(Un)Learning Through Narrative Fiction: Toward a Psychoanalytically Informed Anticolonial Education

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It is now urgent
To dare to know oneself,
To dare to confess to oneself what one is,
To dare to ask oneself what one wants to be.
–Suzanne Césaire

All that can save you now is your confrontation with your own history; it is not your past, but your present.
—James Baldwin

Abstract

In this paper I call for an emotional confrontation with our traumatic, racist, and often unacknowledged history. I share ideas, experiences, and pedagogical strategies with which to engage difficult dialogue about difficult knowledge, in such a way as to disarm defense and, potentially inspire anti-racist activism in education and beyond. The first strategy is to develop psychoanalytic sensibilities in education. I argue that this will help us begin to invite the "freedom to feel" into classrooms that customarily prioritize freedom of thought. The second strategy is to insist that a confrontation with traumatic elements of untold history, and unacknowledged racial (and other) injustices in our current reality, will be uncomfortable. I emphasize that we must work on our capacity to tolerate discomfort and develop our capacities to mourn (loss of cherished belief, loss of innocence, loss of privilege, among other forms of loss). Third, I argue that "knowing ignorance" can be a powerful antidote to the structural ignorance that has hindered our capacities to think critically and creatively in solidarity with different others. I conclude by suggesting that engagement with narrative fiction in film and literature, is a promising pedagogical approach that enables transformative dialogue to take place. I share a few of my favorite films and short stories that have yielded fruitful conversations in my own social justice-oriented classrooms.

Keywords: *anticolonial education; psychoanalysis; ignorance; acknowledging traumatic histories; unlearning through narrative fiction*

In celebration of Juneteenth 2020, *The New Yorker* featured a page turning article, "The History That James Baldwin Wanted America to See."[1] In it, author Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. writes, "[f]or Baldwin, the past had always been bent in the service of a lie," and he asks: "Could a true story be told?"[2] Glaude reports on how both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Baldwin continued the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, who had dedicated his lifework to confronting and dismantling historical distortions about black folk, and white America alike. Dubois demonstrated that "black people have been kept in oppression and deprivation by a poisonous fog of lies that depicted them as inferior, born deficient, and deservedly doomed to servitude to the grave."[3] In a February 1968 speech dedicated to Dubois, Dr. King orated, "White America, drenched with lies about Negroes, has lived too long in a fog of ignorance."[4] Months later, reflecting on the dangerous and tragic road that led to King's execution in Memphis, Baldwin questioned whether the country would have the courage to confront its demons. "Could America tell itself the truth about how it had arrived at this moment? And did it have the moral stamina to surrender the comfort of its lies?"[5] Baldwin argued that new laws, gestures of sympathy, and acts of racial charity would never suffice to change the course of the country. Something more radical had to be done; a different history had to be told. In this paper, I invite educators to think about how we might heed Baldwin's call.

As we navigate a new pandemic that has compounded and exposed our older one, the grave structural racial injustices the country has yet to address, and as we traverse the rise of the alt-right here, and around the globe, now more than ever, we must seek to better understand the ways in which too many people have ignored how our white supremacist past permeates our present.[6] We must better understand the past, so we can better navigate our present, and imagine a future free of state sanctioned violence, profit logic destruction, devastation, oppression. Now more than ever we must ask: How does what we learn about the past shape how we see (and don't see) the present, and dream of a future? How might we begin to finally reckon with how the violence of our colonial past has been erased from mainstream history, only to repeat itself in new and seemingly more destructive ways in our present? How should we teach about the horrors of history, the history we'd rather forget (and seems largely to have been forgotten), one that repeats, seemingly never ends, one which we can never fully comprehend?

Because the perspectives, accomplishments, and accounts of oppressed peoples who were (and continue to be) treated with (unjustifiable) (state backed and intimate) violence are often marginalized in mainstream history, and the official national narrative, the stories many have been told, and continue to tell, about who we are, and how we got here, are often quite skewed.[7] Dominant discourses of American exceptionalism, professed democratic ideals of life, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness foreclose possibilities for a collective confrontation with the traumatic elements of our history. In this "whitewashing" of our national narrative,

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1. Cited in Glaude, Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-history-that-james-baldwin-wanted-america-to-see#intcid=recommendations_the-new-yorker-homepage_11f81167-e88c-4ad0-a449-8a3d5b0eb805_popular4-1
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Dr. King delivered the Centennial Address, "Honoring Dr. Dubois" at Carnegie Hall in New York City on February 23, 1968, the one hundredth anniversary of Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois's birth. Available at: https://www.crmvet.org/info/68mlkweb.htm
5. Glaude, 2020.
6. Covid 19 and the public execution of George Floyd shine a light on structural and racialized inequalities that have never been adequately addressed.
7. Much has been written about this matter. See in particular: Baldwin, J. *Baldwin Collected Essays.* Ed. Morrison, T. (New York: Library of America) 1998; Loewen, J. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong.* (The New Press, 1995).

