

**ACTIVATING IMAGINATION FOR SOCIETAL CHANGE: SPECULATIVE REALIST  
LITERATURE IN THE SECONDARY CLASSROOM**

by

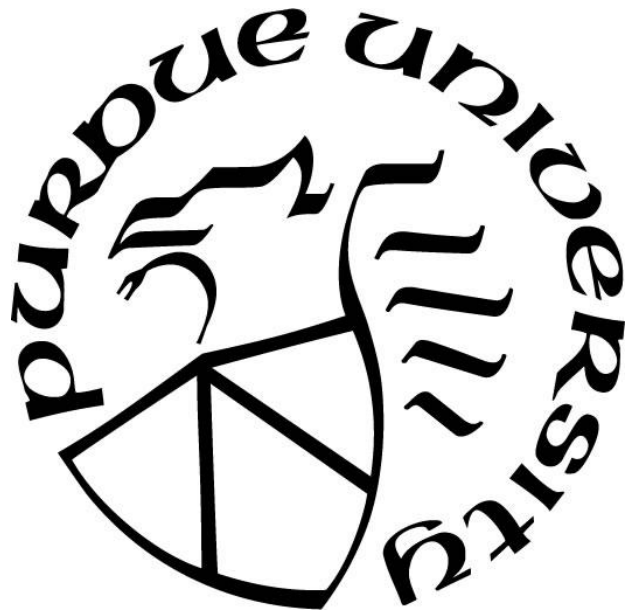
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## ABSTRACT

Speculative realism/historical fantasy are labels coined by Stanford University's Ramon Saldivar. Saldivar describes this genre as "a way of documenting things that have happened, or could happen" (the realist component), but warping realism into science fiction and fantasy, blending and bending the genres (Dickason). In his 2013 article "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," Ramon Saldivar brings an interesting perspective to how a new generation of authors have taken this genre and exposed utopia as fraud. He argues that as many writers (often members of minorities) seek to challenge the status quo and explore new territories with their prose, a new genre has been born from the utopian and dystopian schools- the genre he coins "speculative realism." Implicit in his labelling of a new genre is the assumption that existing genres (created and nurtured by the dominant groups in society) are inadequate vehicles for the sort of work these authors seek to do, and in order to make their unique contributions, they have had to become pioneers in the field. Specifically, these authors have focused on utopian and dystopian worlds and have exposed the ruling class ideology hidden in the resolution. This new genre provides perfect material from which to draw texts that encourage students to grapple with the difficult concepts of how society should be organized, and what means might be required to achieve it.

This project was developed with high school pedagogical practice in the forefront, therefore texts are chosen based on genre, grade level/interest, and thematic/ideological content. Within each group, the texts are chosen to highlight the deliberate indoctrination present within the current curriculum, and through comparison demonstrate how substituting speculative realist and historical fantasy for dystopian and historical fiction novels both educates and empowers students. In the dystopian genre, the commonly taught *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding is compared and contrasted with Octavia Butler's *Earthseed* series. To explore novels based on history, *The Invention of Wings* by Sue Monk Kidd is contrasted with the historical fantasy *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **The power of a story: the creation of race**

The stories we tell matter. The tide of history turned with the sale of a story.

*The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* by Gomes Eanes de Zurara “begins the recorded history of anti-Black racist ideas” (Kendi *Stamped*, 23). Zurara was a commander in Portuguese Prince Henry’s Military Order of Christ, and he was commissioned to write Prince Henry’s biography. Prince Henry’s fortune became increasingly dependent upon African slave trade as Western Europeans began building forts against slave raiders, thus causing the Slavic slave market to plummet. Because Portugal’s competitors hadn’t abandoned enslaving Europeans altogether, Zurara had a unique opportunity to justify, if not glorify, the slave trading work of his boss. The story Zurara told was created, and would continue to be used, in order to justify the enslavement of those with dark skin (Kendi *Stamped*, 25-30).

Zurara was able to distinguish slave trading of Africans (instead of Western Europeans) as missionary work, theologically rationalizing the enslavement as “providence” (Anderson 322). By equating skin color differences with inferior/superior qualities in his writing, “Africans are represented in order to be subjugated; because of this, their visible difference becomes as important as their cultural and religious alterity. And as long as their cultural difference becomes inextricably associated with their skin color, hair texture, and facial features, it is possible to recognize racialization and racism as part of those depictions” (Fuentes 20). What makes Zurara’s book the pioneer of racist ideas was that he wasn’t simply chronicling the variety of human physical appearance; he was using that “difference as a weapon against its victim to the advantage of the victimizer” (Memmi 51).

Zurara’s story of race may be the best selling, most influential story of all time. Not only was he able to create race, and as a result racism, with his pen, but he was able to disguise the monstrous profit-seeking machine as humanitarian missionary work. Other profiteers would gladly borrow a page from his book to secure their own fortunes: “slave traders and explorers circulated the racist ideas in Zurara’s book faster and farther than the text itself had reached” (Kendi, *Stamped*, 25).

Unfortunately, scholarship running counter to the narrative hasn't been circulated in equal measure. After generations of being told the same story, people begin to accept it as "truth": "Americans believe in the reality of race as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world...In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men" (Coates 7). Two histories contribute important missing factors to the understanding of race, *The Shaping of Black America* by Lerone Bennett, Jr and *The White Use of Blacks in America* by Dan Lacy. Bennet makes clear that contrary to the aggressively sold and popular accepted narrative, race and slavery weren't always linked (62). More importantly, Black and White bondsmen constituted a large portion of the colonial population, and "occupied the same economic category and were treated with equal contempt" (62). The relationship between Black and White workers is poignantly described as follows: "Curiously unconcerned with their color, these people worked together and relaxed together. They had essentially the same interests, the same aspirations, and the same grievances" (62). When the American colonies first formed, chattel slavery, as it came to exist in the United States was not yet institutionalized. Directly related to the absence of chattel slavery, racism as we know it today, also did not exist (Lacy 33). Stated plainly, the dehumanization of Black men and women as a group, assuaged the consciences of men and women who, before slavery, hadn't the economic incentive to group them racially, or oppress them on the basis of race (33). A more contemporary piece of race scholarship, *The New Jim Crow*, arrives at the same conclusion: race in America was created specifically to spread racism and divide workers in order to keep the elite in power (Alexander 24).

The expansion of the cotton industry and the insatiable hunger for profit in the United States presented plantation owners with two major problems: labor and land. The problem of land was resolved by the brutal genocide of Native Americans and relentless expansion Westward. The problem of labor was resolved by the institution of chattel slavery. Unbeknownst to the architects of the new system of slavery, with their solution to the labor issue, they created another problem. Many of the poor White servants with whom Black slaves had worked would not willingly go along with such a brutal institution. In 1676, White indentured servants and African slaves united to Bacon's rebellion against the Virginia elite. The plantation elite became worried (Alexander 43). Lacy offers an institutional and economic explanation for



the creation of racism: “the more sensitive the white conscience to the evils of slavery, the more it was driven to find its justification in the denial of human rights to the blacks as a race” (33). This problem was solved more creatively than the genocide of Native Americans, but with equally cruel and devastating impact.

Young America’s ruling class were both plantation owners and academics. German printer Valentin Fernandes published an abridged version of Zurara’s book that had made its way to America, bringing racist ideas into the U.S (Kendi 25). The coupling of production of knowledge and pursuit of profit made for a strong propaganda machine (Wilder 11). The elite, armed with the advantage of positions of respect in academia, followed Zurara’s lead and promoted the story of racial difference (Bennett 61). Upon this racist fiction, our country was built, our institutions were formed, and American culture developed (Alexander 32). Lives have been lost and fortunes have been made because of this story, and variations of the story. Children are taught different versions of this story in school, depending on the interests of the ruling class of the time, but they aren’t ever told the truth. The entire way society is organized would change if the truth was known and accepted, and those in power will both kill and die before they let that happen.

What if the story changed? What if the curtain were pulled the terrible fiction revealed? What if people realized that even the progressive stories like white privilege serve to obscure the racial bribe and the origin of the tale? What would the future be if teachers began telling their students a different set of stories?

### **Statement of purpose**

This project aims to demonstrate that the stories and histories told by a society reveal not only the core interests of the dominant class, but also the major antagonisms/threats to established power structures. The story of race was pushed so aggressively in the United States because of the functions it served: 1) to stop White and Black workers from uniting against the plantation elite and 2) to justify and maintain slavery. Had workers successfully united and rebelled against the systems of indentured servitude and slavery, the bosses’ fortunes would have been lost. Consideration of the story of race through this lens of interest and threat reveals the dangers of multiracial unity among workers and the critical role racism plays in maintaining systems of power profit.

Recognizing the role of stories/histories creates the opportunity to use stories to subvert the dominant narrative and imagine new futures. This project will explore the potential of Speculative Realist literature, when taught by Marxist teachers, in creating societal transformation.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

The pedagogical commentary in the chapters that follow borrows from several traditions. The selection of texts to be discussed in the following sections is a focused on counter stories to “open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live” (Solorzano 475). Counter-storytelling is a major tenet of Critical Race Theory. Another major premise of Critical Race Theory is that race and racism are endemic and permanent (472). The pedagogy reflected in chapters two and three diverge from this premise in a subtle, but important way. The pedagogical premise present in the discussion that follows is that race and racism are endemic and permanent *under capitalism*; therefore, one cannot be antiracist without being anti-capitalist. This distinction becomes especially important when claiming a Marxist/revolutionary approach to critical pedagogy. As critical pedagogy has become more widely accepted, it has also evolved to take on a variety of meanings: “For example, critical pedagogy could be reformist in that it ends up being used to maintain the status quo, even assisting in making capitalism more palatable (i.e. social justice rhetoric being applied to business practices). It can also be non-reformist by attempting to challenge the system, but by leaving it intact all the same (such as a social justice charter school). By itself, critical pedagogy is no longer sufficient to fight against the neoliberal onslaught, just as abstract notions of democracy are no longer capable of assuring human rights” (Foley, et al. 135).

Marxist/revolutionary critical teachers commit to not only helping students understand and recognize the oppressive and exploitative nature of capitalism, but also aim to inspire “a resolve to transform” the system of political economy “that produce the grotesque economic inequalities, military violence, environmental destruction, and concomitant human suffering and hardship in the U.S. and world” (134-135). The revolutionary Marxist critical pedagogy applied in discussion of the following texts, directly addresses the questions “What would the world look like if capitalism were overthrown?” and “What would it take to get from here to there?”

Speculative realism/historical fantasy are labels coined by Stanford University's Ramon Saldivar. Saldivar describes this genre as "a way of documenting things that have happened, or could happen" (the realist component), but warping realism into science fiction and fantasy, blending and bending the genres (Dickason). The genius of this new genre is "that fantasy does not distract us from reality; it makes us understand reality better" (Dickason). This new genre provides perfect material from which to draw texts that ask the questions posed above in order to encourage students to grapple with the difficult concepts of how society should be organized, and what means might be required to achieve it.

The literary analysis that follows is also Marxist in approach, but seeks, in particular, to unpack and analyze issues of ideology and systems of political economy present in the novels at a high school level for application in the secondary classroom.

