Plymouth Rock, he would have encountered the Iroquois who didn’t have the same myth of white gods as did the Aztecs, and so they would have wiped him out. The Dutch merchants and French and Russian trappers who came for furs rather than settlements would have been allowed to co-exist, and the Huron nation would still be alive. “Today, everything west of the Mississippi and north of Texas would be called Russo-Aztlan; everything east would be called Kola-Quebec” (118). Jesse supposes that Montezuma would have learned from the slaughter of Cortez, and then he would have sought help from enemies of the English and the Spaniards. He would have “sent his royal emissaries to Dublin and Edinburgh to speak to all of the clan chieftains of the Ireland and the Scots” (118), and “in the seventeenth century, thirty thousand Aztec soldiers would have joined the Irish for an invasion of England” (118-19). The Inquisition in Spain would have ended earlier without the gold from the new world; the Industrial Revolution would have begun in Mexico, Franco might not have come to power, “‘And we wouldn’t be standing here in Indian country,’” spat Jim Earl, completely aware of the irony in his words” (119). When a white Midwesterner asks, “What about me and my family?” Jesse, ascertaining that his surname is Dutch, explains that he would have become a Dutch Kola-Quebecois, and another soldier notes that he would then have “. . . a real culture. White don’t mean any more than black does” (119). Thus, the act of supposing diminishes the perceived inevitability of the present to evoke a mutual multicultural future.

For jazz artists, music provides a model of the world. “Beautiful” music based on conventions – verse and chorus, triadic harmonies, the familiar combinations of instruments in a bebop quartet or a guitar rock band – implies a set way of perceiving and experiencing the world. You know what’s coming next, how you fit. Nothing *wrong* with that. The jazz impulse asks what about those parts that *don’t* fit: the dreams, desires, unanswered questions. Part of the reason jazz comes out of the African American tradition – though it reserves the right to go absolutely anywhere – has to do with what conventions have meant to black folk. Stay in your place, over on the other side of the tracks. Enjoy the back of the bus. Jazz does its best to blow that kind of complacency away. Which is why jazz sounds revolutionary even when it doesn’t pay much attention to next week’s election or anybody’s party line. Jazz says we don’t have to do it the way we’ve always done it. We can do it like this or like that (133)

The novel suggests that our survival depends on imagination and invention, and constructs bridges between experiences not previously recognized as similar (the Irish and the Mexican Aztecs, for instance), where the opportunity of collective action or creative cultural fusion hasn’t been acted on yet. If one doesn’t understand the importance of the connections, Veja provides cautionary examples like the Supreme Being, a white supremacist who aims for “purity” but is dependent on the help of Jesse and his investigator Eddy who is “Hawaiian of Japanese descent” (54). The problem of supremacist notions of identity is international. For instance, during the war, Jesse connects with an enemy soldier through the shared ability to speak French and the mutual experience of racism. Hong Trac, a South Vietnamese prisoner is Cham, an ethnic group

disparaged by other Vietnamese. In this example, as in the example of Mai and Persephone, the effects of colonialism (shared language and mutual experience of racism) can be repurposed by human ingenuity: “every built thing has its unmeant purpose” Adrienne Rich writes in “Powers of Recuperation.” Indeed, throughout the novel, cooking symbolizes the nurturing fertility of cross-cultural imagination. The restaurant that was to be opened, combined elements of Southern creole (so by definition a mixture already of French and African American and Cajun heritages) and Vietnamese (also-French-influenced) food. Countries with a history of “purity” don’t fare too well in this novel, as the disparaging comments about English food indicate. This symbolism also provides an opportunity to explore the rhetoric of colorblindness that students often use. Acting on the jazz impulse, however, requires critical consciousness. Key to students’ academic success, this critical knowledge is found, Vea asserts, in sources that run counter to the superficialities of the mass media. The novel links the urban youth Jesse represents as a public defender in the 1990s, demographically and metaphorically to the Vietnam veterans; the economics and the neighborhoods of draftees and youth are the same. Just as the soldiers suffer from PTSD, so do the urban youth, only the war they’re in is linked to historical, cultural disregard, compounded by mass media. Jesse and Eddy diagnose the cultural damage they as a kind of “Urban Tourette’s.” Eddy explains that the mixing of gasses from industry and drug residue have mixed with fast food and under the influence of television have:

“ . . . leach[ed] the human spirit out of these kids. It attacks and destroys the hippocampus so that these kids have no future and no cultural memory. Without a hippocampus they are forced to live in the eternal now. The same thing happens to all the vatos in the Mission. The gas robs all of them of their souls.”

