Designing Curriculum for Critical Consciousness
A White Teacher's Process

Allarie Coleman

University of Colorado, Boulder

Abstract

This manuscript describes a white teacher's process of teaching texts authored by writers from historically marginalized cultural groups in a high school classroom. I wrote this self-study as theoretical guidance for teachers who also want to contextualize conversations about race. The scholarship of bell hooks motivated me to adopt the pedagogy of teaching for critical consciousness. I begin by introducing the theory of critical consciousness, the prevalence of white teachers, and the need for teachers to begin identifying white culture with their students. Then, classroom work is connected to conceptual approaches of centering race to demonstrate how to address whiteness. I connected concepts from scholarship on racial relationships to my own reflections to explain the qualities of a pedagogy that aimed to challenge the status quo of teaching while white.

Introduction

The purpose of this manuscript is to discuss how a teacher can include writers outside of hegemonic culture in a traditional classroom setting. By advancing this curricular turn and primarily reading authors outside of white culture, we centered race in the classroom through the words of writers. bell hooks helped me to contextualize how to speak about race with adolescents, because she wrote with authority and humility in plain English. Her clarity positioned me to understand the need to address race in the high school classroom. Reading bell hooks reminded me that traditional education is problematic as it indoctrinates students into ways of behaving and knowing that are aligned with the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2009, p. 29). The status quo of public education reproduces social inequalities (Giroux, 2005). One high school course in American Literature will not remedy this cycle, yet, I hoped to, at the minimum, name race-based oppression and analyze how society works to perpetuate the status quo of white dominance. In teaching this curriculum, I believe that the overall dynamic of centering race provided opportunities for my students and I to raise our critical consciousnesses. Currently in the United States [U.S.], certain state governments aim to dictate which texts educators are permitted to use at school (Alleyne, 2022; Cineas, 2023; Goldstein, 2023; Goldstein et al., 2023). Now it is crucial for us educators to resist this top-down control and start/continue making decisions that disrupt white supremacy in the curriculum of public education.

Teaching for critical consciousness was a pedagogical goal of mine. This manuscript describes curricular possibilities in teaching for critical consciousness (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 2004, 2005; Parkhouse & Arnold, 2019). Through the process of writing this manuscript, I researched scholars' self-studies on teaching through whiteness, repeatedly returned to the work of bell hooks and Cheryl Harris and reflected on my practitioner journal. I write this as theoretical guidance for teachers.

Positionality

At the beginning of this study, I was a 27-year-old teacher, who was teaching in my hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Raised in Albuquerque, where Mexican American culture is ubiquitous, federally marginalized cultures shaped my perspective of whiteness. White culture was more noticeable because there were distinct dominant cultures to compare it to. Growing up, my peers across the city and I were mostly divided according to socioeconomic class, rather than race. At the private high school I attended, the curriculum was geared toward advancing social justice and learning the geography of New Mexico, yet it privileged the western canon.

Once I started teaching in public high schools, I recognized how Latin American, Hispanic, and Indigenous cultures were marginalized throughout standardized curricula. This irritated me because most of my students were Latine and deserved to see themselves in the literature that we teachers required them to read. I also saw that students were unengaged in their English language arts (ELA) courses, I thought this was due to teachers choosing texts that evaded discussions that connected to students' lived realities. My motivation to teach a culturally sustaining curriculum, one that challenged the status quo of teaching while white, arose from what I saw to be acritical acceptance to traditional texts and to banking-style pedagogy (Freire, 2004). When I asked my co-workers to join a pursuit to become a more culturally relevant teacher, they agreed that ELA ought to connect to students' lives, yet in practice evaded changing their curricula. I was frustrated by the tradition of high school curriculum centering the stories of white western Europeans, British

history, and Christians. I looked to teaching for critical consciousness for guidance on how to decolonize curriculum.

