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To Kill a Stereotype: An Examination of Canonical Literature and Racial Representation in the Classroom

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TO KILL A STEREOTYPE: AN EXAMINATION OF CANONICAL LITERATURE AND RACIAL
REPRESENTATION IN THE CLASSROOM

by

Tiphany Phan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the English

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Thesis Mentor

Spring 2019

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
English have been completed.

Kathleen Diffley
English Honors Advisor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in the
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Abstract

This project examines racial representation in canonical texts frequently taught in the secondary English Language Arts classroom. Every year, the population of students in the American public school system becomes increasingly more racially diverse while the demographics of the teaching population and the literature within classrooms remain the same. As the student population continues to change, what type of literature and curriculum must educators teach in order to represent students' diverse identities and encourage respect and responsiveness towards other cultures?

As an Asian-American pre-service teacher, I first discuss the current state of American public school education in this project and then proceed to include two case studies. This section exists to examine and discuss two canonical and commonly used "racially diverse" texts in the English Language Arts classroom. Through examining Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) for aspects of racial representation, this project discusses how these texts portray people of color and their individual experiences. Moreover, this project considers whether or not the characters of color are complex, humanized, empowered, and are portrayed beyond negative racial stereotypes.

I argue that all educators should not only teach diverse literature in the classroom, but should also seek to provide literature which features positive racial representation within its narratives. While Lee's novel perpetuates negative stereotypes that dehumanize black characters, Walker's novel instead features black characters with agency and the capacity to succeed. All students, regardless of identity, have the opportunity to learn from racially diverse literature, experience representation, and develop empathy.

At its conclusion, this project features curriculum that seeks to emphasize cultural competency in the classroom. Ranging from reading techniques to writing prompts and practices to enhance racial awareness, this project provides readers and educators with techniques for developing a respectful and inclusive class.

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Preface

In 2011, my 9th grade English teacher, Mr. Mitchell, walked around the classroom as he handed a copy of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) to every student. Our teacher mentioned that the text would be one of the most important books that we would ever read. He expounded that it is significant not only because "almost every" American high school student in the past 30 years had read the book—a point later confirmed by people my parents' age who had, indeed, read the book—but also because Lee's novel tackled "tough topics" such as gender, class, and race that were rarely broached in school.

Once I started to read the book, I realized that Mr. Mitchell was right; I loved reading about the mundanity of Scout and Jem's childhood growing up in the South, the mystery of Boo Radley, and most of all, the story's mention of "tough topics." It was my first time reading a book that not only addressed difficult themes, but emphasized tolerance through its plot as well. And it wasn't just me—my classmates and I gathered daily around the lunch table dissecting its many plots and enjoying the book's nuances.

Following Mr. Mitchell's course, I did not encounter another book that featured main characters of color until reading Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) in the 11th grade. Although I was excited to read a book about minority characters, my teacher did not use it to talk about race in the same way that many teachers used *To Kill a Mockingbird* for racial discussions. While I enjoyed Walker's work for its plot, complex writing styles, and portrayal of dialect, I took little time to think about the text and its representations of race within the story. For the remainder of my high school career, racially diverse literature and its portrayal of people of color soon became a topic that I thought very little about.

In the year 2016, I began my sophomore year at the University of Iowa and signed up for an English course on American Literary Classics that focused on “Immigration Stories.” I eager and ready to read about Asian-American families that looked like mine, shared my daily realities, and possessed complex lives; these stories were unlike the stereotypical and sometimes racist portrayals of Asian families that I had so frequently encountered otherwise. My prior literacy experience included so many narratives that mocked the accents that many Asian-Americans—including my parents—spoke with or suggested that Asian people were “strange.” These stories were different. Authors such as Hisaye Yamamoto or Sui Sin Far wrote stories that featured characters falling in love, making friends, experiencing familial conflicts, and so on. Those stories did not focus simply on the characters’ accents or other stereotypical assumptions, but they illustrated realistic and respectful experiences.

That same year, I was introduced to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” where she insists “how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children” (Adichie 1:47). She goes on to reference her own childhood readings: “Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify” (1:55). Suddenly, I understood why the texts in the “Immigration Stories” course was so valuable to me; my familial experiences as an Asian-American person were much more complex than mocked accents or assumptions about our food. For the first time, I was able to see this complexity reflected in literature.

I realized that I had learned so little about other marginalized communities through the literature assigned to me in high school. On the rare occasion that the curriculum included texts about people of color, it promoted popular stereotypes or misconceptions; my only knowledge of

the black community through literature featured stories about trauma or slavery, and it was rare that I encountered literature in the classroom that spoke about other minority communities.

To clarify, I loved all of the books that I encountered during high school—even the ones written by white authors about white characters who looked nothing like me or did not have upbringings similar to my own. I was invested in every book that I encountered. Put simply, I enjoyed the literary experience, its extensive plot lines, the complexity of characters, and imagery and other stylistic elements; books such as J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* or Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* inspired a love of reading in high school that remains even today. The books were nuanced and challenging, and I became a better reader and writer because of them. My teachers were well-intentioned and well-meaning; they simply hoped to introduce us to books with literary merit and varying character perspectives.

However, I recognize now, in college and as a pre-service teacher, that as the racial demographics of the United States—and therefore, its student population—become increasingly diverse, the literature must change to match this. All students deserve to see their experiences reflected in literature or to develop a better, more complex, understanding of differing marginalized communities. Students are entitled to read stories that do not promote a master narrative and maybe, even feel the same sense of joy and belonging that I did my sophomore year. Through this research project, I examine racially diverse literature and teaching pedagogy in order to promote classrooms that are more representative and inclusive.

Introduction

My Role as a Researcher

In conducting research, my personal identity comes with implicit biases that affect how I read, engage with, and teach literature. I am currently a student studying secondary English education at a public state university. Though the term “secondary” encompasses grades 7-12, in this project I use it specifically in reference to high school students. I also identify as an Asian-American, able-bodied, heterosexual, and middle-class female. After feeling rewarded by my engagement with racially-diverse literature as a student, this personal experience motivates my desire to conduct research and teach representation in the classroom. Through this understanding, I believe that my race and educational background affects how I read and critique racially diverse literature. Additionally, as a current pre-service teacher, I find that my experiences as a student of color motivates my desire to teach literature in order to encourage cultural diversity and understanding— otherwise defined as cultural competency.

I also acknowledge that my status as a person of color prompts me to notice and critique race at a deeper level than other readers might do so. My race encourages me to look for and critically examine representations of people belonging to marginalized communities— in particular, people of color. In addition, I choose to examine racial representation in this project— as opposed to the representation of other backgrounds or identities—because I personally read literature with critical race theory in mind. While I recognize and value the varying experiences that people with differing identities must live through, my decision in examining race comes from the personal bias that my own race affects my life most prominently.

Through this project I argue that the canon—books that have now found an almost guaranteed place in the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum—must change to feature text

that represents all identities in a positive light. I assert that positive representation in literature must illustrate marginalized groups and identities as complex, possessing agency, and with opportunities equal to the dominant majority's. I also believe that educators, in particular, should create a more diverse syllabus that includes more literature written by authors who come from communities of color and provide a space for marginalized voices. In doing so, educators may work towards improving student reading and writing skills, encourage their students of color to gain a more complex view of the world, and empower all students through complex literature.

It is impossible for a teacher to provide literature that features *all* identities and backgrounds across the wide range of students in any given classroom. However, I believe that through teaching more diverse literature, educators show students an attempt to disrupt the master narrative of white, heteronormative, and middle-class America. In my own time as a student, I was personally interested in and identified more with books that featured minority characters—even if their identities did not directly align with my own—than those that represented the majority. In acknowledging this, I wish to emphasize how my personal reactions to literature have influenced my thought process when writing this paper. I also understand that my reactions as one person of color do not—and should not—represent all students of color, but I offer arguments from the perspective of one racial minority's experience in the classroom.

