

When the Student Is Ready, the Teacher Will Appear: Teaching Black in the White Classroom

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Abstract

Problems arise when you are a Black student at a Predominately White Institution (PWI), which I always thought was par for the course and thus, simply held the mis-education of the said teacher/professor responsible. Unfortunately, those problems did not magically go away when I chose to step in front of the class; for nothing is ever really that simple. Rather, in many ways, teaching at a PWI is a greater challenge, because I no longer have the privilege to hide in that invisible space I seemed to occupy most of the time while a student on a predominately White campus. As I see the shocked faces of students entering my class for the first time, I become the elephant in the room, Ivy League degrees notwithstanding. Therefore, my article, "When the Student Is Ready, the Teacher Will Appear: Teaching Black in the White Classroom" is important, for it addresses issues that have not gone away simply because we have moved forward with a Black president. Further, it talks about the important issue of teaching Black in a White classroom, whether you want to or not.

Keywords: Black students, Black faculty, predominately White institutions, college students, college adjustments, identity, pedagogical practices, communication strategies, identity negotiation, racism, anti-racism, White privilege, institutions of higher learning, negative stereotypes, teaching.

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Teaching the Professor:

I was a junior in college and sitting in my American history class and today's lesson was on the wonders of colonialism. I sat there, only half listening, because I have heard the same story since elementary school. I could probably recite it by rote. Then it happened. The professor, whom I will call Dr. Crawford, pointed at me and said, "For example, if it weren't for colonialism, Pat would be running around the jungle with a bone in her nose, grunting and scratching herself, instead of sitting here in a college classroom." She said this smiling proudly at my accomplishment as I tried not to scratch—though all of a sudden, I felt very itchy.

I was the only Black person in the room. As numerous pairs of eyes turned to look at me—some seeming to see me for the first time, pride was not what I was feeling as I willed myself into that invisible space I seemed to occupy most of the time on this predominately White campus. The student directly to my left touched my arm and said, "Wow, is that true?" I looked intensely at my notebook, as though the answer would be there, and remained silent. My stomach sank as I felt Dr. Crawford move from her central position in the front of the classroom toward my desk. She paused, and I knew she was waiting for me to look up, but I just started taking copious notes. Finally, she said: "If Pat has done her reading, she knows that Africa was full of heathens, with no civilization to speak of—no real language, culture, religion, or traditions before the introduction of colonialism. Did you do your reading, Pat?" I nodded, head barely moving, never looking up from my notebook, and finally felt her move back to center stage. I took a deep breath and continued to stare at my notebook in shock. Not the real shock of "I cannot believe she

said *that*," but rather, that I did nothing, said nothing. Slowly I felt the eyes lose interest in me as I slipped comfortably back into my cloak of invisibility, admonishing myself: *How dare I not speak up? What was I thinking?*

I was thinking that I wanted to protect my "A" average in the class. I was thinking that I needed to fly under the radar, get in, get my grade, and get out without being seen and making a spectacle of myself. I was sick to my stomach by the time class was over and ran to my academic counselor, a Black male, and told him what had just transpired in class and asked his advice. He told me to keep my head down and protect my GPA for that was the most important thing—anything else was a mere distraction. "Don't get distracted," he commanded. I left his office, still feeling as though somewhere my ancestors were ashamed of me, and bumped into my favorite English professor, whom I will call Dr. Jacobs.

Dr. Jacobs is a Black female like me; she was almost 6 feet tall, and spoke as though she were trained for the stage, enunciating every syllable and projecting to the rafters. When she spoke, you listened. I told Dr. Jacobs about the history class; she looked me straight in the eye and said, "So." Even her "so" was delivered properly, no rolling eyes, rolling neck, just very matter-of-fact, but with power. Imagine the power behind voices like those of James Earl Jones or Charlton Heston and that was Dr. Jacobs's voice, even when she was just saying "so." Dr. Jacobs was very calm as she patiently waited for a response, which infuriated me even more. *What did she mean? After all, even though she is an English professor, she was the one who*

introduced me to African American literature as well as African American history. “You cannot understand the literature if you do not understand the history that produced it,” she was fond of saying. Consequently, Dr. Jacobs made me believe in the validity of historical criticism, so what does she mean by “so”? When I did not respond, just looked back at her, mouth agape; she took a deep breath and said, “Pat, why does what happened in that classroom bother you?”

