



## Recentering Humanity: An Anti-Racist Approach to Narrative Writing

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### Introduction and Background

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A dear student of mine, in reference to her progress report midway through her freshman year, once exclaimed, “I love learning and I hate school!” It was not until this moment: feeling the pressures of distilling all the fluid complexities, and learning from taking this seminar into the crystallized structure of this Chicago Style 12 point font, Times New Roman, level 1-2-3 *italicized* not **bolded** sectioned, 15-25 paged curriculum unit--that I truly came to understand the gravity of her words. I’m engaged in a balancing act, holding authenticity and creativity on each hand, while walking a tightrope of compliance to rigid conventions on the other. Through conversation, and now, formal research, I’ve learned that a version of my struggle, reluctantly balancing what I want to say to students, to the structure of what I have been taught I should say to them, exists in all avenues of education. Whether you’re a second grader, or a “master” teacher; we’ve all felt it. That lingering doubt, wondering if what we’ve produced is good enough. And this isn’t coincidence; it’s design. Whether you went through a traditional or alternative route to teaching, through teacher-training in post-secondary programming, and by way of simply participating in the American public education system, as a default, you as a teacher have probably been conditioned to position yourself as the holder of all knowledge, while imagining students are empty vessels waiting to be filled with your knowledge, expertise, and guidance.<sup>1</sup> Without significant collective change, we will reproduce the same result. As organizer and activist Grace Lee Boggs says, “Like workers in the factory, children and young people are denied their full humanity by a system that trains them to survive, consume and produce.”<sup>2</sup>

### Context and Approach

As a public school teacher, there is an unspoken understanding that lessons pertaining to joy and justice are separate from “the curriculum.” There is a burning demand from students that class should be more fun, relevant and inclusive which is met with different iterations of teachers cycling through the multitude of benchmarks that have yet to be hit. Neither teachers nor students enjoy this cycle. As a 10th -12th grade literature teacher, I in no way excuse myself of subduing creativity and joy for the sake of aggressively meeting standards and both creating and executing lifeless lessons, and even units under the guise of *there’s some things you just gotta learn*-esque rationale. I teach predominantly Black and Brown students representing a wide range of ethnicities and backgrounds, also born in New Haven. I also teach a smaller

subset of students from neighboring suburban districts. We are part of the *Facing History and Ourselves Partner Schools* network<sup>3</sup>. Embedded in all aspects of our school wide program is the language of being an upstander, becoming civically engaged, and being a proponent for racial equity within an unjust society. We have a school wide advisory program in which students lead circles, encouraging others to share stories, experiences, feelings, and perspectives. The Black Lives Matter, and Gender And Sexuality youth groups are prevalent and embraced within our school community. Despite every inclusive school feature I just named, we still collectively struggle to engage in meaningful work connected to race and identity.

I decided to take this seminar because in my career as a literature teacher, neither myself, nor my students, have ever felt collective joy engaging with narrative writing. My students have experienced an entire spectrum of emotion engaging with family, school, work, and all other institutions of society, yet when it comes down to choosing what to write, and actually writing, there comes an immense emotional and cognitive struggle in both brainstorming and production. I have students who participate in youth groups, volunteer work, are life-long athletes, commute to school every day at 5 am, yet choose to write about the stress and eventual success of math class. I have students who have participated in organized protests, work near full time jobs, and experience moments of existential and cultural realizations simply by engaging in conversation at dinner, yet choose to write about overcoming procrastination. I've sought out and attended professional development, asked advice not only locally, but all over the country, and have done extensive research in finding a solution to no avail. The vast majority of training, practices and advice I found approaches narrative writing as stagnant, and therefore, were ultimately just different approaches leading to the replicated result of forced-structured, inauthentic writing, that sounds like an individual different from my students.

What I haven't done, despite it being so clear, and what I'm sure I've unconsciously avoided, is approach revising my practice while analyzing through a lens of race, power and identity. Teaching students writing techniques and how to use them correctly has never been a struggle. The struggle is widespread silence, and exclamations of "I don't know what to write" and "I have nothing interesting to write about." The struggle is grading and providing feedback to stories involving death, trauma, and raw human emotion, in no commas, periods, or sentences. I am not only looking to make small adjustments for temporary moments of success, I am seeking sustainable transformation--and my experience learning this seminar is a start. In my research, I have learned history, language, and patterns that speak to the tension I am describing in not only narrative writing, but education at large. Through an exploration of anti-racist theory, I have learned new ways to think, frame and ultimately approach teaching the personal narrative. Through researching the work of experienced, and critically conscious educators, I have found many resources, and also, outlined an approach I have never attempted. Moving forward, I will curate big-picture factors and history leading to the dominant practices in my classroom, and also, give perspective on the fallacy of these practices. I will then curate the teaching methods to counter the dominant approaches aiming for a more unifying, reflective, rich, complex and anti-racist- approach in preparing for and teaching students to write a personal narrative.

## **White Supremacy: Identifying and Discussing Dominant Practice in English Education**

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## **The Western Canon Low-Key Ensures White Supremacy**

James Baldwin once famously stated, “ The crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society.”<sup>4</sup> Every English teacher knows reading and writing are intertwined. We gain insight in how to write by reading and we gain more fluency in reading by writing. Ideally, the older students become, they become advanced and through practice and exposure to different texts, eventually, a student finds their style, voice, and individualized craft.