The two case studies within this project focus specifically on black American narratives. As an Asian-American woman, I acknowledge the power dynamics and my privilege in writing about black narratives. While I am a person of color, my daily experience as an Asian-American woman in America is nowhere similar to what black Americans face. My living conditions are not affected by the same systemic racism that black Americans must face, and my life has not been directly impacted by the horrible legacy of slavery and Jim Crow laws in this country. For

this project, I focus on the texts *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Color Purple* due to their popularity within many American classrooms when discussing race. Although there is much to reflect upon in terms of race and representation in these texts, as an Asian American woman I cannot truly—and hope not to—speak for or about the black community’s experiences through this project.

Research Parameters

This project, includes my own critiques of canonized “diverse” literature that is taught in secondary English Language Arts courses and the representation it features. My goal following this study stems directly from a desire to examine racially diverse literature in the classroom and to critique its representations of people of color. I argue that varying forms of representation affect students in different ways, yet, I also acknowledge that I did not directly interview secondary students during my research. Without data from current secondary students, I recognize that this project does not reveal the direct impact of canonical literature on American high school teenagers. While student voices provide an important perspective on how diverse literature specifically affects readers, I chose to analyze literature because I believe that the first step to a more culturally competent education begins with the stories that an educator brings into the classroom. Furthermore, close-reading allows for an objective analysis of the texts and its impacts on students.

Setting the Stage

Current State of American Public Education

To examine how diverse literature affects students, it is important to first understand student and teacher racial demographics: who teaches the curriculum, and who does it affect? Research conducted by the Center for American Progress on the importance of diversity in the classroom argues that students typically benefit from racial representation in the curriculum:

Teachers of color tend to provide more culturally relevant teaching and better understand the situations that students of color may face. These factors help develop trusting teacher-student relationships. Minority teachers can also... help students feel more welcome at school or as role models for the potential students of color. (Partelow et al. 3)

This study illustrates that a curriculum aiming to teach students about positive cultural representation first begins with educators and how they choose to teach. In addition, it reveals that while students of color specifically benefit from having their experiences represented or welcomed, “culturally relevant teaching” ultimately has the potential to reach all students.

Currently many teacher professional development courses, literature, and discussions argue for the benefits of culturally relevant teaching. Despite the research that supports such a pedagogical approach, statistics reveal a disproportionate ratio between white teachers and students of color. Demographic statistics provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows the American student population becoming increasingly racially diverse by year, while educator demographics remain stagnant and unbalanced. The NCES website indicates that in 1995—when the organization first began to collect data—white students made up 64.8% of the total secondary student population and white teachers made up 86.8% of the total educator population. Now, in the 2017 school year, the NCES indicates that American

public schools are significantly more diverse with white students making up 51.9% of the total student population and students of color as the other 48.1%. Conversely, within the past 20 years, white teachers have consistently made up 80-86% of the teacher population. These statistics reveal that while the American student population continues to change, the teacher force is not evolving to match it with proper representation. When considering the representation in a secondary English Language Arts classroom and the racial disparity between students and teachers, the NCES statistics further emphasize the need to feature diverse literature. Teaching literature that features positive racial representations allows students of color to benefit from diversity in the classroom, even if the demographics of their peers and instructors do not reflect such diversity.

Literature in the English Language Arts Curriculum

In today's political climate the pressure to meet assessments and curriculum standards often stymies the goal of teaching more inclusive literature. Beginning with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, followed by the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" (NCLB), to the current Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), these American policies were created "to ensure that students in every public school achieve important learning goals while being educated in safe classrooms by well-prepared teachers" (Iowa Department of Education 1). These mandates obligate school districts to administer yearly assessments of student achievement levels in core subjects of math, literacy, and science. The failure of assigned students to meet the standards produces possible negative consequences for teachers: loss of agency in the classroom or failure to receive a pay raise. This only further adds to the pressure many educators feel to "teach the test" to their students. In an interview study conducted by researchers Peg Graham and James

Marshall that reviewed the effects of standard assessments, the results indicate that the law only adds further pressure to classroom teachers. After interviewing 12 in-service teachers working in the state of Georgia in the year 2007, Graham and Marshall comment that:

Through our interviews, we found that while many of the teachers either felt they didn't understand the standards or resented standardized testing altogether, they were motivated to learn the standards because they didn't want their students to fail. (2)

While standardized tests have a purpose, this study illuminates some downsides. Rather than acting as a true assessment of quality in teaching and education, the standards instead cause some teachers to teach students specifically how to take and pass an exam. Therefore, some educators emphasize rote memory skills, the mechanics and structure of these exams, and persistent practice in taking these tests— all aspects that may not reflect a student's true aptitude or abilities. Graham and Marshall continue: "The consequences teachers face when their schools do not make [adequate yearly progress] seem dire: school restructuring, personnel changes, lack of job security" (3). This pressure in tandem with teachers' desires to help students succeed on these high-stakes assessments affirm the power of standardized testing in shaping America's current state of education. Expectations to meet standards in the classroom can often hinder the ability of teachers to provide meaningful curriculum that exists outside of testing material.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is another recent educational initiative in the United States. Implemented in 2010, the CCSS is an educational initiative designed to outline Math and English Language Arts learning goals for every student according to grade level. While the CCSS and standardized assessments are intended to work toward a common goal, the reality is that they have conflicting areas of focus. For example, in the state of Iowa, the CCSS claims to "lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century,"

and goes on to list a set of goals and expectations, such as: “[Students] actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews” (Common Core State Standards 3). In contrast to these standards, the Iowa Tests of Educational Development (ITED), the state’s standardized exam for students in grades 9-12, contains sections on vocabulary, reading comprehension, revising written materials, and spelling for the English Language Arts curriculum.

No doubt students benefit from acquiring these basic skills beyond the K-12 classroom; however, the ITED and its emphasis on rote memory skills paired with the pressure of “teaching to the test” often overrides curriculum that focuses on thoughtful engagement. When educators feel compelled to prioritize lessons on basic test skills, little room is left for critical thinking and discussion. The classroom research of Arthur Applebee reveals that:

Although teachers claimed to have broad humanistic goals for literature instruction (building interest in reading, encouraging creativity and independent thinking), observation of classroom practice found that the teaching of literature continued to be a relatively traditional enterprise. Knowledge about text—in particular, knowledge of its parts and how they contribute to an agreed-upon “author’s meaning”—dominated most lessons. (29)

While many English Language Arts teachers recognize the value in discussion-based pedagogy that allows for more critical inquiry, the current state of public education oftentimes makes it difficult for teachers to attain these ideals. To encourage more culturally relevant curriculum, the core standards and curriculum must first empower educators to provide more lessons based in critical thinking.

What exactly is the English teacher's job?

Along with both curricular and assessment initiatives, there is also the question defining the job of English teachers. What are agreed-upon goals for the high school English classroom? To improve students' reading, writing, and speaking skills? To understand the mechanics of essay writing? Or does this position go beyond these basic skills? At the very center of curriculum and standards, educators should prioritize equipping students with critical literacy skills that extend beyond simple reading or writing mechanics. If the CCSS expects students to develop "broaden[ed] world views," then teachers must work to facilitate critical discussions in the classroom (3). This means creating lessons that, for example, encourage cultural competency, discuss representation, and achieve character complexity through close readings of a variety of texts. Such a curriculum relies on rigorous, responsive classroom discourse and meaningful instruction, yet Applebee claims that:

The notion that education provides students with entry into ongoing cultural conversations about their lives and the world in which they live is usually cited in passing rather than being taken seriously as a starting point for thinking about issues of curriculum. (39)

Applebee's argument reiterates that a lag exists between educational ideology and current classroom practice. However, this acknowledgement does not imply that teachers should remove standard lessons of grammar or spelling as they are necessary skills that students must master for "college and career readiness" (CCSS 3). Rather, a teacher's role should exist to bridge the gap between strictly academic skills and cultural and societal competency beyond the classroom.