American historians effectively excluded black Americans ''from the national story'' and ''denied blacks access to the institutional means of changing the narrative.''[8] This "racial erasure," past and present, imposes a structural ignorance rendering us (differently) complicit in the repetition of race based state violence, and misrecognition of the damaging ways in which it impacts each and every one of us.[9]

The problem of addressing what we know and don't know about ourselves and our histories is complex. We must learn to navigate elements of structural, as well as subjective, forms of ignorance. Not only do we need to address the gaps and lapses in official narratives, but we must also reckon with ways in which resisting and defending against difficult knowledge is part of what it means to be a member of the human condition.[10] Challenging cherished belief, grappling with new knowledge that questions or clashes with one's world view, unlearning history, rethinking national identity, is tricky business indeed.[11] Yet, in education generally speaking, and in teacher education in particular, we have yet to fully grapple with what knowledge and ignorance do to (and for) us, particularly the difficult knowledge of "social catastrophe, evidence of woeful disregard, experiences of social violence, illness, and death."[12] How might teacher educators (and educators in general) extend a compelling invitation to unlearn distorted versions of history and rethink a national identity that many have come to prize with passion and pride? How can students, and teachers alike, think critically about our official national narratives of equality and meritocracy when so much of who they think they are is invested in them?

In what follows, I call for an emotional confrontation with our traumatic history, not just a rational assessment of it. I share ideas, experiences, and pedagogical strategies with which to engage difficult dialogue about difficult knowledge, in such a way as to disarm defense (in so far as that is possible) and, potentially, (hopefully) inspire anti-racist activism. Though I do have teacher education as a central focus, I suggest that these strategies can be adapted and incorporated into almost any curriculum. The first is that we engage with key insight from psychoanalytic theory to address the affect involved in learning and thinking, with emphasis on the human (all too human) propensity to defend against difficult knowledge. We must learn not only to encourage and recognize freedom of thought, but we must also begin to invite the "freedom to feel" into our classrooms.[13] The second is an insistence that a confrontation with traumatic elements of untold history, and our current reality, will be uncomfortable. I emphasize that we must work on our capacity to tolerate discomfort, and develop our capacities to mourn (loss of cherished belief, loss of innocence, loss of privilege, among other forms of loss). Third, I argue that "knowing ignorance" can be a powerful antidote to the structural ignorance that has hindered our capacities to think critically and creatively in solidarity with different others. I conclude by suggesting that including "poetic knowledge," igniting the literary imagination, through engagement with narrative fiction in film and literature, is a promising approach that enables transformative dialogue to take place. I share a few of my favorite films and short stories that have yielded fruitful conversations in my own social justice oriented classrooms.

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8. Woods, A. "The Work Before Us: Whiteness and the Psychoanalytic Institute," Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society Vol. 25: 2, 2020, 234.

9. Charles Mills, "White Ignorance" in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (State University of New York Press, 2007), 11–38.

10. Deborah Britzman, "Teacher Education in the Confusion of Our Times" in *Journal of Teacher Education, 51:3, 2000.*

11. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education.* (Routledge, 1999).

12. Britzman, *2000.*

13. Arthur Jersild, *When Teachers Face Themselves.* (Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1955).

Freedom to Feel: On Developing Psychoanalytic Sensibilities in Education

Psychoanalysis teaches us that individuals and cultures alike develop their character and values based largely on how they respond to the traumas of their history. Further, it sees emotional life as our most significant resource for learning to think, and in learning to think differently. [14] Psychoanalysis has always been concerned with the ways in which perception is passionate, and defends against difficult knowledge. By incorporating psychoanalytic sensibilities to difficult dialogue on divisive issues like the global pandemic, ongoing systemic racism, we can invite examination of our own unacknowledged attachments and defensive refusals to know or think differently. We can learn to analyze the affect involved in falling into the all too familiar trap of belief confirmation. We can improve our capacities for participating in genuine dialogue as impetus for collaborative investigation toward personal and social transformation. And yet, psychoanalytic discourse remains relatively marginalized in educational theory and practice.

One notable exception to the defensive refusal to engage psychoanalytic theory in teacher education is Arthur Jersild's groundbreaking work, *When Teachers Face Themselves.* Jersild brings to light the emotional life of teachers, and explores their defenses against it.[15] In talking to hundreds of teachers about their work and lives, Jersild discovered that teachers had secret emotional lives that pained and perplexed them, and that they largely endured these troubling affects alone in silence. He found that anxiety, loneliness, hostility, and desire, were central to the emotional world of teachers, as were numerous ways in which defenses were mobilized against them. Remarkably, however, he also discovered that when prompted, teachers seemed eager to share the innermost feelings they struggled to keep at bay. "If people could encourage one another to come out from behind the curtain that commonly conceals their emotions from others and from themselves," he wrote, "these emotions might be faced in an insight-producing way."[16] He emphasized that "much of what is called thinking is governed by undisclosed feelings. Logic is often ruled by fear or anger."[17] We need, he argued, to be able to recognize how feeling influences thought if the intellect is be able to function freely.