“Are you kidding? I just told you what happened—and don’t say ‘so’ again.” It felt as if I was shouting in the hallway, my voice reverberating off of the teal-tiled walls. Moreover, I felt that my anger was now moving towards rage.

She almost laughed, but looked at my face and swallowed hard and said, “First, remember who you are mad at, I did nothing to you. And second, consider, why does what happened bother you so much? Think.”

I thought about the African American history I knew, not the blurb generally taught in schools. I thought about the African history that I knew to be true, found outside of the textbooks assigned in class. I thought about the philosopher Socrates saying that the most important thing a teacher can do is teach his students to think for themselves. Then I thought about my children and the anger left me. In almost a whine I pleaded, “I do not want someone like that mis-educating my babies. I want them to know the true American story, the good and the bad.”

She smiled at me and said, “Good, so now what? How do you guarantee that someone like yourself is in front of the

classroom and able to teach the next generation?”

And then slowly it came to me, “I will go on to graduate school and I will teach.”

She winked at me and headed for her office. But over her shoulder she challenged, “And the first lesson you need to teach and learn is what?”

I did not know what she meant, but I knew there was no point in asking her because all she would say is “think.” So I thought.

I thought about all that I had read since coming to college: Sol T. Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1913); Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958); Es’kia Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue: Growing up in a South African Ghetto* (1959); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not, Child* (1964); Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* (1973); Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* (1976); and Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* (1981), to name but a few. None of these books were read in any of my literature classes. Rather, as I exited Dr. Jacobs’s classes, she would hand me a book and say, “I cannot wait to hear your thoughts after you read this.” Even when I was no longer her student, she continued this practice, passing books to me when I passed her in the hall—in fact, to this very day I might get a nondescript manila folder in the mail with a book and a yellow post-it note stuck to its cover saying, “I cannot wait to hear your thoughts,” which never fails to bring a smile to my face.

Among this collection of autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works and historical fiction and fiction, the themes were diverse: *Mhudi*’s (1913) romantic epic is set in the first half of the

nineteenth century. Its main action is unleashed by King Mzilikazi's extermination campaign against the Barlong in 1892 at Kunana (Selagole now), and covers the resultant alliance of defeated peoples with Boer frontiersmen in a resistance movement leading to Battle Hill (Vegkop, 1836) and the showdown at the Battle of Mosega (17 January 1839). Mhudi, the eponymous heroine, is still an enduring symbol of the belief in a new day. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) explores the customs and society of the Igbo, and the influence of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on the Igbo community during the late 1880s and early 1900s. *Down Second Avenue: Growing Up in a South African Ghetto* (1959) gives a true-to-life portrayal of the Apartheid era, showing what it was like for a Black man to live under Apartheid and yet still rise amidst all odds. *Weep Not, Child* (1964) deals with the Mau Mau Uprising and the dispossession of an entire people from their ancestral land, while exploring the detrimental effects of colonialism and imperialism on Kenya. Further, it is heavily critical of British colonial rule. *A Question of Power* (1973), on the one hand, is an insider's description of the mind of a suffering, delusional person. On the other hand, it is an exploration of power relations and political-social evil. By conflating these two evils, the text demonstrates that social evil inflicted on individuals can lead literally to madness. *The Bride Price* (1976) tells the story of the clash between the traditional customs of a small Igbo village in Nigeria and the ever-encroaching influence of Africa's European colonizers, as seen through the eyes of a young girl. It is also the tale of male domination. The caste system in Nigerian culture is also explored. And *So Long a Letter* (1981) explores the condition of women in West African society. While all of these titles did not share the same genre,

they all nonetheless collectively spoke to me in one voice: Language, culture, religion, and tradition existed on the continent of Africa long before colonialism.