## **Methodology**

In order to "test" speculative realist/historical fantasy literature's potential in a classroom, texts were selected that closely aligned to texts currently taught in grades 9-12. The subsequent discussion is organized with high school pedagogical practice in the forefront, therefore texts are chosen based on genre, grade level/interest, and thematic/ideological content. Within each group, the texts are chosen to highlight the deliberate indoctrination present within the current curriculum, and through comparison demonstrate how substituting speculative realist and historical fantasy for dystopian and historical fiction novels both educates and empowers students. In the dystopian genre, the commonly taught *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding is compared and contrasted with Octavia Butler's *Earthseed* series. To explore novels based on history, *The Invention of Wings* by Sue Monk Kidd is contrasted with the historical fantasy *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead.

## **Outline**

Chapter Two begins with an exploration of fiction and its functions beyond entertainment, leading to a more in-depth discussion of Speculative Realism and Historical Fantasy, briefly described above. It then begins analysis of *Lord of the Flies* and the *Earthseed* novels, focusing on human nature, leadership, violence, and revolution. Each of the resolutions are discussed in the capacity for revolutionary optimism, or what Henry Giroux labels "educated

hope” -- “a commitment to keep open avenues of dialogue and debate necessary for enlivening and building new social relations, values, aspirations, and identities grounded in conditions of substantive equality and ongoing collective struggle” (Foley et al 133). Because the study focuses on Marxist revolutionary delivery, more time is spent in discussion of violence and revolution as a means for societal transformation than on other sections. Resisting reformism and insisting on using learning to guide activism requires careful and principled consideration of modes for change--including revolution-- so as to avoid dead end strategies, which will likely result in cynicism, or dangerous adventurism, which comes with grave consequences as well.

Chapter Three begins by exploring the problem of how history is commonly taught and received by students in public education, with special focus on slavery. It then begins a characterization study of each novel. In *The Invention of Wings*, the archetypes of Magical Negro and White Savior are explored. To contrast the racist characterizations, present in Kidd’s novel, Cora’s development as “human” in *The Underground Railroad* is described. Analysis of the White characters in Whitehead’s novel is based on the White Savior archetype, and also “The Assimilationist” and “The Anti-racist” as defined by Ibram Kendi. Kendi defines the assimilationist as “one who is expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or biologically inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group” (Kendi 24). The anti-racist is defined as “one who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequality” (Kendi 24). Finally, the issue of genre is explored in order to illuminate the limitations of conventional genres and the possibility of speculative realism to create and maintain revolutionary optimism.

## CHAPTER TWO

We read and tell stories to understand the world, and perhaps also to change it.

Fiction is uniquely qualified to serve as an impetus for societal change because its truths aren't bound to mere descriptions of physical structure or scientific fact. Enjoying fiction requires the suspension of disbelief, and therefore allows the reader to examine different worlds and world views without obviously threatening their station in life or their long held heroes. By granting readers an arm's length of distance, fiction can avoid the typical defensiveness that frequently accompanies discussion of difficult topics. Research has found that fiction triggers readers' empathy, often making a "life changing" impact on the reader (Mar et al 695). It stands to reason, therefore, that literature might be the perfect tool with which to encourage consideration of alternative viewpoints. Additionally, removing subjects from their typical environment allows readers to re-examine objects and issues that are taken for granted when at home.

A powerful American pop culture example of applying this sort of new perspective to literature is the iconic scene from *Dead Poet's Society* where Mr. Keating, an unconventional teacher new to a private school, invites his students to stand on a desk and take a new look at their classroom. As the boys take turns standing on their desk, he offers the advice: "Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way. Even though it may seem silly or wrong, you must try! Now, when you read, don't just consider what the author thinks. Consider what you think." An academic lesson of the same sort is Heidegger's tool analysis. He offers a similar lesson about how one views the world, and where one's attention is directed. A person using a hammer to build hardly notices the hammer while it's performing as expected. If the hammer breaks, it then becomes the object of attention. This example can be applied to most entities upon which we rely; we take them for granted and do not notice them until they break. When they break, we are acutely aware of the weaknesses, the shortcomings in structure, perhaps even how they can be improved. Coincidentally, Heidegger isn't the only scholar who has used the hammer as a metaphor when discussing reality and our relationship to it. Brecht has famously rejected art as a mirror of reality, arguing instead art functions as a hammer which can shape reality. Fiction has the wonderful ability to break one's illusions about long standing

institutions, economic systems, and even world views and then challenge us to ask the difficult question “what can make it better?”.

One would be hard pressed to find a more opportune time to encourage that sort of questioning. As it stands, youth are already disillusioned with current socioeconomic systems, as evidenced by the recent Harvard IOP Poll. Less than half of America’s 18-29 year olds support capitalism (GFK). When House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) was asked by a college student to respond to the results, her response --“We’re capitalists, that’s just the way it is” -- confirmed Frederic Jameson’s shocking assertion that it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism (Raskin). The search for something better, and the illusion of systems and institutions as immutable, places youth in a critical juncture-- a moment in history for deep reflection and evaluation. Capitalist institutions and ideals are deeply embedded and continue to shape American society. The institutions are staunchly defended as right and permanent by the country’s leaders. If youth are disillusioned and dissatisfied with the political and economic systems in place but cannot imagine an alternative, what happens? Do “we just shrug our shoulders and say, well, that’s the way things are. That’s the way things always have been” (Butler 358).

Perhaps it’s no coincidence American pop culture has seen an abundance of utopian novels and movies targeting young audiences in recent years. Rather than surrender to cynicism, one can escape into the world of fantasy and imagine a time and place-- a “One day” where many of the problems of today’s world cease to exist. In his 2013 article “The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative,” Ramon Saldivar brings an interesting perspective to how a new generation of authors have taken this genre and exposed utopia as fraud. He argues that as many writers (often members of minorities) seek to challenge the status quo and explore new territories with their prose, a new genre has been born from the utopian and dystopian schools- the genre he coins “speculative realism.” Implicit in his labelling of a new genre is the assumption that existing genres (created and nurtured by the dominant groups in society) are inadequate vehicles for the sort of work these authors seek to do, and in order to make their unique contributions, they have had to become pioneers in the field. Specifically, these authors have focused on utopian and dystopian worlds and have exposed the ruling class ideology hidden in the resolution.

Ironically, most utopian and dystopian novels to date resolve by ridding society of injustice while also restoring the very institutions that perpetuate the same injustice. For example, in *The Giver*, it is suggested that Jonas' happy ending is a return to a modern world similar to today's. The *Hunger Games* series ends with the rebels being not that different from Snow, and Katniss fighting both sides. Her "happy ending" is having ended the games, and living in a pre-games society with her husband and children-- again, a society not unlike today's. Perhaps an even clearer example is *The Wizard of Oz*. In the beginning of the story, Dorothy is frustrated because and bored because as a young person/female/poor farmer the world doesn't offer much by way of possibility, and no one takes her seriously. In Oz, life is full of excitement; she is a leader; there doesn't seem to be class distinction-- and yet the audience is supposed to believe "there's no place like home" (Baum 45). Authors of speculative realism understand that the very reinstatement of "order" as created by institutions like our own necessitates the reappearance of racism, sexism, etc. These authors caution the reader to beware of utopia's false promises and dystopia's lack of resolution. Equality, justice and peace cannot exist without the destruction of the very structures of society.

The beauty of this new genre is that it invites and challenges the reader to understand the "historical contradictions in the justification of racial injustice, discrimination, and oppression" and imagine "new political destinies" for historically oppressed groups (Saldivar 14). Just as the user isn't actively paying attention to Heidegger's hammer until it breaks, many--while aware of institutions in a generic sense--don't seek to know the essence of political and economic systems; they are taken for granted. American capitalist norms and structures are accepted as "givens" p. Many in the American public haven't taken time to examine the hammer (system of political economy) and recognize its actual function (exploitation) because these institutions and systems exist in an ideological blind spot that has been carefully constructed and maintained by American culture and education. Others who recognize the hammer for what it is may be overtaken by cynicism and believe systems and structures to be permanent and invincible. By illuminating how "broken" the institution as a tool is, highlighting how these tools weren't ever created to work for working class people of color, and offering other possibilities-- speculative realists function to decolonize the imagination and encourage readers to do the impossible- imagine a world outside of Western democratic capitalism.

Part of the genius of this genre is that the authors recognize the draw to utopian literature and use many of the conventions to deliver a very different message. Many readers are troubled by the current state of the world, and are intrigued by the possibility of a time in the future where people of all races and classes and orientations can coexist happily. People like to imagine a just world where people enjoy freedom and equality. These authors have attracted the reader of such fiction and have carried them to a more honest end. Hope for a utopia that maintains current systems and institutions is not only impossible, but a dangerous illusion that prevents real change.

Speculative realist literature, when taught to high school students, can be a powerful resource for the Marxist/revolutionary educator who teaches for societal change. Scholars agree, teacher's choice in content makes a difference: "When we read aloud a novel, assign a poem, pass out an essay, and crack open the text books, we are implicitly saying that these texts are the most essential for students to read. They are the best texts for their education" (Wolk 13). Teachers have a duty, therefore, not to blindly accept required reading lists whose ideology works actively against the best interest of students. The ruling class has saturated curriculum with ideology that serves the elite at the expense of the working class. Carefully selected literature can be used "to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficit society, on the streets where we live, in our schools" (Greene 5). Literature can be the vehicle through which students can ask important questions about justice and systems of power, and can be the impetus for societal transformation. This may seem like a stretch, but students cannot be agents of social change without being able to imagine themselves as such, and envision the world they want to create.

Imagination and all the ways it functions in maintenance of the status quo often goes unnoticed, or even denied. In his June 2019 NYT opinion article Aaron Bastani, author of "Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A Manifesto," argues that many of the problems that plague the modern world such as poverty, pollution, energy and unemployment are only problems under capitalism. He also argues that these problems haven't been solved because "the most pressing crisis of all, arguably, is an absence of collective imagination." While this may ring true at first, it's only the hammer has been operating unnoticed. Society's collective imagination has been hijacked to maintain the fiction of race, the mythology of the founding fathers, and the heroism of murderers like Christopher Columbus. The collective imagination is pointed toward



the past instead of the future. It seems reasonable to argue, therefore, that the teacher of literature has more of a responsibility than ever to nurture and challenge students to imagine what could be. This function-- to see the flaws and limitations in current systems and institutions-- is one of the primary goals of speculative realist literature. Teachers have long maintained the fairy tale of America as “land of the free and home of the brave”, have convinced generations of students that George Washington couldn’t tell a lie, and that there is liberty and justice for all. In fact, teachers are able to convince students of these “truths” even when they contradict the students’ realities. Surely, teachers can use literature to help students see the world as it actually is--“to become conscious of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed” --and save imagination for alternative solutions (Greene 123). Just as a new generation of minority authors have had to create a new genre of fiction outside of the traditional norms because existing genres were grossly inadequate vehicles for their message, educators will have to create new curriculum both within the classroom as well as independent and outside of the institutionalized public school system (also a grossly inadequate vehicle) if working class students of color are to have any chance at a quality education.

### **The books**

“Any Change may bear seeds of benefit.

Seek them out.

Any Change may bear seeds of harm.

Beware.” (POTS 116)

Even superficial examination of high school English Language Arts curriculum reveals that the most commonly taught novels are written by white males (Black). More careful consideration shows that these novels, while critical of some areas of American society, do little to encourage the reader to imagine alternative societies. This shouldn’t be surprising given the purpose of public education. In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Louis Althusser argues that state apparatuses reproduce the conditions that maintain the state by necessity. Under a capitalist state, public schools must teach not only the skills of production but also convince students to accept the ruling ideology (Althusser 93). American capitalism is interesting in this regard because the ideals upon which America is founded (equality, freedom, and justice) are often in stark contrast with capitalism (wealth disparity, mass incarceration, and exploitation).