And yet, the majority of schooling and academic life centers the notion of freedom of thought. Jersild shows that what is more important is the need to nurture the freedom to feel, the courage to face emotions such as fear, anxiety, loneliness, and hostility that are central in the lives of teachers and students (and all members of our human condition). He urged that our affective lives need to become a central focus of teacher education programs, so that we can stop dangerously defending against them. The defense against negative affect can take many forms, such as projecting it onto others, viewing it as pathology rather than an everyday reality, flying off the handle too easily, or being unable to take criticism, to name but a select few. When defenses are unleashed in classrooms, learning shuts down, and the impetus to investigation becomes thwarted. Defenses are designed to help us transform unpleasant feelings, thoughts, and insights into something more tolerable. It is important to note, however, that while they may be life enhancing strategies, they can also have devasting and destructive consequences. When we invite students to reflect on particularly touchy and taboo topics such as systemic racial injustice, state violence, systemic and subjective forms of ignorance, we should expect defense and resistance, and learn how to work through it.

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14. Wilfred Bion, "A Psychoanalytic Study of Thinking," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis; 43 (1962), 306-310.*
15. Jersild, 1955.
16. Jersild, 85.
17. Ibid., 86.

Engaging students in teacher education classes in discussion about the emotional world of learning is a productive way to begin any semester. Making the human capacity to deploy defenses against discomfort part of a class conversation from the outset can help to prevent them from becoming aggressively strengthened. I have found that chapter two of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* leads to fruitful dialogue about the ways in which each of us defends against anxiety inducing feelings and ideas. "Life, as we find it," Freud writes, "is too hard for us; in order to bear it, we cannot dispense with palliative measures."[18] He names three such strategies: "powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it."[19] In my experience, students become enthusiastic in the attempt to provide examples of each of these defensive tactics that they themselves may have engaged in, those they have seen in others, and the strategies that are encouraged and reinforced in our culture more generally. They have addressed topics ranging from how some parents are unable to see the flaws in, or the struggles of, their children, and vice versa, alcoholism, addiction to social media as strategy with which to avoid intimacy, and the magical thinking in Trump's logic that limiting testing will reduce the cases of Covid 19. We have discussed how our consumerist society has us defending against aging, feeling sad, our mortality, and pretty much anything and everything that makes us uneasy or uncomfortable.

If we learn to acknowledge and tolerate anxiety and discomfort, we can learn to not weaponize it, so that we can better navigate it, which frees up new energies for thinking, and frees up our creative capacities. Discussions of the different mechanisms of defense, such as rationalization, idealization, projection, denial, disavowal, identification with the aggressor, and others, can provide a powerful entry point into dialogue about the ways in which we all protect ourselves from affect and insight that threaten our sense of self, our cherished beliefs, our world views.[20] Students can be invited to think of examples of each that they have witnessed on cultural and subjective levels through the encounter with characters in novels, film, and the cultural imaginary.[21] Analysis of the consequences of different defenses produces not only new insight, but new ways of approaching dialogue, new ways of seeing and being in the world. We can study the ways in which some defenses are adaptive and productive strategies to living well while others exert a heavy cost on the subject or culture as the case may be. I find this approach an excellent primer to confronting the uncomfortable topics of our traumatic history, ongoing institutional racism, distortions in the official national narrative of American identity.

As we invite students into a "pedagogy of discomfort," it is important to acknowledge the ways in which both teachers and students constantly seek ways to allow or impede the emergence of unfamiliar thoughts.[22] For many of us it can feel next to impossible to think thoughts critical of a beloved partner, parent, or fatherland. "The force of reason does not easily unbind the energy of passionate attachment."[23] If teachers invite analysis of affect, and our desire to defend against it, into the room, we can help our students recognize how a person's thinking can

18. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey (The Hogarth Press, 1975), 13.

19. Ibid.

20. Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (Karnac Books, 1995). For an excellent account of short stories that portray particular defenses see: Sandra Buechler, *Understanding and Treating Patients in Psychoanalysis: Lessons From Literature. (Routledge, 2015).* For an excellent analysis of ways in which the South defended against the fundamental contradiction involved in owning persons, see Volney Gay, *On the Pleasures of Owning Persons: The Hidden Face of American Slavery.* (International Psychoanalytic Books, 2016).

21. For an incredible list of films that portray different defenses see https://psychmovies.com/

22. Boler.

23. Ibid.

be undone by anxiety, frustration, hate or love.[24] We can help our students stay with an impetus for investigation, stay in the desire to know, to learn, to grow. We must traverse carefully so as not to undo the movement to knowing by igniting the desire to ignore. I suggest that students may be less inclined to repudiate difficult knowledge when this all too human tendency is engaged collectively at the outset. As outlined in this section, the quite practical approach of fostering dialogue with students at the beginning of every semester about the emotional life of learning can help to cultivate curiosity and a willingness to sit in discomfort. Assigning students a free write on all the emotions they feel in learning can be a good start. Teaching about the notion of defense is another excellent way to begin the conversation.

