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Gregory Shafer

Mott Community College, greg.shafer@mcc.edu

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Critical Pedagogy

A Tapestry of Eyes in the Literacy/Literature Class

GREG SHAFER

“So if you want to really hurt me,
talk badly about my language.”
—Gloria Anzaldua

Pecola Breedlove yearned for the bluest eyes. It was a dream that was born on the notion that with blue eyes—with some vestige of the dominant White culture—she would be worthy of the love that eluded her and the people around her. From the poverty of her family’s home, to the racism and self-loathing that pervaded her life, Pecola was certain that she was inferior, that it might be better if she simply did not exist. “Please, God,” she prayed at one point in the novel. “Please make me disappear” (45).

For those of us who teach English to students of various colors and cultures, the story of Pecola’s attempt either to disappear or don the eyes of another race, offers a chilling lesson in the values that are customarily meted out in English classes everyday. Indeed, when we tell students that their language is wrong—that it is substandard and in need of correction—we create a dichotomy that forces them to either fail in school or disappear as a cultural entity. The same, of course, is true in choosing the literature we have our students read. Is it for them, their culture and unique experiences, or is it to complete an official objective, one that will make students more “cultured” and their eyes bluer?

With blue eyes, Pecola felt worthy of love for the first time, but such a fantasy resulted in the abandonment of reality, of her life as a functioning African American. For Pecola and other characters in *The Bluest Eye*, possessing blue eyes was much like the adoption of white dolls and the deification of Shirley Temple. It constituted a denial of their lives and cultural worlds. Perhaps this was why Claudia felt such antipathy for the dolls that were given to her each year for Christmas. “I could not love it,” (21) she tells us as she examines the “Blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll that was what every girl treasured” (20). Nothing about it reminded her of her life at home, while it acted as a grating reminder of what

she could never be.

Literature and literacy pedagogy have created a cultural conundrum that is similar to the oppression in Toni Morrison’s classic novel. Throughout our history of teaching English, we have seen literature and literacy as cultural dolls that must be given to students if they ever are to be successful, civilized, literate, and smart. Literature is read so students can become cultured, meaning more like the white teachers who assign the reading. Composition is done so as to root out difference and create a uniform, academic classroom. As historian Arthur Applebee reminds us, the subject of English emerged with a clear goal of “moral and cultural development” (1)—to mold and shape students using language as its prime instrument. In reality, this was not literacy instruction but cultural inculcation, similar to what Freire bemoans when he discusses the banking system that is part of oppressive education. Banking, according to Freire, domesticates, reducing people to robots, to “receptacles” for information that will make them “things that have no purpose except those their oppressors prescribe for them” (46).

When literacy becomes a way to control and prescribe a monolithic agenda—when it does little more than give diverse students blue eyes—students often resist, which might be the first sign of a real, critical literacy. According to Signithia Fordham, African American students often engage in a kind of linguistic “guerrilla warfare,” refusing to practice the Standard White English they are expected to learn and use in school. Instead, argues Fordham, they rebel, using their home dialect and socially sanctioned ways with words to diss a system they see as irrelevant and insulting.

Thus, dissin’ the standard is at the core of the guerrilla warfare at the school and is fundamentally revealed in both the students’ refusal to discontinue their use of Ebonics as the language of communication while at or in school and their whole sale avoidance of the standard dialect in most contexts (273).

In discussing the actions at the high school she studied, Fordham reminds us that language—when it is really about

authentic communication--involves students in "maintenance of group identity within African American communities" (274). Equally important, it is part of their personal identity and vision of who they are. It is something that transcends lessons or grades, extending to the core of their individuality and sense of power. "Black identity compels them to diss the standard," adds Fordham "because it is viewed as inappropriate speech form" (274). Rather than adopt a literacy that is not part of their lives and that does not empower them in social settings, many, according to Fordham, will "lease" the standard English, return it, and lease it again during the next class session. They do not seek to own it or internalize it" (275). In short, these students offer a vivid picture of the contrast between academic inculcation and real literacy—one that is as dynamic as the people who use it.

The notion that the attainment of literacy—whether it involves reading literature or writing for an academic setting—could be used as elements of control is hardly new and can be seen in the first schools that were created for slaves. In her essay "Good Will Come of this Evil: Enslaved Teachers and the Transatlantic Politics of Black Literacy," Shevaun Watson explains how The Charles Town Negro School, started in the middle of the eighteenth century, was a conspicuous example of how literacy instruction was used as a way to teach not only reading and writing but more importantly colonization and domestication. Indeed, the school was operated by a coalition of slave owners and Christian groups who sought to civilize slaves by providing them with a literacy that taught obedience to the slave culture. This kind domestication created a facade of altruism while surreptitiously using literacy as a way to passify slaves, connecting literacy and education with an acceptance of their place as inferior beings.