Schools are therefore charged with producing patriotic students who (at least on some level) believe in the ideals, but aren't so committed to them that they attack the economic system that makes the same ideals impossible. Contemporary American culture, including literature taught in schools, seems to have resolved this contradiction by posing as critical of many capitalist cornerstones (individualism, racism, sexism, greed, etc.) while at the same time offering capitalism as the solution. This is important for teachers to recognize because without careful planning to do the opposite, capitalist indoctrination is the norm.

Examination of two texts reveals how commonly taught novels in literary study teach both academic skills and this critical but complacent ideology. A revolutionary Marxist teacher, however, cannot be complacent nor cynical. Careful selection of texts is instrumental in delivering quality instruction while maintaining and inspiring revolutionary optimism. The pages that follow are written with high school pedagogical practice in mind, therefore some of the deeper and definitely valuable possibilities of study in higher education may be overlooked or superficially examined. The first text, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, was chosen because it is commonly taught in the early years of high school, and study of the novel highlights the deliberate indoctrination and reification of imperialism and masculine violence present within the current curriculum. The second, *Earthseed* series by Octavia Butler, was chosen to demonstrate how substituting speculative realism for other texts begins with revolutionary optimism that another world is possible, and serves to educate and empower students. By putting these works into conversation with one another, the pairing is meant to show how the choice of text used in a classroom gives way to very different ideological messages and discussions. More importantly, comparison is meant to challenge teachers to select texts that subvert the standard ideological training by encouraging students to envision a world beyond and outside of Western democratic capitalism.

## **Dystopia**

Dystopian novels are common not only among required reading lists for high school students, but also are growing in popularity outside the classroom. Pop culture scholars have described the phenomenon as “the fetishistic disavowal of the dark underbelly of liberal capitalism” (Raymen 429). Educators comment that such literature “presents a powerful critique of economic injustice and capitalist ideals, and offers a vision of collective action largely led by

youth” (Marshall) and that “dystopian literature, specifically, helps us to realize the immoral nature of our society as well as its potential to change” (Rush). Examination of some commonly taught dystopian novels and possible alternatives complicate these arguments by calling attention to where the authors choose to clearly pose capitalism as the problem, and where they cleverly obfuscate capitalism’s limitations as a solution. Beyond putting these works in conversation with one another, the pairings are meant to expose the function of the high school canon in maintaining capitalism as well as to encourage educators to subvert this ideological training by challenging students to envision a world beyond and outside of Western democratic capitalism.

### ***Lord of the Flies***

*Lord of the Flies* continues to be the most commonly taught dystopian novel for high school students (Applebee 28). For this reason, analysis will focus on the moment of reading in the high school classroom, rather than the moment of production. While Golding’s novel has literary value in teaching students about imagery, figurative language, foreshadowing/prediction and other standard high school literary analysis skills, the larger impact on students (and likely the reason it remains in the canon) is ideological. The thematic content around human nature, leadership, violence, sexism, and religion not only bolsters capitalist ideals, but absolves capitalism of any responsibility for the negative results of said ideals, blaming instead abstractions like “wilderness” and “human nature”.

### **Human Nature**

Throughout the course of studying *Lord of the Flies*, students are encouraged to ask: “Are human beings evil? How does evil arise? What is the nature of isolation?” (Olson xi). Each of these questions imply the greed, violence, toxic masculinity and cruelty with which the children act are the result of human nature or being removed from society, not the result of how they were socialized. This theory, however, isn’t consistent with the chronology of the novel. Almost immediately upon arrival on the island, Ralph begins to taunt Piggy about his nickname, despite Piggy’s nearly begging him to stop. It is worth noting that not only is this an early incident, but it’s also the “good” leader who begins the bullying. Jack, the novel’s villain, also displays bullying/hazing behaviors early in the novel accompanied with a competitive, if not machista, attitude. Jack forces the other choir members to remain in their heavy choral robes while

marching across the hot beach. Upon meeting the others, he is quick to announce his position as leader and begin positioning himself as some sort of authority. Hints of the cruelty and power struggles to come occur early in the novel, suggesting isolation did not create these characteristics, but rather they were present all along.

There is a bit of irony in the suggestion that teachers in the public school system can be instrumental in dismantling capitalism's ideology since schools were so critical in its creation. One might even illustrate this with Golding's school boys. Leading up to both World War I and World War II, the British public schools were instrumental in building patriotism, class order, and enthusiasm for war and military service. In fact, many upper class boys were prepared only for military service. Students of the working class were delegated to the "O" level of education, preparing them for "ordinary" work as laborers (Lipschutz 252). This bifurcation of education and the resulting division of labor glorifies military service and imperialist ideology and maintains powerful class division. The ideology and attitudes resulting from such education reveals itself plainly in *Lord of the Flies*. The boys immediately work to create a hierarchy of power and divide the labor between caregiving, shelter, and hunting/rescue. Given the glorification of war and violence, it is not surprising that the hunters eventually abandon their task of maintaining the fire and also stage a rebellion to acquire leadership. In fact, these behaviors seem to be the natural result of an education that is "rooted in violence, both instrumental and epistemic, to maintain the hierarchy on which its class-based division of labour is based" (243).

If teachers do not highlight the role of education in accepted norms and behaviors, they are missing the opportunity to help students reflect on their own education. Examination of the ideology present in their public school experience and comparison to the schools of Golding's era encourages students to ponder the hammer. By placing the novel in the context of schools and the military, classes can grapple with issues in education such as tracking, military testing, and curriculum choices. If students can recognize the hidden indoctrination in the texts they read, they are more likely to be able to choose whether they want to accept or resist it.

## **Leadership**

In the absence of historical understanding, the power struggle in the novel can be reduced to individual psychological or character-based difference. A recent article on leadership

development in children “From Classroom to Conscription: Leadership Emergence in Childhood and Early Adulthood,” by Therese Reitan cites *Lord of the Flies* as an example of various ways children develop leadership skills. Reitan suggests the novel poses the questions: “What makes a leader? Do some individuals simply have the right attributes (being tall and attractive or able to sing C sharp) or is leadership something that comes from practice (as head of the choir)? Do leaders emerge through social interplay whereby someone is nominated by peers? Are situational factors essential for leadership emergence (e.g. who is holding the conch – the symbol of power – or what leadership qualifications are in demand on a desert island)? Moreover, are leadership positions and attributes in childhood sustainable through to early adulthood? If Ralph and Jack were to be drafted later in life, (they were actually saved by a naval officer) would they be considered “officer material?” (298-299). The study focuses on individual attributes, and finds that family socioeconomic status, parental support, and birth order have significant impact on leadership ability, and concludes that both Jack and Ralph likely will serve as leaders in adulthood- possibly as naval officers (316).

To the extent that socioeconomic factors and parental support are linked to access to the means of ideological production (schooling), it makes sense that these qualifiers are linked to future military leadership. While these qualities should be considered, in the process of viewing *Lord of the Flies* as a tool of said schooling and ideological production, it is more important and interesting to examine how and when each of the boys comes into power. Almost immediately upon gathering, the boys insist on finding a chief. The need to organize themselves hierarchically is reflective of the society from which they come. The need for a “chief to decide things”, the power of the conch, and the “toy of voting” clearly mirror Western electoral politics (Golding 22). Just as “none of the boys could have found good reason” for electing Ralph and very quickly shifted their loyalty to Jack, in the adult world whether “withheld or cast, the vote is increasingly worthless” (Cox). The traditional reading of the novel views Jack and Ralph as opposites, each representing “different organizing principles of society” (Chatterjee 50) or the conflict between “democratic utopianism versus fascist violence” (Diken 431). Similar to the argument that isolation is responsible for the boys’ degeneration, this dichotomy falls apart with a close look at the novel’s chronology. Jack is content to accept Ralph as “chief” and serve as his second-in-command. Having reached the agreement “Jack and Ralph smiled at each other with a shy liking” (Golding 23). When Jack suggests exploring the island, and leaving Piggy as

caregiver, Ralph makes no objection and is eager to work together with the older boys, leaving Piggy and the rest of the boys who elected him behind, over their objections. He assigns Piggy a trivial job of getting names, dismisses Piggy's feelings of betrayal, and allies himself with the supposed opposition. This early incident surely isn't the impact of isolation, but instead is very similar to leadership in the adult world. It can be said that Ralph, like his adult politician counterparts, is "interested only in the symbolism of voting in a democracy, but never in a government of the people and for the people" (Mabasa). Jack and Ralph, like capitalist democracy and fascism, aren't opposites, but "explicate the two sides of the same social bond" (Diken 431). Highlighting this concept when discussing characterization can lead to great discussion about modern leaders and their choices during times of crisis.

It has been postulated that fascism is nothing more than capitalism in decay (Dutte 1). This perspective may cast a different light on the relationship between democratic leadership styles and the more fascistic use of fear and force. While the boys maintain a reasonable expectation of rescue and establish comfortable routines, the conch is sufficient as a "token" of legitimacy (432). Jack is no more violent or cruel than Ralph, and the other boys are more or less satisfied with accepting their roles. In fact, insofar as establishing order, no one is quite as effective as Jack. Not only does he gracefully accept his position as second in command, his charismatic affect makes him far more helpful to Ralph than Piggy in gaining the boys' confidence and cooperation. When Piggy tries to convince the boys that they need to maintain a fire in order for them to be rescued, he's unable to hold their attention or command any respect. Jack, on the other hand, uses his influence to support Ralph and the idea of law and order: "I agree with Ralph," he says. "We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages" (41). Immediately afterwards, he generously devotes a portion of his hunters to maintain the fire and keep a lookout. Confronted with crisis however-- the passing of a ship while the fire was extinguished and the spotting of "the beast" -- tension rises, violence increases, and the boys tend more and more toward the "fascistic" leader. Teachers can use this plot progression to introduce non-fiction texts and study fascistic leaders in history, and the conditions that allowed for their ascension into power.

This progression from accepting an electoral democracy toward violent fascism reflects human historical tendency as well. In the article "The Question of Fascism and Capitalist Decay", R. Palme Dutte argues that fascism is a desperate effort for the "doomed capitalist class

to maintain its power and overcome the contradictions by extreme violent means, and thus to maintain the existing social forms” (Dutte). He goes on to explain the bosses do this by 1) eliminating class struggle, 2) using their “planning” power to pass restrictive laws, (3) overcoming the inner contradictions by through repression and consolidating power, and finally (4) overcoming the outside contradictions by intensified organization for war and conquest. Interestingly, all these elements are present in the shift in governance from electoral democracy (Ralph) and fascism (Jack). In Chapters five and six, the readers begin to see the unravelling of the structure and organization Ralph tried to establish in his makeshift democracy. The hunters haven’t been able to provide any meat, they aren’t helping with building the shelters, and no one is honoring the agreed upon lavatory spaces. Moreover, the signal fire wasn’t lit when a ship passed by, and the fear of a beastie begins to foment. Ralph calls a meeting to reestablish order, but the hopelessness and fear are too much for Ralph, even with Jack’s help, to overcome. Ralph tries to stick to reason and convince the group there isn’t a beast nor a ghost. Jack follows his lead at first but the boys’ unwavering fear and Piggy’s public criticism of Jack for failing at both the hunting and maintaining the fire pushes him over the edge and begins the progression of fascism described by Dutte. He silences Piggy and discredits Ralph and his desire for rules and reason: “Bollocks to the rules!... If there’s a beast, we’ll hunt it down” (86). Perhaps not coincidentally, this is also where Ralph recognizes the fragility of the society he’d set up. When Piggy urges Ralph to use the conch to reassert his authority, Ralph responds; “If I blow the conch and they don’t come back; then we’ve had it” (86). Once Jack has effectively rendered the conch and Ralph powerless (features 1 & 3 as described by Dutte), he uses his self-appointed authority to order the theft of Piggy’s glasses, the capture of Samneric, and ultimately the bounty on Ralph (feature 2) inner contradictions or resistance to his authority are met with torture and repression. When Samneric refuses to reveal Ralph’s location, they are tortured into confessing. The ritualistic beating of Roger as a game, the increasingly brutal methods in hunting, and the murder of Simon and Piggy create an atmosphere of violence, absolute power, and fear of disobedience-- a perfect fascistic dystopia. Not surprisingly, the war/conquest Jack wages is against Ralph, his only remaining opposition (feature 4). He is able to unite the boys and work them into a frenzy in the organized effort to hunt and kill Ralph.