Some practical classroom strategies with which to facilitate discussion on the importance of working through defense could include a screening of the 2019 film, "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood." The film is a dramatization of Fred Rogers' (played by Tom Hanks) conviction that children, and people in general, can and must learn how to talk about and deal with emotions. Specifically, it is based on a true story of the formation of a friendship between Mr. Roger's and a journalist (Tom Junod, given the pseudonym Lloyd Vogel in the film; played by Mathew Rhys) who has been unable to work through his emotions regarding his mother's death, and his fury at his estranged father for abandoning the family during that trying time. The film was inspired by Junod's 1998 Esquire cover story "Can You Say… Hero?" Vogel is put on assignment to profile Mr. Rogers, which he finds a demeaning task at first. The film does a wonderful job depicting the journalist as defensive, angry, and aggressive until he meets Fred, who, without being obvious about what he is doing, teaches him how to process and work through his rigid defenses. How does this happen? Through witnessing the television show, where Roger's teaches kids how to acknowledge and address bad affect, and, even more importantly, through continued and ongoing collaborative dialogue between the two men.

By the end of the film, Vogel has transformed into an open, loving, son, father, and husband. My favorite line in the film is, "Anything mentionable is manageable." A wonderful line to repeat to students in classrooms centered on difficult dialogue. Rogers says this to the journalist's family as they are at the bedside of his dying father, actively avoiding a conversation about death. Roger's personifies Freud's conviction that people avoid things that are painful, and that they often do so at their peril. The price people pay for rigid defense, and the gains to be had in working through them, was brilliantly portrayed through the transformation character of the journalist. The conversation Rogers' begins about the fear of death, and our desire to avoid facing it, and about how talking about it helps us process painful affect, couldn't be more timely. We could use this as a jumping off point into whether students think our society renders talk about death and dying taboo, or whether it was a mere character flaw in Vogel and his family members. We could invite classroom discussion about whether anti-maskers might be acting out of a legitimate fear of death. Screening this film to facilitate dialogue about the emotional worlds of students can lead to powerful and lively discussion about the perils of failing to acknowledge and analyze bad affect. It powerfully depicts how talking about things we don't like talking about has transformative impact on people's lives, as well as the worlds we inhabit. Simply asking the students to free write, and then pair share, about any of the following prompts: how did you feel when you watched the film? What motivated the characters to do X? What motivated the screen play? The director? What associations did you make? Do you know people similar to any of the characters in the film? Did they change or remain the same? can be the beginning of a wonderfully transformative classroom experience.

24. Ibid.

The short story, “The Years of My Birth” by Louise Erdich is another powerful depiction of the damage defending against unpleasant emotions can do to people and relationships. The destructive defenses of failing to admit and process loss are beautifully represented by the different characters in the story. It is the story of a white girl, Linda, who’s been abandoned at birth because of a slight deformity. Her twin brother had cramped her up in utero so that her skull was misshapen, her feet and legs twisted and contorted. Her brother, on the other hand was picture perfect—outwardly at least. Their mother rejects Linda at once, leaving the doctors to determine her fate. The Ojibwe nurse who had assisted in the labor, secretly cares for the lonely infant, who has been left alone with a feeding tube while the doctors figure out at which institution they should place her. Each night the nurse holds, feeds, and cuddles the baby, massaging her head, working to stretch out her legs. After not long, she brings the child home and raises her as one of her own, on the reservation. 5 decades later, after her Native parents have passed, Linda receives a phone call from her birth mother, whose only reason for reaching out, though she doesn’t share this at first, is that she needs a kidney for her son, the protagonist’s twin brother, Linden, who will surely die without a transplant. Linda is surprised to find that she can’t help but contemplate doing so, and soon enough, she finds herself taking the test to find out if she is a match. Why would she do this?

Knowing the story of her abandonment, the person performing the test tells her that her twin did not value his own life (in much the way they had devalued hers), and had tried to suicide with alcohol and pills. Linda is urged not to donate her kidney, which is indeed a match. In thinking about why Linden would not want to live, Linda surmises that their mother, who could not acknowledge the guilt she felt in having abandoned her own life that proved worthy of love, must have taken it out on her chosen one. Linda decides to pay him a visit. He is miserable and exceedingly cruel to Linda, confirming her conviction that despite appearances, he did not live a good life. “Before we were born,” reflects the protagonist, “my twin had had the compassion to crush me, to improve me by deforming me: I was the one who was spared.” Linda had been loved and had grown into a beautiful person—on the inside at least. Which is more important? The story is short, and rich with much more racial and cultural nuance than here depicted, but note that there is much to be unpacked about what it is like to live with loss, particularly when unacknowledged. Unpacking the emotional and cultural lives of each of the characters with students is a promising approach to bringing the phenomenon of defense and the importance of working through negative affect to the forefront of a class that will deal with the thorny issues of institutional racism, a pandemic that should be much better contained, and other pressing social and global problems that inspire intense emotional response.