I thought about all of these books and more. My reading list surpassed what Dr. Jacobs would give me to read—each one of her books leading me to another. And even though some were fiction, nevertheless, they collectively discredited the “dated” material in the textbooks I was using in history class. The history of Africa is as vast and grand as the continent itself. Further, the notion that colonization was needed to “civilize” the uncivilized, was not only erroneous, but “a hangover from the days when the white man believed it was his mission to bring civilization and its values to the world” (Hamilton, 2007, pp. 33-34). In any sense of the word, civilization came to the continent of Africa centuries before colonization. Consequently, I compiled a booklist, which included the aforementioned texts, as well as *From Slavery to Freedom: a History of Negro Americans*, by historian John Hope Franklin (1980). I felt Franklin's text was important not only because it shows the origins of Black people in Africa, but also because it traverses the horrors that colonialism and imperialism brought on the people, culture, and traditions of Africa. In addition, like many of these texts, Franklin's book shows a people, in this case the African American people, rise amidst all odds.

Now what do I do with this booklist? Should I call Dr. Crawford out in class? She called me out in class. “No,” I decided. Sadly, I am not sure if my decision was based on the fact that I was embarrassed to be singled out as the only Black person in the class and consequently did not want to embarrass my professor, or if it was something else. It has been my experience

that when people are put in what they perceive to be an embarrassing or awkward situation, some feel threatened and strike. So, was it fear? Was I afraid to go in the front door, self-righteously brazen, for fear of being attacked? Or was I opting, rather, to enter through the comfortable back door, which is less confrontational and suggests on some level that I know my place? Historian and educator, Carter G. Woodson (2005) contends in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*:

If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one. (p. 55)

So, maybe I am just a product of my over-14 years of education, or as Woodson (2005) would contend, my “mis-education,” in spite of my outside readings.

Whatever the reason, I chose the back door and thus went to her office hours, with booklist in hand. She sat at her desk. Three walls of books from ceiling to floor surrounded her and her cluttered desk like a comfortable blanket. She looked up at me, over her glasses, with questions chasing each other in her steel-gray eyes. *What is wrong? She never speaks in class. She barely makes eye contact. What could she possibly want?* I saw the questions in her eyes, which she blinked excessively, as if trying to clear an apparition from her vision, brow furrowed in the attempt. After my assessment of the situation, I averted my

eyes, choosing to look over her right shoulder instead. She cleared her throat. I lost my courage and voice at the same time and laid the paper on her desk and fled. I have never told anyone about my cowardice that day, until now. I still feel the shame.

As it came time for us to have class again, I was a nervous wreck. *Would Dr. Crawford call me out again or would she just find a reason to fail me?* Dr. Crawford, however, never mentioned that slip of paper or me coming to her office. We got through the rest of the semester not speaking or even seeming to see one another. Interestingly enough, even though more Black topics came up in class—after all, it was an American history class—she never mentioned me again. I thought it was a sure sign that I had crossed the proverbial line and forgotten my place and that she would surely fail me when the time came, despite my grades. But that did not happen either. I received the grade that I earned in the class, nothing more and nothing less. And as I spent the next year applying to graduate programs and had no other classes with Dr. Crawford, I slowly forgot the incident.

I forgot it, that is, until the day I had to walk across the stage and accept awards for graduating with honors in both my majors, English and History, and noticed that standing next to Dr. Jacobs stood Dr. Crawford. Again, I almost fled. Both professors held a folder in their hands; one looked at me, while the other looked out at the audience, never making eye contact. I took a deep breath and forced myself to walk across the stage after my name was called, willing myself not to trip and fall. Dr. Jacobs handed me her folder and gave me a warm embrace, then whispered in a thick French accent, “courage,” as she pivoted me towards Dr. Crawford. My primary goal from that point on was to get off the stage as

quickly as possible. I walked up to Dr. Crawford, who handed me the folder that she was holding and shook my hand. With my eyes lowered, I mumbled, “Thank you” to her shiny black shoes, and glanced up to see her lips moving as I headed for the stage’s exit. The blood pounding in my ears was deafening, thus I was almost three steps away from her, and beginning to descend the stage’s steps when my brain registered what she had said: “Thank you.” *She said “thank you” to me. Why?* I ran to the nearest restroom. I needed to be alone.