Examining the leadership styles of the boys with students in the larger context of capitalist electoral politics vs fascism allows for the broadening of scope from individual

psychology to structures of society and government. Consideration of the conflict from this wider perspective allows students to formulate ideas and questions at the systemic level.

## **Violence**

It stands to reason that violence would be a large part of a story about boys stranded on a deserted island. The ways in which violence manifests itself in *Lord of the Flies*, however, seems to emphasize the darker side of humanity-- be it the result of socialization or human nature. The boys aren't engaged in violence for survival, but target one another as objects of bullying and scapegoating. Revolutionary Marxist teachers might take this opportunity to help students develop a nuanced view of violence. Students can examine different instances of violence in *Lord of the Flies*, and try to determine the motivation and result. More importantly, students can ask questions about the war going on in the adult world, and what similarities exist.

## **Bullying**

As mentioned earlier, Ralph seems to enjoy poking fun at Piggy right from the beginning of the novel. Upon arrival on the island, when he learns Piggy's name "he dived in the sand at Piggy's feet and lay there laughing" (12). The ridicule doesn't end at his name. Piggy isn't able to get so much as a sentence in about his background or medical affliction before Ralph interrupts him with "sucks to your auntie" and "sucks to your ass-mar" (13). When the other boys join Ralph and Piggy, they are quick to establish regular routines, one of which is the bigger boys bullying the others. Even in the early stages of the novel, "such violence primarily works against the background of normality" (Diken 434). Similarly, when Simon faints from heat and fatigue, Jack dismisses it as a sign of weakness. This inspires "sniggers from the choir" (20). One might even argue the act of having the choir march along a hot beach in heavy choir robes is a form of hazing.

Jack, like Ralph, is quick to target Piggy as whipping boy. Just as Ralph was quick to interrupt and silence Piggy with mockery and taunting, Jack responds to Piggy's contribution in gathering names with "you're talking too much... shut up, Fatty" (21). As with Jack's derision of Simon, the comment elicited "a storm of laughter" from all the boys, "even the tiniest child" (21). This violence escalates from somewhat harmless to the destruction and theft of Piggy's



glasses-- seriously incapacitating him. Ultimately, the bullying results in the violent murders of both Piggy and Simon.

Close examination of bullying by nearly all the boys from the opening of the novel forces readers to acknowledge such violence isn't merely the result of isolation from society.

Historicizing the novel and emphasizing the militaristic quality of British education at the time challenges students to not only consider the role of school and society in bullying patterns in *Lord of the Flies*, but might encourage them to consider the increasingly brutal and often fatal bullying that is allowed to continue in today's schools.

### **Scapegoating**

Like any number of behavior patterns, bullying "if left unchecked, can lead to more serious forms of violence" (Whitted 167). It stands to reason this tendency might accelerate if rather than being discouraged it is incentivized. Research has shown that making a common enemy serves as a powerful uniting force, especially in emergencies that are perceived as life threatening (Montuori 21). One of the most famous examples of scapegoats being used to unite a people is Hitler's use of the Jews. It is worth noting that the atrocity of the Holocaust wasn't the unfortunate consequence of personal prejudice, but instead a deliberate strategy used to gain power over the masses. When he was asked whether the Jews should be absolutely annihilated, he responded in the negative asserting "then we would have to invent them. It is essential to have a tangible enemy, not merely an abstract one" (Hoffer 183). In other words, Jewish people should be tortured, many killed, but the absolute genocide (that he sold to the public) was not his intention. Jewish people served only as human tools to unite people in hate. In considering *Lord of the Flies* and the use of scapegoats it is worth noting that the boys were educated and socialized in the age of Hitler and the Holocaust.

Jack, as the unofficial victor of a coup d'état of sorts, has both advantages and options in executing Hitleresque rule. The boys are already fearful of the beastie; Jack and his hunters have far more to offer by way of protection than Ralph and Piggy. Given Jack's position as protector, Ralph and Piggy's resistance to his leadership further ostracizes them from the majority of the boys. In times of crisis, any dissent is considered dangerous and simple thinking processes emphasizing conformity are the most comforting (Montouri 20). When Ralph and Piggy refuse to fall in line with Jack's more violent, fear-mongering agenda, they alienate themselves from the

crowd and add themselves to the list of perceived enemies. While the beast serves as an “abstract” enemy, Ralph and Piggy make for perfect tangible counterparts. Jack is able to foment such intense hatred that the boys are happy to commit theft and even murder to destroy them. Using the scapegoat framework to study *Lord of the Flies* can be useful to teachers in highlighting their necessary role in advancing the ruling class agenda. Students have likely already studied the Holocaust, the Salem Witch Trials, Sacco and Vanzetti, Japanese internment, etc., but using *Lord of the Flies* to develop of critical lens of the systems of power that depend upon scapegoating can help students elevate the blame from individual “bad people” to an overarching “bad system”.

## **Resolution**

Perhaps one of the most frustrating features of *Lord of the Flies* is the resolution. Conflict between Jack and Ralph has risen to fever pitch, and it seems certain that Ralph will suffer the same fate as Simon and Piggy. Golding has primed the reader not only for some sort of grand battle between “civilization” and “savagery”, but also for what seems to be the inevitable victory of Jack’s violent regime. Instead, Golding ends the novel with a *deus ex machina* that leaves many readers feeling confused and dissatisfied and that rings untrue. Golding’s dilemma may lie in the reader’s desire for a happy ending coupled with the earlier stated argument that it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Had Golding foregone the forced rescue, readers would be forced to reckon with the notion that such behaviors and ideologies, regardless of the source, can only end in destruction. The reader that views the novel in the context of history understands that unless the boys were able to organize a society free from capitalism’s toxic influence, they were doomed from the start.

The abrupt and perhaps unrealistic conclusion of the novel is probably the best evidence that apart from imagining a completely different world, there cannot be a happy ending. The critical reader understands that the appearance of the naval officer might save Ralph’s life in the immediate, but will return him and the other boys to a “civilization” that created the behaviors and ideologies responsible for the murderous violence in the first place. While *Lord of the Flies* can serve as a means to engage students in critique of current institutions, it offers little by way of hope or possibility outside of Western capitalism. The revolutionary Marxist teacher has an urgent challenge and responsibility to use literature to create imaginations daring enough to

imagine the end of capitalism, lest the end of the world (brought about by capitalist follies) will not simply be found on dystopian pages.

### **The Earthseed Series**

*The Earthseed Series*, consisting of two dystopian novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* by Octavia Butler, begins with the world in a capitalist-provoked crisis. Global warming has caused drought and a scarcity of fresh water. Hardship is the norm. Those lucky enough to still have homes live in poverty-stricken gated communities to protect themselves from the desperate homeless. Violence is widespread. Theft and murder are common practices both of those struggling to survive and of those addicted to Pyro, a drug that encourages its users to set fire. Politicians use fear to consolidate their bases and prevent social progress. Against this backdrop Lauren Oya Olamina, a fifteen-year-old black minister's daughter, grapples with the problem of survival and more optimistically, living a meaningful life.

Like Golding's novel, the *Earthseed Series* has literary value in teaching students about imagery, figurative language, foreshadowing/prediction and other standard high school literary analysis skills. Ideologically, however, it serves almost as the antithesis of *Lord of the Flies*. The thematic content around human nature, leadership, violence, sexism, and religion not only challenges capitalist ideals, but challenges the very notion of reform-- encouraging students to imagine worlds and systems not yet created.

### **Capitalist Nature**

Throughout the course of studying the *Parable*, students are encouraged to ask: What happened to put the country in such a crisis? What impact does our current system of government and economy have on humanity? Are there alternatives that can save humanity? Each of these questions are in dramatic contrast to those encouraged by *Lord of the Flies*. Whereas *Lord of the Flies* encourages students to identify humanity or nature as the culprit for the crisis, the questions that arise from the *Parable* novels lead students to understand that society's biggest problems arise not from human nature or wilderness/isolation, but instead from our system of political economy.

Focusing on systemic problems rather than individual flaws allows Butler to develop rounder characterization, even with minor players. People are neither good (like Simon) or bad

(like Jack), instead they make good and bad decisions, with positive or negative impact on those around them. Early in the *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren (the narrator and protagonist) describes the deaths of Alicia Leal, an astronaut, and Mrs. Sims, a judgmental elderly church goer. Lauren gives serious consideration to the deaths of the two women, and their respective significance. Alicia Leal dies believing and doing something she thinks the “denying, denying, backward looking people need” (25). Mrs. Sims kills herself after she is robbed and her family dies in a house fire. Mrs. Sims is bigoted and gossipy. She is one of the only people who has a home to herself, and refuses to allow her son to move in with her because she dislikes his wife. She also disapproves of her Chinese neighbors and Lauren’s Mexican mom because of their race. Even still, “everyone brought Mrs. Sims things after the robbery, in spite of the way she is... food, clothing, money” (22). Mrs. Sims, in the face of human kindness and generosity, takes her own life. Neither her religion nor her neighbors were able to inspire Mrs. Sims with the will to live. She doesn’t see the good in people, and dies hopeless. On the other hand, Leal dies in the ultimate act of selflessness and hope. In Lauren’s estimation, the space program is the only way for society to go “some place other than down the toilet” (21). In both cases the good and bad sides of humanity are evident. Humans, in pursuit of greater profits and with disregard for the environment, have trashed the earth. Along similar lines, people robbed Mrs. Sims and burned the home of her son in search of material goods. The difference, however, comes to light when one thinks about what people do for consumption, and what they do in cooperation to create a joyful and purposeful life. Butler’s novels neither idealize humanity nor seek to obscure man’s capacity for evil. However, in contrast to Golding’s novel, Butler explores both the best and worst in people, shedding light on what inspires each.

This difference forces the reader to reckon with history, the capitalist need for consumption and profit, and search for a solution beyond Western capitalism. The reader borrows Lauren’s skepticism of new politicians and temporary reforms. Rather than rallying around the candidate with the best rhetoric, Lauren questions the entire electoral process and political economic system. When she questions presidential candidate Donner’s plan to put people back to work by lowering minimum wage and offering incentives to employers who provide training and room and board to their workers, the reader wonders along with Lauren “What’s adequate...A house or apartment? A room? A bed in a shared room? A barracks bed? Space on the floor?...Will it be legal to poison, mutilate, or infect people-- as long as you provide

them with food, water, and space to die?” (27). Slavery, sharecropping, company towns, and the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment all provide proof that capitalist bosses aren’t above such abuses of workers, especially in times of desperation. Teachers can use the novel to teach deliberately hidden history, so that students understand Lauren’s concerns aren’t unfounded. Young Lauren’s lens can be used to expose how cruel capitalism is by nature and can encourage students to challenge the idea that profit should come before people.