There are many ways to begin these difficult dialogues; one final powerful example of a discussion starter about destructive defensiveness could begin by screening an episode from the new series, “In My Skin,” streaming on Hulu. The show can perform a similar platform through which to analyze the defenses people deploy to avoid painful realities, or to prevent others from seeing or knowing fundamental aspects about themselves. But defense often comes with a cost. One cannot experience intimacy when one hides oneself from others. One cannot experience the joys of connection, of sharing, of being known. The protagonist of this coming of age story has a mother who is mentally ill, and an alcoholic emotionally stunted, absent father. Quite a lot for anyone to grapple with, let alone a teenager navigating high school. Part of the protagonist’s coping mechanism is to present a false picture of her family life to her friends and teachers. In so doing, however, she is unable to tap into her creative capacities, unable to form deep connections with her friends, and she winds up setting herself up for humiliation and alienation. How would her experience of the world be different if she talked about her struggles with friends and

teachers? One could ask students. How did you feel when watching? What associations did you make? What do you think motivated the writers and the characters? Such depictions of defense, and the destructiveness of bottled up emotional worlds, can lead to an excellent entry point to having these important discussions early in a semester, before even beginning to engage students in affective (un)learning about our traumatic and white-washed histories.

Working Through: On Developing the Capacity to Mourn

Freud believed that the aim of psychoanalysis was the freedom to come to new understandings about what we've been through, to *feel* it fully, to *mourn* the tragic events in our lives, and to move forward with all the knowledge, wisdom and courage that facing the truth entails. And yet, our cultural norms have it so that when we discover that life brings suffering, capitalism offers us a product, a service, or a drug to help us forget the suffering, avoid it, resist it, deny it. Aging, fear, sadness, loss? American capitalism offers a hypnotic treatment. And as a result, too many of us experience discomfort – a contradictory idea, a hostile remark, a gender difference, a cultural norm or political opinion different than our own—as a trauma that must be removed at all costs.[25] Sandra Buechler shows that as a culture, we are suffering from the loss of sadness—our culture pathologies normal sorrow while our lives are characterized by loss. [26] How do we live loss and why do we, culturally speaking, refuse to grapple with it, and what are the consequences?

The Inability to Mourn by German Psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich[27] explored the psychic defenses against guilt, shame, and remorse of Germans in the aftermath of Nazi atrocities. The authors write that "all levels of society, and especially those in positions of leadership—industrialists, judges, university professors—had given the regime their decisive and enthusiastic support; yet, with its failure they regarded themselves as automatically absolved from any personal responsibility."[28] A central theme of the book is the project of "working through": remembering horrifying events and one's own participation in them, confronting horrifying events, and one's own ambivalent relation to Hitler, emerging with greater openness to reality, detaching oneself from repetitive denial and avoidance of our common humanity, our common capacity for suffering. The authors write of mourning as the psychic process by which we learn to cope with a loss, or a nation with a catastrophe in its history. This working through, they emphasize, is simultaneously an intellectual and emotional process. Learning to live well with our traumatic histories requires that we do not forget the past, but rather we must mourn those aspects of it which we would rather not confront.

While it took the Germans a few generations after the Mitscherlich's first conducted their research to begin to make reparations for the wrongdoing in their past, they have done a better job at confronting the evils of their history than have Americans, argues Susan Neiman. I tend to agree and think we might learn from the Germans, as Neiman suggests in her new work,

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25. Steven Reisner, "Mourn and Mobilize: Radical Psychoanalysis Confronts the Climate Emergency" Season 1, Episode 5 of *Madness: The Podcast,* Feb. 9, 2020.

26. See Sandra Beuchler, *Psychoanalytic Approaches to Problems in Living: Addressing Life's Challenges in Clinical Practice* (Routledge, 2019).

27. Cited in Drekmeier, M. "Review: *The Inability to Mourn" in Cosscurrents* 26:3, 1976, 328.

28. Drekmeier, 329.

Learning From The Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil.[29] American culture prefers narratives of progress, victory, and happy endings, Neiman suggests.[30] Lost with this tendency, however, is the ability to express emotions that are fundamental to our humanity. We lose the capacity to tolerate discomfort, to grieve, to mourn; rather than learn how to process bad affect. When bad affects aren't processed, we learn defense, which can then become rigid and aggressive resistances to learning, to feeling, to living well with history and ourselves. Neiman argues that many American students know more about the evils of the Holocaust than they do about the evils of the slave trade, which occurred for over 400 years; many students here can point to how evil the Holocaust was but neglect to register the brutal racial terror of reconstruction, which extends into our present in numerous ways. Neiman suggests that the focus on the evils of the Holocaust is a form of displacement for what we don't want to know about our own crimes. If the Germans learned to mourn their traumatic history, so can we. As the world seems to be crumbling around us in the face of a global pandemic and massive civil unrest, now more than ever we must learn to process loss so that we can work through it constructively.[31]

Aside from permitting ourselves awareness of the impact of the loss, when allow ourselves to feel sad, we become more aware of the potential these experiences have for furthering growth and development. Rather than fixating on the (often unexamined) pursuit of happiness, we might come to see sadness as an emotion that potentially binds us together. Buechler argues that sadness eventually cleanses, allowing us to return to the fray. It acquaints us more nearly with all it means to be a human being, binds us to each other, and sharpens our appreciation of joyous moments. It lends perspective to the ordinary and the extraordinary vicissitudes of life. We need to learn to develop a strong tolerance for sadness and loss, for they will always be close at hand. "In navigating an ongoing relationship to loss, sadness is doing its essential job, of binding me more firmly to life."[32] We need to keep this in mind as we invite students to confront a past they do not wish to learn about. We need to keep sadness and loss in mind as we invite students to examine their own complicity in injustice as it plays out in our present.