“Like soldiers in extremis,” mused Jesse.

“Jesse, these kids are incapable of abstraction. Everything in their lives is physical and in the immediate present. They need to own things now; they need to react to insults now Hell, half the boys that were raised in this place are already in state prison. When the union movement was murdered in America, the bodies were thrown here and a thousand places like this.” (170)

Without critical consciousness, the boys are vulnerable to self-hatred and cultural and corporate manipulation, lacking the ability to envision community and work collectively toward change. In *Gods Go Begging*, John Wayne embodies a glorified American masculinity responsible for much recruiting in the Vietnam War, prefiguring sports and music celebrities used to convert youths’ discontent into consumption. In Vietnam, “Americans [were] sent . . . to fight against an evil and undefinable thing called Communism: to fight for blue jeans and convertibles and full-color foldouts of big-breasted blondes. . . .” (79). Facile sports-related images at home falsified the actual experience of war, and betrayed young recruits.

“War” was just a word in some politician’s mouth. “Combat” was a word that bartenders and sportscasters used to describe a football game. “Sudden death” was something that jocks looked forward to in a game that’s gone into overtime. “Next of kin” was just a phrase, just a bunch of faceless people back in the world. It was all a judas-goat lie, like John Wayne wading through Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima, and them recruitment posters. (94)

In the 1990s, sports-related advertising offers falsely individualistic paths of escape to folks in inhumane, dead-end conditions. The novel is frank about the brutal inequality of America.

Every child born on this hill had entered this world without the slightest chance to succeed. That chance had been ritually excised at birth, as routinely as the removal of the foreskin.

Having suffered that mutilation ceremony, every child had been given rights to an automatic weapon, a pair of oversized shoes made by Indonesian slave labor, and a personal saint – a celebrity athlete who had “gotten out,” a patron point man who had scouted out the invisible path to the other world and would soon return to lead the way there. (163)

As signs marking the path out, the novel sardonically substitutes “white, balding television sports announcers” and sports clothing lines for fairytale bread crumbs (163). “Over the years one or two of their predecessors had managed to use their athletic abilities to escape this place, only to become transformed into strutting, megalomaniacal Judas goats for various clothing and fortified beer companies. They were the new John Waynes, peddling the myth” (163). Meanwhile, aspirational, the “soldiers” take care to sport the right “uniform” (163). Both the draftees and the urban youth face an America that yields no true self-consciousness. The narrative of our nation as beacon and model offers limited guidance to those whose histories have been “buried, wasted, or lost” as Muriel Rukeyser says. “America had fully expected to win without suffering, without loss. The boys on the hill knew differently. The American Dream – the two-bedroom house with a white-picket fence – had always been built on a graveyard. It had always been built at the expense of the Huron Nation, at the expense of the bison, and at the expense of the Vietnamese. It had always been built on a hill” (197). In combination with mass media entertainments, this national silence results in a lack of vocabulary to articulate

perceptions or states of feeling, particularly in the impoverished urban settings of the novel, but, as many of my students could testify, not exclusive to it.

Here, where Biscuit Boy was born and raised, was a free-fire zone, open season on any moment of calm. Like the Middle Ages, this was a place of basic oral communication only. An oligarchy of sports and movie celebrities ruled over a new consumer peasantry. Like poor soldier serfs, these children built their lives around the imaginary castles of athletes and actors. In this land of functional illiteracy, there were icons everywhere, sports icons, icons of status, icons on the computer screen. There were icons on every television urging children to buy denim icons for their legs and canvas icons for their feet. As a new medieval era dawned, iconography, cryptography, and feudal impotence merged and now held sway. (169)

The means that Jesse employs to foster critical consciousness is cultural literacy through classic African American texts written by Ernest Gaines, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin that offer histories that acknowledge the “losses” and thus provide some analysis and imagination with which to confront the present. Given the books, Calvin begins to articulate his own perceptions, as Jesse explains to the jury: “Once his own spirit was a riddle, an unbreakable code. What has changed is Calvin’s newfound ability to name the things within his own soul, to give them voice. You have to know that your life is empty before you can begin to fill it” (273). However, Ve’a’s idea of culture is borderline elitist, defining hip hop (and sports) as part of the problem, when both can be used effectively to develop these abilities. To be sure, there is much to critique in mainstream cultural productions that often promote sexism, homophobia, and materialism. But,

as educator-activist Jeff Duncan-Andrade explains, if “culturally relevant pedagogy” is limited to ethnically relevant texts, delivered in traditional ways, it’s not particularly effective. To “reject and debase youth culture as academically irrelevant and socially reprehensible . . . contributes to many students’ perceptions that school is at odds with their personal and cultural interests” (*What a Coach* 58). Understanding youths as organic intellectuals, creators as well as consumers of culture, he makes the case that critically conscious attention to youth culture—sports, music, television, video games, slang, fashion—can develop students’ academic skills and provide “access to broader society’s valued knowledge” (58), particularly if teachers employ participatory educational methods (*What A Coach* 56).⁸