A unique feature to revolutionary Marxist pedagogy is that it resists reform through electoral politics. Apart from exposing the flaws of capitalism, Marxist revolutionary teachers can expose the limitations of electoral politics. One of the reasons mainstream leftist pedagogies are ineffective as agents of societal transformation is due to the “educational left’s failure to challenge the two-party system that is organically linked to the exploitation of human labour and the well-being of corporate profits” (Foley 111). Lauren’s loss of confidence in electoral politics is mirrors the same in today’s world. Recent headlines like “‘No offense, but I never vote.’ Stunning apathy in the heart of California’s Trump resistance”, “On The Sidelines of Democracy: Exploring Why So Many Americans Don’t Vote”, “Why Has Voter Turnout Been So Dang Low?” and “Apathy was, once again, the big winner on election night” reveal major disillusionment and lack of interest in the ballot. When asked why, interviewees candidly respond, “I don’t believe in the system,” (Lopez). Revolutionary Marxist teachers can also use Lauren’s disillusionment with the political system to introduce excerpts from radical nonfiction texts such as *Poor People’s Movements* by Frances Fox Piven and “The Ballot or the Bullet” by Malcolm X. Pairing these texts with the *Earthseed* novels allow students to grapple with Piven’s claim that the poor and minority working class cannot compel the elite ruling class to surrender power in any meaningful or sustainable way with the vote (Piven xxi). Malcolm X had a very clear ultimatum for this circumstance, powerfully stated in his speech “The Ballot or the Bullet”. This framework can help students begin to consider alternatives and challenge the representation of violence in absolute right/wrong terms-- a lens that will be useful later in the story and throughout their education. The *Parable* novels allow teachers to swap capitalist indoctrination for student imagination and radical possibilities.

## **Leadership**

“Choose your leaders with wisdom and forethought” (POTT 183)

One of the most important differences between *Lord of the Flies* and the *Parable* novels is the difference of governance and organization. The boys in *Lord of the Flies* seek to get back to British society, and model their hierarchy after that of Western capitalists. Lauren, however, seeks to transcend late capitalism and models Acorn, her new society, collectively. Collective leadership, rather than individual elected officials, shapes every part of Acorn culture and society. Weekly “Gatherings” are a combination of celebration and “problem-solving sessions, they’re times of planning, healing, learning, creating, times of focusing and reshaping...they can cover anything at all to do with Earthseed or Acorn, past, present, or future, and anyone can speak” (66 POTT). Attendees at the Gatherings are so won to their part in shaping Acorn, they don’t hesitate to challenge Marc, Lauren’s brother, or Lauren herself. The Gathering, while an important feature to collective leadership, is only a vehicle by which it’s implemented. Trust and investment in one another and Earthseed is carefully created and maintained by collective and cooperative production. The rules of Acorn are “Everyone works here, kids and adults...in the fields...with the animals...maintain[ing] the school and its grounds. Building homes is a communal effort” (74 POTT). Moreover, everyone goes to school “One of the first duties of Earthseed is to learn and then to teach” (74). Leadership isn’t a gold star that affords one more power or luxury. Because all Acorn members benefit from society’s fruit, they all are responsible for leadership and labor. So much of capitalist leadership comes with privilege and power that fiction is a perfect vehicle to begin to activate student imagination. So much of why and how Americans work, what we decide to study, and where we study has to do with being better than others and having more, consideration outside the world of fiction might be too great a challenge. When Lauren is frustrated by Bankole’s inability to “see the possibility of doing anything he hasn’t seen done by others,” the reader is encouraged to ask *why not?* (POTT 71). When Lauren supposes that “he believes that large, unimportant things are done only by powerful people in high positions”, the reader is nudged toward self-reflection. Rooting for Lauren and Earthseed challenges conventional views of power, change, and society. The revolutionary teacher can help transfer the imagination necessary to believe in Earthseed into the imagination necessary to have confidence in and create new systems in reality.

## Violence

Cynicism is perhaps one of the biggest enemies of the revolutionary Marxist teacher. With honest teaching of history, students are likely to become disillusioned about the world, and without actionable alternatives, cynicism is the most likely result. Revolutionary teachers must challenge students to resist cynicism and reconsider what might be accomplished by activating the disruptive power of the working class against the state. This approach requires careful consideration and guidance by the revolutionary teacher to help students reconceptualize violence, and contemplate when and how it has been used throughout history and in the world today. This might be most easily accomplished by pointing out the hypocrisy in how acts of violence are taught in the traditional curriculum. When soldiers risk their lives to fight imperialist wars, they're labeled war heroes. The abuse and sacrifice of "non-violent" Black bodies during the Civil Rights movement is applauded as brave and heroic. Militant organizing on behalf of the working class (i.e. Red Summer) is rarely mentioned, and when it is it is condemned. The *Parable* novels offer an opportunity for students to consider violence from unique perspectives. Like *Lord of the Flies*, violence is a critical part of the *Parable* novels. However, rather than merely providing action and adventure (or worst still promoting misogyny and sadism) the violence in the *Parable* novels inspire questions. What causes violence? Under what circumstances? Is violence, by necessity, bad? Are there circumstances where violence is justified? Can violence be an act of salvation? Whereas the violence in *Lord of the Flies* can be broken down into bullying, scapegoating, and toxic masculinity, the biggest distinction in the *Parable* novels is violence against the oppressed and violence against the oppressor.

### Damaging Violence: Violence against the Oppressed

When studying violence in the *Earthseed* series with high school students, it is important to consider intent and impact. Students confront violence in their real lives, and are bombarded with racist comparisons of "Black on Black crime" vs the violence caused by poverty, economics, and class (Wilson 4). Looking first at Butler's world may help students recognize that violence in the working class communities, as well as the label "Black on Black crime", serves to criminalize Blackness and advances the "political purposes of mayors, governors, senators, the penal community, law enforcement... and the formation of social policy" (Wilson 131).

One of the earliest and most harrowing incidents of violence in the novels is the murder of three-year-old Amy Dunn. Amy is the product of incest and rape, but shows both remarkable intellectual curiosity and desperate need for attention and supervision. Lauren takes an interest in Amy, and soon Amy is learning to read and count. More than that, at the first taste of love, she has latched onto Lauren. The reader scarcely has time to feel hopeful about Amy's future before she is shot and killed. The details of Amy's life and death are important to consider in regard to violence. One could easily argue that the gross neglect of Amy by her mother was already an act of violence. Along those lines, one could also sympathize with a young girl who was raped by her attractive and popular uncle and then expected to raise the resulting child. Amy was killed somewhat accidentally. She certainly wasn't a deliberate target. Lauren and Amy live in a gated community, Robledo. While those in Lauren's neighborhood were poor, some had jobs. They shared homes, but they had shelter. Community gardens and small rabbit farms supplied the food. Beyond the wall were abject poor without any of those comforts. The starving, desperate, thirsty and weather beaten outsiders attacked the walls that kept them from human necessities. Amy happened to be on the other end of the wall when they attacked, and she was struck by the bullet. Amy's life and death may be the clearest and most tragic examples of violence by the oppressed.

Closer examination, however, reveals that this violence isn't always intentional. No one set out to hurt or kill Amy Dunn. Perhaps the most pitiful aspect of her tragedy is that she was nearly invisible. She wasn't the target of anyone's rage. Instead, the tremendous suffering that characterized Amy's short life was collateral damage in the act of survival and self-defense. Amy's death was primarily the consequence of two factors: 1) She was wandering unsupervised and 2) The wall was a barrier between the starving and food. It's difficult for the reader not to be angry with Tracy Dunn, Amy's mother. After all, Lauren who is right around Tracy's age cares for Amy all day at school and returns her safely home. At some time after that, Amy makes her way outside unattended and is killed. Butler goes through great lengths, however, to complicate it beyond simple negligence. Tracy was twelve when she became pregnant by her twenty-seven-year-old uncle who had been raping her. Christmas Dunn, the sister of Tracy's rapist and Tracy's mother, is described as being void of maternal instincts and blames Tracy for her brother's exile. The reader is also told Tracy grew up in a home of sixteen people, most of



whom were unstable (POTS 33). Teachers can encourage students to question how these factors played a part in Amy's death, and who they think is "most" responsible for her death.

Along similar lines, it is difficult to blame those who shot at the wall. The world beyond the walls is "a carcass covered with too many maggots" (9). Outside the walls people are "Desperate or crazy or both.... They cut off each other's ears, arms, legs.... They carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don't get enough to eat so they're malnourished-- or they eat bad food and poison themselves" (11). The wall is a symbol of security and stability of sorts. On Amy's side of the wall there are homes and there is food. Like the dead animals, human limbs, and bags of feces, the shots fired through the wall were "gifts of envy and hate" (50). In discussing Amy's death, important questions can be posed to students: If not for desperation, abject poverty, and glaring inequality-- might Amy Dunn have survived? Is violence against what keeps one hungry and unprotected against the elements violence at all, or an attempt at survival? Asking these questions about Amy Dunn's death provides teachers with an opportunity to discuss borders, walls, and reasons for such glaring disparities in wealth across countries.

This question arises for young Keith, Lauren's brother who is convinced the only way for him to realize manhood is to get out from under his father's influence. In order to survive, he shot a friendly stranger in order to steal food, a sleep sack, and twenty-three thousand dollars. When Lauren expresses disapproval he responds with "What was I supposed to do? Wait for God to come and give me some money?" (110). Eventually, Keith's lifestyle catches up with him, and he is found tortured and killed, likely by drug dealers with whom Keith had either competed or from whom he had stolen. The details are gruesome. His murderers cut and burned most of his skin and burned out his eyes. While the reader never doubts Keith met this end as a result of a string of bad choices, the brutal nature forces the reader to wonder at what point is violence justified, and when is it wrong. When reading this difficult section, students might engage in an examination of gang culture and the associated violence. Students can read about why youth join gangs and discuss societal failures that contribute to gang formation, and how they can be solved.

The inhabitants of Robledo grapple with the dilemma of when and where violence is justified in the wake of Amy's murder and a few robberies. Unable to rely upon the police, the residents of Robledo organize and train for defense of their community. They conspire not only

to scare off intruders, but to kill them if necessary and cover up the murder. Cory, Lauren's stepmother, is wary of the plan, and conflicted about taking human life. "Thou shalt not kill," she whispers to her husband, a minister. He responds with his own verse, "Nehemiah, chapter four, Verse 14.... Fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives and your houses" (72). The message is well received by most in the community, and they come together to ward off the next attack. Reverend Olamina celebrates a victory beyond temporarily saving crops or food. When everyone, in spite of their differences comes together, he celebrates: "They came out to defend their community... I protect the Moss's place in spite of what I think of him, and he protects mine, no matter what he thinks of me. We all look out for one another" (76). This plan seems as if it will work until a stronger collective, armed with trucks and possibly drug-addicted, attack Robledo two years later. Robledo has been weakened, having suffered the loss of some of their members, including Reverend Olamina. The attackers leave Robledo "littered with ash-covered corpses" and the streets covered in blood (159).

