

# Revolutionizing the English Classroom through Consciousness, Justice, and Self-Awareness

*The author argues that, by revolutionizing the literary canon, we are revolutionizing the English classroom, and urges us to shift from focusing exclusively on required texts to equally acknowledging the urgent need for consciousness and activism from our students.*

**D**r. Christopher Emdin once described a classroom setting where students were lulled to sleep by the monotony of a lesson. Although the teacher was fully engaged in a rhythmic performance of teaching, “when [Emdin] looked at the faces across the room, everybody was asleep in different variations of what sleep should look like . . . Head on hand, nodding all the way back, just asleep.” As if by fate, a sudden rumbling noise somehow seemed to bring the children to life. “It was the bass line of a rap song.” Emdin details the life and emotion that filled the room as the kids awoke in excitement—the bass “permeating” the space, the lyrics all too familiar. Yet as the music moved down the street and away from the classroom, Emdin also describes the teacher, who still engaged in his performance, missed the entire moment of something that had “captured [the students’] interest in a way that all his dancing and pirouettes could not do.”

As a high school teacher, it is this exact experience that I dread—not the temporary moment of excitement, but the other 45 minutes of class where students are disconnected, disengaged, and disinterested in learning. The trembling anxieties of walking into a classroom full of students whose eyes lack passion and whose ears are listening keenly for the lunch bell, rather than the sound of my voice, creates an unnerving frustration. I remember my first year of teaching. I was blessed with the challenge of working in a Title I Priority school. I remember vividly, the hallways were filled with energetic and expressive

teenagers—laughing, dancing, and joking. I stood in my sixth-period class yelling at the top of my lungs for students to pay attention. I often gave the “education is important” speech—convincing students that they needed to listen and learn to become assets to society. I was perpetuating “literacy myth” conceptions that had for generations been passed down. “What did it mean to, as our elders told us, ‘grow up and be somebody’? And what precisely did this have to do with an education rendered as rote discipline?” (Coates 25).

Before I ever stepped foot into a classroom, I knew exactly what I wanted to teach and how I wanted to teach it. I had adopted the teachings of Emdin. My teaching pedagogy focused on infusing hip-hop culture and multimodal approaches to teaching and learning. Quickly, though, I learned that under micromanaged supervision teachers were restricted from the “close your door and teach” policy. I was afraid to stray away from the standards, reject the canonized texts, and even incorporate what I knew my students could relate to. I took the traditional route. I followed archived and archaic lesson plans until they equally bored me and my students. I had so hopelessly reached the point where I began telling students I was obligated to teach what was written for me in the plans. They met me with much resistance and frustration. I had to make a conscious and radical decision to stand up for what and who I believed in—my students. Tanehisi Coates mentions in his *Between the World and Me*, “black people love their children with a kind of obsession. [They] are all we have, and [they] come to us endangered” (82).

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These students—only a handful of those who weren't African American—were yearning for something more. Our curriculum, our rituals and routines, and our purpose in the classroom needed to be rooted in something deeper than what had already been laid out for us. We needed a spiritual, culturally relevant, and intellectual connection to the texts being used in class. My responsibility, as a vessel of mentorship and inspiration, was to provide opportunities for students to see themselves reflected in texts and the lessons. My goal was to stimulate inquiry about social injustice, spark interest in African American history, and create a platform for students to share their own experiences, encourage and motivate each other, and engage in discussion about the new leaders of today.

### **Civic Engagement: A Critical Assessment of Popular Culture, Racial Ideologies, and Self-Awareness**

Education should move beyond the confines of standardized tests and traditional rhetoric. This idea is especially true in schools where the majority of students are African American. It is too often the case that students of color are unable to relate to what is taught in their classrooms. This lack of connection and validation often affects the level of student engagement and even academic success. Students tend to display forms of resistance when they cannot identify the importance of what is being taught. On the contrary, by infusing ideas, arguments, and texts that are culturally relevant, educators create and expand opportunities for students to think critically about the world and themselves and to formulate ideas that promote civic engagement.