Teaching for Critical Consciousness

Developed by Paolo Freire, teaching for critical consciousness is a method of teaching for social justice where "self, community and global awareness operates to expand youth consciousness to higher levels of social criticality and human compassion" (Cammarota, 2011, p. 829). Youth consciousness can be raised through conversations that contextualize an individual within society by unpacking the institutions and paradigms that shape the way the individual interacts with the world. Teachers who utilize a pedagogy rooted in teaching for critical consciousness believe that adolescents are more engaged in academic work when it is connected to their own life experiences (Cammarota, 2011; Chubbuck, 2008; El-Amin et al., 2017; hooks, 1994). Teaching for critical consciousness is a pedagogy that seeks to reveal dominant ways of thinking and behaving, with the goal of students and teachers then collaborating to discuss solutions for a more equitable society.

It is difficult to incorporate all components of teaching for critical consciousness in the context of traditional public schooling because there are few opportunities to engage in critical political/civic action. According to Seider et al. (2020): "Contemporary models of youth critical consciousness development have conceptualized critical consciousness as consisting of critical reflection, political agency [social analysis], and critical action" (p.1). Teaching for critical consciousness asks for a wholistic approach that encompasses each of these three components; in the third stage of developing critical consciousness individuals are asked to act, and then reflect again, as the components comprise of a cycle. This curriculum stayed inside the classroom, and we did not engage in community action as a whole class. Although, many of my students were activists outside of school.

Freire perceived teaching as the project of increasing another's ability to think critically, which is the process of debunking mythology until rational explanations are realized (Freire, 1970). I think mythology can take the shape of stereotypes, prejudices, and incomplete or biased stories of historical events, which are then accepted as fact without interrogation of the authors' perspectives. Humans are political animals, who enter classrooms as people already a part of a polarized, yet nuanced and historically bound society (Freire, 2004; hooks, 1994). By aligning my own perspective of classrooms to Freire's ideology, I saw that individuals engaged in learning are not neutral to societal issues such as race.

Dominant and Non-dominant Cultures in Education

People marginalized by dominant culture in the United States tend to be more aware of their identity because it is not considered 'mainstream'. Therefore, individuals outside of dominant culture notice that dominant society expects behaviors that may be different than how one would act at in their own community (Freire, 2005; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). When I think about dominant and non-dominant cultures, I connect my own life experiences to the feminist adage, the personal is political (Hanisch, 1970). As a woman, I can readily recognize patriarchy and know my place in this social system. This feminist adage aligns with aspects of Freire's ideology. Freire's ideology understands educational practices to begin with an individual's stance on the world (Freire, 2005). Freire approached education from the perspective that our private lives are sculpted by our public identity: who an individual is outside of the classroom, determines their position to

the work done inside of the classroom (hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015).

In the U.S., traditional pedagogy and curriculum predominantly serves middle-class white men (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Cammarota, 2011; hooks, 1994; Tanner, 2022). Students, who are outside of that demographic, attend public schools as students on the margins of curricula's foci. Freire advocated for including students' home lives and past experiences as the building blocks of curriculum development and subsequent knowledge formation (Freire, 2004); through this approach, students' identities are welcomed into the classroom and their experiences serve as vehicles for academic learning. When as I teacher I committed to teaching for critical consciousness, I invited the home cultures and lived realities of students to the forefront and took an activist approach to curriculum. With this pedagogy, my teacher identity demonstrated that school can be a place to transform reality (Freire 2004, 2005; hooks, 1994; Robinson, 2010).

Teacher Identity in a Critical Consciousness Aligned Classroom

A crucial aspect of teaching for critical consciousness is enacting a pedagogy that demonstrates a personal awareness of one's own culture and race (Jupp, 2013; Tanner, 2018). Once I was equipped with self-awareness, and a willingness to continue increasing my awareness, then I could begin the process of teaching the domains of language that students need to access to productively maintain conversations on contemporary society (Gee, 2008; Tanner, 2018). Talking about race in secondary classrooms is the first step towards the far-reaching goal of creating a more just society (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Tanner, 2022). Teaching for critical consciousness exposes "certain truths and biases in the classroom" and can often create "chaos and confusion" (hooks, 1994, p. 30), which may be necessary if educators want to talk about the qualities of a white capitalist patriarchy. Normative ideas about what a harmonious classroom looks like will be challenged when teachers open the floor for student-driven dialogue on race. Pedagogy that welcomes students to activate their sense of critical reflection deviates from the status quo of hegemonic schooling, because traditional secondary education is not rooted in students' lived realities (Freire, 2005; Jupp, 2013; Kinloch & Lensmire, 2019). When I adopted this pedagogy of critical consciousness, I disciplined myself to be self-reflective throughout the year by writing in my practitioner journal, and I prepared to listen to the emotionally charged conversations of my students (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Chubbuck et al., 2008).