Justifications for Diverse Literature

As an undergraduate student currently studying at a large public university's College of Education, I have taken multiple courses on teaching literature; in the future, I plan on teaching English literature at the secondary level, preferably at a public school. In my pre-service coursework, I have frequently encountered scholarship that addresses the importance of teaching multicultural literature in the classroom. While the term "multicultural" can be defined as literature that represents characters from a variety of ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual identities, my writing will specifically focus on representations of race.

As the American public school population becomes more racially diverse, educators and administrators have emphasized the importance of teaching multicultural literature so students may see their experiences reflected. In "The Canonical Debate: Implementing Multicultural Literature and Perspectives" Heriberto Godina finds that struggling students may potentially benefit from racially diverse representation in their courses: "Students [begin] to see reflections of themselves in text, and this provide[s] them with a familiar path for thinking critically and scaffold[ing] their writing" (546). Godina's work here argues that the benefits of multicultural literature on students of color goes beyond representing diverse characters, but may also improve on their reading and writing skills. In addition, while this scaffolding for writing and critical thinking will benefit all students, this research could particularly benefit English Language Learners (ELLs). For many ELL students, school can be a particularly isolating and frustrating experience if they cannot yet properly communicate with their peers, do not understand assignments, or experience culture shock. Again, as Godina's research indicates, providing students with literature in which they see themselves could not only make their new experiences

in the American education system less jarring, but would also aid students in their intellectual growth at school as well.

In addition, multicultural literature models respectful interactions between cultures and provides an opportunity for students to learn about backgrounds different from their own. When discussing the specific types of multicultural literature that should be taught, Stan Steiner et al. note that:

Within the genre of multicultural literature, we have kept an eye out for children's literature that reflects not just the portrayal of single ethnic groups or insight into distinct cultures, but books that depict people from multiple cultures and ethnicities interacting with one another in various capacities. (88)

To reiterate the value that diverse literature holds, according to the US Census Bureau, “more than half of the nation's children are expected to be part of a minority race or ethnic group” by the year 2020 (6). If educators hope to provide students with the skills to interact with others upon leaving the secondary classroom, they must engage pupils with literature that accurately represents America’s demographic makeup. Literature that depicts different racial groups interacting with one another—as Steiner et al. suggest—demonstrates positive cooperation and allows students to “practice” in the classroom. When students read literature, the text forces them to view and interact with the world through another’s perspective and practice empathy.

Specifically, in reference to Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, some argue that the book creates a community amongst its readers. In “Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Community: Relationships and Renewal” Deborah Vriend Van Duinen and Audra Bolhuis document their success in bringing their community and secondary students together through teaching Lee’s novel. Van Duinen and Bolhuis emphasize *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s local impact

as they discuss a project in which students and professional artists collaborate to create artwork after reading the novel: “Community members initiated conversations with ‘young people’ about their interpretations of a piece of literature,” and “for years, students and teachers in our community have read the novel together, learned about life in the South during the 1930s, discussed its many themes, and completed book-related activities” (81). The frequent references to “the community” in Duinen and Bolhuis’ text in addition to discussing how the novel is “read together” indicates the value in reading and teaching canonical texts such as Lee’s novel; it introduces students to a shared cultural experience that generations before them have had, and generations following them will encounter as well.

Proponents of Lee’s novel also discuss the value of teaching it as a historical classic with valuable themes and societal critiques that go beyond race relations. Edgar Schuster, a former high school teacher, discusses how his students often overlooked these themes, noting: “over and over again their interpretations stress the race prejudice issue to the exclusion of virtually everything else” and he also goes on to ask: “If *Mockingbird* is primarily a race relations novel, why is it that the author gives such a full treatment to episodes that seem totally unrelated to this theme?” (507). Schuster’s arguments indicate that, because Lee only presents a few scenes featuring black characters interacting with their white counterparts, the book serves a much larger purpose in the classroom by encouraging students to discuss texts with literary merit. Furthermore, Schuster claims suggest that Lee’s novel has valuable thematic lessons to teach students, such as Jem’s physical and physiological growth, a societal caste system, the symbolism of the title, and topics relating to education. Michael Milburn also echoes a similar thought when arguing:

I suspect that Francine Prose might share Bloom's view, if not of *Harry Potter*, then of traditional school texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Separate Peace*. Her article affirms the importance of modeling what Bloom calls "the best that has been written ever, the best that has been thought ever." (90)

Milburn's discussion shows that while educators can present their students with texts that feature themes of youth, growth, or education, that students ultimately benefit from reading about these themes in historically praised books.

While these authors all argue for the very real benefits of teaching these texts in the classroom, they fail to address the role of student personal reactions in experiencing literature. If negative feelings accompany the reading of a text, then this distraction potentially thwarts students' abilities to focus on a novel's literary merit. In addition, while Duinen & Bolhuis' research indicates that canonical texts may provide a sense of community for all who have experienced the novel, they fail to address the feelings of students who react negatively to it would feel; if students disagree with or feel misrepresented by a text, then it may ultimately alienate them from the rest of the "community."

Furthermore, citations from articles by Johansson or Suhor and Bell repeatedly indicate that simply teaching and identifying books as "diverse" due to their inclusion of ethnic minority characters is not enough; all students, particularly students of color, deserve to read literature where their identities are positively represented rather than being forced to feel uncomfortable or humiliated by poor portrayals of their cultures. Yet, many English Language Arts classrooms continue to teach novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* with justifications that the books are either canonical, have literary merit, or are important historically. If educators expect to teach multicultural literature meant to benefit and represent students, teachers must first put forth an

extra effort to think about the potential impacts of the texts sanctioned in their classrooms and begin “seeing” who they really are.

The goal of including more multicultural literature into the curriculum is well-intentioned by most English Language Arts teachers, yet two important aspects are frequently overlooked: 1) the portrayal of characters or cultures that students of color are expected to see themselves reflected in, and 2) the reactions of students of color toward the representations that they are presented with. Much of my research fails to acknowledge the potential negative effects of showing students degraded or mistreated characters meant to represent them. Rather than focusing solely on providing racially diverse literature, educators must be more discriminate in their choices, finding books where students of color can see themselves reflected in a positive light. Lisa Taylor and Michael Hoechsmann echo the importance of positive representation through mentioning:

Educational research has clearly demonstrated that there is dramatic impact on intercultural understanding, communication, and respect associated with multicultural curriculum reform that explicitly recognizes and learns from the achievements of communities of colour. (225)

Reading stories with empowered characters of color communicates a belief in the ability of *all* students to succeed, regardless of race. While negative representations may perpetuate harmful biases, literature that represents communities of colors’ achievements works to combat stereotypes that assume inferiority in minorities.

In addition to Taylor and Hoechsmann’s study, varying educational research references students and communities of color at times expressing discomfort over literature that represents diverse communities unfavorably. For example, in a case study from Larry Johannessen’s

teacher handbook that follows American high school students reading Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a black student discusses the n-word and its impacts on her:

It's hard for us. The *N* word is ugly. Our parents and adults are always telling us not to use that word, and then here it is, like, on every other page or something. It is humiliating for me as an African American, and then you want us to talk about it all the time in class.

There are some racial problems in this school, and this only seems to make it worse. (88)

Educators must consider how varying types of representation impact their students in the classroom; when teachers identify books as “diverse” simply because they feature characters of color and assume that students of color will enjoy or benefit from “seeing themselves” in the literature, this well-meaning intention may be harmful. Johannessen's study demonstrates the importance of considering student opinions and feelings when choosing literature rather than making decisions based on seemingly good assumptions. Similarly, in a “teacher study guide” for teaching Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Charles Suhor and Larry Bell note that “students, and often their parents, sometimes have difficulty with the profane language, racial epithets, absence of a Black perspective, complex family and social relationships, and violence in the novel...” (4). While this research gives voice to communities of color who feel distress towards problematic novels, many secondary schools still currently teach these books.