Such horrific violence by seemingly normal people in desperate situations may lead one to similar beliefs about human nature as those inspired by *Lord of the Flies*. It is the role of the revolutionary teacher, however, to point out two related but distinct features of the violence in the beginning half of the novel. The first is that the conditions for violence (some might argue the necessity of violence) was created by the system of political economy. When a system cannot provide enough jobs, food, shelter, etc. for the people, they will do what they can to survive. Where economic deprivation and human suffering are high, so is crime (Wilson 18). The second, and perhaps trickier concept, is that the problem with the early incidents of violence is that they are directed against the oppressed. Most of the action leading up to the attack on Robledo is driven by violence by the oppressed against the oppressed. The revolutionary Marxist teacher can use the lessons outlined in the novel to develop class consciousness and to help students understand true class antagonisms in both the *Parable* series and in the world around us. As long as Lauren is in battle against others of her class, her energy is misdirected. After she escapes Robledo and begins to seriously build the Earthseed community, minor incidents of self-defense against the lumpenproletariat take a back seat to the battle she has to wage against the ruling class.

### **Building Earthseed: Organization as the best weapon**

The destruction of Robledo puts Lauren in a very similar situation as the boys in *Lord of the Flies*. Without the guidance or protection of the adult world, she is forced to fend for herself. The only survivors from Robledo are Harry Balter and Zahra Moss. At first, Lauren is reluctant to trust anyone but Harry and Zahra. However, driven by both human compassion and confidence in the possibility of creating a completely new society, she overcomes her mistrust of others and her own individualism. While on her journey, she helps a young family ward off robbers and invites them to join her, Harry, and Zahra. Later, they come across a lone, but kindly, stranger Bankole whom they also welcome into their group. When an earthquake and fire threaten the life of sisters Allison and Jill Gilchrist, Lauren and Bankole rescue them and offer them the opportunity to travel with the newly forming community. Similarly, when Emery and Tori sneak into their camp Lauren struggles with the group to accept them as well. Finally, Grayson and Doe-- a formerly enslaved man and his daughter-- are accepted as part of the travelling group.

There are two important lessons about organizing class struggle in the second half of the novel revolutionary Marxist teachers may want students to consider. The first is the value of collective leadership and confidence in our allies. Students are currently bombarded with individualist philosophies and singular, charismatic leaders. Rejecting cults of personality and trusting the collective to make the best decision aren't norms students often see modeled. For this reason, the reader might clearly identify Lauren as the sole leader of the group, and ignore the collectivity in decision making. Revolutionary Marxist teachers can point out that each time there is an important decision, discussion is opened up to the larger collective. When there is disagreement, disciplined struggle is welcomed and all perspectives are considered. For example, when Lauren suggests inviting Emery and Tori to join them, Harry says, "You're going soft... You would have raised hell if we'd tried to take in a beggar woman and her child a few weeks ago" (285). Lauren doesn't discount Harry out of hand or try to pull rank as leader. She gives his opinion honest consideration, admitting, "You're right... And maybe that's the attitude we should keep" (285). The group struggles together to come to a decision. The practice of principled disagreement and collective leadership and decision making is part of what wins Harry to Earthseed, and also remains one of Earthseed's cornerstones once it is better established. In order to develop such honest and open relationships, Lauren has to be open about

her own weaknesses. She battles with the choice to reveal her hyperempathy syndrome, but trusts her tribe enough to make the best decision about whether or not she herself should be included in the group (193).

The second lesson students can learn from the *Parable* series is to avoid opportunism and always put politics primary. While gathering a tribe was essential for Lauren's survival, she was never dishonest about her goal of building Earthseed. Joining Earthseed or agreeing with its tenets weren't requirements for travel with the group, however without her consistent invitation for her companions to discuss and shape Earthseed, it might have remained a philosophy that never made it beyond the pages of her notebook.

The practice of collectivity and principled recruiting to Earthseed resulted in a vibrant, strong pilot Earthseed community, Acorn.

### **Revolutionary Optimism and Violence**

An exciting feature of the *Parable* novels is that they offer the opportunity to teach revolution as a concept rather than a call to nationalism or patriotism. Using the pilot community of Acorn as an example, students can wrestle with the idea that existing power systems are not likely to allow societies counter to their values to flourish; these societies often are targets of violent attack. Through discussion, students can come to terms with how although Acorn didn't present a military threat, the success of its inhabitants was an ideological threat that undermined the growing fascism of the time. The revolutionary Marxist teacher shouldn't shy away from discussion of the violent repression by the ruling class that follows any real attempt at liberation, or even a refusal to be subjugated. Nor should they avoid histories, including that of the USA, where armed insurrection against the ruling class was the only way to reach systemic change. Capitalist education has done such a thorough job twisting history, that revolution sounds like something belonging in science fiction novels or on the silver screen. Again, historicizing is important for students to really grapple with some of the concepts. No ruling class in history-- be it slave owners, feudal lords, or capitalist bosses-- has ever surrendered power peacefully. Still, systems have been toppled and new ones formed. Often, the American Revolution is taught in a sort of glamorized catalog of the accomplishments of the founding fathers, highlighting the symbolic protest of the Boston Tea Party. Violence is almost a detail in high school texts. The *Parable* novels, rather than using violence as titillation (like the violence

in *Lord of the Flies*), allows students to engage in deep thought about when and if violence is necessary. Students can ask questions with real implications for their world moving forward. What would it take for Earthseed to really flourish? What irreconcilable contradictions present themselves? Could Earthseed have taken root anywhere but “the stars”? What would that take? What is lost? What is gained?

The *Parable* novels invite readers to ask these questions and take on a more empowered and complicated view of violence as it occurs in this world. It is worth noting, the novels begin with the earth and the worker suffering the aftermath of capitalism’s violent abuse of both. The environmental crisis threatening young Lauren’s world resulted from the capitalist need of placing profit before people, poisoning the soil and water, and leaving the world next to uninhabitable. In this world illiteracy is rampant, drug use is debilitating, young women are sold as property, and people are being enslaved under the guise of “reeducation.” Every one of these things are violent. They are attacks on the bodies as well as the minds of the people in Lauren’s world. Today, students are taught only to view certain actions as violent. While students will acknowledge the police that turned hoses on youth during the Civil Rights struggle were violent, will they make the same claim against the leaders that passed and upheld the laws that inspired protest in the first place? Students can be challenged to turn their “reader lens” onto their world. Violence is underfunded schools with lead in the water and impoverished ghettos; there are nearly four thousand areas in the U.S-- mostly inhabited by poor non-White residents-- with higher lead poisoning rates than Flint, Michigan (Kendi 21). Violence is creating a culture that glorifies drug use and objectifies women, then marketing it to poor youth. Violence is convincing Black and White workers that “Black on Black” violence is the problem without examination of the system that perpetuates it. Violence is not only locking up 2.3 million people in America, but getting the masses to accept it (Sawyer & Wagner). The current environmental crisis, today’s toxic culture, and the enslavement of millions under the guise of “rehabilitation” is so similar to Lauren’s world, it might not take a stretch of imagination to see the parallels. However, with the constant praise of peaceful protest, non-stop images of beaten Black bodies, and Judeo-Christian messaging of “turn the other cheek,” it’s harder for a teacher to get students to shed the anti-violent indoctrination they’ve received in K-12 education.

The absolute view of violence can be problematized relatively early on in *Parable of the Talents*. Lauren’s Earthseed community, Acorn, has grown into a successful and strong entity.

Earthseed doctrine is beginning to spread throughout the country, and Acorn is proof that society can be organized differently. President Andrew Steele Jarret, working toward his promise to “make America great again” makes grand speeches at hate rallies, and a number of vigilante and crusader groups form (20). One of these groups attacks and enslaves the Acorn community, killing and raping many of their number, and kidnapping the children. They rename Acorn “Camp Christian.” When the opportunity to flee arises, members not only escape, but slaughter their captors, who call themselves teachers. During the escape, teachers were “torn to pieces” by the captives (257). Members of Earthseed “grappled with them, dragged them down, and strangled them” (257). These acts of violence are done without regret or remorse. Lauren admits, “I have never been so eager and so glad to kill people” (257).

As in *Lord of the Flies*, parallels between dystopia and fascism are clear. It is difficult not to connect this scene to the escape of the imprisoned from concentration camps. The novel offers an opportunity to teach about genocide. Modern day parallels abound, and historical references are chilling. A very quick supplement can be Pastor Niemoller’s famous quote: “First they came for the Communists...” Students can be challenged to ask-- why did they come for the Communists first? Why did they target Earthseed? Many students have already read *Diary of Anne Frank* and *Night*. Similarities are easy to find, and can make for interesting class discussion about author’s purpose. Why did Butler make such heavy use of historical allusion in a novel about the future? What message does she want the reader to learn? More interesting than the similarities, however, are the differences. The commonly read accounts of imprisonment and escape almost always exalt peace and forgiveness. At the end of *Night*, when the prisoners are liberated, Weisel writes, “Our first act as free men was to throw ourselves onto the provisions...No thought of revenge...And even when we were no longer hungry, not one of us thought of revenge” (115). A student response to that quote, found on an English 10 public blog, is pretty telling. The first student shared the passage as evidence that Weisel wasn’t interested in revenge. His classmate agreed and added, “revenge isn’t the answer and you shouldn’t rise up to that level” (Bryce).

Students aren’t often taught to question what they read in textbooks, and as a result accept what is printed on the page as “truth”. Students rarely have the opportunity to question why some books are taught and why others are not. They don’t have opportunities to consider that for every version of every story that makes it into their history books, there are at least as

many that don't. Because students don't read much about the value of principled violence, pairing *Parable of the Talents* with excerpts from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* opens new interpretations of the novel. Reading and discussing an excerpt takes only a class period, but the lens students develop can be used throughout the novel and the rest of the course. For example, when members of Earthseed kill the guards they "take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress" (Freire 56). Does that justify the violence? Even make it good? Teachers can contrast Weisel's response to violence with the fictional Acorn and the historical Sobibor uprisings (possibly making time for the film). Showing students examples of the oppressed overcoming the oppressors are important in developing confidence that it can be done--revolutionary optimism. Discussing Earthseed and Sobibor in connection with Freire arms students with imagination and hope: "The oppressed must see examples of the vulnerability of the oppressor so that a contrary conviction can begin to grow within them" (64).

## Resolution

"There's Nothing New / Under The Sun, / But There Are New Suns" (Parable of the Trickster, unpublished)

The *Parable* novels' resolution is in equal part hopeful and disappointing. Earthseed is finally ready to take its place among the stars. Lauren is too old to make the trip and remains behind. It is important that students are allowed to imagine what this world, without so much of capitalism's toxic influences, will be. With that world in mind, with new practices of solidarity and collective life, they can begin critical analysis of this world. What will it take to get from here to there? What would need to change?

This is where Butler's novels disappoint. By placing Earthseed in another world, it seems there is no salvation for this one. Throughout the novels, Butler places Earthseed in violent opposition to those who are destroying the world physically and ideologically. Without a final contest, it feels unresolved, not unlike *Lord of the Flies*. However, the lack of resolution affords even more opportunity for students to activate their imagination and sharpen their understanding of the contradiction between the oppressed and the oppressor, drawing on historical and sociological lessons from earlier in the novel study.

For example, in the excerpt from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, students read and discuss the passages: "It is essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in

which they are caught” and “The act of rebellion by the oppressed (an act which is always, or nearly always, as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors) can initiate love” (10).

Discussion of these passages along with the *Parable* series lead to a number of questions for students to consider-- Have the members of Earthseed, by abandoning Earth neglected their duty to take away the oppressors’ power and help restore their humanity as well? What happens with the oppressed who remain on Earth? Will the ruling class allow Earthseed to fulfill its destiny under the stars, or will they attack as they attacked Acorn? How do the answers to these questions impact how we should organize for change in our world?