Teaching for critical consciousness required an amount of authenticity from me that was not required by state standards nor was necessarily taught in teacher education. I knew that I could, as many teachers do, become bogged down by standards, assignments, assessments, and administrative tasks, and could forget that pedagogy and relationships are what shape classroom experiences (hooks, 1994). While I was intimidated by the prospect of departing from traditionally taught texts, I reminded myself to keep my eye on the influence that teachers have in classrooms, because "though some teachers know they are powerful, too few teachers act individually or collectively on these understandings, nor do they recognize the power associated with their… practical expertise" (Jupp, 2013, p. 3). For a teacher to adopt a pedagogy that is aligned with teaching for critical consciousness, a teacher must trust their professional knowledge.

White Culture in Schools

White teachers make up the overwhelming majority of teachers in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]; 2020). And most minoritized students attend schools that maintain a majority-minority status (NCES, 2020). This information demonstrates that white teachers are working in schools where most students are of color, and white students are mostly taught by teachers of their own race. When working with white students, anti-racist educators need to take into consideration the psyche of white students, who were normalized into a social contract, and the legal legacy of white supremacy (Harris, 1993; Tanner, 2018; Thadenka, 1999). The social contract as used here names the implicit situation of participating in a society in exchange for the rights and protection of that nation (Giroux, 2005). White students may know the history of slavery in the U.S. and understand some communities' fights for equal rights; although, it is unlikely that white students have already processed the impact that white supremacy has had on their psyche.

Understanding white culture requires analyzing the impact that white supremacy has had on daily life in the United States. Studying white identity in school needs to progress from McIntosh's seminal piece, *Un-packing White Privilege,* because identifying white privilege is not synonymous to anti-racism, and there is more work to do regarding how white culture occupies classroom spaces (Jupp, 2013; McIntosh, 1989; Tanner, 2020). Tanner (2018) calls for white educators to understand the history of white supremacy and the "psychic byproduct that comes from white people being normalized" as superior in the U.S. (p. 16). The normalization of white culture being superior to all different cultures is an aspect of white supremacy and is an implicit byproduct of the social contract that one enters growing up in the United States.

Despite the current calls for the contrary (Parents Bill of Rights Act, 2023), there is a need for public education to consistently address the history of white supremacy, name the contemporary privileges that accompany being born with white skin, and bring different conversations about race to the center of learning experiences (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; hooks, 1994, 2009; Jupp et al, 2013; Kinloch & Lensmire, 2019; Tanner, 2018). This manuscript comes at a time, when in the U.S., only seven states have zero book bans (Blair, 2024). PEN American (2024) explained that these bans are "prohibitions to restrict teaching about topics such as race, gender, American history, and LGBTQ+ identities in K-12 and higher education" (p.1). Book bans promote an ideology that white students can be comfortable with all topics taught in school; when teachers design curricula, we resist top-down control that aimed to advance a white-washed agenda.

Race-based Social Hierarchy

Critical thinking on race-based material advantages is necessary for understanding the tools that white culture employs to impose dominion geographically, culturally, and economically over different groups of people, with the implicit goal of eradicating cultural competition (Bonds & Inwood, 2016). When describing culture, it is crucial to encourage white people to say the word 'white,' because white culture has been the silent standard of 'normal.' Neglecting to identify the white race contributes to the unspoken privileges of being white (Thandeka, 1999). A race-based social and economic system built the U.S., white supremacy was once written as law, but it is by no means a problem of the past because the institutions of contemporary society continue to empower white culture and oppress different cultural groups (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Harris, 1993; hooks, 2009). The documented differences in academic opportunities between white

students and students of color (Assari et al., 2021; United Negro College Fund, 2023), the known achievement gap experienced by students in schools with high concentrations of poverty (Bradley, 2022), and the continued segregation of U.S. schools (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016; 2022) are examples of educational institutions reproducing the material conditions of white supremacy.