My starting point for these types of discussions is through a critical assessment of popular culture. Students today are digital natives who have immediate access to media and entertainment. They are habitual listeners and even composers of music. As they are already entranced by hypnotic and captivating beats, my goal is to get students to listen to the

message. Many Black artists have been transforming music with quite unapologetic and conscious lyrics. Integrating Black music into the curriculum not only allows for the teaching of figurative language and literary elements but also an analysis of theme and more importantly a critique of society. Beyond the music realm, popular culture also offers a wide and diverse range of new leaders and revolutionaries—whether they are implicit or explicit in their intent.

There exists a plethora of influential musicians who reserve the right to be acknowledged as pioneers in the area of consciousness through music. For the purpose of engaging and relating to the interests of high school students, I like to incorporate current-day artists. The shifts in music are dynamic and rapidly occurring, but a few names have stood the test of the music industry and musical trends. Besides Tupac Shakur, one artist I use very heavily is Kendrick Lamar. His lyrical genius and activism qualifies him as an author to be studied and questioned in the classroom. Our most recent study of Kendrick Lamar involved a close analysis of his album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. We specifically studied the songs “Blacker the Berry” and “Alright” in a situated context after viewing his 2016 Grammy performance. The lyrics allowed us the opportunity to review poetic devices, but more importantly to engage in a critical discussion about past and present-day injustices. The visuals to the performance add a multimodal layer to the lesson and extend opportunities to discuss symbols as representation for blackness, heritage, culture, America, and its justice system.

Symbols are important as they offer a host of connotative meanings and implications that amplify the message of the texts. For the purpose of teaching, lyrics in this case also function as texts. Analyzing symbols in the English classroom becomes an extension of a literary analysis of symbolism and also a critique of societal norms and stereotypes perpetuated by media. Symbols have also been intentionally used as political and social commentary. Beyoncé's music video and 2016 Super Bowl performance of her song “Formation” caused quite some controversy for its suggestive and, in some moments, obtrusive allusions to Hurricane Katrina, police brutality, the Black Panther Party, and the Black Moors.

Both Kendrick and Beyoncé create platforms for initiating discussions about race and injustice and promoting social activism. An equally pressing

theme explored in the English classroom is the concept of discovering identity. For Black students, this theme should be handled with a special kind of care. Where much of the literary canon fails to include positive messages that promote self-love—Black self-love specifically—it should be considered by teachers a nurturing and civic duty to supplement such texts into the curriculum. I will later suggest a few texts for “revolutionizing the literary canon” that express themes beyond self-identity. It is useful at this moment, however, to highlight lyrics from “Blacker the Berry” and “Formation” that fit into this theme. Kendrick opens his first verse with the lines “I’m African-American, I’m African. I’m black as the moon . . . my hair is nappy . . . my nose is round and wide.” Beyoncé parallels this proclamation with “I like my baby hair with baby hair and Afros. I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils.” Both artists embrace an often rejected and denounced view of beauty. Additionally, they extend their medium beyond music—as many others seem to be doing.

Rappers David Banner and Killer Mike have taken to social media, radio, and television to teach truths about black history and strategize as a means of creating change in Black communities. Valuing or even simply considering passionate concerns voiced by celebrities encourages the use of current and culturally relevant rhetors of civic discourse. Much more frequently are African American public figures widening the reach of their audience with positive, powerful, and urgent messages. At the 2016 BET Music Awards, *Grey’s Anatomy* actor Jesse Williams, in his acceptance speech, poetically and brazenly shared his thoughts on racial issues that have created a growing tension in Black communities. He critiques a system that perpetuates and is fueled by the employment of institutionalized racism. He argues, “we are going to have equal rights and justice in our own country or we will restructure their function and ours.” His speech also attacks many recent cases of police brutality, mentioning names like Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and Dorian Hunt. With great rhetorical facility, he moves his audience to action. We cannot deny the power of his message and use of literary techniques to enhance his speech. Allusion, parallelism, and rhyme are to be mentioned, but it is his tone and alliterative elements that are also quite captivating. Williams professes, “the burden of the

brutalized is not to comfort the bystander.” These texts, these moments, cannot be excluded from the English classroom or kept from Black students.