Ultimately, these findings shows how canonical American texts can serve to silence the voices and concerns of marginalized groups even today.

In addition, I realized in researching this topic that only a small body of work addresses students of color responding to the use of multicultural texts in comparison to the vast amount of research on students of the majority (typically white and middle-class) reacting to this literature. When students of color and their voices are overlooked, even when their presence encourages

educators to bring in “diverse texts,” it emphasizes a need for teachers to focus more on bettering literature experiences of *all* students. Such insensitivity also perpetuates the oppression and silence that students of color often face in the classroom when their thoughts and concerns are ignored.

In the sections following, I address two books commonly taught and canonized in the American English Language Arts classroom and whether or not they provide positive representations of people of color. In this body of work, I identify “positive representation” as showing characters that have the agency to make their own decisions, independence, and complexity. Rather than caricatures or stereotypes, these characters are well rounded, have multiple layers to their thoughts, actions, and personalities, and their lives go beyond the narrative of victimization and trauma in people of color. The two books that I discuss, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, are not only ones that I encountered as a public high school student, but also common texts that current in-service teachers confirm are still taught in the classroom. Again, if the goal is to provide students—particularly, students of color—with a positive experience by seeing themselves reflected in literature, teachers must first identify the types of literature that students should encounter. Moreover, teachers must emphasize the importance of students being able to “see themselves” as people with agency, power, or with lives that go beyond *only* suffering and trauma.

Black Victimization in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Throughout the United States, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the most widely used texts within English Language Arts classrooms to teach about racial equality and tolerance. To date, Lee's novel has sold approximately 40 million copies, has won multiple awards, and continues to be recognized as a book with great literary merit. Over time, the novel has become a consistent staple in the ELA classroom. While Lee's novel may have provided an important contribution to the discussion of racial equality during the 1960s, it also dehumanizes black characters, features harmful language, and supports a white savior narrative—a trope in which white characters rescue people of color from their struggles. Simply because Lee's novel focuses on the relationship between black and white characters does not mean that *To Kill a Mockingbird* should be taught in the classroom to emphasize positive portrayals of diversity. Instead, educators should consider how diverse literature reflects their students, and what they wish to communicate to students through these narratives. While the novel's enduring place in the ELA curriculum has canonized it, in the past 20 years, American classrooms have changed drastically; as the racial demographics continue to become more ethnically diverse, educators should question whether the “American experience” represented in Lee's book reflects all experiences, or if it simply represents white and more privileged students.

At its core, Lee's novel perpetuates a negative stereotype about black male sexuality. Although the story enforces that Tom's rape accusation is an injustice, it fails to address or criticize the stereotype that black males are violent and hypersexual. Quoted in Suhor's teacher study guide, Claudia Durst Johnson (qtd. in Suhor) argues that “the novel challenges our stereotypes - of the Southerner, the African American...” (3). Yet when Atticus calls attention to Tom's disability and the lawyer simply asks Mayella “how” Tom raped her, the story implies

that the *only* reason that Tom did not rape Mayella was due to his physical disability (Lee 249). Rather than writing a story about an innocent and able-bodied black man, Tom's disability makes him an exception to the black stereotype instead of an argument against it. Without an attempt to complicate this generalization, Lee's novel adds to and perpetuates a narrative that continues to stigmatize the black community today.

While Lee uses Tom's disability to imply his physical inability to rape another person, she also illustrates the character as passive and harmless— therefore making him dangerous even to himself without the guidance of others. As Tom recounts Mayella pushing herself onto him, he states, "I say Miss Mayella lemme outta here an' tried to run but she got her back to the door an' I'da had to push her," and goes on to confirm that he refused to put his hands on her, even to move her out of the way (Lee 206). While Mayella pushes Tom into a position that clearly endangers him as a black man, he refuses to defend himself simply for Mayella's sake; even Tom's words to her are stated as a passive request as opposed to an assertive command for her to stop. Tom is forced to pay the price for his passivity when the Ewells frame him for a crime that he did not commit. When others unjustly accuse Tom, it is not the character's assertive nature or actions that protect him, but instead Atticus Finch's protection and guidance. Throughout the story, it is Atticus who spares Tom's life, such as when he guards Tom's jail cell to protect him from lynching, or simply when he serves as the man's attorney and attempts to prove his innocence. Without others to protect him, Tom's character possesses no power to protect himself from harm and, in turn, illustrates the black character as someone with no personal agency.

When prison guards shoot and kill Tom after his attempt to flee the jail, Lee once again illustrates the character as someone incapable of protecting himself without Atticus. Immediately upon being moved to the county prison and without the presence of Atticus, Tom is killed. After

Tom's death, Atticus reflects on Tom's actions and argues: "I guess Tom was tired of white men's chances and preferred to take his own" (Lee 249). While this quotation shows Atticus's attempts to justify his client's decision to escape, Tom's ultimate fate also implies to readers that his decision was unwise and foolish as compared to Atticus—the white man's—advice. This suggests that had Tom listened to Atticus and remained in the jail, he would not have been killed, and therefore Atticus's presence in Tom's life would have protected him.

Furthermore, Lee's story perpetuates a white savior narrative through Atticus, a white man in a position of power, who is assigned and chooses to defend a black character incapable of protecting himself. Although Lee uses Atticus's character to illustrate moral responsibility and respect, students may associate concepts that address racial inequality with white heroism. In "The Case Against *To Kill a Mockingbird*" Issac Saney touches upon this point by discussing the historical lack of agency that representations of black people have endured throughout time, noting that:

They are robbed of their role as subjects of history, reduced to mere objects who are passive hapless victims; mere spectators and bystanders in the struggle against their own oppression and exploitation. (102)

Not only does Lee's story perpetuate a narrative of oppression and victimization against the black community, but it also promotes Atticus as a white savior. When a curriculum encourages readers to view the white male as a hero, it implies that people of color either lack the agency to defend themselves or that white people are responsible for "saving" racial minorities. Although many choose to view Atticus as a morally just figure in the small town of Maycomb, this view also dangerously borders viewing the white man as a hero to the oppressed and incapable black man. Lee's narrative of a white man saving a black man with a complete lack of agency

communicates the “black experience” to students as one in which people of color are continually dependent on their white counterparts for a better quality of life. Not only is this false, but teaching students this narrative may cause students of color to feel degraded or inferior to their white classmates. This detriment continues onto white students, who may come to view their peers of color as inferior or in need of their salvation, which may perpetuate oppression and ignorance in our societies beyond the text.

Throughout the story, Lee uses the mockingbird as a symbol for Tom Robinson. While the bird exists to represent Tom’s innocence—shown directly when Mr. Underwood refers to his murder as “the senseless slaughter of songbirds”—it dehumanizes Tom and, by correlation, the black community, to the status of mere animals (Lee 254). After they receive their air rifles, Atticus tells Jem and Scout that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird, to which their neighbor Miss Maudie agrees:

Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t eat up people’s gardens, don’t nest in corncribs, they don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird. (98)

Comparing Tom—and indirectly other black characters—to something subhuman asserts that their value in society is directly related to their ability to serve others rather than emphasizing their humanity. When Miss Maudie discusses the sin against killing a mockingbird, her main argument considers what mockingbirds can do for “*us*”; she makes a clear distinction between black and white citizens, and also equates their valuable service indirectly to what the black community can do for white people. This is especially true when considering that the two main black characters shown in Lee’s novel both serve their white neighbors somehow: Tom as a field hand for Link Deas, and Calpurnia as a maid for the Finches. Miss Maudie’s sentiment

dismantles the humanity of the black community, and instead assigns value to black people solely based on their ability to do the laborious work that white people would prefer not to do themselves.