A fundamental issue with the aforementioned rhythm is, as it stands, the traditional English curriculum is dominated by Whiteness. In discussing Whiteness, I must first make a crucial distinction. Whereas white skin, with a lowercase w, is a physical feature of the human body; Whiteness, with a capital W, is a social construct stemming from the earliest chapters of American “settlement” and was designed to increase the political power and privilege of European colonizers.<sup>5</sup> Whiteness empowered the rationale to exploit the land, resources, and bodies of those deemed non-white. White is an invented idea that was embedded into American law, sanctioning the oppression of those deemed non-white--including humans who have white skin.<sup>6</sup> White is a social construct that empowered redlining and housing discrimination.<sup>7</sup> Race in its very beginnings is a construct of racism. Although today, the most visible institutional markers of blatant white supremacy including, systems of slavery, Jim Crow and Eugenics are no longer legal, what remains are the more subtle and hidden forms of racism. This subtle racism, operating in a structural way in contrast to interpersonal, operates to strengthen the privilege of the White population and continue systemic disadvantage to communities of color.<sup>8</sup>

With this understanding of Whiteness in mind, I revisit the traditional English curriculum. The authors who are canonized are predominantly White. The protagonists within the text read in academic settings are predominantly White. And the curators and stakeholders in determining what is deemed worthy of literature, again--White. I am positive that the problem I just referenced is a fact you already know and probably tired of hearing; but if you want a quick refresher go on google and search for “famous American authors.” Take a look at who pops up. To be clear, I want to name two things up front. First, I will not be suggesting and justifying a long list of authors of color who deserve to be canonized. Secondly, my criticism of the canon being predominantly White--this is far from an issue in representation. The history of the construction of the Western Canon is tied to America solidifying its national identity in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This didn't only include the taking of land, and spread of religion, but also the spread of ideas. A nation's identity is constructed by literature being read, and in this time period, what was being thrust at the forefront were the ideas of White European Men.<sup>9</sup> Just as the texts canonized is a choice rooted in empowering Whiteness, the heavy resistance to reconsider and make structural changes to the literature we study is still a choice to empower and sustain Whiteness. Without a nuanced understanding of history and structural racism, attempts in rethinking and changing the canon amount to decades of interpersonal disagreement and decision making.

## **The Limits of “Diversity” and “Inclusion”**

The following is an excerpt produced from the International Literacy Association titled “Expanding the Canon: How Diverse Literature Can Transform Literacy Learning.”

Extending Our Reach Beyond The Classics:

As educators who teach with literature, we need to reflect constantly on the literature landscape shaping the

classroom. Books selected for instructional focus should demonstrate high-quality word craft, the study of which will enhance students' abilities to think, reflect, write, and present with increasing levels of skill and cogency.<sup>10</sup>

What's explicitly stated here is a challenge to reflect on the literature landscape, and to think of a book that will enhance students' abilities to an assortment of skills. What's subtle here is two things; first the establishments without explicit naming of "classics" and secondly, the active definition of what shapes "high-quality" prior to the list of what's named. Colorblind reflections in reshaping the canon, absent a lens of power, will lead to solutions under the banner of representation.

Regardless of where and whom you teach, many of the following scenarios might sound familiar:

- A diversity expert has come to your school to facilitate a workshop on diversity and inclusion.
- A teacher created a new unit at the end of the year centered on a book by an author of color.
- A teacher used Black History Month as the perfect opportunity to go hard in planning lessons for poets Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, and if the teacher is feeling passionate, throw in Black musical artists as well.
- A teacher has recently incorporated quotes and facts for Hispanic and Asian American Heritage month.
- A teacher attained funding to open up a new section containing books by authors of color.

For each attempt at diversification, its effectiveness and success varies upon the dynamics of each individualized classroom. What's guaranteed however, is that attempts at diversity as a means of "representation" regardless of who is included, guarantees the canon remains as is--White. Responses in "inclusion" are a way to change the racial-makeup of a curriculum and create an implicit misconception that studying texts from the viewpoint of a person of color comes at the expense of academic rigor. It simply isn't enough to include books from authors of aggrieved populations, meanwhile, maintaining the same approach to reading.<sup>11</sup> What's ignored is the level of richness and rigor that comes with race-conscious reading, which would inherently challenge readers to engage through different perspectives. It is the ongoing standardization of the works of White, antiquated, colorblind texts that underpin the dominant methodologies in teaching English.

Regardless of what our opinion is of the canon, and teaching the canon, so long as we remain teachers in public American education--we are forced to engage with the canon. As students we learned the canon, in our teacher training and certification we learned the canon in more depth, then were tested upon our knowledge of the canon and the writing structures within it to become certified. What's deemed the highest level of literature, AP Literature and AP Language of Language and Composition, are designed for students to again, internalize White dominant craft moves and rhetorical structures. The experience of White canonical authors is one absent from the experience of racism in America and the complications of navigating in a racist society. Their literary process lacked language, ideology, or consciousness and most bluntly-- their writing does not approach the complexities that come with being a person living in 2021. As a result, the major texts studied and taught in literature curriculums that we as teachers don't have to pay for, stand as the primary examples of how to transcribe human experience into writing.