But the novel suggests that more than individual critical consciousness is necessary for healing, a dilemma we raise in the classroom as we emphasize the importance of dialogue and student-to-student interactions to facilitate learning. Any teacher knows the power of a message when it’s transmitted from one student to another, when the words convey intellectual and emotional truth.⁹ In *Gods Go Begging*, by the 1990s, Jesse has attained critical consciousness but still hasn’t healed. His efforts at life-makeovers and his pain over clients’ misfortunes make plain his dedication to others, but he eschews emotional connection with women as onerous. The awareness of the forces arrayed against ordinary folks proves toxic without the ability to connect with others who know the same pain—without literate witnessing. Where can we learn this? Mainstream movies again provide the wrong answers: “‘Soft rape,’ Penelope would call them, countless movies about post-pubescent men winning sexual license by rescuing the once unattainable, now helpless girl-woman, by using daring and violence to skirt around acts of intimacy, words of communication and commitment. ‘Kill enough people and you qualify for a

waiver of the courtship requirement. Don't take her to dinner and talk to her . . ." (17). Not until Jesse shares his experiences of the toxic aftereffects of war with another veteran, Hollis, does he understand that he needs to risk the foolishness of vulnerability, to acknowledge the pain associated with the unprotected naiveté of his youth when he was initiated into deep blues misery and chaos. This is nothing like the laconic, ostensibly self-sufficient John Wayne masculinity. Hollis explains, "I thought that war let me see the real things about who we are. It was like all the truth you could handle – not like living in the world, back here where nothin's true" (222). He found himself unable to embrace his wife, beating her instead. "I knew what was right, but it seemed so foolish, so weak" (222). He continues: "Here, inside me,' he placed a palm on his chest, 'I love things, I love lots of things, but I never can reach out for them. I got no arms for that. I love music and rhythms, but the foolishness of dancin' makes me paralyzed. . . . Shit, I see the death in everything even more than the life'" (222-3). The shared discussion of how the war has turned them from men into stone (223) sparks something in Jesse.

"To fools," said Jesse as he raised his glass. All at once the poem ["Fire and Ice"] made sense to him. Robert Frost had been writing about the process of poetry itself, about the process of creation. It is desire that creates poetry, that sparks into flame those incredibly rare moments of humanity in our mundane and selfish human lives. . . . All at once it was clear to him what they had been saying: the end of desire was a greater tragedy than the end of life itself. Ice keeps the hand from reaching out. It is ice that keeps the rhythmic soul from dancing, from improvising. Desire could never be the agent that ends the world. (225)

Choosing to risk foolishness and exposure allows him to experience the reality of connection as well as destruction. He returns to his girlfriend who has almost given up on him.

As they kissed he sobbed a full stratification of tears; a wrenching, rippled core sample of himself: There was belated proof of a sentient childhood, then a silvery stratum of innocence; a green layer of budding sexuality veined by lines of nascent romance; a deep cobalt layer formed by the pressurized brutality of the now infamous blue ballet; then a coal-black layer, denser and deeper than all the rest combined, for all the dark years that followed – years of life without loving.
(314-15)

His ability to accept himself as foolish cuts through his protective cynicism and opens his vision and to understand the stories of Persephone and Amos, Mai and Trinh, as exemplars of transcendent love, rather than needless waste. Indeed, how we understand these stories indicates something about our own orientations toward the world.