White supremacy, globally, or in the United States, will not be overcome through discourse in secondary classrooms. Education alone is not sufficient to overcome "differences in the society divided along dimensions of class, power, income, wealth, and privilege" (Zajda et al., 2008, p. xii). Asking students to read texts authored by historically marginalized people is just one small step toward identifying the multiple oppressions perpetuated by the U.S. and is a method of resisting white supremacy within high school curricula (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; hooks, 1994; Kinloch & Lensmire, 2019). Identifying white culture encourages young minds to recognize that the material conditions of oppressed people are due to the social systems created to maintain dominant society's chosen hierarchy. If students are not challenged to recognize these social systems, then the hierarchy of dominant society will remain unchanged (Kumashiro, 2012; Parkhouse & Arnold, 2019). One challenge of teaching students within white culture is debunking the myth of meritocracy in the U.S., for popular opinion holds that people achieve socioeconomic success because they work for it (Lensmire, 2017; Solomon, Portelli et al., 2005; Thandeka, 1999). This popular opinion is sustained by white culture because it conceals privilege as merit.

The white race acts as the standard under which all other races are ordered (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Lensmire, 2017). When racially oppressed people do not succeed as easily as racially privileged people, status quo ideology evaluates only the efforts of individuals, while evading a consideration of the hegemonic social hierarchy. Seeing beyond race-based privileges and oppressions requires properly identifying the role race plays in people's lives (Tanner 2018). An overt effort to center texts authored by writers of color is a step toward social justice because in reading these texts, teachers can introduce students to fictional situations to begin exposing the system that benefits being white (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; hooks, 1994; Kinloch & Lensmire, 2017; Tanner, 2018). I hoped that through identifying the often-unspoken privileges of participating in white culture, perhaps white students would learn to identify themselves and reflect on their role in dominant society. I learned that in a class where whiteness is a topic, racially minoritized students could speak their minds. When I named my own white privilege, I invited students to recognize that authority ought to be earned, not expected due to race or professional status. Finally, I needed to envision that in addressing race in the classroom, the end goal was to transgress beyond racial stereotypes (Cammarota, 2011; hooks, 1994).

Methodology

Identities at School

I designed the curriculum for a 11ᵗʰ grade American Literature course knowing that I could teach my students the standards without ever having to address my racial identity. Teaching in New Mexico was distinct from other states in the United States because white middle-class culture was not the norm; Latine cultures, Chicano lifestyle, and bilingualism are common across the state. And yet, despite the prevalence of Latine cultures, secondary school curricula remained focused on white western European American cultures.

Our school was unique, with a full-inclusion Special Education model, a student body culture of activists and allies, and a nearly equal number of white and Hispanic or Latin American students. The next demographic groups of students identified as Indigenous American or American Indian, African American or Afro-Latine, and several Asian American students. The school received Title I funding for serving students from low-income households (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Many of my students were individuals fighting for their voices to be heard within a school system that centers the stories of middle class, racialized white, cis-gendered European Americans. Students of color noticed the power structure at school because school was known to be a white space. Some of my students were familiar with being people of color in a place dominated by white culture; they understood that white spaces are empowered through specific behavior expectations and policies (Beach et al., 2010, p. 39; Oesterrechi et al., 2017).

Self-study Process

This is a self-study in which I, the practitioner/researcher am studying myself as a teacher and my curriculum (Lassonde et al., 2009). The phenomenon being studied is teaching while white. During the summer I planned specifically to teach authors of color. I first took notes of the texts available in the school's book room and considered the texts taught in previous years. The school's book room had plenty of texts authored by writers of color, however many of these class sets were unopened. The literature textbooks available also had options to choose from. For an example curriculum map, see Table 1. I primarily selected texts written by African American, Asian American, Indigenous American, and Latin American authors, placed these texts in chronological order, and connected each unit to Common Core State Standards. State and federal standards are not focused on specific texts; I learned that the texts commonly taught in American Literature are in place primarily due to teacher choice and school tradition.