Students engage in a career-long series of comprehending canonical texts, and then writing about them, and then all of a sudden without meaningful engagement in introspection, or critical thought, are supposed to have the ability to write a personal narrative armed with knowledge of how to structure a story and craft moves in isolation. This dissonance is what leads to the silences and struggle engaging with writing personal

narratives. For students of color, they're being asked to write a story about their life using writing techniques and structures derived from experiences of White authors unattuned to questions of hierarchy, power, and struggle. For White students, they're being asked to tell a story using writing tools crafted by White men who lived centuries before them.

### **The Writers Workshop Model**

Again, reading and writing are intertwined. Reading is the internalization of literature, and writing is the externalization of understanding literature. The writers workshop model is a dominant practice in the teaching of writing. Students learn, write, get feedback, share, get feedback, and finalize. In the earliest versions of the traditional writers' workshops in university programs in the U.S, and even still to this day, the workshop leaders, participants, and grounding texts are predominantly white Professor Felicia Rose Chavez, characterizes the origins and current state of the traditional workshop model as an "institution of dominance and control."<sup>12</sup> She reflects on everything from workshop leaders, participants, required texts of study and the persistence of a system that ultimately silences authors of color. In his essay, *MFA Vs. POC*, author Junot Diaz, criticizes the domination of whiteness in his creative writing program at Cornell in the 1990's:

In my workshop the default subject position of reading and writing—of Literature with a capital L—was white, straight and male. This white straight male default was of course not biased in any way by its white straight maleness—no way! Race was the unfortunate condition of nonwhite people that had nothing to do with white people and as such was not a natural part of the Universal of Literature, and anyone that tried to introduce racial consciousness to the Great (White) Universal of Literature would be seen as politicizing the Pure Art and betraying the (White) Universal (no race) ideal of True Literature.<sup>13</sup>

Twenty years after this experience, and now as an accomplished writer, Diaz reflects, "I've worked in two MFA programs and visited at least 30 others and the signs are all there. The lack of diversity of the faculty. Many of the students' lack of awareness of the lens of race, the vast silence on these matters in many workshops." Again, reading and writing is intertwined, and as it stands, the writers workshop structure is modeled through the thinking of canonical authors and its widespread facilitation, even at the highest of educational institutional levels, is built in a way to which its participants are meant to write in a specific type of way in contrast to exploring areas of creativity.

It's haunting to read how even in these two separate experiences, I too, in my own practice, have focused entire class periods of writers workshops as an arena for students to practice a prescribed craft, encouraging silence in contrast to creativity. Attempts in student explorations of race and identity have always had an inorganic fit with the parameters of what I have assigned, and therefore, I've always had approaches in isolation in advising writing. My classroom is in a place where students simply ask me to give commentary on their progress, and students, when they share with each other, just like the experience of Chavez and Diaz, is through a mainly a structured process of giving advice again in alignment to their ability to replicate Standard English..

### **Sounding White and Linguistic Discrimination.**

It's always interesting to me how much students have to say verbally, but then when it comes to putting it on paper, for a multitude of reasons, it doesn't translate. A few quick anecdotes. I graded and advised a students' argumentative essay, and we were discussing their conventions together. After pointing out patterns of grammatical error, my student looked up like a lightbulb went off and asked, "Got it...so I gotta sound white?" While supervising a study hall, my seniors were dressed up preparing for a scholarship interview talking to

each other about the experience. Three of my students with a bit more interpersonal experience and who already went through the experience gave a piece of advice that grounded the rest, "It's easy, just sound white." During class, while students were engaging in small group discussion, I listened as one of my students debriefed her understanding of the day's passage. Another student looked at her and said "Yo, you sound white!" Annoyed by the comment, she responded "Um. I'm educated." Everyone understood both the comment, and the rebuttal. None of these students were explicitly taught this understanding of "sounding white," yet there is a universal understanding of what it means. In each context, white was associated with education, access, and higher grades. I've always struggled navigating this idea because--in a structure where employers and stakeholders for social uplift pay specific attention to body language grammar and social affect--"sounding white" actually isn't bad advice. Also, in reading sentences with commas, semicolons, and with correct punctuation-- "sounding white" isn't a completely inaccurate summation.

After learning in more depth about the history, purpose and patterns of whiteness however, I've learned first and foremost that having conversations about Whiteness absent of power inevitably lead to confusion. We have the ability and agreement to describe it, and universally agree on it--yet naming and describing Whiteness becomes an intellectual challenge. This is by design. White dominance gains, holds, and secures its power by being nothing in particular. <sup>14</sup>There is a conflation between "White" and "professional." America unfortunately has a past and ongoing present pertaining to discriminatory linguistic profiling. Individuals with "ethnic" names are viewed differently in applications through writing. Individuals with "foreign accents" are met with more resistance and criticism. Historically, each wave of immigrants were mocked in the struggle to master "good" English.<sup>15</sup> Although the U.S has no declaration of an official language, those who do not have a level of mastery in "standard English," have less access and privilege in society. It is in this same ethos, a hyperfocus in learning of "good English," that causes a subsequent discrimination and relegation of language outside academic English. In his book, *A Strangers Journey*, he reflects on the witnessing the dismissal of Black Vernacular as "publishable" writing, and ties the struggle of being a writer of color, to an ongoing societal struggle:

Writers of color don't have video proof of their reality, just their words. That their words and sense of reality continue to be dismissed, excluded, marginalized and distorted links them to a struggle taking place everywhere in American society, the struggle for their communities to be heard and their truths to be acknowledged.<sup>16</sup>

There isn't only an understood requirement in what to read, and how to write--but also, how to sound. Any student who has an accent opposite to the dominant linguistic of their classroom, is at an automatic disadvantage in the literature classroom, even if they are actually fluent in English.