What is particularly interesting however, is how the slaves frequently resisted the politically charged instruction

provided by the school. Despite the employment of Black teachers to lead the lessons, the school found that many slaves began rejecting both the lessons taught and the Black teachers who were assigned to teach them, ostracizing the black teachers and using their time to create their own space to learn reading and writing on their own terms. After a short time, the literate black teachers found themselves "ironically divested of power, respect, and place in the slave quarters" (77). Instead of finding a transformative power in literacy, many found it a place of resistance, where 'educational imperialism' was combated by slaves who wanted literacy to feel more empowered.

So what can we glean from our look at both Fordham's dissin' the system and Watson's slave revolt? First, it seems clear that literacy is, as Brian Street argues, an ideological endeavor involving people who seek to articulate ideas that transcend simply notions of correctness. Indeed, in looking at the African American students in both cases, we see participants who appreciate the power and transcendent ability of literacy to attain specific goals, to establish an identity, and to acquire very political aspirations. Literacy is never as simple as disseminating skills and teaching lessons in an ideologically free context. When it is relevant and empowering it always

transcends the notion of preparing students for the "academic world." Instead, it is an experience that enhances their place in the here and now, in their present situation with diverse groups of people.

This is the essence of authentic literacy—one that results in liberation and change for those who use it. "It is through their own language that linguistic minority students will be able to reconstruct their history and their culture," (55) writes Donaldo Macedo. It is critical to their experience.

One of the most cogent examples of how political and personal literacy can be comes in Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*. For six years, Heath studied the communities of



The Studio Mirror, Charles Martin Hardie (1898)

Trackton and Roadville in the Piedmont area of the United States. In Trackton, she found African American families that shared a vibrant literacy and in Roadville she studied primarily white people who had very vigorous and lively ways with words. What Heath found most troubling in looking at both communities was their shared isolation from the school and the notion that education was a key to their success. While both Roadville and Trackton did their share of reading and writing, engaging in ceremonial acts of literacy, neither were honored by or important to the schools, relegating both places to alienated status—one where their literacy was rejected as irrelevant.

Not surprisingly, both communities found the school to be a foreign place, one where they served a set period of time but a place where their cultures and values were not wanted. Yes, they could learn the literacy of the school, but the result would be a loss of identity, much as the slaves in Watson's study or the students who dissed the system in Fordham's research. For both Roadville and Trackton kids, literacy was essentially reduced to Freire's banking system, where lessons were monolithic and estranged from their lives. Because of the chasm dividing the school from the two communities, neither Trackton nor Roadville found personal success in their classes, often completing their high school years as estranged outsiders, people who did not matter. According to Heath:

the significance of these different patterns of language socialization for success in school soon become clear. After initial years of success, Roadville children fall behind and by junior high mostly are waiting for school's end or their sixteenth birthday. The legal age for leaving school" (349)

The same, of course, was true for Trackton children who "fell quickly into a pattern of failure, yet all about them they hear they hear they can never get ahead without a high school diploma" (349). What all of these examples provide is a portrait of the "double perspective" articulated by nineteenth century writer and activist WEB DuBois. For African Americans—and other students who do not bring an educated white language to the school setting—there is a choice to adopt the values and language of the school or to resist and remain true to one's home dialect. Much like Pecola's attempt to don blue eyes, students must choose between their own culture and what the school offers them. Of course, real literacy can never exist when students are learning simply to complete an assignment. The students of Fordham's school were never more literate as when they engaged in warfare against the imposed and hegemonic rules of the school. In the

same way, Watson's eighteenth century slaves found language to be useful as a tool against the colonization of their school.

In the end, Heath recommends that teachers and students join in becoming ethnographers, studying and using the languages and language habits of many communities, celebrating the social and forever changing qualities of literacy when it is done for authentic purposes. "At the junior and senior high levels," writes Heath in describing the more democratic linguistic changes, "teachers found they drew more and more on what the students could bring to class to teach the teachers about their reading and writing need and habits" (314).

For our students to be literate, for our students to be actively engaged as readers and writers, they must connect with the language on a cultural and personal level. They must feel ownership over it and use it to transform their world, finding self-actualization and transcendence in the process. And while this seems like a lofty and unlikely order for the hundreds of students who trudge through our doors, I have found that virtually of them have a yearning to use language to trumpet their place in a complex and increasingly social world. This is the essence of real literacy. It is not a language experience that is done to complete an assignment but to address a very social and personal need—one that brings new life to the writer who is able to do it.