Throughout the academic year, I wrote notes about race in my practitioner journal. I documented my reflections on the conversations I had with students and the atmosphere of our classroom. My students and I talked about race and read texts written by historically marginalized authors. Through this, we made space for the voices of people usually silenced in public school secondary classrooms. I am grateful to the school administration, who advocated for decolonizing curriculum. I am also grateful to my students, who taught me about my culture and pedagogy.

This self-study was an independent process. I hope my description of this process encourages educators at all levels to embrace the ability to change curriculum and pedagogy. I read Paolo Freire's pedagogy of teaching for critical consciousness. This reading helped shape my perspective alongside bell hooks's theories (hooks, 1992; 1994; 2009; 2014; 2018). After this school year, I reviewed my practitioner journal, and engaged in thematic coding through the lens of critical consciousness (Saldaña, 2021). Through this lens, two overarching themes were identified: meritocracy and whiteness. These themes could be explained by the sub-themes of contextualizing race in a classroom, daily life, racial objectification or fetishization, and internal dialogue.

Table 1
Example Curriculum Map

Era	Unit Question	Text
Pre-United States	How do allegories serve the truth? How does religion serve reason? How do we *know?*	1. de la Cruz (2003) *Loa for The Divine Narcissus* 2. Iroquois Nation (2003) *Great Binding Law* 3. Miller (2003) *The Crucible*
Civil War	How can we compare fictional and empirical experiences?	1. Jacobs (2003) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* 2. Morrison (2004) *Beloved*
Diaspora	What is tradition?	1. Cooley (2013) *The Norton Sampler: Short Essays for Composition* 8th edition, selected short stories 2. Gilman (2003) *The Yellow Wallpaper* 3. Malcolm X (1992) *By Any Means Necessary* 4. Paz (1970) *Children of the Mire Children of the Mire*
20th century	How does national culture develop in the 20th century?	1. Cooley (2013) *The Norton Sampler: Short Essays for Composition* 8th edition, selected short stories 2. Hemingway (2014) *The Sun Also Rises* 3. Lyrics of selected Jazz songs
Civil Rights	How do we cultivate a homeland for all?	1. Ellison (1995) *Invisible Man* 2. Wright (2005) *Native Son*
War & Peace	How do we reconcile our personal truths? How to find peace?	1. Alexie (2003) *Class* 2. Alneng (2002) *What the f*** is a Vietnam* 3. Baldwin (2003) *Sonny's Blues* 4. Takei (2014) *Why I love a country that once betrayed me*

Discussion

Reading bell hooks

In *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom,* bell hooks (1994) posited that once she attended a predominantly white school, then for the remainder of her schooling, the message from school was that her mind and body were expected to behave. Behavior took the shape of "obedience to white authority," rather than an appetite and excitement for learning (hooks, 1994, p. 4). While reading hooks, I realized that the classroom I taught in promoted this same obedience and I represented white authority. To challenge white culture, while still maintaining a traditional classroom space as required by the unspoken professional rules of working at a school, I committed to teaching texts authored by writers marginalized in the U.S.

Contextualizing Race in a Classroom

As I explained to my students, enslaving humans for a period and enslaving humans as the aftermath of political conquest are practices witnessed throughout the history of humanity. Chattel slavery was a unique form of servitude because in practice the notion was that Africans, and anyone who looked like an African, and their children, and their children's children, would continue to be enslaved by those with white skin. Cheryl Harris (1993) explained that authority over dark skinned humans was granted to white people in law, which white people wrote and enforced through policing. Compulsory schooling is a product of law and the government's goal is that all children on U.S. land attend school through their formative years (Diffey & Steffes, 2017). Because the type of authority in schools is not altogether distinct from enforcing the law, it is important to note that the same government that once upheld racial segregation, also upholds public schooling. Students of color are under the jurisdiction of predominantly white educators; therefore, the law as written by white people parallels school as taught by white people.