### **The Common Core and The College Essay**

The glue that holds the dominant educational structure together in K-12 education is *The Common Core Standards*. The Common Core Standards are positioned as a universal set of guidelines for mastery of all subject areas in public education. There is no mention of race or intent in producing race-consciousness for anyone engaging in the standards; it is the quintessential colorblind ideology. With a fundamental and designed lack of race consciousness on the teacher's end, the creation of lessons, units and curriculums are guaranteed to reproduce the aforementioned White dominant constructs in literature, leading to the stifling of creativity and perspective of everyone involved. The Common Core Standards for 11-12th grade narrative writing, also identical for 9th and 10th graders, (*ELA-W.11-12.3*) states that students should be able to, "Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details,



and well-structured event sequences.” The connected standards for narrative writing include tidbits that define what the “effective techniques” “well chosen details” and what “well structured” consists of. This includes the usage of sensory language, dialogue, and writing that is structured in the form of problems, progression of coherent events, all leading to a resolution.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that it isn’t noted how these specific practices came to be deemed as “effective,” or “well chosen,” it is simply a stated declaration that they are. And it is in this moment we go back to what we know and what was taught to us. With these standards defining exemplary, narrative writing becomes significantly less about the experience of the writer, and more of a platform for usage of “Standard English.”

Methods in teaching narrative writing traditionally include various iterations of reading anchor texts with the heavy usage of imagery and dialogue, lessons in grammar rules in isolations, and then mimicking authors technique via reflection on personal experience. Different iterations of these practices repeat throughout all 4 years of a student's high school career. The ideal result, with repetition throughout the years, students are equipped to use what they’ve learned to be prepped for the penultimate personal narrative--the college essay. The college essay is positioned as a way for admission committees to learn more about the lives and personality of the applicant...but all know this isn’t the case. The college essay, just like the common core, is positioned as neutral, however, also like the common core, it is far from this. It is imperative to contextualize college admission prompts with the dominant practices in teaching English. Through this lens, although the parameters set can be perceived to encourage honesty, creativity, and personal experience, they are actually a hindrance. The 2021-2022 *Common App*, a universal college application used by over one million students yearly. Below are the three choices in the personal essay:

1. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
2. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
3. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.<sup>18</sup>

To help with approaching this essay, the following is on Harvard University’s website, advising applicants, “...Look at [ the personal narrative] as an opportunity to write about something you care about, rather than what you think the Admissions Committee wants to hear...Remember, your topic does not have to be exotic to be compelling.”<sup>19</sup> Without parameters, the task of thinking about how many experiences fit the prompts is already cognitively difficult. Upon close examination of the questions, what seems like a creative challenge on the surface, thinking about a *meaningful* story, is actually a structural challenge in choosing the *right* story. I challenge you to think of an experience you would write about. This experience should include a setting and situation where you can include sensory details. This experience should involve a conversation. There also has to be both a clear problem, solution, and also well-structured events. Oh and remember, it doesn’t have to be “exotic” to actually be good. Although not named explicitly from the parameters of the prompts, the line of questioning leads to a specific structure accessible through mastery of techniques of the common core.

Out of all the words and messaging to choose to say, Harvard gives a reminder that topics don’t have to be “exotic.” Something can only be defined as “exotic” in commenting on “other” cultures. Meaning, the operating assumption is that the student reading the prompt is White. The emphasis on “exotic” is a nod to a myth that students of color have unearned advantage in their admission due to their background. In

actuality, the design of this prompting has a unique disadvantage for students of color. They have the added psychological burden to perform higher than their negative perception in avoidance of confirming the existing negative stereotype--a concept coined as a stereotype threat.<sup>20</sup> This time, the threat isn't performing well on a math test--it's a written evaluation on students' ability to write about their life, and what's on the line is college admission; the thing that Black and Brown students have been literally told is "freedom." The widespread repetitive stories and inauthentic voice produced by students in their submissions of college essays are a direct result of the structure of the prompting, and the literal k-12 pathway leading up to the production of this essay. The human experience isn't universal, the writing tools and methods used to convey the human experience shouldn't be universal. What if a student learned empathy, but through a moment of body language in contrast to verbal communication? And if there was verbal communication, what if it wasn't in English? How does someone express the layers of challenge of being a student of color in a White dominant school through dialogue, sensory details, and plot structure? The college essay is yet another colorblind construct, lacking a fundamental understanding of intersectionality, henceforth encouraging assimilation into a way of being.

### **The Consciousness Gap and Sustainable Change**

To reiterate, the creation and sustainment of the Western Canon upholds the standardization of Whiteness in literature--both in writing and linguistics. The writers' workshop has a sustained legacy of denying the perspective and presence of authors of color, and positioning elements of Whiteness as elite. The Common Core standards written around narratives ensure good writing is the mastery of specific techniques in contrast to meaningful experience, and the college essay is a penultimate task that ensures the White dominant rhythm in writing persists. These are four examples among countless others that operate in unison, reproducing a widespread result in stifling perspective and creativity, especially for students of color.