Lee's novel continues to perpetuate the perspective of black people as inferior through the Finch family's maid, Calpurnia, and her inability to gain credibility in their household. After Scout and Jem's mother dies, readers quickly learn that Calpurnia has taken over the role as their mother: she cooks for the children, she protects them, and even attempts to teach them proper manners. Yet, despite her efforts and hard work, Calpurnia is not afforded the same authority as the kids' Aunt Alexandra, who has only recently come to live with the family. After Scout and Jem angrily confront their father over Aunt Alexandra's refusal to allow them to spend the weekend at Calpurnia's home, Atticus responds saying: "Let's get this clear: you do as Calpurnia tells you, you do as I tell you, and as long as your aunt's in this house, you will do as she tells you" (Lee 146). Although Atticus does list Calpurnia first when instructing the children on who they must respond to, the book never shows the children going to Calpurnia's house on the weekend, and therefore prioritizes Aunt Alexandra's—the children's white aunt—commands first. Additionally, while Atticus and Aunt Alexandra both trust Calpurnia to care for the children, Aunt Alexandra's refusal to allow the children to spend time with the maid in her own personal space implies that it is somehow wrong or dangerous. Through these interactions, Lee illustrates that the Finches only value Calpurnia to the extent of the services that she provides to the family, but never for her contributions as someone who cares for and loves the children.

Throughout the novel, Atticus defends Calpurnia from Aunt Alexandra's scrutiny; however, the very basis of his arguments address how Calpurnia does not "seem black." When Aunt Alexandra criticizes Calpurnia's presence in the Finch household, Atticus argues: "...she's

never let them get away with anything, she's never indulged them the way most colored nurses do" (Lee 147). In this quotation, Atticus makes an argument for Calpurnia's worth directly in relation to how she is different than "most colored nurses"—implying that Calpurnia is an exception to typical black nurses and instead is more similar to a white nurse. Here, Calpurnia's worth to the family comes from her ability to "erase" or "hide" her blackness through her behavior.

Similarly, the scene in which Calpurnia takes the Finch children to church with her reiterates how the white family only finds value in their maid's ability to "act white." After hearing Calpurnia use African-American English and the n-word, Scout asks her: "Why do you talk the [n-word]-talk to the— to your folks when you know it's not right?" and when Calpurnia acknowledges her culture and its importance, Jem responds: "That doesn't mean you hafta talk that way when you know better" (Lee 136). When Jem reminds Calpurnia that she "knows better," his words emphasize that Calpurnia's black identity—which features her dialect—is inferior to the white culture that she typically portrays when she is in their household. This is further reiterated with Scout's use of the n-word, which directly associates the derogatory term to a dialect common to the black community. Both Jem and Scout's comments to Calpurnia act as a reminder to readers that they prefer the maid when her 'blackness' is hidden. Throughout the novel, interactions between Calpurnia and the Finch family work to repeatedly emphasize how Calpurnia's value is deeply rooted in her ability to assimilate into white culture.

The disrespect towards black citizens and their culture extends beyond Tom and Calpurnia in the novel, but is also emphasized in Reverend Sykes and the other church members' constant accommodations towards the Finch family. When Tom Robinson's jury reaches its

verdict and Atticus begins to leave the court house, Lee illustrates a scene of ultimate respect demonstrated by Calpurnia's black church members:

“Miss Jean Louise?”

I looked around. They were standing. All around us and in the balcony on the opposite wall, the Negroes were getting to their feet. Reverend Sykes's voice was as distant as Judge Taylor's:

“Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father's passin.” (224)

This scene serves to illustrate the black Maycomb community's graciousness towards Atticus's efforts to defend Tom; however, their actions also reiterate the constant expectation for black citizens to show respect to their white counterparts, even if they themselves are never shown the same. Although Reverend Sykes does encourage Scout to stand up and Atticus—a white man—arguably shows his respect to the black community by defending Tom, Atticus himself was *assigned* to defend Tom. Furthermore, Tom's innocence only reiterates that he deserves a fair trial. Yet, the black community understands that by defending Tom, Atticus has “stooped to their level” and become a “[n-word] lover,” and therefore they are grateful towards Atticus willingly lowering his social status to an inferior level. The scenes in the courthouse reiterate to readers the perpetual racial inequality when examining respectful interactions between black and white communities.

While many teach Lee's novel with the note that it illustrates the problematic perspectives of the 1930s South, the story also forces students to experience scenes where communities of color are degraded and portrayed as inferior. In the teacher study guide, Suhor notes that the balcony scene “may be viewed as a powerful moment to some students while for others the scene may be humiliating, and a chilling reminder of the legacy of powerlessness in

America” (4). In addition to Suhor’s comments, opening up a classroom discussion in which students emphasize their beliefs about this “powerful scene” can also minimize and demean the feelings of those students who experience the scene much differently. Although a discussion such as this could allow students to learn from each other’s perspectives and encourage students to see the humiliation of this scene, it is not without first minimizing black and minority students. Students of color may feel discouraged from expressing their shame or humiliation at the risk of disagreeing with the majority of their classmates during discussion. Not only may this particular discussion have detrimental effects to a student of color during the lesson, but it can also create a future environment where minority students no longer feel comfortable sharing their thoughts or feelings about race.

In addition, teaching Lee’s novel within the classroom provides a platform to the historically degrading and derogatory n-word. Although teachers emphasize that negative representations—such as the use of the word—are perspectives of the past, students of color must forcibly read through these demeaning portrayals of themselves, while white students are provided with a space to consider and grapple with these degrading depictions of people of color. In discussing the role of the past when teaching Lee’s novel, Saney notes that: “The White student... may misconstrue it as language of an earlier era or the way it was, this language is still widely used today and the book serves as a tool to reinforce its usage even further” (100). Saney’s discussion shows how having students read a text with problematic views may not only demean people of color, but it may also spread false assumptions about race and racism. Rather than encouraging students to think critically about race, providing a space for problematic and historical texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* may reinforce or imply that racism existed only in the past.

Throughout time, parents and students alike have vocalized discomfort towards reading and discussing Lee's novel within the classroom. While this discomfort could easily be avoided through providing students with different texts that also feature characters of color, the schools that consistently choose to keep Lee's novel in the curriculum perpetuate a sense of oppression onto its pupils. When addressing black students and their families' reactions to reading Lee's text, the teacher study guide acknowledges that:

Students, and often their parents, sometimes have difficulty with the profane language, racial epithets, absence of a Black perspective, complex family and social relationships, and violence in the novel. (Suhor 4)

Yet, even today, many schools continue to teach this text in spite of the negative reactions that many families of color have voiced. If students see themselves reflected in the demeaning situations that Tom and Calpurnia face, yet still must read Lee's novel alongside their classmates even after expressing a sense of uneasiness towards the book, then are their experiences really any different from the characters that they see in the novel? If students align their cultural existences to Tom and Calpurnia's, they may feel invisible or marginalized in the classroom.

Data from Suhor's teacher study guide further asserts that many families feel upset specifically over the text's portrayal of black characters and their experiences, rather than the discussion of race itself. For many parents and guardians, this discomfort stems from their children's' engagement with literature full of racial slurs, violence, and dehumanization of black characters. Yet despite these complaints presented towards teaching Lee's novel in the classroom, Saney observes that in many communities: "The book was lauded as a classic, a paragon of anti-racist literature, and therefore, untouchable and sacrosanct. The Black community was chided for being too overly sensitive" (3). This data point shows us that while

the black community—the very community supposedly represented—expressed a disapproval towards Lee’s novel, that these complaints were not only ignored, but blatantly rejected and minimized. This blatant ignorance and these demeaning actions can communicate to parents and students of color that their feelings and opinions are inferior, thus causing or perpetuating a lack of trust between teachers and their students of color.