In the process of becoming a teacher, I prepared myself for frequently talking about race. Perhaps for the first time, I asked myself to negotiate my experiences with race, my personal thoughts on curriculum, and my professional persona of a teacher in control of her classroom. I considered that it would be appropriate for race to be regularly included in conversations with students. I asked my students toward the end of the year, and they agreed: as one student told me, "I feel like in every situation we discussed, race played a part somehow" (Coleman, 2018). I understood that my students de-stigmatized discussing race and recognized that race was an active topic in our classroom. We connected race to an understanding of society: "When talking about race, we looked at what race is and what it meant in society" (Coleman, 2018). By committing to talking about race, I experienced how deviating from white culture's expectations - which are that race / whiteness are rarely discussed - positioned me as outside of the status quo. My colleagues did not want to interrogate white culture and saw acknowledging our school's diverse learning environment as a method of recognizing all cultures. I wanted to disrupt colonial curriculum and read different texts with adolescents.

Examples of Curriculum

Daily Life, Real Cool

I found that the stories of daily life impacted students' readiness to recognize how race plays a role in every aspect of social life. A historical understanding of racial dynamics in the U.S. entered our classroom through Toni Morrison's (2004) *Beloved*. The stark imagery in this novel held my students' attention. Since the plot was set over a century ago, I found students imagined their kin, and in doing so, arrived on new insights of what racial identity means today. *Beloved* had an emotional and unique tone when representing daily African American life. In my journal I wrote:

> Most people are aware there are social advantages with being white, but many do not understand how deep rooted they are, or how they come into play in day-to-day life. *Beloved* forced the class to consider where they stand on the matter of white privilege, and if they contribute to it. (Coleman, 2018)

I appreciated how I did not see the class describe race as inherent biological traits or a set of natural instincts. I wrote 'race is a social construct' on the board more than once and defined racism as a

system. In an ungraded unit reflection, students wrote that they connected racism against black people to white culture. When I connected class comments to my reading of hooks, I saw how students looked toward whiteness when reading a novel centered on African American experiences. This approach to analyzing literature demonstrated an alternative to the tendency of thinking about racial relationships only in the context of people of color. hooks explained that "one change in the direction [of understanding racism] that would be real cool would be the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness" (hooks, 2014, p. 54). We worked towards being real cool because after we read *Beloved*, a story about African Americans, students responded with discussions of white privilege.

Another novel with a realistic depiction of daily life that caught my students' attention was Ralph Ellison's (1995) *Invisible Man.* In this story, the protagonist struggled to find his feet in the New York City job market. My students regularly used terms such as institutional racism, and most students were familiar with race-based prejudices within workplace environments. I wrote that students understood how institutional racism was inflicted on the protagonist of this novel because as he "struggles to climb the corporate ladder or even get hired for a job that isn't purely physical labor. He's actively prevented from trying to get better jobs" (Coleman, 2018). When we read *Invisible Man,* we discussed how some characters lived on the periphery of dominant culture's view and how this is white supremacy's goal, to reproduce a culture of silencing alternative experiences. I wrote that my students' perceptions were that "keeping African Americans in low-paying, menial jobs was effective in keeping them from having a voice in this country" (Coleman, 2018). I presume classrooms that uphold a culture of whiteness would not have a classroom dynamic in which students could readily challenge 'the right to free speech.' The right to free speech, if complicated, can lead one to question – which type of speech? When I un-packed the idea of African Americans having a voice in this country, I saw that students connected a high-paying/'good' jobs to having a voice in this country.