Before I move forward, I want to make a few things clear:

- Black and Brown students can absolutely learn valuable lessons reading texts from White authors, especially in literary writing.
- I do not believe White authors, professors, and major stakeholders who support the western canon as it stands are conspiring White supremacists with an intent to marginalize people of color.
- Although I do believe there will be impact, I do not believe replacing White authors with authors of color in all mainstream curriculums will enact major educational transformation.
- It's possible, and there have been countless examples of students of color finding success in the ELA education system as it stands, and White students can be unsuccessful.

It is essential to understand how the multiple pieces function together and imperative to move away from criticizing the elements of teaching literature in isolation. But by design, again, we are not conditioned to think this way. What doesn't exist in mainstream programs in teacher education, and education at large, is critical consciousness. Engaging in topics on educational change without critical consciousness, an understanding of systems and power, and also a study of history outside mainstream textbooks, will only lead to solutions that uphold the function of the system as it stands. As Dr. Dorinda Carter states, "Educators have to be able to say that 'I work in a system that is inherently unequal.'"<sup>21</sup> In the most cliché reminder, we cannot change the past. Something I'd add to this is that we can't deny, rewrite, or be actively complicit to the past either. We must take the knowledge we have and do our absolute best to identify, acknowledge, and work toward changing legacies of our racist past in hopes for a more equitable future. We must also remain conscious of the present and the effect our choices have on those around us, and ourselves. I have yet to meet a teacher that has



stated anywhere near something along the lines of, “The American Education system is equitable, fully functional, and prepares students for being an active citizen in our society.” I work with former teachers, advocates, and community partners who push for notions that absolutely everything needs to change and it needs to change now. I work with present day teachers who all believe something needs to be changed, disagree on what, however are all collectively overworked and exhausted. If we tried to change everything overnight, the result would be damaging for all stakeholders involved. If we change nothing, the result will be continuously damaging for all stakeholders involved.

In the rest of this unit, I will be outlining principles, pedagogies and methods that counter the dominant practices and structures referenced above. This is a mix of ideas I have found in my research, and original ideas created by me. It is important to note that all five pedagogical principles I name should be engaged together, not in isolation.

## **Disruptive Teacher Pedagogy: Countering White Domination and Colorblind Ideology**

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### **Disruptive Pedagogical Principle 1: Drawing From a Diverse Canon**

In curating readings, first off, on top of planning texts in advance, create an ongoing system for students to recommend a poem, video, excerpt, quote or anything that they would like to share and engage with as a whole class. Consciously curate a diverse set of perspectives stemming mostly from authors of color, and move away from the work of canonical White authors. Analyzing the words, experiences and craft of canonical White author’s hinders the necessary level of nuance for all students, not only students of color, to engage in deep reflection. Drawing from a diverse canon helps disrupt the White Gaze, allowing students more space to look inward, hence raising critical consciousness.<sup>22</sup> Texts should also center on a range of emotion and experience, for instance: justice, pride, joy, struggle, love, identity. Inherently, there will be moments in which the reading could serve as a painful trigger, or, the content matter could potentially cause heavy disagreement or even heavy agreement. It is important to be mindful of this, and encourage students to feel and also interrogate why they’re feeling this way. For example, combining breathwork and meditation. A quick approach: ask students to pause, breathe for 10 seconds, and interrogate why precisely they are feeling this emotion.<sup>23</sup>

With a set of diverse texts, students should reflect and discuss the ways these various texts challenge their perspective, then identify the ways in which authors were able to capture the complexity and nuance of their experiences into words. In reading, discussing, and analyzing texts, have students keep a log of the specific techniques they found<sup>24</sup>, and also, gauge their level of comfort and confidence with each. By reflecting on specific techniques, the way they’re used, and students’ orientation to them, when it comes down to writing on their own, they will have an awareness of the tools they can use to express the message they want to communicate.

### **Disruptive Pedagogical Principle 2: Implement Low Stakes Writing**

A major shift that needs to occur is for students to lessen their hyperfocus on the stressors that come from producing Dominant Academic English (DAE). Teachers also need to shift their gaze and avoid their instinct to

exclusively focus on issues with word choice, misspellings, and language of potential academic failure.<sup>25</sup> An immediate way to shift gaze away from *DAE* is to increase the frequency of low-stakes, immediately accessible writing. Felicia Chavez writes that, “Frequency teaches workshop participants that writing is less a high-stakes assignment dictated by the workshop leader, and more an instinctive impulse to create.”<sup>26</sup> Consistently alleviating the pressure of a grade, criticism and judgement, and allowing students time, space, energy to write, recenters student voice and perspective as the most crucial part of writing. With this paradigm shift in writing, it opens the door for students to become further to reflect and be creative while using writing as the vehicle to do this. With this shift in approach, this will open up more fluency in the practice of writing, and an added benefit for teachers, a very tangible way to make thinking and progress visible.

This will also help alleviate the widespread issue of, “I don’t know what to write.” Rather than jumping to conclusions of being unable to write, or not being a good writer, the challenge evolves to one in which a student becomes conscious of a translation of their perspective that needs to occur to help deepen and develop a shared understanding between them and their audience. And this translation, in many cases, in accessing mainstream American society is Standard English. This level of conscious writing alleviates much of the tension that comes with the evaluative nature of producing what’s deemed traditional academia, while at the same time, significantly improving students’ ability and confidence as a writer.

