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MADE ME WANNA HOLLER

Carol Winters

I tried to talk to William many times at the beginning of the semester, but he wouldn't. He politely responded to my hearty, "How are you doing," by raising his head toward me but not meeting my eyes. His body language shouted louder than any words that a connection with this particular middle-aged whomever from whatever university was not something on his agenda. I had come to his world, Central High, an inner city school of around 1,000 students, to observe unofficially public education in process and do a little teaching. As a teacher of pre-service teachers, I had wanted to experience first hand the kinds of students we were asking our student teachers to teach. Since I hadn't been in a high school classroom since the 1960s and never in an inner-city one, I was anxious to find out for myself what was happening. Well, I definitely wasn't happening with Mr. William Cashall.

I had seen him early in the semester when he had strolled confidently into class, greeted a few friends, pulled out a book, and settled in for the class. He didn't participate in any class activities, let alone talk to me; and, if asked by the teacher to attend to the lesson at hand, he made an elaborate ritual of putting away his book, getting out paper and pencil or else asking for it, and generally disrupting the flow of the lesson. Most days he was allowed to read without interruption; it was simply easier.

On one day, the classroom teacher sent him to the library with me. Our assignment was to make up a quiz for use on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and William was one of five students who had raised their hands when asked if they had read up to Chapter Eight. William, with indifference, ambled along with the group just far enough away to show he wasn't under anybody's lead. Once there, but before I could begin to address the assignment, William informed me that he had finished the entire book but wasn't interested in working on any quiz. I asked if he had a problem reading a woman author, my attempt to spark any connection; his reply was to pull Alice Walker's *Temple of My Familiar* out of his backpack and assure me by looking straight into my eyes that he had no problems reading books either by women authors or with women protagonists.

Finally, a connection. I was impressed with William's reading material. After all, he was in regular, tenth grade English, not an honors section. We talked about Walker briefly; then I asked if he had read any Toni Morrison. Sure, he liked *The Bluest Eye* but didn't understand *Beloved* at all. Okay, I'll admit it. I was hooked. There stood a six-foot, sixteen year old, supposedly woefully deprived because of having gone through an inner city school system, and he was reading good literature by choice. I tried to extend the conversation by asking what he disliked about *Beloved*, and he said he didn't know; it just didn't make any sense. What didn't make any sense to me was the conflicting feelings I was having at that moment. William was just the sort of

black man, who, if I had met him on a street late at night, would have moved me immediately to tense up, grip my purse, and walk quickly by. Now I had just found out that he read the same books I did. What could that mean?

William turned to leave for another table, and my voice followed, asking if he had read any Buchi Emecheta. I thought he probably hadn't, but I was trying to stay connected, if only for a moment. "No," he said. "So?" I did a two-minute sales job on the qualities of this Nigerian writer and offered to bring in one of her works. That began a semester long trading routine between us, during which I brought *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Souls of Black Folks*, *Langston Hughes' Poetry*, *Race Matters*, and *Makes Me Wanna Holler*. It also began a semester long journey for me on my attitudes toward black learners. Frankly, I didn't know I had had any attitudes at the beginning of the relationship. But he always knew.

I could tell the books William enjoyed. They came back to me dog-eared, but he maintained his distance from talking to me about any of them. He did get so that he would raise his hand in greeting in order to acknowledge my presence; but, when I asked how he liked the reading, invariably he would answer, "Good." When pressed about what he specifically liked, he answered, "I don't know; I just did. I don't want to talk about it." I was convinced that he was a natural but untrained reader, who only needed to open up to me. We needed to connect, and then I could help him. I wasn't sure exactly *what* I would help him with. And why *help* was the mode I naturally chose wasn't clear either. It became clearer as I analyzed our relationship. We were wary of each other, and, originally, I had thought the reason for this was that I brought such an educated element into his life, one that he was not used to dealing with. However, as I pulled back the layers of my reactions to his superior reading ability, I found that I had had very low expectations of William. I was surprised in an unpleasant way about myself. I had also assumed that his lack of response to my questions about his reading was based on his shyness at presenting his opinions in front of such an educated person. I was wrong on both counts.