The 2016 ESPY Awards opened with a similar call to action. NBA players Carmelo Anthony, Chris Paul, Dwyane Wade, and LeBron James expressed desires for social change while condemning recent cases of racial injustice and violence against black and brown bodies. Allowing students to watch the video in class invites conversations about societal expectations, past and present history of African Americans, and initiatives to create change. By using authors, rhetors, and figures that students are familiar with and even admire, we are taking a subtle attempt to bridge the gap and eliminate the disconnect between students and the texts, information, and discussions we engage in. The themes and purpose for critically analyzing those themes also changes the approach of teaching and learning. Education should serve a meaningful purpose. As Ta-Nehisi Coates recalls, “When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing” (26). This is an approach we should steer away from, as it not only perpetuates a possible “literacy myth” but also because as teachers and mentors we should offer something more.

## Revolutionizing the Literary Canon

Coates’s *Between the World and Me* is a great place to start when thinking about texts to add to the English curriculum. The text, written in the form of a letter from a father to his son, functions as a practical, moving, and informational text. The anecdotes and lessons described in the text are familiar ones that resonate with a large number of Black students and other minorities that I’ve taught and encountered. Coates recalls his own experiences and watches his son’s attempts to navigate, comprehend, and fight against an unjust system. He sets up a harsh dichotomy between “the streets” and school—a charge students are well equipped and eager to commit to. “If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left” (Coates 25). Schools “had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls” and were simply “opportunities to better discipline the body” (Coates 25). He questions his purpose for being in school and

exhorts that “schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance. . . . I sensed the schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality so that we would not see, so that we did not ask: Why—for us and only us—is the other side of free will and free spirits an assault upon our bodies? This is not a hyperbolic concern” (26).

Coates’s concern, as a young male, is one our students grapple with quite often. Students tend to exhibit resistance against a system they don’t believe has been put in place in their best interest. This text works to initiate a conversation about race, identity, and more importantly about taking a different approach to education, student literacy, and personalizing teacher responsibility to Black students. Another book I’ve used in this unit is Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The book in its entirety is to be considered as a required reading, yet there is still much value in reading its excerpts. I used this text to focus on the theme of institutionalized versus internalized racism to situate and dissect the broader concept of racism, which many students only understand at surface level.

Where art imitates life, literary texts are equally significant as informational texts. Literature has the power of engaging readers through



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compelling narratives. When the text in some ways reflects the identities or experiences of the readers, the audience—in this case, our students—have the ability to activate prior knowledge and offer something personal to the discussion. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, a text that has already been inducted into the literary canon, serves as a complex look into many of the earlier mentioned themes. The overarching theme of beauty and self-acceptance is also present in Kendrick Lamar’s “I”—where in a repetitive proclamation he asserts “I love myself.” We were taught to believe that “We were black, beyond the visible spectrum, beyond civilization. Our history was inferior because we were inferior, which is to say our bodies were inferior” (Coates 43–44). Coates challenges this notion with the commanding statement, “I had Malcolm.”

Writers . . . were out there creating a new language . . . an argument for the weight and beauty of our culture and thus of our bodies. . . . I felt this weight and saw this beauty, not just as a matter of theory but also as demonstrable fact. And I wanted desperately to communicate this evidence to the world because I felt . . . that the larger culture’s erasure of black beauty was intimately connected to the destruction of black bodies. (Coates 44)

This is most certainly a message that should be taught and perpetuated in classrooms where black and brown bodies exist. It is crucial for the psychological development of black students to embed an unending and unconditional sense of pride and self-love.

For opportunities to study shorter texts, I like to use written poetry and spoken word. Like music, spoken word is my gateway to infusing one of the elements of hip-hop—rap. Written poetry is powerful in its message and use of poetic devices. Spoken word, with its multimodal characteristics, embodies an undeniable passion and sometimes angst from the performer that moves the audience. These examples of Black expressivities function in a way that emotionally connects to Black students. They become invested in the message and intent and therefore engaged in the critique of its content. Some notable poems are “The Transcendental Gospel of Freddie Gray” by Brian Mooney, “What I Wasn’t Taught in School” by Samuel King, “Being Black in America” by Dylan T., and “Black Privilege” by Crystal Valentine.

It is useful to introduce other mediums and art forms to evoke meaningful discussion and provide opportunities for interpretive critique and analysis. Michael Paul Britto's "Something in the Way of Things" is an artistic assessment and commentary of the state of Black men in America. In an interview with the Huffington Post he says, "I became more aware of the state of blackness in America . . . Mass media is really good at demonizing males of color, and reinforcing stereotypes" (Frank). With his cut-and-paste collages piecing together haunting images from the media, Britto says, "I like the idea of taking something familiar and using it to respond or comment on a social issue" (Frank).