### **Disruptive Pedagogical Principle 3: Pose Open and Meaningful Prompts**

In preparation for the college essay, students should evaluate the prompts of the common application, deconstruct what they’re asking, and evaluate the extent the prompt fits in with what students want to share about themselves. Students should also engage with prompts created by themselves and their classmates that intentionally ask for responses outside the traditional narrative. Paired with a growing comfort with writing, carefully crafting prompts that will engage students to think deeply and write will elicit rich engagement. In *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, longtime teacher Linda Christensen, focuses on creating curriculum that centers students’ lives as “critical texts.” She creates classroom conditions to honor students’ memories, heritages, and positions writing as a platform to make meaningful change. A key teaching method she engages with is selecting meaningful prompts. She describes what makes a good prompt in this way:

Typically, good assignments ask students to write about important events in their lives...choices, resistance, moments that shaped them. The subjects are broad; they give students room for choice within the topic, and they offer multiple entry points. I try to choose stories that open dialogue between students about how their race, gender, and class have affected their lives”<sup>27</sup>

She also goes on to say, “Students write about times when they were allies, perpetrators, targets, or bystanders during a critical moment in their lives. This narrative helps students probe the connections between their stories and historic (and continuing) inequalities.”<sup>28</sup> Posing accessible prompting for students to think deeply about the intersections between their specific identities, lives, and societal impact elicits a deep level of thinking, discussion and nuance absent from dominant teaching practices. This benefits all students’ levels of reflectiveness and critical thinking. Specifically for students of color, this opens up the door of possibilities in reflecting on memories, experiences, and realizations that have been limited by the structures of dominant teaching practices. Versions of this level of prompting will live in lower stakes writing, responses to text, group work, and also formal assessment. A level of building trust, trust and consistency will be necessary to ensure an individual and communal level of comfort in engaging and sharing in deep prompting, especially for student groups who are new in conversations openly discussing differences and have been

mostly in classrooms with teachers engaging in colorblind prompting and methods.

Longtime educator, activist, and scholar Milton Reynolds, proposes the method “Big Paper” as a way to encourage deep listening, engagement, and comfort in engaging in this level of work. In this method, students in a small group of 3-4 people write their thoughts on a text, quote, or prompt that is in the middle.<sup>29</sup> Students then read each other's responses, and continuously respond via writing. This method democratizes voice, ensures deep listening and also, again, keeps student perspective at the forefront, and positions writing as a means of communication.

#### **Disruptive Principle 4: Power Sharing and Community Building Through Critical Race Theory**

In all educational spaces a necessity for the physical and emotional safety of all students is a minimal requirement conducive to learning. In engaging with something as personal as an authentic--literally *personal*--narrative, the classroom environment needs safety beyond the basic needs. They also need a guarantee of intellectual safety and creativity. In order to get here, it is important to be conscious of the power dynamics of the classroom and make choices in breaking them down. These choices should include the intentional co-creation of space, community building, and shifting power dynamics. To help frame this process and shift in classroom culture and dynamics, contextualize tenets of *Critical Race Theory (CRT)* in your classroom. CRT is described as a concept in which the core idea that racism is a social construct, and that it is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies. It's early work served as a legal framework for analysis by legal scholars, including Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, and Richard Delgado.<sup>30</sup> The work in CRT provided language, ideology, and terminology in raising race-consciousness, and also made colorblind ideology visible. There are movements, protests, and groups around America aimed to characterize CRT as something that is a concept that is oppressive and divisive, however, I cannot stress how false this premise is. Understanding and implementing tenets of CRT is a step towards unifying and transforming classrooms. While taking a doctorate course on CRT under Professor Adrienne Dixson, Caitlin Ryan co-taught an applied linguistics class to rising educators with another professor. In her teaching, Ryan consciously drew from tenets of CRT in her practice. In her reflections after identifying success in her teaching, Ryan reflects, “It is not just research in Pre K–12 institutions that can benefit from this framework. Teacher educators, too, need to be open to a similar type of critical reflection on our own practices”<sup>31</sup> Ryan, in her conclusion, also goes on to offer key tenets of CRT that are crucial in teaching:

1. Become more comfortable with the continual process of not knowing.
2. Continue to problematize our thinking in those times when we think we know what students need to do, think, feel, or believe to be more equitable teachers.
3. Position ourselves as co-learners rather than as experts.
4. Search for more ways to invite traditionally silenced voices and ways of knowing into the classroom.

These tenets undergird all aspects of effective teaching, and are assets in community building. In experiences fostering community, engaging deep reflection with students, learning and embracing difference, everyone will be challenged--especially teachers. It's important for us to embrace the ongoing learning, and interrogation of our practices. It is also important for us to be OK with not knowing the result of what students may produce. A visible way to position ourselves as a co-learner is to engage in the same writing and sharing process as our students. Just as we expect our students to share their stories, continue to write, and engage in the prompt, we as teachers must do the same. Just as we give feedback to students, they should do the same<sup>32</sup> Students are more ready to reciprocate when we model and are also involved in the process. And just as students need to build a better habit of writing--a consistent culture of sharing will also be necessary.

Students are more invested in work they will share with a group. This must include smaller, on the spot sharing of stories, and also larger ones with a larger audience including family, friends and community members.<sup>33</sup> Inviting families and community members to engage in the work is more feasible than ever. Families are the biggest stakeholders in the lives of students, yet schools often leave families out of the academic process. Having a student share a story involving family, with family actually there, will increase the buy-in, effort, and enrich the experience.