Losing—things, loved ones, cherished belief—is ubiquitous, unavoidable, and incredibly difficult; it is particularly important to develop the capacity to mourn loss in the processes of learning, unlearning, and relearning our traumatic histories. Elizabeth Bishop's short poem "One Art" can be a beautiful opening into conversation about what it means to develop the art of losing. How do we process the loss of those things which we cherish deeply, along with the trail of other objects, investments, and attachments on life's journey? Bishop reminds us that life is full of losing. She writes, "so many things seems filled with intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster."[33] In order to process losses that do feel like disaster, she admonishes us to lose something every day: keys, an hour of time, our way to different places. That way, Bishop seems to say, we are better prepared to deal with dashed dreams, and the loss of loved ones. The short story "Grief" by Scholastique Mukasonga is a compelling look at how difficult but important grieving and mourning can be.[34] Assigning Bishop's poem, Mukasonga's story, and the film "Ordinary Peo-

29. Susan Neiman, *Learning From The Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019.

30. Ibid., 35.

31. Stacy Otto's work on the educative value of mourning is instructive here, see in particular, "A Garden from Ashes: The Post-9/11 Manhattan City-Shrine, the Triangle Fire Memorial March, and the Educative Value of Mourning." *Journal of Social History*, Volume 47: 3, 2014, 573–592.

32. Buechler

33. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47536/one-art

34 .https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/grief

ple," which is a fascinating portrayal of a family navigating the loss of a son/brother, could provide means for a really important class discussion on the importance of feeling sad, of mourning loss. Life makes us practice losing all the time; though, we too seldom acknowledge this in education; I have not experienced collaborative dialogue about loss in my own educational history, in professional development workshops, nor department or university wide events. Given all that we have currently lost as a result of the pandemic, it seems such dialogue is long overdue. When it comes to teaching divisive topics, or calling for a confrontation with our traumatic history, a focus on the shared humanity of having to navigate loss can help to disarm defense, and create a sense of community in classrooms.

Inviting students to read and discuss Bishop's short poem is an excellent practical approach to collectively acknowledging and sharing about the inevitability and importance of dealing with loss in a classroom. Students will often share stories of how they deal with losing keys, phones, their homework assignment, romantic partners, and what strategies do and don't work for them. This practice can be augmented by also screening the film "Ordinary People," an excellent way to complement the dialogue on Bishop's poem. Talking with the class about the different approaches each family member in the film takes towards acknowledging and working through grief (and in the case of one of them, disavowing it entirely) is another powerful and practical way to guide a discussion with students on the importance of developing the capacity to mourn. Spoiler alert: The mother in the film is incapable of mourning, which hardens her and limits her capacities to live fully. She becomes incapable of loving her son, and eventually her husband. She loses them both. She is unable (perhaps unwilling, too afraid?) to feel sad, to reckon with the tragic loss of her first son, but in her incapacity to mourn, she loses all the joy and love in her life as a result. Students who screen the film gain a powerful image of the difficulty in ordinary people can have with grieving, in feeling sad, and being vulnerable to troubling affect. To facilitate discussion, educators can invite students to free write about their experience viewing the film. How did it make them feel? What associations did they have? What motivated the characters? Did it resonate with experiences they had in real life? What in life, besides loved ones, do we need to mourn and why? Engaging in anonymous freewriting can free students up from fear of being mistaken, but indulge in a practice of free thinking and feeling. There are many opportunities to learn from anonymous free writes, such as collecting and randomly redistributing and having other students read and share what they've read. Engaging and important dialogue emerges, which creates a sense of community, and helps prepare students for the loss that the emotionally charged learning and unlearning about the traumatic histories we have yet to be formally taught in mainstream education entails.

On Knowing Ignorance: Narrative Fiction as Fuel for Transformative Dialogue

Andrew Bennet's concept of "knowing ignorance" is another important intervention against defensive, rigid habits of thinking.[35] "Knowing ignorance" according to Bennet, is the cultivation of a literary imagination to invite the embrace and exploration of the condition by which we are all beset, namely, the state of ultimately *not* knowing.[36] Part of what it means to be human is to grapple with ignorance: What is the meaning of life? How did we get here, and where are we going? Too often we forget that it is questions that drive historical inquiry, and

35. Andrew Bennet, "Literary Ignorance" in *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, eds. Matthais Gross and Linsey McGoey (Routledge, 2015).