The open-ended conclusion of the novel is perhaps the best exercise for student imagination. The critical reader understands Earthseed will likely always be under attack as long as it organizes itself counter to ruling class standards. The revolutionary teacher is tasked with taking that message, and infusing it with hope. In the opening verse of the unpublished finale, the reader has the promise of new suns. What might the sun symbolize? What might the new one be? Can teachers challenge students to build imaginations daring enough to imagine and build these other suns? In order for students to become agents of positive social change, they have to imagine a better world. In “Paulo Freire and educación popular”, Carrillo argues that “maintaining and promoting hope in overcoming systems of injustice and imagining achievable utopias”<sup>1</sup> is a vital component of transformative education (Carrillo 5). As revolutionary Marxist teachers in this period of history it is imperative to have the revolutionary optimism to answer yes to the question of new possibilities, and to inspire “yes” from students--as well the courage to back our convictions. Teachers should encourage students to integrate Lauren’s curiosity and imagination about her world into their consciousness and activism.

Together, the Marxist revolutionary teacher and the students, as a learning community, can engage in the same exercise as Lauren: “I wanted us to understand what we could be, what we could do. I wanted to give us a focus, a goal, something big enough, complex enough, difficult enough, and in the end, radical enough to make us become more than we have ever been. We keep falling into ditches, you know? I mean, we learn more and more about the physical universe, more about our own bodies, more technology, but somehow, down through history, we go on building empires of one kind or another. We go on having stupid wars that we

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Carrillo. Original text: “debe mantener y promover la esperanza en la posibilidad de superación del orden injusto, de imaginarse utopías realizables



justify and get passionate about, but in the end, all they do is kill huge numbers of people, maim others, impoverish still more, spread disease and hunger, and set the stage for the next war. And when we look at all of that in history, we just shrug our shoulders and say, well, that's the way things are. That's the way things always have been" (*Talents* 358).

It is our job to teach the architects of the world yet to be.

## CHAPTER THREE

“History has been taught in all national school systems attending to two different-- and to some extent contradictory-- goals: to make students “love their country” and to make them “understand their past”” (Carretero 99).

The problem with teaching actual history and expecting patriotism is that in reconciling the contradiction, it requires students to partake in an act of self-hate. History often casts minoritized students’ ancestors as the victim, the criminal, the conquered, or the saved. To accept the popular retelling of history serves to keep minoritized students in the same positions as the ancestors about which they read. English teachers concerned with disrupting this pattern of identification and subjugation have the important responsibility of selecting “historical fiction texts” (are there any other sort of historical texts?) that subvert that standard story, challenge familiar archetypes, and reject any version of the past that reinforces the racist, sexist histories that bombard students throughout their K-12 career.

Arguably the most sinister and dangerous record of accepted American history is the wildly slanted, but commonly taught, narrative on slavery. The Southern Poverty Law Center recently published a troubling report documenting students’ (mis)understanding of slavery and teachers’ resistance to teaching it properly. Since understanding or lack thereof likely springs from instruction, considering teacher attitude and practice is critical. While 90% of teachers claimed to be comfortable teaching slavery in the classroom, teacher responses to open ended questions revealed “profound unease around the topic” (Shuster 8). Likely a result of this discomfort, problematic practices are commonplace in K-12 education about slavery including teaching “good news” and heroes out of context, failing to connect slavery to white supremacy and racism, and centering the white experience when teaching about slavery (10-11). It should come then as no surprise that only 8% of high school seniors identified slavery as a central cause of the civil war (8). Given that 90% of teachers say they want to deliver quality instruction about slavery, it stands to reason that such widespread ignorance must result from more than individual teachers’ inadequacies. Such uniform and mass ignorance must be institutionally manufactured.

It is critical for the revolutionary Marxist teacher of literature to recall how and why the tale of race was spun to begin with. Additionally, teachers must recognize that this deeply entrenched ignorance goes beyond the institution of slavery. As Matthew Desmond clearly states in his article of the same name, “In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation” (Desmond 31). Herein lies the contradiction and the likely reason American schools don’t teach slavery. If students understood that under capitalism they are a commodity not a person, they might have questions. If they understood that schools are in the business of educating them according to the “imperatives of profit and domination rather than by human need,” they might resist this purpose (Bowles 54). If students understood exploitation and recognized its roots from a slave master’s “culture of acquiring wealth without work, growing at all costs and abusing the powerless” and also understood that slaves fought back, they might be inspired to do the same (Desmond 40). In his investigation of school systems, Bowles asks “what prevents workers from wresting control of their activities from their employers? What prevents workers, through the combined power of their potential unity, from altering the terms of their contract with employers toward satisfying their own needs?” (55). Today’s bosses, the descendants of yesterday’s slave masters, understand now as well as they did then that their position of power is tenuous. If the exploited understand the condition and their position in it, they might also recognize their own power.

Today’s bosses borrow a page from masters that prevented slaves from learning to read. They’ve become sneakier and more sophisticated, however. They don’t keep the working class illiterate, just limited. Lois Weiner, lifelong teacher and union activist, explains plainly the reasons why: “Global scale Wal-Mart jobs require no more than an 8th grade education... If the standards and livelihoods they envision for our children are limited to “McJobs,” it seems they do not need the kinds of inter-disciplinary, authentic project-based learning and critical inquiry that are prevalent in the prestigious schools the privileged send their children to” (CTU 8). Access to accurate history has become even easier to control since the ruling class has all but cemented their exclusive position as the primary producers of knowledge. Even the “exceptional” student who makes her way into the more prestigious schools is no more likely to be exposed to the study of slavery in any real way because to do so would expose capitalism’s dark underbelly and also its weaknesses. Deliberate resistance to reinforcing racism and

capitalism requires teachers to reject standard curriculum choices and search for more truthful and empowering texts.

## **Historical fiction**

Historical fiction texts are common not only among required reading lists for high school students, but also are growing in popularity for young readers outside of the classroom. Since 2000, nine of the twenty Newberry Award winning books have been historical fiction, surpassing realistic fiction (7/20), fantasy (2/20), and comedy (2/20) (Lib guides). Educators comment that such literature helps students “gain an understanding of their own heritage and others...students today can relive the exuberance of African American girls and boys who, after the Civil War, attend school for the first time. Good historical fiction creates an emotional connection between children of today and their counterparts” (Ricki 163). Examination of the commonly taught *Invention of Wings* by Sue Monk Kidd and posing *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead as an alternative complicates these arguments by calling attention to where the authors choose to make the same mistakes as teachers-- focusing on “good news” and heroes out of context, failing to connect slavery to white supremacy and racism, and centering the white experience when teaching about slavery (SPLC 10-11). The pairing reveals how literary study can either replicate the complacent ideology and poor understanding of slavery, racism, and capitalism described in the Southern Poverty Law Center’s report, or challenge and empower students to question the “knowledge” they’ve been fed, to view the world as a broken hammer, and to imagine what it might take to fix it.

The pages that follow are written with high school pedagogical practice in mind, therefore some of the deeper and definitely valuable possibilities of study in higher education may be overlooked or superficially examined. The first text, *The Invention of Wings* by Sue Monk Kidd, was chosen because it is commonly taught in the early years of high school, and study of the novel highlights the deliberate indoctrination and reification of whiteness present within the current curriculum. The second, *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead, was chosen to demonstrate how substituting speculative realist and historical fantasy for the typical historical fiction novels begins with revolutionary optimism that another world is possible, reveals difficult truths about history and present day, and serves to educate and empower students. By putting these works into conversation with one another, the pairing is

meant to show the function of storytelling and standard archetypes in maintaining the racist and sexist histories that shape students' worldview throughout their academic career and beyond. More importantly, comparison is meant to challenge teachers to select texts that subvert the standard ideological training by encouraging students to envision a world beyond and outside of Western democratic capitalism.

### ***The Invention of Wings***

Teachers shoulder a great responsibility when selecting and teaching texts and must be aware of the circumstances under which readers are more likely to believe that fiction reflects reality. When a text is taught in school, there is an assumption that it was chosen because it is true and important (Wolk 13). In addition, readers use "resemblance shortcuts" (Jones 7). If what is on the page reinforces what readers already hold to be necessary truths or resembles what is seen in the "real world", it is more likely to be understood as knowledge of the real world. Historical fiction can be especially confusing, since students understand that the work is "based on a true story". Students' ability to distinguish fact from fiction has been the cause of rising alarm since the Stanford study that revealed less than 20% of high school students demonstrate mastery of evaluating evidence (Wineburg 13). This is important to bear in mind when teaching a historical fiction novel. Authors of such books make important choices about what factual information to include, what fictional liberties to take, and what information is best omitted. These choices shape the ideology and thematic message of the novel. Revolutionary Marxist teachers should take great care in examining the authors' choices when teaching historical fiction novels, and be critical of creative decisions that reinforce problematic, and often harmful, belief systems. In *The Invention of Wings*, Sue Monk Kidd chooses to write about a failed slave insurrection and keeps her fictional slave character alive whose historical counterpart died after a severe beating. In so doing, she is able to minimize the role of the enslaved in freeing themselves, and develops much of her tale around the archetypes of White Savior and Magical Negro.

The decision to cast Handful, an enslaved child, as the contrapuntal voice in the novel rather than more obvious choices, such as Angelina, Sarah's sister, continues the long standing and dehumanizing use of Black characters to serve as scaffolds for the White character's story. True to life, Sarah Grimke taught her young slave to read when she was around the age of

eleven. In the novel *Handful* is discovered, both girls are punished, and then develop a complicated, but close, relationship. In reality, *Handful* was given a beating so severe it is likely responsible for her death shortly thereafter (Driscoll 2). In Kidd's fictional retelling, *Handful* only receives one lash with "not much force in it" (71). The reader is almost encouraged to feel more sympathy for Grimke. When she is barred from her father's library her "legs gave way" and she fell to her knees (69). The first person description reeks of desperation: "I lifted my hands, palms up, as high as my head, molding myself into the shape of a suppliant. "..... Father, I beg you... P-please, don't take books from me... I can't bear it" (69). When Kidd switches to *Handful*'s voice, the fictional voice of the real child who was beaten and likely died as a result says, "The gash healed fast, but Miss Sarah's hurt got worse and worse. Her voice had gone back to stalling and she pined for her books" (71). In the few pages where Kidd retells the story of the incidents that led to historical *Handful*'s death, she not only absolves Grimke of any responsibility, she reinforces both the stereotypes of Black physical strength (fictional *Handful* heals quickly) and White intellectuality (Grimke cannot bear to be without her books). Similar to the mistakes made by educators in teaching slavery, this creative decision humanizes and centers whiteness while dehumanizing blackness and softening the reality of slavery's brutality. Stated more plainly, Grimke ignores the fact that a child was killed, and instead uses that child as a prop to support the story of her White protagonist.