As the school year came to an end, I asked William if he would be willing to talk to me about the protagonist of *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, and he agreed. I didn't know what to expect and tried to keep myself from expecting too much. After all, we didn't have much of a history together. His regular teacher had told him that his cooperation would count as extra credit in the class, something he desperately needed. I don't know whether that promise prompted him to talk, or whether he simply decided to show himself to me; but, for forty-five minutes, William let me inside his mind just a little.

The main character of *Makes Me Wanna Holler* is Nathan McCall, a black man, who currently works as a reporter for the *Washington Post*. The book chronicles in autobiographical form his growing up in a middle-class black neighborhood and his young adult years on the street, in prison, college, and corporate America. It is an intelligent and angry book, one that makes any white reader uncomfortable and only too aware of either her prejudices or patronization or ignorance. I wondered how William felt about Nathan and his stance toward the world.

First, I asked William what Nathan's attitude was toward old people. Although I hadn't remembered anything particularly significant in the book, even that exclusion would say something about the priorities of the author. William pointed out that indeed Nathan had had a grandmother whom he loved very much. In fact, she had been a maid for a white family and continually prodded her grandchildren to act like those white kids. Nathan had tried hard to do that for his grandmother, but then, as he grew up, decided he didn't want to be like those white folks at all. So, in spite of the fact that he counted on his grandmother for love, he couldn't act in the way she wanted him to. I wondered aloud how it must be to act like someone else to please a family member, but William didn't want to pursue that notion. What he was interested in was catching me ignorant about the book. I hadn't remembered those incidents involving the grandmother, but William certainly had picked up on Nathan's steadfast refusal to be like the white man.

I turned to the subject of religion and again thought I had picked a subject that wasn't covered in much detail by McCall. William, with a grin, noted that religion had been a hot topic while Nathan was in prison; indeed, he had been part of a bible study group. I admitted defeat in recall and should have admitted defeat in reading with sensitivity this young black man, because William willingly speculated that he was a lot like Nathan: they both believed in God but not in religion. Organized religion wasn't something either one of them wanted any part of. At this point, I was learning to keep quiet and listen.

I touched on the subject of women, something I remembered well from the book, because Nathan recounts his early sexual exploits, including gang rape. William defended Nathan's behavior to women, calling it "adolescent," arguing that Nathan hadn't instituted any of the "trains," but had only participated out of peer pressure. After all, Nathan had later married a woman he didn't love in order to give his child a name and had even stayed with her when she went crazy, when she had another baby just to keep her meal ticket. He had an okay attitude toward women; in fact, he had even loved one, although he lost her in the end. Nathan had also fathered another baby, to whom he gave only passing reference. William didn't want to think about that subject at all, only admitting that the women in Nathan's life were a complicated bunch. I was no longer trying to help William respond as I thought he ought.

We branched out on the subject of racial attitudes in America. I asked William if he thought racism was getting any better, and he assured me it was worse. I immediately jumped to my race's defense, but he made it clear that what he meant by worse was that *his* people's attitudes were worse than before. Since I wasn't used to thinking from another perspective, I was becoming uncomfortable with the conversation. He then brought up Marvin Gaye, whose song title forms the title of McCall's book, and declared that, although Gaye had looked around and been appalled at the way African-Americans were treated then, the attitude that treatment has created in African-Americans was worse now. This miscommunication showed me that I had an attitude I needed to change. Who was I to think of a person of another race as someone who needed to conform to my world view? Didn't that

assume the other race to be a problem? Didn't that assume that I held the standard to which William must adhere? Didn't that assume that not only should William be like me, but he ought to *want* to be?