36. Ibid., 38.

that what we feel certain of today will change tomorrow. Bennet's concept of "knowing ignorance" is a call to approach texts, and life, with our ignorance in mind. Ignorance cannot be eliminated, but it can be directed towards new ways of reading, thinking, and being in the world. One helpful way to (re)discover our capacities to tolerate ambiguity and cultivate curiosity might be to heed Bennet's call to step into the literary imagination and linger in what poet John Keats calls "negative capability," the "capacity for remaining in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact, logic, and reason."[37] We need to learn to dwell in a state of openness to all experience, and identify with the inspirational power of beauty, which is, according to Keats, much more important than the quest for objective fact.

What we learn from Bennet is that we need to unlearn desire for certainty and cultivate a disposition of curiosity—aspects of the human condition stymied by mainstream k-12 education, enamored as it has become with the cult of efficiency, accountability, measurement, and productivity. In an attempt to show us what we need to unlearn in order to adopt a stance of knowing ignorance, Blanchot suggests that what most threatens reading is the person who thinks they know in general how to read. It is a reader's stubborn insistence upon remaining themselves in the face of what they read that gets in the way.[38] Blanchot argues that reading demands more ignorance than knowledge; it requires knowledge endowed with an immense ignorance. One of the key attributes of a good reader, for Blanchot, is forgetfulness. I think what he means by this is a willingness to leave behind, to let go of what one thinks one knows, to lose what one has learned when one approaches a new text, a new form, or any Other. Learning new ways of knowing, and challenging entrenched habits of thought, might help students become more vigilant in their studies, helping them become more independent, creative thinkers, who are able to better grapple with forms of knowledge that are difficult and challenging. "Knowing ignorance" is an important strategy as we try and repair a misremembered history and relinquish dreams of mastery, superiority, and invulnerability.

I have found that students become more engaged in transformative dialogue about notoriously touchy and divisive topics through stimulation of the literary imagination, and the supplementing of my curriculum with poems, short stories, and film. Characters in fiction can be an excellent template for analysis and assessment of the predicaments people have found and continue to find themselves in. Mainstream history books fail to capture the intricate dynamics of unreliable narration, defense mechanisms, the dialectics of knowledge and ignorance, the lived realities of violent oppression and fierce resistance against it. Teachers and students alike can be invited to explore and interpret the lives, defenses, conflicts, and circumstances they encounter in fiction to explore the past more fully. As Richard Hoggart wrote back in 1970, "literature may help to keep open our sense of the richness of human experience, the virtually inexhaustible meanings in each gesture and word spoken, if they are understood in their contexts."[39] Compellingly, he argued that not only can literary imagination help to show expressive phenomena are not only symptomatic of the consciousness of their age but themselves help to alter that consciousness."[40]

Poetry and fiction invite critical reflection on what it means to be a member of the human condition, what it means to be caught in the contradiction between wanting to know and not wanting to know. We get an intimate portrayal of how minds work. How (unacknowledged)

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37. Cited in Bennet, 39.

38. Cited in Bennet, 40.

39. Richard Hoggart, "The Literary Imagination and the Sociological Imagination." Available at: http://ressources-socius.info/index.php/reeditions/18-reeditions-d-articles/229-the-literary-imagination-and-the-sociological-imagination

40. Ibid.

affect determines action and thought. The interplay between knowledge and ignorance, the precariousness of privilege, the innovative and ongoing forms of resistance to oppression are revealed in narrative fiction in ways traditional educational texts fail to encapsulate. Stories in film and literature can provide us with a comforting distance from which to be on the look-out for defensiveness, bias, blind spots, active forgetting, willful and structural ignorance, rather than leaving them dangerously dormant, misrecognized as matters of fact, masquerading as masterful and mastered objective knowledge. It can help us in the development of capacities for reckoning with loss and an ability to mourn—capacities required as we encounter and work through difficult knowledge. Short stories and film, in particular are tremendously well suited to the social justice oriented teacher education classroom as they can be read alongside a more theoretical chapter and well digested within a week, stimulating a more complex reflexivity on a host of challenging issues that are raised in the main text.

One of my favorite poets, a revolutionary activist in the decolonization struggles of Martinique, and around the globe, Aimé Césaire, went so far as to argue that "poetry is the only way to achieve the kind of knowledge we need to move beyond the world's crises"[41] In his most systematic statement on the revolutionary nature of poetry, he wrote that "science affords a view of the world, but a summary and superficial view"[42] and that "side by side with this half-starved scientific knowledge there is another kind of knowledge. A fulfilling knowledge."[43] And yet, we seem to side-step and discount such knowledge in mainstream traditional educational settings. R.G. Kelley shows that Césaire strove to demonstrate that what presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, the sharpest sensibility or the subtlest feelings, but experience as a whole. One of his most profound and impactful works, the historical prose poem against the realities of colonialism, *Discourse on Colonialism* summons up powerful unconscious forces, a powerful source of knowledge and revolt.[44] This work makes a powerful addition for any teacher who wants to invite students to more fully human encounter with the realities of our colonial past. *Discourse* sets out to prove that the colonial mission to "civilize" the so-called primitive is just a smoke screen. Césaire demonstrates that it decivilizes the colonizer, and results in the massive destruction of entire societies—societies that not only functioned at a high level of sophistication and complexity, but that might have offered the West valuable lessons about how we might live better together, and remake the world. Mainstream history does not encourage students to think about the perils of white privilege, about what has been lost in the colonial encounter. Césaire's portrait of what is lost for both colonizer and colonized is rich, poetic, and a multidimensional accounting of our past that has the potential to move students out of comfortable ways of understanding the past as including victims and the victorious. In Césaire's poem, the suffering of all is brought to the fore, inviting reflection on how we might reimagine the past to better grapple with the present and imagine our future.