I sat in the sitting area of the ladies restroom, trying to remember how to breathe and then opened the English folder I had been given. In it was a nicely emblazoned award acknowledging my graduating with honors in English. Now, with bats playing tag in my stomach and much trepidation, I opened the next folder. I saw the same emblazoned award, except that it acknowledged my graduating with honors in History. There was no trip wire or explosion, no trick—nevertheless, I took it out of its folder to inspect it more thoroughly. I held it up to the bathroom light, and that is when it happened. A paper fell out. It had been placed behind the award. I picked it up and turned it over. Dr. Crawford included the first page of her new syllabus, which included a new book list. She even included some from the list that I had given her. There were 14 words beautifully handwritten in cursive, in the right corner: “Pat, you have much to teach and we have much to learn, thank you.” I sat there, rocking back and forth, clutching that piece of paper to my breast, without a care for the two awards that I had just earned, thinking, *That is what Dr. Jacobs meant by “And the first lesson you need to teach and learn is what?”* I needed to teach Dr. Crawford and in doing so, I would also learn a lesson or two myself—like first, there is

power and great responsibility in teaching, and second, that I *can* teach. That I love to teach is just icing on the cake.

Teaching the Class:

In one of my earlier teaching posts, I was asked to teach an American literature survey course. Even though I considered myself an African Americanist, I was comfortable teaching the course because I was well trained in American literature and history, as well as in the politics of what it means to be an American. Although I was given a canonical list, I was also told that I could “tweek” it, which I did. I decided to be more inclusive with my definition of American literature, beyond the predominately dead, White, male writers on the list that I was given. Thus, I added some “color” to this list. For example, I had section (A) “Narrative prose—canonical voices” and section (B) “Narrative prose—multicultural voices.” In the latter section I included the likes of Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Carlos Bulosan, James Baldwin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sandra Cisneros. Within the poetry section, I had four distinct topics, all from canonical poets, which I called “Continuing American Lines,” “Major Directions in the Twentieth Century,” “Artistic Consciousness,” and “Probing the Personal.” To the canonical poetry list, I also included a fifth section, “Poetry—the Outer World,” where I added poets like Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audré Lorde, Amiri Baraka, Lucille Clifton, Michael Harper, and Rita Dove. And I balanced the canonical section of American drama by including Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson. I did not take away one iota

from how the canonical list had been taught by the previous professor, but I did *add* to it, which to me benefits everyone.

Enter the class—Monday (first class of week one). Now as a Black woman, having taught in predominately White institutions before, just like many of my Black and Brown colleagues, I understood that

I do not have the privilege of walking into a classroom and having students assume that I am a capable and credible teacher. Nor do I have the privilege of walking into a classroom and having people assume that I have earned my position through hard work and determination. I have to be deliberate in the subject matter that I teach so that others do not see me as an exception to their assumptions about who is qualified, about who has a right to be here. I also do not have the privilege of having people know that I am a well-educated person with three degrees . . . and is an expert in my discipline. (Tuitt, Hanna, Martinez, Salazar, & Griffin, 2009, p. 69)

I must explain myself; therefore, when I introduce myself, I do what I know my White colleagues do not have to do and give my students a brief rundown of my curriculum vitae, Ivy League degrees and all, in the hopes that it validates my reason for standing before them, ready to teach. And this class was no different, I introduced myself. After I mentioned my academic pedigree, however, a hand immediately shot up from the back of the room. Before I could call on him, a student whom I will call Matthew said: “I only came to this university because I didn’t get into my first-choice school. My friend, who is Black and did no work the entire time we were in high school, was offered a scholarship to my

first-choice school. I think Affirmative Action is reverse discrimination.”

As I leaned against the blackboard, I thought about my slow climb out of the projects of East-Harlem, New York, to the Ivy League campus of graduate school. With every stroke, I was swimming against the tide, exhaustion whispering to me to quit or at least rest awhile, but I knew the current would carry me away from my goals and toward a trap: enslavement to the welfare system, prison, or the cemetery. Still silent, I looked around the room at the other students, some showing signs that they were getting uncomfortable in my silence, many refusing to make eye contact. I willed them to understand that Affirmative Action may have opened the door, but it did not keep me in the seats—pure unadulterated hard work did. But still, I said nothing. If I were White, Affirmative Action would not even cross anyone’s mind. I sighed, weary to my soul, for I realized what Matthew did not see when he looked at me: a studious hard worker, a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps go-getter. He saw a slacker, someone who was handed something she did not deserve. I knew it was problematic to discuss diversity on a predominately White campus, nonetheless, without a trace of emotion, I said, “I am sorry that you did not get into your first-choice school and I am further sorry that you are here, when it sounds like you want to be elsewhere, Matthew. However, schools want and need diversity. Did you apply to a historically Black college or university? If you had, you may have been offered a ‘free ride’ while your ‘Black friend’ may have had to go to his second-choice school. It is all about diversity. By the way, getting into any college or university and staying in are two very different things.”