In his essay "The Library Card," Richard Wright discusses the world of literacy he notices in newspapers and books, the power of the written word to effect change, and his desire to become part of the political discussions that swirl around him. With racism pervasive and no money or power, Wright knows that the only way to become engaged and empowered is through the language. "A vague hunger would come over me for books, books that opened up new avenues of feeling and seeing. . ." (40). It is such passion—passion to become part of their literate world—that pulsates through the language user when they are driven to make their ideas known. James Paul Gee has suggested that discourses are inherently ideological," (538) that they are part of an "identity kit" that imbues the language user's persona. If we invite students to practice a language that is truly emancipator, how much can be accomplished?

Again, we must return to Pecola and her endeavor to assume eyes that are not and never can be hers. It is only at the end of the novel and only after years of being reviled by the people around her that such an extraordinary step is taken. It is a logical response to a hostile world that refuses to ac-

cept her as she really is. But little is really accomplished. The novel's end leaves us with a pathetic girl who is beleaguered and besieged. Blue eyes are as improbable as her chances for happiness. She can't be White and is unable to be happy.

In short, Pecola's goal of blue eyes is as impractical as our attempt to force minority voices simply to absorb the language of the academy. While it is often deftly feigned in academic settings—and later in the professional world-- it is rarely done with any of the vigor or elegance that is captured in the honesty of genuine language. Yes, we can force students into linguistic ultimatums—and give them their dose of canonical literature-- but what is accomplished? More importantly, what is lost? Such questions become especially vexing when one moves beyond the abstract and begins to comment on student essays—when one is required to make value judgments about what language goes and what is worthy to stay. And then later, there is the question of how the experience affects these students and their vision of language. How many walk away from the English class with internal scars and anger. How many revert to the perfunctory simply to escape?

A logical solution, it seems to me is a language approach that offers reading and writing as social and ideological practices. Instead of introducing them as a static set of rules and routines, we do our writers a service by opening the classroom to the many contexts in which language is used—by embracing the ideological. This, of course, does not force us to abandon the language of the academy, but offers a lesson in the plethora of registers and stories that are part of our social discourse. It addresses the language in context and challenges students to compose papers that explore diverse communities and celebrate a manifold of voices. It imbues personal expression—replete with dialect—with importance and dignity.

The Literature Class: Teaching the Puritans

Teaching American Literature is always a daunting endeavor but bringing relevance to the Puritan experience is especially formidable. In wondering how I could introduce my class—which was thirty percent African American and seventy percent white—to this unit, I focused on Mary Rowlandson and her captivity narratives. First we would read her personal journals on her captivity among the Native American during King Philip's War and then discuss the many ways that "difference" is seen and handled in our present day world. Rowlandson's journal is rife with ethnocentric remarks about the Native Americans who kidnapped her and held her captive. As a religious woman, she sees evil in difference and

is quick to assign iniquity to those who oppose her white Christian world.

After reading and discussing her harrowing responses to the ordeal and the context in which it was written, I asked students to create their own modern day captivity story, discussing the ways they have been stereotyped and marginalized based on the prejudices of modern society. In this sense, I tried to make Rowlandson and the Puritan adventure not only an exercise in Freire's banking model--as way to make my students appreciate her seventeenth century verities—but also a way to highlight my own students' values and plights as cultural, religious, and gender minorities.

Of course, in doing their own pieces of literature, students understood that the notion of captivity was metaphorical but no less debilitating or important. They were asked to compare their dilemma with Rowlandson and share differences and similarities with the Puritan icon. Brian, a student who was often vocal about his Irish heritage and the struggles of his ancestors, wrote a fascinating story on his own journey as both an American teenager in 2017 and a third generation Irish-American. In his story, he described the pressure he felt from his grandparents to remember his Irish past and the pain he often saw in their eyes and demeanor. In what turned out to be a very provocative piece of writing, Brian discussed the "captivity" of melancholy that pervaded his ancestors—a melancholy that still haunted him today—and the burden of trying to both respect and move on from this past.