The kinds of discussions that arise from teaching the novel reinforce current research on best practices in reaching urban youth and segregated whites. For students of color, Veá’s analyses accord with contemporary pedagogical innovators.’ For instance, in *Black Youth Rising* (2010) educator and activist Professor Shawn Ginwright argues against culture-of-poverty phrasings that pathologize urban youth. Instead, conceiving the effects of poverty and institutional racism as trauma that constrains rather than controls behavior, he puts the focus on healing, building community relationships to develop critical consciousness. Similarly, in “Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete,” Jeff Duncan-Andrade articulates “audacious” critical hope as an ontological need, “especially in the lives and the

pedagogy of educators working in communities where forms of social misery seem to have taken up permanent residence” (55). In this essay and others, building on the work of Paulo Freire, he explicates double consciousness as critical consciousness for students, and introduces classroom practices that demystify the media and reinforce group rather than individualistic models of success. Like Veia, he contends that we must risk ourselves to foster genuine rather than “hokey” hope. Spreading audacious hope requires sharing the burden of students’ suffering through the sacrifice of time and energy to foster relationships that can help us connect teaching to students’ lives and channel emotional responses toward social change. “This makes us better people as it makes us better teachers, and it models for our students that the painful path *is* the hopeful path” (63). Similarly, for white students, the novel spurs critical awareness of social class, the social construction of whiteness, and the damaging effects of white supremacy, pivotal to the work of educators such as Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia G. Ramsey, authors of *What if All the Kids are White?*

In addition to discussion, current pedagogical theory emphasizes the need for participatory forms of learning. Text-based interpretations are significant, but alone are not responsive enough to students’ multiple styles of learning. In defining students as creators as well as consumers, Duncan-Andrade and others like Julio Cammarota, construct projects that matter to students’ lives.¹⁰ Even though Veia understands youth culture differently, the possibilities suggested by “supposing” provide a way to engage students to combat the passivity and hopelessness detailed at the beginning of the novel, so that even if beauty can’t always trump stupid, we have enough of a sense of efficacy to keep battling. Thus Veia’s novel provides a jumping off point for considering the central themes outlined by educators who aim for

empowerment and anti-bias work: twin goals of Inclusive Excellence. What remains is for educators to facilitate discussions, provide opportunities for research and historical learning, offer strategies for critical analysis of culture, and create assignments for collective creative work. As the last line of the novel says, “Everything turns on jazz” (320).

Notes

¹ As Wise explains, “‘All that’ is the term whites tend to use instead of that other one; the one people of color tend to favor when speaking of the same thing. What’s that other one again? Oh yeah. ‘Genocide’” (57).

² What’s more, historical studies show that the majority of whites have thought that the racial status quo was fine and fair, even during historical eras of segregation (see Wise –*Colorblind*, 65).

³ See *White Like Me* by Tim Wise (90, 146-7) and *What’s the Matter With Kansas* by Thomas Frank (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004).

⁴ For more detail see *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics* by Dan T. Carter (1995)

⁵ See, for example, “Multicultural Critical Theory. At B-School?” by Lane Wallace in the *New York Times*, 1/9/2010.

⁶ bell hooks’ introduction to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* offers a margin-center image of double-consciousness that can be useful here.

⁷ As with the blues, I bring in specific examples of the jazz impulse for students prior to reading Veal. While students are not any more familiar with jazz, they have heard hip hop remixing, and to bring in specific examples can be useful when we come to exploring Veal’s conceptions of youth culture.

⁸ There are also numerous programs operating outside the schools that employ hip hop as part of consciousness raising. See, for example, Youth Roots in Oakland or WordPlay in Baton Rouge.

⁹ At a lecture on the function of audience – the dynamics of participatory listening in Spoken Word settings, Anna West, co-founded of the acclaimed Louder Than a Bomb teen poetry slam in Chicago, suggested that students-poets need initiated audiences who can set the standards for each other. As an example, she explained how when she moved to Baton Rouge, just after Katrina, as a thirty-something white woman from Chicago, she couldn't provide a literate audience for the teens with whom she was working. The examples of Chicago youths were too foreign for local students to find promise of their own capabilities there. But West contacted a young New Orleans spoken word artist to post some of his work online. When she showed it to her students, and asked them to write back to this poet, he became their literate audience, initiating them into spoken word, jump starting the program.

¹⁰ As an example of how participatory education can help students understand conditions as collective rather than merely individual, Cammarota describes a project done by a young man, Yolo, who had immigrated from Mexico and was put in a substandard bilingual education program in Arizona, where he was supposed to learn English in one year. In a Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) class, Yolo began a research project on bilingual education at his school. As he took photographs of classes where teachers ignored students who didn't understand English -- didn't give them worksheets, didn't involve them in discussions -- he was able to show that these students were not getting an education. He and other students took their evidence and arguments to the school board. Through this project Yolo came to realize that the

problems were not personal (his inability to learn English) but social (school and state policies).

“He has the capacity to learn but institutional forces attempt to limit this capacity. When Yolo realized his agency, he proceeded to excel academically” (839).

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