He looked at me incredulously and said, “I wanted a ‘regular’ education so why would I apply to any of *those* schools. Besides, it would be weird to be the only ‘regular’ person in the class.”

Welcome to my world, I thought as I moved on to my lesson plan and passed around the syllabus. After giving them time to read it over, I asked if there were any questions.

Matthew raised his hand again. “I thought this was American literature.”

“It is,” I responded emphatically.

“But why are there all these other people on here? We should just be reading things by ‘regular’ Americans,” he spat.

I said, far more calmly than I felt, “I do not understand? Every author—”

He burst in, “Of course you don’t understand. *You* are not a regular American, so how could you?”

And here we go again I thought— *I get so tired of taking class time to teach this lesson. Why can’t it be like the telephone game, you tell one class and then all the subsequent classes already know it? Do White teachers who teach from a diverse list of literature also have to defend why they chose the authors they chose? And what does “regular American” mean anyway?* Then it hit me, I can get mad and no one learns, or this can be a teachable moment.

I put the syllabus and the day’s lesson aside. I casually leaned against the podium; adjusted the navy, three-quarter-length jacket that I was wearing; clicked the heel of my right, black, cowboy boot and watched its peace symbol bootstrap fall into

place; and then said: “How many of you are Americans?” A sea of White faces stared back at me. All hands quickly shot up in the air. *Not only were they Americans, but they were proud Americans.* I smiled. I walked over to a wall of three chalkboards and at the top, in the center, I wrote the word, “A-M-E-R-I-C-A-N.” I turned back to the class and asked, “Does anyone know what it means to be an American?” All hands eagerly shot up again, *good*, I thought. Then I said, “For the purpose of this class, we are going to create a working definition for this term, okay? Once we collectively agree on the definition, we will use it during this class, agreed?” My request was met by eager nods and a few smirks.

“I will write ALL of your responses on the board. So let’s begin. What does it mean to be an American?” I asked, very curious as to what they would come up with, and began to fill every space on all three boards with things like: “Your family must have been here for at least five generations,” “You must be a Christian,” “You must be straight,” “You must own land,” “You must have a job,” “You must not be on Welfare,” “You must have a United States passport,” “You must have at least four generations of United States veterans in your family and English must be your family’s first language”—to name but a few. Remember, three chalkboards were completely filled.

By the time the boards were filled, students were talking amongst themselves, very satisfied in what they had done. You would think they had done what politicians have failed to do since the signing of the Declaration of Independence—define to whom “We the People” referred and, more importantly, to whom it did not. I stepped into the classroom so that I could really see the board, and after briefly wishing I had a camera to capture this truly Kodak moment,

I turned to the class and asked, “How many of you agree with this definition of American?” Hands shot up quickly, Matthew was even patting other students on the back, and I saw a few high-fives. I smiled, walked back to the front of the class, and slowly looking around the room said, “By this definition, how many of you are *still* Americans?”

This time only 70 percent of the class raised their hands. I asked the 30 percent, who by the class’s definition could no longer claim an American identity, if they were fine with their new-found status, and they said “yes.” The “at least five generations” rule was generally the problem. “Fine,” I said, “Then, first, acknowledging that beyond the doors of this classroom, there might be another definition for American, like, for example, ‘you only need to be native to America,’ for the purpose of this class—and this class only—do you want *this*,” as I gestured to all three boards, “to be the working definition for American?” They agreed in unison. I nodded, and walked over to the board and wrote “70 percent of the class,” under the word *American*. The class cheered, even the 30 percent who, by the definition on the board, were now non-Americans. When the uproar died down a bit, under the “70 percent” I wrote my name, “Dr. Hopkins” and slowly turned to face the class. The classroom was dead silent for 14 full seconds. There was just the big, black, second hand on the classroom clock ticking off . . . *one, two, three, four*, as the silence deepened . . . *seven, eight, nine, ten* . . . I did not even breathe . . . *thirteen, fourteen*.