When Lee’s novel was released, it was produced with good intentions: to portray various multicultural experiences and perspectives, to facilitate positive black and white relations, and to defend the innocence of African-Americans. With these intentions in mind, Lee’s novel quickly became one of the most frequently taught books in the classroom with educators hoping to use it as a model example for students to understand their roles within society. Now, however, Lee’s novel has instead become a well-meaning yet racist text with stereotypical and degrading portrayals of the black community. Instead, the English curriculum must do better by seeking books that can act as “mirrors” that reflect diverse students in positive lights, in which students can see themselves succeeding, experiencing acceptance, or gaining respect, rather than enduring a constant narrative of trauma.

Domesticity and Empowerment in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Another commonly taught classroom text, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, also features black characters who face trauma at some point in the novel. While Lee's book perpetuates black victimization, Walker's novel instead works to subvert harmful stereotypes about the black community. By featuring successful and empowered characters, a variety of "black experiences," and directly addressing stereotypes, Walker's novel presents a more thorough and comprehensive representation of the black community. For students who typically encounter oppression or failure in black narratives, Walker's novel offers a different learning experience. With a complex narrative that features characters of color with agency and complexity, Walker's novel allows students either to see their backgrounds reflected or to learn about new cultures in a respectful manner. Rather than simply wishing for students to see themselves in characters that "look like them," this book allows educators to offer a book that represents their pupils in a positive light.

Although *The Color Purple* has become canonized in the American English Language Arts classroom over time, many argue that it lacks the literary merit that novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* possess due to its idealistic ending. When Walker first introduces Celie, readers meet a character who suffers from abuse, is relatively illiterate, and fears that she has completely lost communication with her sister. By the novel's end, the character becomes a successful businesswoman, inherits a large home, and magically reunites with her sister after a mission trip in Africa, an ending which Trudier Harris argues in "On The Color Purple, Stereotypes, and Silence" is illogical: "How Celie grows and how [Walker] presents other characters as growing is frequently incredible and inconsistent to anyone accustomed to novels at least adhering to the worlds, logical or otherwise, that they have created" (156). Admittedly, Walker's plot does move

unreasonably fast and ends unrealistically. Yet this should not prevent educators from teaching it. First, the story allows teachers to discuss logical plot structures and progression with their students. Educators may also discuss the literary merit of classical texts and whether or not Walker's novel qualifies as one. Additionally, despite its unreasonable plot progression, the story provides students with an opportunity to interact with stories of black characters beyond the scope of trauma and suffering. Instead, it allows students to see these minority characters in positions of success, power, and joy.

Indeed, despite the indulgent plot, many students respond positively to the novel's optimistic ending. In documenting her students' reactions to Walker's novel, educator Aisha Bailey quotes a student who comments: "I mean, Mister oppressed Celie and the other women in his life and kept cutting down Harpo's manhood. So when Shug and Celie figured him out, they took a stand and ended up with all the power. That was deep" (24). While the speaker's comment "that was deep" sounds slightly comical, it does illustrate the positive effect that the story's ending may have on students. This particular student's reaction to the story emphasizes its potential to empower readers, rather than a critique of its plot progression. Subsequently, more important than the plot itself is the opportunity for students to see characters of color—especially black characters—as people who are capable of success and happiness.

While many readers have responded positively to *The Color Purple*, it is important to note that much of the criticism that surrounds the novel addresses Walker's negative portrayal of black men. After analyzing a variety of reader responses, Jacqueline Bobo cites responses that feel "[the novel exposes] aspects of inner-community life that might reinforce damaging racial stereotypes already proffered by racist antagonists" (338). This quotation refers to Walker's portrayal of black male characters, such as Pa or Albert, which may lead readers to believe in a

long-standing and harmful stereotype about black male violence and abuse. I do not want to discredit the arguments and reactions of those who respond negatively to Walker's novel because I believe that educators must pay attention to *all* of their students' responses to literature. However, the increasing complexity in Albert's character, an antagonistic black male, serves to illustrate his actions as individually motivated, rather than an archetypal representation of black men. As opposed to a one-dimensional character who perpetuates negative stereotypes throughout the entire novel, readers see Albert redeeming himself and attempting to connect with Celie within the novel. Near the end of the story as the two characters sit together, Albert tells Celie: "Took me long enough to notice you such good company" (Walker 276). This observation not only demonstrates Albert's remorse for his treatment towards Celie, but it also illustrates his development. The character begins as someone who despises and objectifies women, but eventually comes to view them as "good company" and considers Celie his equal.

Furthermore, Walker uses Nettie's time in Africa to assert complexity and variation in black experiences, rather than perpetuating a generalized image of black people. In one of her first letters to Celie, Nettie writes about meeting other people of color beyond the town that she and her sister grew up in as she recounts: "Oh, Celie, there are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa or Albert, or beaten down like Ma was" (Walker 132). Nettie's letter serves to educate both Celie and the reader in emphasizing that not all black social living conditions are the same; while Celie's background as a young adult may indeed play into racial stereotypes—with violent men and victimized women—this letter works to reiterate that this is not representative of the entire black community, as stressed when Nettie tells Celie "They are not *all*..." Rather than simplifying Celie's past and using it to represent the living conditions of all black women, Walker carefully

attempts to remind readers that Celie's daily realities offer only an insight into the unique individual experiences of one person who happens to be black.

When the novel begins to shift its focus from Celie's perspective to Nettie's, Walker illustrates a transition in the character's level of agency as well. At the outset, Celie writes her confessions to and trusts in God, a male figure that she associates with the man who raped her. After Celie's stepfather rapes and impregnates her, then sells her baby without her consent, rather than telling her mother truthfully what happened, Celie instead claims that God was in control: "Whose is it? I say God's... He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can" (Walker 2). The act of replacing Pa's name with God diminishes Celie's suffering and silences her experience as a victim. Such an association implies something pure or holy, such as the Virgin Mary's pregnancy with Jesus Christ, and prevents Celie from acknowledging the crime committed against her. Finally, it shows readers Celie's direct association between God and the only man present in her life, who up until that point had abused her.

However, Walker shows Celie eventually releasing herself from an oppressive relationship with God and gaining her own agency when she begins to address her letters to Nettie. After learning about her true relation to Pa from Nettie's letters, Celie writes another letter to God and challenges him by ending the letter with: "You must be sleep" (Walker 177). Celie's decision to begin writing to her sister illustrates her gaining power and agency as she decides to abandon her oppressors. Stacie Hankinson also argues that this scene represents a shift in Celie's writing, in which her letters to God were "cast with a fearful hue..." whereas her letters to Nettie show an "underscoring [of] the newly emerging theme of love, connectedness, and restoration, which Celie's bond with Nettie represents" (324). Celie's shift illustrates her

gaining agency and taking control of her life. Rather than perpetuating a narrative of suffering and victimization—as readers see in Tom Robinson’s fate in Lee’s novel—Celie’s story becomes one of growth and empowerment.