The story of *Invisible Man* facilitated conversations on how society influences identity. When an individual recognizes their role in a society, even if they dislike that role, rejecting that role proves to be challenging because we are forced to participate in society. In *Invisible Man,* the protagonist's body, his skin color, stood outside of dominant society's expectations of who ought to participate in dominant society's workforce. The novel was primarily set in New York City, where the protagonist aimed to join the white-collar workforce, a social sphere he was promised to enter after attending college. However, when the protagonist arrived in New York City, he was shunned and disgraced by white collar workers and was also mistreated by blue collar workers.

bell hooks, like the nameless protagonist of *Invisible Man*, was raised with the perception that some places in the United States upheld social justice regarding multiracial relationships. hooks related to the experiences of this protagonist: while she was accepted by elite institutions, once she attended school there, she found that she embodied ways of knowing, speaking, and behaving, that were silenced within the walls of those prestigious schools (hooks, 1994). White European Americans, who preached values of individuality and political participation in writings on political theory and republican government in the early U.S., believed that they were paving the way for a more just society (Harris, 1993). Because the initial ideology of U.S. institutions was embedded with contradictions, for a society cannot simultaneously uphold the systems of democracy and chattel slavery, the systems in place today continue to be rife with contradictions.

Race and Objectification

While my students and I welcomed the concept of race to be an ever-present component of our discussions when we contextualized novels, we were careful to avoid an overly affectionate tone when discussing any particular race or racial artifact. Through reading Sherman Alexie's (2003) short story, *Class*, we saw how American Indians were fetishized and treated unusually kindly by members of the dominant race. This saccharine treatment of racial differences creates the opposite impact of overcoming differences, for it dehumanizes individuals by turning them into objects to be consumed by dominant society (hooks, 1992).

I documented how my students were quick to notice that the protagonist of *Class*, a successful lawyer in the Pacific northwest, did not have one true friend. And they were unsurprised when as his life faced turmoil, his friends from dominant culture turned away. I wrote: "In reading Sherman Alexie's story we discovered how people of higher classes tend to fetishize and use their power over others to feed their own selfish and morally objectionable desires" (Coleman, 2018). I journaled about how my students were able to read between the lines. They understood that Sherman Alexie's story asked readers to be critical of the sweet attitude that white people expressed toward the American Indian man. The male protagonist of *Class* felt uncomfortable with middle class people because they made him feel like a foreigner in his own socioeconomic group. The protagonist's chosen identity was a professional living in a middle-class suburban neighborhood, yet he was treated like an outsider by his white friends because he had brown skin and braids in his hair.

Harris (1993) explained how the liberty to self-define was a privilege awarded to those with white skin: "The fact of race subordination was coercive and circumscribed the liberty to self-define. Self-determination of identity was not a right for all people, but a privilege accorded on the basis of race" (p. 1744). Sherman Alexie's protagonist was recognized by his white counterparts, although he was not treated as an individual, who could grow, change, and embody Indigenous American identities in ways distinct from his long, braided hair. In a contemporary revisiting of her work *Whiteness as property,* Harris (2020) noticed that whiteness has changed but continues to uphold social privilege. She wrote: "Whiteness does not confer immunity from disaster on all white bodies, however, poor and working-class whites suffer greatly in all areas… Yet, whiteness mitigates risk through racial/spatial structures" (Harris, 2020, p. 6). While the reality was/is that whiteness does not guarantee all social privileges in the U.S. as it once did, being white continues to be a favorable social position. If we apply this reasoning to people oppressed by race-based social systems, we could conclude that being an Indigenous American man in contemporary society would not categorically exclude one from experiencing social status, although, even with social status, being an Indigenous person would position one to be dehumanized by a white person.

Race and Internal Dialogue

Students were asked to draw/sketch an image in response to the semester essential question, which was: *How does literature from the 20th century inform our present dominant or non-dominant culture in the United States?* The image was to be accompanied by evidence from the texts we read. One student drew a brown-skinned person with their mouth open, the person was thinking: "Do they see how INFERIOR I am?" She included a quote from Richard Wright's (2005), *Native Son:* "He hated himself at that moment. Why was he acting and feeling this way? He wanted to wave his hand and blot out the white man who was making him feel this (p. 47)" (Coleman,

2018). I documented this description because to me it portrayed how the sociopolitical becomes personal. This drawing depicted how an individual begins to internalize white culture's stereotype of their racialized persona. Maybe through our classroom conversations on individuality and society students saw how unspoken stereotypes impact one's internal dialogue. The prevalence of notes in my practitioner journal that corresponded to internal dialogue leads me to think that we were developing critical consciousness through our class discussions. We were unpacking the relationship between the personal and the political.

