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Look to the Present, Not the Past: An Argument for Increased Use of Contemporary African American  
Voices in Classrooms

I. General Area of Study

This is a proposal for research within the educational field of Liberal Arts. Specifically, the proposed research will focus on the subject of the Black experience as it relates to an educational topic within the American high school classroom. Given the subject matter at hand and the targeted age group of the students focused within this proposal, the research will pertain to the English or Language Arts classroom setting. Two separate schools of thought will be introduced throughout this proposal. Both intend to educate and provide awareness from students regarding race relations in American Society. One, will be a common approach that might be familiar to those who studied in America throughout their high school years. The other approach will be suggested in order to increase engagement from students and to attempt to provoke empathy toward a crucial issue within the current American societal landscape.

II. Literature Review

There have been several works that address the concept of educating American students about slavery and segregation among other seminal moments throughout African American history and how these points in time, as well as the actions committed accordingly, have brought

us to where we are today. It might be conceivable to suggest that the more we know in reference to the issue of slavery, the better off everyone will be. However, nothing is that simple, especially when it comes to a subject as dense and layered as slavery; this is especially true in America.

W. Cohen and J. Cohen point out, “Knowledge is said to be power, but the knowledge and distribution of that power has never been equal in America. The Supreme Court, in the seminal case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, declared that racially separate public educational systems and institutions were inherently unequal. But more than sixty years after *Brown*, the goal providing equal educational opportunities remains elusive” (57)

This is certainly true as this is not merely a problem in education, but unfortunately, African Americans are not on an equal playing field in most areas within American society. However, how does the concept of education revolving the black experience pan out within more privileged settings? More to the point, do White schools learn about the slave trade and Jim Crow laws?

Granted, far too many schools with a predominantly black student body may not have the same funds or resources as privileged schools elsewhere. However, this does not mean that students should be deprived of simple arithmetic or a basic knowledge of science. This same train of thought ought to apply to the education of slavery in America, surely.

Disappointingly, this does not seem to be the case as there appears to be a lack of research in teaching blackness or the black experience to white students. As Olcon mentions, “no studies of international immersion programs examined learning about Whiteness and racial oppression; instead, they have focused on cultural adaptability, cross-cultural learning, and intercultural sensitivity” (4).

For better or worse, there are studies conducted of the extremes on either end of the spectrum when it comes to education revolving race relations. This is meant to say, either a completely Afrocentric outlook on education, or a completely Eurocentric heritage belief system within education.

New branches of pedagogy have emerged in order to address this gap in education. While Olcon mentions “Social work in the United States has remained strangely silent on the meaning of whiteness, both within the profession and society more broadly” (2) this statement can very well be applied to teaching in America. On the other end of the spectrum, Wood notes that “Afrocentric pedagogy is the educational methodology by which Afrocentricity is advanced” (4).

That said, as we know, public schools do indeed offer lessons about Black history. Whether the American schools in question do so exclusively throughout the month of February, during Black History Month, or whether these sensitive topics only materialize within syllabi when convenient, we cannot prove. So, what are educators teaching students after all? In the context presented at the beginning of this proposal, it was stated that this research would focus on an English or Language Arts classroom. What African American material is being taught? Is this being grasped? Do students, regardless of color, process the sacrifices of a Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King or several of the many heroes of America’s blemished past? If they do grasp or process the information and concepts designed to be understood within this classroom, what would explain the raving disparity in this country when it comes to even the acknowledgement that black lives matter?

### III. Research Proposition

This research project proposes that today’s students would benefit from learning about contemporary African American writers and poets more than they would benefit from learning

from African American voices from the civil rights movement. This is not to say that the works of all the greats from years past need to be done away with. The project will set out to discover whether students will grasp contemporary voices rather than being alienated from vernacular, concepts and traditions which would inevitably need to be addressed or mentioned when discussing works from over 70 years ago.

#### IV. Project Rationale

This project raises the following question: if the curricula and syllabi throughout high schools in America is as good as they should be, why is that the division in sentiments toward race in America does not stop at the millennial or Gen-Z age group? When Badenhorst mentions the how Ta-Nehisi Coates' (2015) *Between the World and Me* “reflects and speaks to the burning, often brutal racially inscribed events of our present day and age” (1), it is a reminder that there is fresh material to be taken advantage of as an educator. Perhaps students would be more susceptible to a text that references events which occurred a few years ago and mentions musicians' names that the students also listen to, rather than works that, through no fault of their own, simply may not grasp the students' attention.