Additionally, Walker uses Celie’s letter writing as an opportunity to represent African American English in a positive manner that forces readers to view the story from a black perspective. Although the novel never explicitly acknowledges or praises Celie’s use of dialect in her own writing, its presence encourages readers to experience and appreciate it. In an article on teaching Walker’s novel in the classroom, Diane Lunde notes how her white students’ views on dialect came to change over time: “When the students began reading *The Color Purple*, they saw Celie’s dialect as problematic. Some white students had trouble because the language seemed too unfamiliar, although they eventually got used to it, and even began to appreciate it” (58). Rather than writing the story in Standardized American English, Walker’s use of dialect forces readers to work through—and ultimately make meaning out of—a dialect that largely represents black culture. In doing so, Walker does not attempt to hide Celie’s “blackness,” but instead allows it to become the central focus of the story and reading experience. It is also important to note that once Celie begins to receive letters from Nettie, whose writing conforms more to Standardized American English, Celie makes no attempt to change her writing, and does not express self-consciousness over the dialect in her own writing. Through Celie’s own attitude towards her writing in comparison to others, Walker chooses to celebrate and emphasize a large part of the black community rather than conforming to stereotypes that assume African American English is inferior or unintelligent. Within the context of the classroom, this text directly provides non-black students with an experience outside of their own—similar to Lunde’s students—and

enables black students who may speak the dialect to see their culture represented and appreciated in the classroom.

Walker also illustrates Celie's empowerment by showing her monetary success, which allows her both to sustain herself financially and develop a more positive outlook on life. After recognizing her talent in sewing pants for others, Celie begins taking commissions for clothing which ultimately helps her gain independence. As she updates Nettie about her life, she exclaims, "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time..." (Walker 215). Here, Walker shows readers the direct connection between Celie's successful business and the other aspects that make her happy. Only with a successful business that gives her a proper income does Celie have "free time" to spend for herself and with others that bring her joy. Celie's thriving business not only empowers her by providing her with an income and some aspect of status within society, but it also benefits her emotionally— as indicated when she points out her happiness and love. Again, while Celie does suffer from abuse and oppression at the beginning of Walker's novel, allowing readers to see Celie becoming successful, independent, and happy can give students a look into the perspective of a complicated character who has evolved and is capable of continuing to do so.

In addition to Celie's development throughout the novel, Walker uses the character of Sofia to subvert white stereotypes about black women. Although Sofia does become a maid to a rich white family in the story, rather than using the character to represent the archetypal "black nanny," Walker instead uses the character to argue against this stereotype. After Sofia refuses to show affection to the child of her white employer, Miss Eleanor Jane, the woman exclaims, "I just don't understand... All the other colored women I know love children. The way you feel is something unnatural," to which Sofia responds "I love children. But all the colored women that

say they love yours is lying” (Walker 123). Here, Walker uses Miss Eleanor Jane to represent the dominant culture—upper-class white Americans—and its creation of the stereotype that black women love white children, only to immediately dismantle it using Sofia’s voice. Not only does Sofia’s retort against Miss Eleanor Jane explicitly deny the white woman’s stereotypical assumption of black women, but it also gives the character additional agency. When Sofia counters her white employer’s statement, she presents herself as equal to the white woman, rather than subservient. While Sofia does fit into the stereotypical role of a black woman at surface-level, her ability to argue her beliefs provides additional complexity and agency to the character.

Another stereotype that Walker works to dismantle is the white assumption—developed through racial power dynamics originating from slavery in America—that black Africans are impoverished and therefore require white assistance. In the letters to her sister, Nettie introduces a white missionary, Doris, whom she has met and promptly draws her sister’s attention to her savior complex. First, Nettie discusses the woman’s initial interest in missionary service, claiming, “Ah, but a missionary! Far off in the wilds of India, alone! It seemed like bliss. And she cultivated a pious interest in heathens...” and then goes on to quote Doris discussing her achievements in the African continent:

I was actually able to help [the Olinka people] a good deal... I learned to speak their language faultlessly... I tapped the family vaults for close on to a million pounds before I got anything from the missionary societies or rich old family friends. I built a hospital, a grammar school. A college. A swimming pool—the one luxury I permitted myself, since swimming in the river one is subject to attack by leeches. (Walker 230)

Immediately as Nettie introduces readers to Doris, she mocks the woman and her intentions to become a missionary through using exclamation marks excessively; Nettie discredits the woman and presents her as absurd, dramatic, and ridiculously over-enthusiastic. Then, as the text transitions to Doris discussing her time in Africa, it presents an elaborate discussion on her own experiences rather than those of the Olinka people whom she claims to help. Doris emphasizes the monetary sacrifices that she made and brags about the buildings she constructed, yet never mentions how her “services” benefit the Olinka people themselves. Instead, almost comically, Doris even mentions building a swimming pool for her own benefit, something that Linda Selzer claims Nettie does not respect: “From Nettie's perspective as a black woman familiar with the trials of the displaced Olinka, Doris's aristocratic troubles seem small indeed, and Nettie further trivializes the white woman's decision to become a missionary...” (71). Although Nettie never explicitly states her lack of respect for Doris, her mocking tone shows the absurdity—and therefore diminishes—white stereotypes about impoverished African countries. Nettie’s treatment and judgment of Doris therefore implores readers to consider the role that white people play when attempting to “help” black people in any capacity.

Ultimately, Walker’s novel offers a view into varying black communities full of complexities. Rather than promoting a “single story,” Walker introduces readers to multiple characters all with different desires, lifestyles, and flaws. Additionally, because Walker herself is a black woman, her narrative offers a more representative and dynamic view of black living conditions and struggles. Finally, the ending itself also disrupts the stereotypical narrative of “black trauma” as readers watch Celie establish a successful business and reunite with her sister. With *The Color Purple*, students come to see struggle as only a small portion of the black community’s experiences.

Results

Through my research and experiences teaching in secondary English Language Arts courses, I compiled a list of pedagogical suggestions for teaching diverse literature to students. Although I understand that every classroom is distinct with its own set of students who read and react to literature differently, I have experienced success when implementing these practices in my own classrooms. Below, this project offers curricular suggestions in an effort to help educators avoid teaching “the single story.”

Representation Through Authors

The most straightforward method to feature empowering representation in the classroom is simply to teach literature written by authors of color. In doing so, educators provide a space and voice for marginalized groups within their own classrooms and grant stories written by minorities the same authority as those written by white authors. Rather than only featuring narratives written by individuals from the majority group and assigning worth to their stories, expanding the canon and inviting a multicultural literature provides a space and voice to marginalized groups within classrooms where all students, particular those of color, feel acknowledged and validated.

Furthermore, stories about people of color written by authors of color themselves may offer more nuanced and authentic representations. As students encounter literature written by authors of color about characters with similar identities as their own, it encourages students to “[see] people on their own terms and through their understandings of themselves rather than imposing one’s own social and cultural knowledge...” (Schey 33). Ethnically diverse literature written by marginalized authors in the curriculum allows students to work past harmful

stereotypes and assumptions about minority groups promoted by the master narrative. This in turn also communicates to students the value of marginalized stories in places of authority.

Many resources exist for educators who hope to incorporate more diverse literature in their classrooms. Often a great place to start is with book awards specifically aimed towards diversity, including awards such as the Arab American Book Award, Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, Coretta Scott King Book Awards, and the Tomas Rivera Book Award, among many others. Not only do these awards feature texts written by authors of color about characters of color, but each judging committee includes members from the same ethnic backgrounds to the awards, respectively. By selecting books from these lists, educators provide their students with texts that feature positive representation, literary merit, and are selected by judges with culturally specific knowledge from their own experiences.

Additionally, understanding and recognizing positive representation begins with staying active in communities of color. Regardless of racial or ethnic backgrounds, all educators should seek out and listen to voices of color. Furthermore, resources on the internet such as book reviews, non-profit organization websites (such as We Need Diverse Books), book suggestion lists, and even social media exist and offer insight on representative literature. In particular, engaging directly with authors and people of color may offer educators a perspective on identity, culture, and pedagogy different from their own.

Awareness of Stereotypes

When looking for literature about diverse characters, teachers should be aware of whether or not the stories perpetuate stereotypes. Regardless of whether a story is written by an author of color, educators should take time to examine the representation of characters within a story and

the potential biases of the author. Does the story perpetuate stereotypes or generalizations about a group of people? Does the story present its diverse characters as flat? Do the characters seem like caricatures? What sort of general statement does the author seem to make about a group of people? While these are important questions to ask before choosing books to teach in the classroom, these are questions that may also be asked of students. In turn, encouraging students to recognize and problematize generalizations allows for a push-back against these stereotypes rather than a perpetuation. Furthermore, this mindset equips students with the skills to seek out culturally representative texts in their own time without needing to depend on a teacher.