On the fifteenth click of the black second hand on the round clock facing my lectern, pandemonium broke out: “Wait!” said Matthew, “What are you doing? *You* can’t do that!”

“Why?” I innocently asked. “I meet all the qualifications on these boards, so why aren’t I an American?” I challenged. Dead silence again, as the clock ticked off, *one, two* . . . but that was okay, for I saw the wheels were turning, some of them were actually thinking this thought for the first time in their lives, *nine, ten*. . . . Matthew’s mumblings temporarily broke the silence. Matthew would not look at me as he continued to mumble to himself. Rather, with head hung, nose just a few inches from his notebook, he began to take copious notes. *I know that trick*, I thought. I invented it. I have the patience of Job. I can wait. I am not afraid of silence in the classroom. I looked up at the clock as the second hand tapped out *thirteen, fourteen*. Finally I saw a hand slowly being raised out of the corner of my eye.

I turned to face a girl in the front row, whom I will call Allison. First Allison looked at Matthew in the back, still mumbling to his desk top and ferociously scribbling in his notebook, then at me and said, “Dr. Hopkins. . . ugh, you are not, you know?”

“I am not what? Skinny? Short? What?” I said, a little too impatiently, but I was weary of this game, I wanted someone to say it to my face.

“You are not White,” Allison said, almost apologetically.

I wondered, *is she sorry that I am Black or sorry that I am not White? Regardless, there it was*. I sighed, then pointed to the board and challenged, “Where does it say you have to be White anywhere on this board?” Dead silence for the third time, just that clock keeping time, *one, two, three, four, five* . . . *White privilege exists to such an extent that Whiteness goes without*

saying. *It is a given*, I thought. *Six, seven, eight, nine . . .* Matthew started a nervous clicking of his pen—opened, closed, opened, closed—his thumb was working overtime, the knuckles grasping the pen were white with tension. Yes, Matthew was obviously bothered by my name being on the board. He kept looking up at it and looking away, *click pen open, click pen closed*, but he could not figure out how to get my name off the board.

A battle was raging in me as I stared at the blackboard and struggled with the class's contention that I was unable to claim an American identity. I, who could easily trace my African American blood line on my maternal grandmother's and paternal grandfather's sides to Charlotte, North Carolina, from this very day to two generations before the "War," which is how my family always referred to the Civil War. And while my maternal grandfather's family immigrated to America, some after fleeing and others after enduring the Holocaust, my paternal grandmother was a member of the North Carolina Cherokee nation. I wanted to scream, "I AM AMERICAN!" But I did not. Rather, I sighed to my soul and decided to teach, not preach. I did not want to antagonize them further on this point. I had asked them what they thought "American" meant and they told me. Before they could challenge their collective definition, they must learn to think differently: both critically and analytically. To that end, I decided to further trouble the water and asked, "How many of you have Native American origins?"

Matthew, glad to have an opportunity to let out some of his frustration over my name almost touching the word *American*, said, "We told you, we are all 'regular' Americans, or at least most of us,"

he said, as he looked at the traitorous 30 percent.

Ignoring the tone of his outburst, I said, "Unless you are of Native American origins, it means your family came here from someplace else and I need you to find out where your ancestors came from." That assignment did not sit well with the students and even some of their parents. For example, Matthew's parents sent me an e-mail accusing me of telling their son that he was not an American, which, of course, was untrue. *I did wonder if Matthew's parents would feel as outraged if they knew that their son told me that I was not an American.* Probably not, and since I do not teach in lower grades, I do not have to answer to parents, and so moved forward with what I thought to be an important lesson on American identity.

On Wednesday, (second class of week one), no one had done the assignment. They said things like, "Well, did my mom contact you?" To which I replied, "You are all over 18; therefore, legally I cannot talk to parents about your progress in my course, due to privacy regulations." I love that FERPA rule! I then proceeded to share my beliefs on why I thought the assignment was important to an American literature class.