Another unique and uplifting art exhibit is Renaissance Connection's "When Sistahs Gather." The artwork composed by female artists focuses on women—with an emphasis on heritage and roots. Because self-identity and self-love is important, I have also used images from the "Black Is Beautiful" campaign, a cultural movement from the 1960s, which is still thriving in other forms and under different names.

## Resources and Strategies

Cultural movements like "Black Is Beautiful" have been reshaped in the form of "Black Girls Rock," #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackExcellence, although these are only some of the forms. With increased use of social media, information about and engagement with these movements are easily accessible. Twitter is a great tool to use in the classroom as it provides real-time discussion about trending and pivotal topics. Twitter also unites communities from around the world in efforts to inform about social issues and inspire activism. One of the fastest growing movements is #BlackLivesMatter. Because the objective of the BLM movement—one that "advocates for dignity, justice, and respect"—is often misconstrued by the media, it is important to have students further research their goals and positive impact. A great starting place is visiting the Black Lives Matter website to review the 13 Guiding Principles that govern their mission (<http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/>).

As an advocate for strategies that allow students to engage in developing their rhetorical skills and critical thinking about the world they live in, I like to incorporate activities that mimic the

breakdance and graffiti elements of hip-hop. Dramatic activities and fishbowl discussions are monumental ways of engaging students with multimodal means. The use of fishbowl and online discussions is an effective way to have students question the role and consequences of media, the impacts of injustice, parallels between race and beauty, and even their own responsibility as leaders in society. Dramatic activities in the form of skits, tableau vivant, spoken word, interpretive dance, and other performances serve as outlets for free expression.

Because I am a writer at heart and am always quite fascinated with beautifully written words, I must also address the use of hip-hop to teach writing. The most skilled writers (or rappers) often employ a sophisticated use of diction, inimitable syntax, and strong descriptive and connotative words. By studying and dissecting the language, students have the opportunity to analyze and mimic the complexities of the lyrics. Music offers teachable moments for critical analysis and extensive study of a text's message, vocabulary, rhetoric, tone, and structure. A noteworthy example are lines from the rapper Nas's song "Memory Lane." He raps:

Sentence begins indented, with formality . . .  
Poetry, that's a part of me, retardedly bop  
I drop the ancient manifested hip-hop, straight off  
the block . . .


In a song where Nas discusses stereotypes and forms of institutionalized racism, he maintains an erudite tone and employs the use of a number of rhetorical devices and varied sentence structure.

The English classroom should be a safe haven, a collaborative workshop for practicing modes of discourse, a retreat for the exploration of identity, and a forum for sometimes sensitive conversations about race, class, and society. By revolutionizing the literary canon, we are revolutionizing the English classroom. Let us shift from focusing exclusively on required texts to equally acknowledging the urgent need for consciousness and activism from our students. Inspire students to think critically about the world, offer opportunities to gain

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self-awareness, and function as a resource of knowledge that you can either provide or help students gain via alternate sources. Dismantle the existing tensions students have about predetermined standards of what schools should be and how teachers should function—a sentiment Coates expounds on:

I wanted to pursue things, to know things, but I could not match the means of knowing that came naturally to me with the expectations of professors. The pursuit of knowing was freedom to me, the right to declare your own curiosities and follow them through all manner of books. I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was a jail of other people's interests. The library was open, intending, free. (48)

For all students, but desperately for Black students, English teachers should be librarians of justice, hope, and consciousness. English classrooms should provide something more complex than grammar, something deeper than the classics, and something much more meaningful than “writing between the lines, copying the directions legibly, [and] memorizing theorems extracted from the world they were created to represent” (Coates 26). 

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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

**Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

This lesson from ReadWriteThink.org begins with the playing of the chorus of rapper Kanye West’s “Diamonds from Sierra Leone.” Students should be able to recognize the track and artist and might even sing along. This lesson makes a connection to popular culture by asking students to work in pairs to research and analyze contemporary and historic protest songs. After learning about wikis, each pair posts its analysis of the protest songs to a class wiki, adding graphics, photos, and hyperlinks as desired. The class then works together to organize the entries. Finally, students listen to all of the protest songs and add information and comments to each other’s pages. <http://bit.ly/dpibg5>