



# THIS IS FREEDOM WORK:

## Tugging at the Seams of American Literature

Teaching is freedom work. It is resistance. It is joy. It is love. It is not easy, but it is necessary.

I teach for freedom, for myself and for students. I teach because I am an artist, a visionary, an optimist, a lover of people and identity, and an advocate for the marginalized, the minority, the visible even when we choose not to see them—all of them in their very layered and complex ways. The same complexity that seems to both complicate and glamorize the fabric of American identity. It is a weighted blanket, caressing you with

the warmth of belonging and security, yet heavy—smothering and suffocating whether it means to or not.

In education it is the collective use of Common Core and the way straying away from the curriculum is viewed as radical resistance. In American literature, it is the *voices of the literary canon* strong, resounding, deafening, unavoidable—drowning out the muffled voices of Black, Indigenous, People of Color.

To be clear, I am referring to American identity and its juxtaposition. There is a clear line and a blur

where history and education will tell you the stories of a nation while including and excluding identities, centering and decentering voices like a game of tug of war. Teaching for me, for a very long time, has been this game. I have been engaging in the mental, emotional, and physical work of pulling this rope in the other direction. I never wished to leave the other side of history sore and on its rear but to catch a glimpse of the flag lying victoriously in the center.

This reflection is a gentle unraveling of the threads that hold the playbook together in order to form a more perfect merging of the identities in American literature, to provide educators with a wider perspective of the curriculum, to promote the inclusion of marginalized voices, and to secure the rights students have to see themselves reflected in the lessons, the texts, and various modes of expression.

I am writing from my own experiences of teaching American literature, as one who has desperately searched district pacing guides for texts that reflected anything my students could relate to—anything that didn't *just* feel like work—work we were obligated to do. So, with the same fervor that long emboldened the voices of many Americans in history, I sought to explore the landscape of literature that reached far beyond what was being offered.

I started with inquiry. What does it mean to be American?

This is a question I never gave the answer to; I only listened to students—Black, Latinx, Asian, and white—who with both conviction and wavering intonation painted symbolic images of patriotism against a canvas of injustice, immigration, diversity, education, and opportunity. They were *American*. They were describing themselves and their own lives and experiences. They were natives, nonnatives, first generation. If these students believed themselves to be American, why then did they feel so detached from the stories of American literature?

There are many ways that teachers approach American literature—chronologically, thematically, etc. But I propose and support the idea that we approach American literature from the framework of antiracism, abolitionist teaching, and the pedagogy of humanity—of a love, appreciation, and reverence for people, of an acknowledgment of the ways that the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have been excluded and an intentional plan to center these voices, of an affirmation of our humanity as seen in texts not just limited to those that exploit our pain.

I won't disregard the American literary timeline. It is what I owe the organization of my planning, but I've learned that the end of the semester will drag its

tattered train to your classroom door before history has had time to include Black voices, before the habiliments of literary appreciation will ever adorn Modernism and contemporary pieces.

Including these voices should not feel like a superficial insert into a curriculum, but a natural celebration, critique, and study of America and the literature born from its diverse people. The American literary time period, as it parallels US history, has always reflected what's happening in society, in government, in politics. It has simply favored and centered white male voices. It is the disruption of that canon and curriculum that causes discomfort.

## I started with inquiry. What does it mean to be American?

But if it feels radical, it is because we have accepted the idea that no other group can be *inherently* American. If it feels radical, it is because we have normalized and mandated a racist curriculum. “Abolitionist teaching is as much about tearing down old structures and ways of thinking as it is about forming new ideas, new forms of social interactions, new ways to be inclusive, new ways to discuss equality . . . new ways to resist, new ways to agitate . . . new ways to establish an educational system that works for everyone, especially those who are put at the edges of the classroom and society” (Love 89).

This is a charge for teachers who are doing the work hesitantly and cautiously, behind closed doors in fear of observations, and to those who have not yet begun. It is an encouragement to teach unafraid with the framework of humanity and the dismantling of oppressive educational systems in mind.

This is freedom work—“Freedom to create your reality, where uplifting humanity is at the center of all decisions” (Love 89).

### Work Cited

Love, Bettina. *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. Beacon Press, 2019.

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