"I am, because my ancestors were. You guys have guessed it—I am a descendant of people who endured the trans-Atlantic slave passage. What may be less obvious, however, is that my ancestors also endured the Trail of Tears *and* the Holocaust. Class, Ubuntu is a Bantu philosophy, which states 'I am who I am because of who we *all* are.' As a result, I made it my business to collect all of the familial stories I could—always asking the pertinent questions. Remembering and passing on our ancestral stories, whether

their origins entailed immigration, forced immigration, or forced relocation, it is the story of America. And had my ancestors not endured, I would not be here. And by extension, my children would not be here. But they did live through what my mother calls ‘their trials and tribulations’; consequently, my life is the gift of their endurance. Again, Ubuntu: ‘I am because we are.’ I honor them by the way I treat that gift—my life. In addition, I honor them by remembering them and passing on their stories, which keeps their legacy alive and makes sure we learn the whole American story, the good and the bad.”

In addition, I added: “Sankofa is an Akan philosophy, which loosely translated means ‘that in order to move forward, you must look back.’ Therefore, your ancestral stories are important and you owe your ancestors to listen and pass them on; further, by living my life honorably, I also give thanks to them for enduring their trials and tribulations. You are here now, because your ancestors were then. Honor them, first, by remembering them and, second, by respecting the gift they gave you—your ancestral lifeline.” I gave them the assignment again, telling them to talk to grandparents, great-uncles, great-aunts, and collect their stories as gifts they would someday pass on to their own children.

On Friday, (third and final class of week one), students came in very animated. They had done the assignment. Ninety percent of the class was of Scotch-Irish descent. They were exchanging stories of immigration and retelling stories of courageous relatives whose very decisions “way back when” meant that they could sit in this classroom living the American dream, paid for on the backs of their ancestors.

Since the first two sections of our American literature class were called Narrative Prose—Storytellers, which would take us to week six in the course, I asked the class to complete a family history assignment and tell that story, the ancestral story that led to their lifeline. I reminded them that their families’ narratives were only one perspective or point of view on history, like psychiatrist and human rights activist Thomas Szasz’s perspective on how history would be changed if Native Americans had not been called Indians. Szasz asserts:

Had the white settlers in North America called the natives “Americans” instead of “Indians,” the early Americans could not have said that the “only good Indian is a dead Indian” and could not have deprived them so easily of their lands and liberty and lives. Robbing people of their proper names is often the first step in robbing them of their property, liberty, and life (2012, June 29).

The assignment, which they had five weeks to complete, was in two parts as follows:

We the People — Assignment

Part One: The Interview:

Try to cover as many of the questions as possible and do so as thoroughly as you can, while discovering the following:

- Have you always been of the same social class? What is it (working class, middle class, business owners, or aristocracy)?
- Have your fortunes improved or worsened?
- If you are able to trace back to when your family immigrated to America,

explain why and when they did so. What were the “push factors”—the reasons why they left their original home—and what were the “pull factors”—the reasons why they chose to come to America? These will involve research into conditions in the country of origin at the time of emigration and conditions in America at the time of arrival. Pay particular attention to important local, national, or world affairs happening at the time. Did these affect the decision to move?

- Why did they come? Were they sponsored?
- How did they get here? Did they all come together?
- What language did they speak when they arrived? Did they learn English? When?
- Where has your family lived in the United States? Where did they first come to?
- Why and when did they come to Virginia?
- How have attitudes toward the old country and America changed from generation to generation?
- If you still have contact with relatives in the “old country,” note how your family members’ lives here are similar to or different from family members there.
- What traditions does your family still practice that can be linked to your immigration history? (Food, religion, music, gatherings, etc.)
- Are you glad that your family made this move? Why or why not?

Part Two: The Personal Narrative:

This assignment is important because it will require that you talk to your elders, particularly the oldest members of your

family. All too often we do not seek this information until it is too late. This is how family histories die. The next step in this process will be to turn the information you have gathered into a story, a story that reflects your roots in America. The story will be written in the first person as if it were a memoir, based on the information you have collected. You will take on the voice of an immigrant in your family’s history, and describe the experience, referencing the information from the interview(s) you conducted. This assignment is a creative one, and you will round out your personal interviews with a little bit of outside research, so you will be able to capture the right mood (say you learn your ancestors immigrated from a certain county in Ireland, you might go online to get a sense of what that place is like). The narrative should be approximately 1,000 words, and should include description and detail. Your goal is to personalize this story—use the facts and information you have learned to help others appreciate the story. Be sure to keep this assignment and build your family knowledge through it.