### **Disruptive Principle 5: Community Involvement and Connections**

Famed author, social and political activist Grace Lee Boggs actively challenged the dominant paradigm of education, offering community centered pedagogy as a means of transformation, and creating new pathways of meaningful communication as a way to energize young leaders.<sup>34</sup> Students are more civically engaged, and eager for community involvement more than ever. Drawing from this, tap into your local network, and ask students to do the same. Identify community members willing to share their story /perspective. Organize a library of videos, written work, and responses from community members for students to interact with in different ways. In the most immediate step, community perspective should be intertwined with the collective theme that is in your curriculum. Also, find ways for guest speakers to visit either in person, or virtually, to engage with students. This includes experts in the field, guest lessons and also, simply guest speakers in order to listen for empathy. Find ways in which myself, and other participating teachers, can collaborate together in a shared project, whether it's an anthology, open-mic, an informal virtual or in person meet up, or story sharing, but ultimately, ensure that student learning occurs outside the classroom. Through small and large scale ways, continuously reflect on ways for students to directly interact with other students, community members locally and even nationally. Teachers often in the past overly shoot too high on a high end project that we no longer have the time, energy, nor capacity to sustain, and give up. Start small, and brainstorm ideas alongside students. Together, through a reflection of our passions, power, leverage, networks, and agency, we will continuously find ways to leverage our course in making an impact.

## **Classroom Lessons and Activities: Disruptive Pedagogy In Action**

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### **Classroom Activity 1: Show Tell and Write**

This activity should happen in the beginning of the unit. Students will look through their phone, and look for a picture that elicits an emotion and or strong memory. They will then share the stories behind these pictures through writing and speaking. The purpose of this is to introduce and become accustomed to low-stakes, yet meaningful, writing. This is also a way for the classroom community to develop meaningful relationships. For prep, you will need to create a google slide presentation with one slide per student, and one for yourself. Students will need editing access.

#### **Warm Up: Free Write**

Ask students to open their notebook to a clean page. For five minutes, they will write whatever is on their mind. There is no wrong answer, no need to worry about punctuation, however, the only rule is they should not stop their pens from moving. Emphasize that if students don't know what to write, then write "I don't know what to write" until something pops up. It may be useful to project an example of your own free writing. In

your example, be sure that it is more informal, unedited, and an authentic representation of your free writing. Emphasize to students that this will not be shared, and if there is ever a time you will ask people to share, you will tell them in advance. While students are writing, keep prompting them to continuously write.

### **Selecting A Picture That Tells a Story:**

Project your slide with a meaningful picture, and speak to these three questions: *What is the story behind this memory? How did you feel at the time of this memory? What is the lasting impact of this memory?* In your explanation, be sure to go into depth, and reveal details about yourself that your students wouldn't know had it not been for this moment. Be sure to emphasize a specific feeling, and or adjective and give an explanation. Write the three questions on the board, or project it so students can see. Give them access to them editing access to a powerpoint and instruct them to scroll through their phones and select at least two pictures that will help everyone learn about them. They should insert these picture(s) on an empty slide on the powerpoint.

### **Small Group Share**

Put students in groups of 3-4. Ask students to each show their picture, and verbally respond to *the three questions*. Emphasize students should be actively listening, and not responding to each other until all students are done sharing. When all group members are done, encourage them to ask follow up questions to each other, and also any connections. Emphasize them to be ready to share.

### **Free Write Part 2:**

In the note section on the powerpoint slide, instruct students to engage in a free write for 5 minutes. They are to pick at least one of the three questions, and write everything they can within the time frame. Emphasize not to worry about grammar, or structure. The goal is for us to be able to learn something new about you. In about 7 minutes, tell class to stop and then instruct students to take time to read at least five people's stories. Ask them to jot down two different quotes that stand out to them for any reason.

### **Closing:**

Ask the group, what did you learn about someone else, or what connection did you make with someone? You can do this via an online platform where everyone can see responses, for instance using the Padlet app. You can also ask students to write on sticky notes and post it somewhere, or do a quick round where students verbally answer questions. It's important that students walk away from this activity being conscious of the connection they made.

### **Potential Extension Activities:**

- This activity can be used as a way for students to unpack their perspective on many things: readings, quotes, art pieces, social media posts--anything at all.
- Have students pick out the emotion they associate with this picture, and then write lines of imagery that help emphasize the specific emotion.
- Project two slides somewhere in the beginning, middle, and or end of upcoming classes and ask the specific students to share the whole group the story about the picture.
- Have students continue to keep adding to the note section about this specific picture, but with new questions.
- Have students decorate the slide with meaningful pictures, symbols.
- Have students copy and paste what is on the note section, and add in a writing technique you learned

from the day.

## **Classroom Activity 2: Reading to Feel/ Empathy**

This activity comes in the beginning of the unit and will be the precursor to race conscious reading. Students will read poetry and reflect on the specific words, feelings and emotions that the author elicits. Students will analyze specific lines in order to understand why the poet included them, and also what they reveal about the poet themselves. Students will make a conscious attempt to empathize and connect with the writers. Engaging with poetry is essential in opening up a student's perspective on writing and intellectual rigor.

### **Opening Free Write:**

Put the word “poetry” in the middle of the board. Ask the students to write as many memories, associations, thoughts, reactions and questions as they can for four minutes. Prompt students to select a few lines from their response, and share with each other. Doing this will give you a better sense of comfort levels with more ambiguous writing, and also, to get the conversation started. Emphasize that the goal of reading and analyzing poems today is to understand the experience of the author.