This same spirit can be translated into other art forms, of course. Often, English classes can explore other forms of writing, whether this be poetry or musical lyrics. Therefore, why not take advantage of a common and contemporary genre of music that exhibits African Americans in a position of success, rather than one as the victims. Hip-Hop Scholarship “explores, in part, how hip-hop culture and rap music can increase positive academic and therapeutic outcomes with young adult Black men in educational and clinical settings” (Washington 3).

#### V. Data Collection/Analysis Methods

The Data Collection process of the proposed research will occur throughout the span of one semester. The data set will derive from a senior high school English class. At the onset of the course, students will be given a survey which will include a set of questions designed to produce qualitative answers from students. The questions will be as follows: Who is your favorite African American author? Do you believe the average African American person suffers a natural disadvantage in society? What was the last police shooting case you remember hearing or reading about? Who would you say is the best role model for the Black community as of today?

While there are no right or wrong answers, these questions will provide a foundation of information that will allow for contextualizing the students' knowledge and familiarity or lack thereof with the current Black experience and racial landscape in America.

Throughout the semester, the class will engage in reading four books. Two of these will be written by authors from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and the other two will have been published within the last 10 years.

The books assigned to this class will be Ta-Nehisi Coates' (2015) *Between the World and Me*, Amanda Gorman's (2021) *The Hill We Climb*, Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1964) *Why We Can't Wait* and James Baldwin's (1974) *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

These books were selected upon the same principle of criterion: influence. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is practically the embodiment of the Civil Rights Movement. His *I Have a Dream* speech has been taught and studied for decades, rightfully so. James Baldwin, a close friend of Dr. King's also had tremendous influence throughout his time but in a different way. Baldwin was in between various circles of the Civil Rights Movement. He had the ear of Martin Luther King Jr. as well as that of Malcolm X. He frequently spent time with Medgar Evers and Marlon Brando. His essays and works had a lasting impact, both then and now. The point being

that both Dr. King and Baldwin symbolize the feelings and thoughts of their time in very distinct ways. Therefore, they will metaphorically be representing their era within this research.

Coates and Gorman were chosen in a similar way. Gorman became the talk of the town after delivering her speech, *The Hill We Climb*, at President Biden's Inauguration. Along with Coates, who has not only written a seminal piece of first-hand recounting of the atrocities within race relations throughout our times, is also a leading voice within the Marvel Comic Universe in his role as a writer for the giant media company. He is in a clear place to shift the American culture and, through writing within *The Black Panther*, can begin important conversations regarding race identity and relations throughout this country.

After readings and discussions have taken place within the classroom, students will take an assessment corresponding to each novel or poem. These assessments will include multiple choice questions as well as short answer written prompts that will determine the student's understandings of the material at hand. Additionally, students will be given the same survey they were presented with at the beginning of the course. Responses will be compared. Success or failure of the proposition that students would benefit from learning contemporary works more often than past works of African American studies will be decided based off test results as well as survey results.

If the average test results from the contemporary works are higher than those based off Dr. King's and Baldwin's, then the proposition is proven to be true. The opposite is true if students have better average test scores for the works of the heroes from the Civil Rights era.

Frequency with which students mention or name either author or poet from a corresponding era will dictate the failure or success of the proposal as well. For example, should most students mention Coates, Gorman, Colson Whitehead, Kendrick Lamar, Oprah, Jay-Z or any of their contemporaries in their surveys, the researcher will assume that students had an

easier time of relating and grasping to ideas from the contemporary works. Should the opposite occur and students name Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou or Dr. King himself, then the proposal will have to have proved inaccurate.

## VI. Broader Significance

This research has the potential to do a lot of good in the world. That may seem like a lofty ambition at first glance. However, consider that “Racial pride messages focus on positive feelings toward the racial group by emphasizing group unity and African American heritage” (Gaylord-Harden et al. 2) If young African Americans are fed examples of their community thriving rather than being the victim of hate crimes or in a helpless position, they will then be able to have more pride in themselves and, in turn, in their heritage.

As previously stated, this research never intended to do away with the likes of a James Baldwin or Dr. Martin Luther King from any school anywhere. It simply posits that while the fight is long from over, African Americans are in a better position, or at least more likely to, succeed in Amanda Gorman’s world compared to Dr. King’s. This research could effectively usher in a new era of American Literature due to the new authors students will be exposed to. This research has the potential to usher in a wave of inspiration for young African American boys and girls to gain interest in writing fiction or becoming educators themselves.

## Works Cited

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