Teaching Irreplaceable Texts

What happens when teachers are unable to change their curriculum or the books that they teach? Oftentimes, books continue to remain in the classroom over time simply due to lack of funding or administrative decisions that educators may not have control over. In discussing the American education system, Applebee reiterates this sentiment:

This predicament is one that has faced most teachers at one time or another, and that faces many teachers all the time. But institutional constraints on subjects and materials may be less critical than the teacher's decisions about the conversations in which students will be asked to engage. (50)

Despite this, there are still many possibilities for teachers to teach canonical texts in a way that can empower their students of color. Below, I continue to provide pedagogical texts that educators may use when teaching canonical texts. While I offer these measures in reference to literature that remains problematic in a curriculum, ultimately these techniques may be utilized for any texts used in the classroom.

Critical Lenses

Encouraging students to read literature through critical lenses allows them to analyze, evaluate, and make their own decisions about their class texts. In the context of reading stories with characters of color, this pedagogy can encourage students to analyze representations of race in texts, and evaluate whether the representations are positive. Educators should encourage students to use critical race lenses to consider whether race is portrayed fairly or stereotypically in the narratives that they encounter.

One particular lesson that I find successful includes introducing critical lenses through children's books. To begin, I lead students through a discussion of stereotypes and their effects on society. After creating a space for student answers, the class reads a children's book together out loud. I typically use Matt de la Pena's *Last Stop on Market Street*, which features characters of varying identities and cultural backgrounds visiting a soup kitchen. After finishing a reading of the book, I ask students to examine whether the representations of varying groups of people were positive or negative, and if any stereotypes were challenged.

Using children's picture books offers a great opportunity to demonstrate and scaffold use of critical lenses and reading for students in a short amount of time. The books themselves are shorter in length and typically feature fewer complex characters and plots than longer novels that are curriculum standards, thereby providing educators with an opportunity to model the use of a critical lens within one class period. Additionally, this approach allows educators to break their students into small-groups that may practice using critical lenses together with teacher guidance. With enough practice and confidence, students can eventually transfer these skills to larger and

more complex books. Once confident in these skills, even if a teacher must teach their students problematic texts, critical reading skills allow students to question the narratives they encounter.

Supplemental Texts

Supplementary texts relating to a novel's main themes can provide students with access to multiple conversations regarding a topic. In this scenario, an educator may select supplementary texts, or may even have students do their own research project to find related material. For example, for a unit focused on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students may research current statistics and articles that relate to black citizens and their treatment in America. Students may also read book reviews or critical work on their selected texts to engage with intellectual discussions about the text beyond their peers.

With such activities, educators open students to multiple perspectives on one text, further enhancing the classroom learning experiences that students participate in and encourage deeper critical thinking. In addition, this approach also updates older canonical texts by making them relevant and helping students illuminate harmful stereotypes and unacceptable assumptions about racial backgrounds.

Creative Writing

When students cannot access stories that represent them, creative writing can give them opportunities to write stories that more accurately fit their experiences. This process is a relatively easy one: educators simply choose an assigned text, ask students to make a list of all of the ways that they are *different* from the narrative's main character—this can range from cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds to interests or hobbies—and ask them to consider what the story

would look like if it were about them. Students then write their own versions in which they create main characters and stories that are similar to their own personal lives. As a bonus, students who wish to do so can distribute their versions of the story for their peers to read. This lesson not only provides students with an opportunity to create and engage with literature that reflects their own personal stories, but it also communicates that their writing and experiences are equally valuable to published authors. When these stories are shared, teachers give equal importance and representation to every story regardless of the differences.

Importance of Choice

While it may be easy to assume that a student of color wants to or automatically benefits from reading texts written by or about people of color, the value of choice cannot be overemphasized. Whenever possible, educators should provide opportunities for students to engage with racially diverse work, but never force it. This may include providing a list of suggested texts for an independent book project, offering a variety of essay prompts, or giving students the option to work on projects that are culturally relevant. Such choices create a space for diversity and representation in the classroom while providing students with the agency to make decisions about their own learning. Furthermore, educators should provide trigger warnings and accommodations for assigned class texts in order to help students continue their learning without feelings of humiliation or discomfort.

Incorporating Standards into the Curriculum

Finally, while all of these teaching suggestions work to create a more inclusive classroom environment, this does not mean that teachers have to—or should, for that matter—completely

disregard common core standards or other administrative measures created to hold educators accountable; in fact, there are many ways to incorporate more diverse and inclusive curriculum while simultaneously working to help students meet required standards. All of the examples suggested in this project will meet curriculum standards on reading and writing for students even as it attempts to move educators away from teaching the canon. Additionally, these practices provide educators with an opportunity to understand students and help strengthen their writing, grammar, and critical thinking skills while simultaneously providing more diverse and inclusive lesson plans and literature.

Conclusion

Sometimes educators and fellow pre-service teachers approach me with doubts regarding my project and students' capacities to discuss topics pertaining to race and identity. "Is race too difficult for high school aged students to talk about?" "Is the topic too uncomfortable for the classroom?" "What if students don't know how to talk about race?" While these are legitimate concerns, I believe in the value of discussing race and representation in the secondary classroom. Growing up, I was not equipped with the language to talk about race. However, I recognized through my experiences that racism existed. I may not have possessed the vocabulary to discuss ideas about "representation" or "microaggressions," but I lived through these concepts in my everyday life. I hoped for—and was excited by—Asian characters and stories in the literature that I read and the shows that I watched; I experienced daily microaggressions when classmates told me that my food was strange or asked me if my parents worked in a nail salon. It didn't matter how old I was—I knew that these concepts existed, and had someone taught me the proper vocabulary, I could have talked about my feelings and experiences much sooner than I did.

Similarly, secondary American students experience race in their daily lives. Regardless of their ethnicity, the concept of race exists in everything that students do. They experience race in the media that they consume, the communities that they live in, and the schools that they attend; students know race exists. It may be uncomfortable at times, but most students are ready and eager to talk about race. In the past, students have admitted to me that they want to discuss race, but are perpetually afraid of saying "something wrong" or "offensive." What better way to address these apprehensions than in the classroom— especially through literature where students can experience the thoughts and perspectives of others? If educators avoid discussing these

concepts in class through a fear that their students will struggle, they do their students a disservice by ignoring a chance for students to practice talking about and engaging with race.

Students enter the classroom as unique people with their own experiences, cultures, and beliefs. In acknowledging and embracing these identities, teachers create a learning environment that promotes better understanding, tolerance, cultural competency, and mutual respect for others. No longer do we have to live in a time where canonical texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* have to be the only stories that are valued or given a space in the classroom. Stories such as Lee's represent only a few students within a given English Language Arts course and degrade many others.

Instead, the secondary English Language Arts classroom should exist as a space that allows for growth, understanding, and validation of student experiences. If American ELA students live in a diverse and complex society, why must they read literature that only represents the backgrounds of a select few? By providing texts such as *The Color Purple*, educators instead provide students with a more complex view of varying groups of people which more accurately represent the demographics of their fellow peers at school and their societies as a larger whole. I, for one, have benefitted from racial representation in the classroom. After growing up in a community where most of my peers did not have cultural backgrounds similar to my own, racially representative literature reminded me that my experiences were valuable and deserved to be narrated. So, in short: yes. Secondary students *are* ready to talk about race and representation. They deserve a curriculum that allows them to see their lives reflected, and a classroom that works even harder towards inclusivity.

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