### **Reading The Poem:**

The poem for this activity is, *I Tried to Be a Good Mexican Son*, by José Olivarez. This is from his debut poetry collection, *Citizen Illegal*. Before reading the poem together, read the brief bio of José Olivarez as a class. On the first read, prompt students to allow themselves to feel and listen deeply to his words. Before beginning, plan out which student is going to read each segment.

### **Second Read:**

Prompt students to read and annotate the text and look for the five lines that stand out to them most, and for each line, write a feeling or emotion that this line makes them feel, and also, what this line tells them about the author. Tell them to be ready to share the line, the feeling, and speak to why it makes them feel this way. Emphasize that if something stands out to them, and they aren't sure yet why, this is OK too. Give students about 10 minutes to do this. When they're done, give them 5-10 minutes to share some of their lines in small groups.

### **Debrief/Discussion**

First ask students to list every feeling or emotion that was felt. Record answers and make a collective list on the board. Even if students felt the same feeling, record this--it will be important to visually see the trend. After you list emotions, ask students what patterns they notice. Choose the two emotions you see the most, and ask students why they think these specific emotions were felt. Prompt them to refer to specific lines from the poem in their response, and encourage personal connections. As a reader, be ready to either in the beginning, or during the discussion also tie a line to a memory or personal experience.

### **Closing**

What can we learn from poetry? Have students respond to this in writing, and hand in.

### **Potential Extension Activities:**

- Select poems from the collection *Soul Sister Revue*, edited by Cynthia Manick, *Citizen Illegal* by José



Olivarez, or *Poetry for Resistance and Justice*.

- Invite students to bring in poetry they found on youtube, read, or have even written to share at any point.
- Have students make a list of texts that best exemplified a specific feeling or emotion, and to consistently share with each other.
- Create a gallery walk with poems and art, and do the *Big Paper*
- Have students select a specific line in a poem, and free write an anecdote in connection to the line. Make sure they explain the connection.

### **Classroom Activity 3: Using Imagery to Describe Neighborhoods**

This activity is meant for students to practice translating images and emotion into words, as well as characterizing settings proximate to their daily experience. Activity can be done in a classroom, and also in collaboration with a neighboring school engaging with the same prompts, in a larger room. This is meant to be implemented in person, although a virtual translation is possible with breakout rooms. If school is a neighborhood school and not a magnet, mirror the activity except with specific streets. For a smaller scale, topics can be adjusted to “school, family, church, my home” or any other major institution in students’ lives.

#### **Day 1: Individual Prompt**

First, as a class, engage in an exercise. Have the class write down every visual detail they see in the classroom. They are likely to stop after naming specific objects, or a few colors. Push students to write about textures, smells, sounds, and everything they can. Model what this looks like. After this activity, is done as a class, give students this prompt:

*Writing Prompt:* Imagine you take a step outside from where you live. Using nothing but sensory details, without any reflection, reaction, or set up: fill up an entire page describing different parts of your neighborhood. Include sights, sounds, smells, textures, and anything else you deem important--but do not reveal what it is.

#### **Day 2: Story Sharing**

##### Part 1: Whole Group Discussion

- On a large map of New Haven county, circle or put a thumbtack (if applicable) where you live.
- What patterns do you notice?
- What questions does this raise for you?

##### Part 2: Small Group Activity: Active Listening Protocol

- Find 2 individuals who live in different neighborhoods than you.
- Each group member reads what they have without any edits, summary, or explanation.
- After everyone shares, each group member picks one detail from another group member’s writings, and the group member is required to **verbally share a story** involving this detail of their writing, and also, explain why they chose to include this.
- Students then engage in asking students for more detail about the details of their story.

##### Part 3: Closing Written Reflection

- What did you feel today? What led to this emotion?
- What did you learn about your community, peers, and yourself?
- What do you want to write about next, and what inspired this?

#### **Other Relevant Activities/ Practices/Resources**

- Unpacking the common application questions, determining which questions best cater towards what students would like to share, and how they would like to characterize their experience, and which question best fits what they want to share.
- Facilitate story sharing circles, inviting students to share excerpts of anything they've written in class, and out of class. As well as parts of their formal writing.
- Self Reflection: Students overview and reflect on their list of writing strategies, and share with each other which ones they feel the most and least confident with.
- Multimodal Story of Self: Students draft a story that utilizes written expression and at least one other modality: audio, video, or visual art.
- Empathy Interviews: Students practice asking students questions involving their understanding of race, power and justice.
- Class Anthology: Students create a digital anthology, putting a collection of their work together, and democratically coming up with a class title. Anthology will include description and picture of each author.
- Writers Workshops Days: Students practice writing differently in order to portray a specific emotion in words--they select together the emotion they want to practice, and together, come up with things they'd like to work on.
- Formal feedback days: students submit an excerpt from their written work, and in small groups, pose a specific feedback question.
- Free Writing Journal: students should, at all times, have a journal designed specifically to free write.

## **Appendix On District Standards:**

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The activities and methods in the curriculum unit, although approach the standards differently, meet every major standard in reading literature, writing narratives, and intentionally using conventions. The standards include the following:

#### **Reading Literature:**

- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.8
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10

## Writing:

- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.5
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.6
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.8
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10

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