Another image and text combination that I documented because of its juxtaposition of the individual and society was a profile of a black person. On one side of the face: "What people expect" with a quote from *Native Son*: "I just work, I'm black. I work and I don't bother nobody (Wright, 2005, p. 170)" (Coleman, 2018). On the other side of the face: "What people do," with a quote from *Invisible Man*, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me (Ellison, 1995, p. 3)" (Coleman, 2018). This image again represented a conflicting internal dialogue: an individual fulfilled a role demanded by society yet remained invisible in that society. This image was reflective of our classroom conversations, we collectively grappled with the expectations and realities of participating in white culture's hegemony.

Conclusion

Spiritual Growth

The pedagogy of bell hooks encourages teachers across the world to speak out against international hegemonic systems. In an article on education as the practice of freedom, two educators reflected on relationships in classrooms and on the vocation of teaching. These two educators practiced in Kenya, I taught in the United States, all of us read bell hooks and were determined to enact pedagogy that transcends nation and re-centers learning to be focused on raising consciousness. Specia and Osman (2015) wrote that "self-actualization should be the goal of the teacher as well as the students" (p. 195). According to Specia and Osman, self-actualization ought to be the main outcome of the process of teaching, for both teachers and students. Their concept of pedagogy implies that teaching is as much a process of getting to know oneself as learning is. Self-actualization is possible while teaching, as bell hooks teaches us, so long as teachers see themselves as participating in the spiritual growth of learners.

The content in a teachers' curriculum is as important as the pedagogy, because through both teachers can be attuned to their own spiritual growth (hooks, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Specia and Osman, 2015). If education is a matter of spiritual growth, then learning becomes a practice of freedom, and teachers can openly engage in discussions about the social systems of their nations. Through these discussions, teachers arrive on an awareness of their positions as teachers in a nation (hooks, 1994). Classrooms where education is not a practice of freedom fall prey to silencing the spiritual growth of students and could preclude the self-actualization of both teachers and students.

Teacher Self-Awareness

I aimed to adopt a pedagogy that challenged my race-based privilege in the classroom by choosing texts that centered the lives of individuals from cultures that were marginalized by whiteness. Through text choice and discussion, I demonstrated to my students that I was willing to reflect on my experience with race-based privilege. In admitting privilege in my classroom, I

relinquished some control because my authority could then be questioned. hooks explained: "The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race…is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained" (hooks, 1994, p. 39). Aligned with hooks, when I challenged the notion that the U.S. is a meritocracy, I challenged the notion that I deserved to be my students' teacher because I earned it. White culture may have entrapped classrooms when educators chose to sacrifice freedom for control. By associating meritocracy with white supremacy, the classroom space became available to alternative ideologies.

It is possible for educators to manage conversations on race and teach texts on which they are not authorities. Whole class discussion can guide students and teachers in learning the emotional discipline necessary to productively analyze society and continue discourse. Reflecting on our classroom, I learned that my students were already discussing what white culture looks like and what it means to be socially marginalized. By centering texts that welcomed conversations on topics that my students were already questioning, I found the classroom dynamic fostered a willingness to share lived realities. While the focus of this self-study is race, our classroom upheld student-led discussions on multiple socio-politically charged and culturally relevant topics. The opportunity to exercise my teacher agency in text selection set the foundation for resisting the status quo of teaching while white.

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Author

Allarie Coleman is working on her doctoral degree at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Informing her graduate work are her experiences in bilingual and arts-based secondary schools. She was a high school humanities teacher in her hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico and taught in a dual immersion middle school in Salt Lake City, Utah. She is passionate about teaching for critical consciousness, bilingual programs that are representative of their communities, and designing inclusive project-based learning curricula.

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