He listened to my next question, "Don't you at least want what the white people have?" but shook his head. "Whites *think* they're first, but they aren't; we are. Then come Hispanics, really close, and Asians dead last, way last." This blunt statement made me want to smooth things over, to murmur something about living together equally, but the words stuck in my throat. I saw that *equal* for me meant my way, and it was his vision of the world I had said I wanted to know. So I asked how that ranking fit in with the existing power structure and how much he thought he could give, in order to get what he wanted. William's response was that he wouldn't have to give in; he was going to go into business for himself. He would make it on his own with plenty of money to show for his trouble. Now I saw fire in William's eyes as they met mine. He wouldn't give in; he would beat the system.

Backing away from the challenge in his eyes, I asked William where all his reading fit into his success equation. He said that he needed knowledge in order to get money. Here was a fundamental belief in the material power of knowledge. William was a believer, but such a naïve one. He didn't realize that while the student body in his school was 75% African-American, the school's faculty was 90% white, which meant he had to work with a power structure that he perceived was against him. No matter what William knew he needed, the school system knew better.

This disjunction between need and reality was further clouded by a failure on William's part and a failure on the system's part. For when I asked him what had turned him into such a voracious reader, he responded, "I did." He didn't remember one teacher who had guided him, but only his own self, sure to recognize what it wanted to know. William bragged that when he had taken the California Achievement Test in Junior High, he had tested as one of the best in the nation. Granting that he hadn't done very well in school for the last several years, he promised himself to "get with it" for the next two years so that he could get a scholarship for college. This raw determination sounded good, but I knew some of the statistics about inner city youths who made it to college. They weren't high.

I pushed for an answer as to why he hadn't done well on his GPA. He blamed school, specifically some teachers. "They always think they're right. Well, I know I'm not always right, but they *sure* aren't either." He further accused them of non-professionalism, of bringing attitudes from home into school and putting them on the students. He refused to have any of that and acknowledged that he had been kicked out of classes when he had pointed out such lapses of professionalism to the teachers. "They argue with me just like they were kids; and when I say that, they get mad." William couldn't seem to resist challenging the system. It might be in control, but that didn't make it right.

The subject of anger led me to my last question: "Look at McCall's picture on the cover. Is he angry? Does he end the book an angry man?"

"Yes, righteous anger." William then interpreted McCall's actions on his last two jobs. In the first, McCall had acted badly; he had given up too much of himself in

order to have a decent job. He tried too hard to become part of white society. However, with the *Washington Post* job, McCall had looked around with a mind that believed in its own abilities; he had seen that blacks were treated as tokens, as objects, as coups to be counted on the way to political correctness, not as people. McCall made it his business to keep himself aloof from the office politics as well as the people who worked there, to do his job better than anyone else, to show himself able to hold the position. Clearly, William approved of this approach, even mirroring McCall's frustrations with his white co-workers' lack of interest in who he was. Their thinly disguised fear at what that African-American might do, their general devaluation of the way Nathan dressed, talked, carried himself—all resonated in William's experiences. Although he didn't use the word *respect*, that was the heart of his definition for "righteous anger." It was his demand to be treated as a human being. I was surprised at the depth of my reaction to this. I've never considered myself a racist. I'm tolerant, arguing equal rights for all. But I have unconsciously lived in a sea of white majority standards, beliefs, and values which we expect to be privileged over all others.

This question remains: is William's need to be treated with respect going to be met with the reality of the school system? It doesn't seem so. The need is rarely articulated. It usually evidences itself in sullen, angry, stubborn responses to authority. It resists being known. It makes of its resistance a stance toward life. William wants power and money, but he expects to take them by sheer inner strength. The reality of his situation is that he makes himself an outsider, one who won't accept the system. However, I had not understood until our conversation what being a part of the system would cost him. Presently, he is confident and smart and a leader. He knows how to handle himself in his world; he's looked up to by peers and either feared or indulged by staff. The potential for success is great, but so is the potential for defeat. He will not bend, but he may be broken, and perhaps by a well-meaning educator. Makes you wanna holler—doesn't it?