"My family will never forget the famines, the prejudice, and the way Irish Catholics were treated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries," he wrote early in his narrative. "There is a sense of it whenever I talk to my grandparents. It is part of their legacy and is as much a part of our visits as a cold wind that touches and chills one during a picnic." In writing his paper, Brian blended quotations from Rowlandson's literal captivity to the cultural captivity that continues to be a part of his life. As a sensitive student, Brian wrote that he felt he was compelled to remember and saw his plight as similar in that both he and Rowlandson were struggling to live in two different worlds. "I want to drink but I see what it has done to my great uncles, to my distant ancestors and fellow Irish people. I want to be happy but see how difficult it was for many of my ancestors. Even in the media stereotypes, I am captive to the Irish captivity that exists even today. It is like being in two worlds, just as Rowlandson was in living with the Indians." In crafting together his final draft, Brian used both standard academic English and many examples of vernacular as a way to make the paper his own, showing the

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class how diverse language can be and how liberated students can be when they are allowed to capture personal dramas in the classics they read.

Serena's Response

Serena, an African American teen in the same class wrote about the captivity of being African American, the judgments made about one's color and how difficult it is to exist as both a teen and a minority—especially one who is conscious of her hair and lighter skin color. “Rowlandson was surrounded by her sworn enemies, by people she resented, but I am surrounded by people who are my so-called friends, despite the fact that they probably wouldn't hang with me if I didn't have lighter skin and straight hair,” she wrote early in her paper.

Next, she chose to write a short story about a day in her life, the reactions from her boyfriend, and the way she saw darker skinned friends being mistreated. Perhaps what was most dramatic about Serena's piece was the way she also wrote it as a day-to-day journal piece, examining the plethora of thoughts and questions she has as she ruminates on the media's constant deification of lighter-skinned African Americans and her daily thoughts of self-worth and cultural responsibility. Day Three: “Do I tell the man at the counter that he is a twenty-first century bigot because he won't treat my darker-complected skin cousin the way he does me? Do I show my vision of racism or do I smile and pretend to be happy when I am not? This is what Rowlandson felt in the seventeenth century and Frederick Douglass felt in the nineteenth century—different captivity stories for those of us who see what others don't.”

In completing her story, Serena—like Brian and others in the class—often used non-standard English and racially abrasive terms. She used first person, cursed, and peppered her journal with African American terms. But such freedom to explore one's language and history is what makes a class about true literacy—a literacy that extends well beyond a monolithic curriculum that demands “blue eyes.” It is how students become true participants in the literacy and literature they are exploring.

In essence, what I am suggesting is that literature and literacy instruction acknowledge and respond to the notion of both ideology and cultural capital—that we make our class more democratic and inclusive by transcending the notion that all students must have blue eyes—that all students must adhere to a literacy that is more interested in inculcation than liberation. Such an issue is important in not only making our class more inclusive but in making literature and

language more socially relevant. French educator Pierre Bourdieu reminds us that students come to us with certain views and ideas about language, views and practices that are often shunned or disparaged by the school. As with the students from Trackton and Roadville, these students are asked to either change to fit the dominant culture or be relegated to second class status.

Teaching the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Few novels are more celebrated and condemned than Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. While some see it as the quintessential American classic, others view it as pure racism, especially in its use of inflammatory language and depiction of Jim as a slave. Because of this controversy, Twain's novel acts as yet another ideal place for teachers to lead a more social and dynamic approach to the language arts. I often begin by displaying some of the critical essays written for and against the novel, reflecting on the controversy it has generated and impressing on students the political nature of all language and literature. There is, for instance, Gene Wallace's excoriation of the novel as “racist trash.”

Without question, some of the most compelling language I have read has emanated from students who felt liberated to communicate a story with all of the color and culture that was inherent in their community. The conspicuous absence of trite and contrived remnants of the academic model were happily welcomed as writers found a voice in journals, informal essays, and opinion papers that provided latitude for dialect variation. In short, one can broaden the parameters of acceptance without undermining the significance of Standard English. Sometime more is more.

In the end, then, I find myself agreeing with at least a part of Lisa Delpit's argument. When she suggests that it is our duty to teach students the dialect of power, rather than limiting them to their community or home dialects, I agree and assert that we immerse them in various contexts for language use. “Teachers must acknowledge and validate students' home language without using it to limit students' potential,” she argues (553). However, as we all know, the problem has never been about neglecting the language of power and commerce but in offering time for other discourses. Pecola shouldn't need blue eyes to be happy, but it is helpful for her to be able assume that linguistic range in her life. The question, then, is not whether she should learn the language of power but how it should be done and what other voices can enhance it. Happiness and self worth should not be predicated upon the acquisition of another's discourse. Pecola should be able to love and celebrate her own eye color—just as she feels pride in her ways with words.

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Greg Shafer is a Professor of English at Mott Community
College and past president of the Michigan Council of Teach-
ers of English.