In an anonymous free write on their reaction to his text, one of my students wrote, "after finishing the text, I realized the in-depth trance that Césaire's writing brings about. I found myself feeling the arguments and descriptions Césaire was providing." We paired this reading with Suzanne Césaire's poem in the epigraph to this paper, which enabled a most fruitful dialogue about manifest destiny, civilization, and who holds knowledge and ignorance in history. The Césaires were heavily involved in the surrealist movement, which helped to inform and inspire decolonial

41. Robin Kelly, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism" *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine. November, 1999. Avaialable at: https://monthlyreview.org/1999/11/01/a-poetics-of-anticolonialism/*

42. Cited in Robin Kelly, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination. (Beacon Press, 2002) ,9.*

43. Cited in ed. Melissa Kwansy, *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry. (Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 232.*

44. Aimé Césaire, A., *Discourse on Colonialism.* Trans Joan trans. Pinkham (Monthly Review Press, 2000).

struggles around the world. Suzanne Césaire wrote of surrealism, "far from contradicting, diluting, or diverting our revolutionary attitude toward life, surrealism strengthens it. It nourishes an impatient strength within us, endlessly reinforcing the massive army of refusals. And I am also thinking of tomorrow."[45] Students shared that they had not been introduced to the surrealist movement, nor such an imaginative stance towards rethinking our past, present, and future.

Other key couplings that have generated fruitful discussion where power, privilege, knowledge, and ignorance are interrogated in new ways include the pairing of Mills' "White Ignorance" with Orwell's, "Shooting an Elephant." Challenging simplistic notions of the ways in which power operates, who creates and belongs to the "British" tradition, Orwell's protagonist brings to light the structural white ignorance that Mills articulates, and demonstrates the destructiveness and precariousness of white privilege—on the privileged himself. When I have tried to teach about what Mills' notion of white ignorance in the past, it seemed to fall flat. Students felt accused and didn't really engage. Orwells' story, however, depicts a character struggling with emotion with which we are all familiar. Desire to conform, to appear in control, in the know. The character acts against his own instincts to avoid looking like a fool. How many times has each of us done this and why? It is surprising how open students become, and more willing to examine the perils of white privilege on each of our shared humanity. Excerpts Alicia Elliot's *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* paired with chapters on native American History from Loewen's *Lies my Teacher Told Me* yielded fruitful acknowledgement of the humanity and resilience of first nations peoples. Students shared they want to read more of Elliott, who shares her experience of being ashamed by the food pyramid we teach our students, because her family couldn't afford to eat that way. She suffered shame and humiliation by a practice my students admitted they had previously taken for granted.

Too few white Americans have been forced to face just how violent, just how hideous and awful slavery was, just how brutal was the Jim Crow south. Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" and Richard Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" compel us to grapple with it. These stories are not an easy read but they did foster an eye-opening class discussion on the intersections of race and sexuality, how these have been constructed violently, and have been so violently eroticized. Wright and Baldwin again reveal how privilege can distort the privileged themselves. The first few times I taught these stories I was open about my worries that I might traumatize students. They shared that they had a hard time with them, but found the perspectives new and powerful and difficult. A secret ballot vote with commentary revealed that the entire class felt I should teach these stories again. There is a powerful, and powerfully traumatic scene in the 2013 film "12 Years A Slave" of a hardened, terrifying white slave owner attempting to separate a family and auction them off to different owners. If we examine this man's emotional life, we can see that he too is suffering a trauma, certainly not in the same way or to the same degree as those whom he terrorizes. But does he look happy? Is he able to live to his fullest capacities to experience love, joy, beauty? What does he lose in this violent equation? Just as the emotional worlds and psychic lives of characters in fiction come to life in ways that tradtional textbooks and theories occlude, so, too, do students engaged in discussion about them. In my experience the use of short stories and film has enabled more engagement with the traumas of our histories we have yet to work through collectively. As psychoanalysis has revealed, change happens through sustained and collaborative dialogue about our emotional lives that we often are too afraid to speak about. Narrative fiction can help us to break through the cultural taboos on discussing race, sex, and death, and show us what is lost when we are afraid to say what we feel and how what we

45. Suzanne Césaire *The Great Camouflage ed. Daniel Maxim (Wesleyan University Press, 2012).*

have experienced shapes how we feel the world. We can come to learn to think and see differently when we begin to confront our traumatic histories collectively. We can uncover the self-investment of all sides privileged/oppressed divides when we begin to talk about how these dynamics are lived and suffered in silence too often. This approach has the potential to inspire personal and social transformation, and hopefully anti-racist activism in education and beyond.

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