Conclusion:

There is a saying that “you cannot teach an old dog new tricks.” Well, my undergraduate history professor, Dr. Crawford, learned the lesson of inclusion and not stereotyping, and in addition, I hope she learned the problems that can arise when you single one student out and then make him or her speak for the group. In learning, she taught me that she was open to new ideas—even if those ideas challenged her core philosophy. After all, she was a product of her education, or *mis-education*, as Woodson (2005) might say, but also smart enough to want to do something about it.

As for my American literature class—well, young people may be harder “to teach new tricks,” for two reasons. One, I think it is because they are not as sure of the world, they only have this little piece of ground to stand on and if they give up that piece they think they may fall, or worse, lose a piece of themselves. Two, I realized that students may feel that the weight of all the injustice of history is being loaded onto their shoulders. At the end of the semester, as a student whom I will call Cassidy was asking me what I was teaching next, I took the opportunity to ask her about her initial steadfast resistance to what I planned to teach on that first day of class. Cassidy’s response was eye-opening. She said laughingly, “I thought it was going to be another ‘blame the Whites’ class. Boy did you prove me wrong.” I sat with her comment for a long time, not appreciating the positive, only hearing the negative. That anyone could take what I said in a lecture and turn it around to suggest that I blamed anyone for anything, I found troubling. With this thought, I felt that proverbial hoop I must jump through in order to teach my class raised another inch. *Students may be resistant to me and what I teach because they feel that I am blaming them.* Imagine blaming a teenager for centuries of history—*incredible!* Nevertheless, I believe the greatest gift that I can give my students is to get them to a place where they think for themselves. To achieve that goal, I have to get them to stop regurgitating 12 years of spoon-fed facts and start thinking about what that knowledge *means*.

How does this apply to the American literature class? As far as the students in the aforementioned course, at least 60 percent, including Allison and Cassidy would follow me until they graduated, whether it was a class on African American literature, the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights and the

Black Power Movement, Black Science Fiction, Black Poetics, Black Literature, film, or multicultural literature—they were hungry for this diverse perspective. And watching them take a racial issue in a text and apply it to social issues today always brings a tear to my eyes, for I know that means they are thinking for themselves and seeing beyond skin color.

The problem was never really the color of my skin. That was a red herring; what needs to be addressed, challenged, eradicated, is the historical dogma that propagates the view that my skin color is evil. Nonetheless, for some, the challenge in that American literature class was too insurmountable. Matthew chose to drop the class at the end of the second week. I often wonder where his “We the People” project may have taken him. Occasionally our paths have crossed on campus, but his dead eyes look through me. A stanza from Maya Angelou’s (1971) “When I Think About Myself,” comes to mind: “Sixty years in these folks’ world / The child I works for call me girl (p. 26, lines 8-9).” I think, *Not only does Matthew not see me when our paths cross on campus, he does not have to see me. Like in the Angelou poem, White privilege suggests it is I who must see him.* “I say ‘Yes ma’am’ for working sake. / Too proud to bend / Too poor to break / I laugh until my stomach aches / when I think about myself” (p. 26, lines 10-14).

Even though I wish I had the privilege of just teaching what I was assigned to teach and not having to go into history or spend so much energy to get students to see that I am a human being who worked hard for her piece of the American Dream, which no one *gave* to me. I earned it. If they could just see beyond the package that I am wrapped in and understand that in all the important ways I am no different than

they are; well, they might see a phenomenal professor, who not only knows her craft, but is still excited about teaching it. For it has never been about the “blame Whites” game, but rather, the “fill in the blanks” game. I think of the American story as a patchwork quilt, with all its diverse colors and stories. When I hold that quilt up, however, I see gaping holes—missing people, missing stories, missing voices. I want my students to leave my class with the image of an intact quilt (at least more intact than when they entered my class).

Then I think about Matthew and wonder how I could have held onto him. What should I do differently next time? I am just not sure. The one thing I am assured of, however, is that there will be a next time. Nevertheless, I wish I could have reached him. I wish I was able to teach him. But teach him what? Maybe, teach him to *see* me. Yeah, that’s it. Well, when the student is ready ... I will be there.

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