Rather than attracting criticism, the romanticized tale of parallel struggles of white woman and enslaved woman garnered widespread acclaim in supposedly liberal/progressive circles. Oprah added the novel to her book club, and her enthusiastic praise on the back cover described the book as "a remarkable novel that heightened my sense of what it meant to be a woman – slave or free." *The Guardian*'s book review calls it a "resonant, illuminating novel" (Sethi). Given that Kidd casually minimizes a beating that likely resulted in death and subordinates it to losing access to books, it should be shocking that NPR says Kidd deals with the difficult subject of slavery "unflinchingly" (Dumas). Perhaps this is better understood when later in the same article the reviewer goes on to say the book "leaves us feeling uplifted and hopeful" and then thanks the author for the introduction to the Grimkes. Kidd delivers what American audiences have been primed to accept, plots that "shift attention away from the problem inherent in the social system and, at the same time, garner support of its institutions" (Hughey 754). Without the stock characters of the Magical Negro and the White Savior "a slew

of unresolved questions and problems would emerge that... the plot could not resolve without... becoming overly politicized” (Hughey 759).

### **Handful as the Magical Negro**

One of the most problematic features of the Magical Negro character is that the character exists only in relation to his/her White counterpart. The Magical Negro serves to assist the White character in discovering who they are, inspiring some sort of change, or offering some type of “folk wisdom used to resolve the character’s dilemma” (Glenn 138). This use of Black characters is so common, neither Kidd nor her interviewers took issue with resurrecting an enslaved child likely killed as the (albeit inadvertent) consequence of the protagonist’s actions. In one quote, she comments casually on how Handful’s tragically short life made her novel easier to write: “Handful’s character and voice came to me with more ease than Sarah’s. Handful would talk, talk, talk...What made Handful so accessible to me was her free, unrestricted reign in my imagination. She did not come with the fetters of a previous history. She could speak and do as she wished” (Penguin Random House).

A likely reason for the “ease” with which she developed the Handful character is that the blueprint for her character has been present in American literature for centuries. The magical negro character archetype is defined as “a paranormal or godlike Black character who transforms the life of a lost and broken White character” (Hughey 756). Kidd establishes this mystique with her first sentence: “There was a time in Africa the people could fly” (Kidd 3). It reads almost like the introduction of a fairy tale-- and grants the Black characters a “primordial exoticism” typical of American depictions of Black characters in a multi-racial cast (Hughey 756). Sarah Grimke’s introduction, by contrast, is not only void of all magic, but is cold and bleak: “My eleventh birthday began with Mother promoting me from the nursery” (Kidd 8). The first person narrator then goes on to describe the unwelcoming room “paneled with darkness” that Sarah is forced to occupy, leaving her childhood behind. The opening sentences of each character’s narration establishes the contrast between whiteness as bland and cold and blackness as mysterious and spiritual.

These counter distinctions between black and white are woven throughout the novel. Consistent with the stock racialized characterization, Whiteness is cognitive, normal, and scientific; Blackness is physical, stylistic, and spiritual (Hughey 756). Early on Sarah Grimke is

portrayed as noble and precocious when she decides in the course of the same day to sign papers of manumission for Handful-- the young girl who was given to her as a gift-- and also to study law and become the first female jurist. When Charlotte, Handful's mother, puts her agency to the same ends-- freeing Handful-- her intelligence is described as "keenness" and "cunning", and Sarah Grimke categorizes her as "dangerous" (30) and "wily" (31). When the girls are discovered for their adventures in literacy, Handful handles her beating well and heals quickly-- reinforcing the stereotype of physically strong Blackness. Sarah can scarcely tolerate losing access to the library-- reinforcing the idea of incurable White scholarship. After the punishment, Handful begins her healing with her mother by placing her spirit in their "spirit tree" (83). (It is worth noting the first time the reader learns of the spirit tree is after Charlotte's beating--perhaps to emphasize the importance of spirituality and religion in Black suffering). Sarah's healing, by contrast, comes in the academic and ideological training of her sister, Angelina (82). Beyond this point in the plot, Handful fades to the background. The primary focus becomes "the White character's dilemma, not the Black characters'" (Glemm 138). Her life and voice are no longer "entwined with Sarah's" as Kidd intended (Kidd 363). Instead, Handful's character serves only to accelerate Grimke's self-actualization.

The bulk of "Part Two: February 1811-December 1812" focuses on Sarah Grimke's romantic possibilities and her subsequent disgrace by womanizer Burke Williams, using Handful's voice mostly as an echo of Sarah's pain. When Sarah is nursing her broken heart and wounded pride, Handful knows Sarah won't eat and is torn apart with grief. She pulls out the silver button that had taken on all Sarah's childhood dreams years ago, polished it and "rubbed it until it gleamed" and set it on her tea saucer. In Sarah's dark hour, Handful functions to remind her who she is- fulfilling the role as "the noble, good-hearted black man or woman" who saves the White character from themselves, avoiding crisis (Appiah 80). There's mention of Denmark Vesey, but mostly in the capacity of Charlotte's twice married lover. The relationship doesn't warrant much attention or exploration, since soon after the reader learns of his identity, Charlotte is arrested while visiting his town for refusing to yield to a White pedestrian. The might-have-been valiant scene, like everything else in the novel, serves mostly to develop Grimke and offer her comfort and perspective. The following morning, Sarah ponders the event, "Charlotte's disappearance brought a severe and terrible mercy, for not once throughout the harrowing weeks that followed Burke's betrayal was I uncertain which event was tragic and which was merely



unfortunate” (141). Comparing her own loss to Handful’s, Sarah is not only able to handle her own sorrow better, but consideration of Handful’s suffering allows her to become a more compassionate and selfless person. This connection between Sarah’s development and her understanding of Handful becomes even more explicit when Sarah is arguing with her father about colonization and professes, for the first time, her belief in racial equality. Her father is quick to attribute the thought to the Presbyterians, asking if they are suggesting slaves should live among Whites as equals. Sarah is quick to claim ownership of the thought:

“No Father. I’m saying it”

As I spoke, a rush of pictures spilled through my mind, all of them Handful... She was filling the house with smoke. She was learning to read...I saw her taking her lash...Walking bereaved circles. I saw everything as it was (145).

It isn’t conversation between the women that leads to this epiphany. Handful’s thoughts play no part in the transformation. Instead, her experience and existence as objects to be examined and contemplated are responsible for the formation of the accidental and reluctant abolitionist activist. That isn’t to say that the novel doesn’t have its share of unpretentious down-home wisdom delivered by Black folks when the white characters need it. For example, when Sarah leaves her second and more serious love interest to help her mother settle their finances after Mr. Grimke’s death Handful finds her in the drawing room, seeming “woebegone all the time” (200). Handful has just learned that many members of the only family she has left-- the others enslaved by the Grimke’s-- will be sold to other families. Of course, Sarah’s tears are harder to take and Handful seeks out the opportunity to console her master. When asked why she’s sad, Sarah answers “*This* is my life. Right here for the rest of my days” (200). Handful reflects on their commonality, thinking, “She was trapped same as me” (200). The thought sparks the recollection of a sermon by Denmark Vesey. Handful delivers the second hand message saying, “My body might be slave, but not my mind. For you, it’s the other way around” (201). Again, the horrors of slavery are diminished. The enslaved are portrayed as loving their masters, and again Sarah’s dilemma takes center stage, even in the Handful pages.

### **Sarah Grimke as the White Savior**

Ironically, both the Magical Negro and the White Savior archetypes “promote White supremacist messages regardless of which race acts as the ‘savior’” (Hughey 759). The White

Savior has been of particular value because of its utility at preserving racism while allowing White readers and audiences to feel anti-racist. More than showing friendly inter-racial relationships, the stories highlight White characters “going the extra-mile to help people of color who cannot or will not help themselves” (761). This combination of White sacrifice and Black helplessness is carefully constructed and central to the plot throughout the second half of the novel.

Actual history and teachers’ understanding of history are important to consider in the decision about which historical fiction novels should be taught in the K-12 classroom. A 2019 study of pre-service teachers reveals that teachers hold “narratives that charged Black people as responsible for their own demise [and] systemic oppression” (388). This warped perspective is easily understood when one considers how history is taught. In order to maintain the legitimacy of democratic electoral politics, students are taught that change happens with the ballot and then the legislative bill. In effect, this gives politicians, historically white and male, the power to make the changes. Therefore, we celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th amendment, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In reality, Lincoln’s proclamation prolonged slavery, Black codes and vagrancy laws kept Black people in positions of forced free labor, and gross inequalities exist over fifty years after the Civil Rights Act.

Of particular importance in the consideration of *The Invention of Wings* is the history around slavery and emancipation. The myth of Abraham Lincoln as “The Great Emancipator” is powerful and pervasive. The truth, however, is “slaves made a larger contribution to this process than Lincoln” (Bennett 21). In fact, if not for rebellion and runaways, that is to say if “the Blacks themselves had not taken the initiative... there would have been no emancipation in 1863” (Howard 30). Kidd’s treatment of the Vesey and Handful characters reinforces the narrative that Black people lack the agency or power to make real changes and must depend upon White allies to rescue them.

When Kidd first introduces the Vesey character, she immediately begins to discredit him. Kidd praises Grimke as “among the earliest major American feminist thinkers,” and the entire novel takes a feminist lean (Kidd 361). Therefore, when the reader learns Vesey is having an affair with Handful’s mom, lives with a woman who isn’t his wife, and has two wives somewhere else, the almost automatic response from a feminist reader is to dislike the character. In historical fiction, authors make very specific choices about what information to include and

how. Vesey's relationships with women never advances the plot, and serves only to call his character into question. As if to make the character even more off putting, when Charlotte (Handful's mom) visits, Vesey has instructed her not to ring the bell, but rather to stand outside the window until he happens to notice she's waiting there (117). It's worth noting that this detail doesn't play into plot development at all. There's no point where Charlotte waiting by the window is important to the story. Rather, this detail is pure characterization of both Vesey and Charlotte. The otherwise strong character willingly debases herself in a somewhat humiliating practice for the womanizing Vesey character.

Just as Kidd uses the tried and true archetype of the Magical Negro for the Handful character, her characterization of Vesey borrows from the racist American playbook. Kidd makes much of Vesey's women being "mulatto". Black men's attraction to White women has not only historically been an exaggerated danger, but has been motive for the murder by lynching of countless Black men. During the period about which Kidd writes, "white male thugs" looted and destroyed homes, schools, and churches in racist rampages (*Stamped*, Kendi 177). Their supposed mission was to protect women from "hypersexual Black-faced animals" (177). To complete her racist and dangerous characterization of a philandering animal, she describes Vesey as a "bull of a man" (Kidd 117).

Further characterization choices amplify racist images. Vesey is aggressive, yanking young Handful by the arm when she yields to a white pedestrian and scolding her (118). He treats his wives poorly, telling them "to find something to do" when he receives guests (175). His temper is uncontrollably violent. When his team makes mistakes, his wife confides in Charlotte that she "thought Denmark was gonna kill the man" (223). While some of the characterization might come from historical records, Kidd's imagination doesn't take into account that Vesey's life is "described only in the voices, often hostile, of one white master talking to another" (Robertson 8). Her fictional accounting amplifies the negative and fearful voices of the masters Vesey was trying to overthrow. Kidd doesn't describe his great devotion and love for people he worked to help free. When he had the chance to emigrate to Africa, "he wanted to stay and see what he could do for his fellow creatures" (Robertson 8). This one sided characterization of the leader of a failed revolution lays the foundation for Grimke as the novel's White savior.

Kidd ends the novel with Grimke as the hero, leaving her home to accompany Handful to freedom. The heroic moment ignores Handful's actions earlier in the novel. She is creative enough to think to hide Vesey's list of co-conspirators in a quilt, and confident enough to suggest it to him, despite his reputation (in Kidd's retelling) of dismissing women and scolding them mercilessly (Kidd 226). She is brave enough to volunteer to get into City Arsenal to steal bullet molds for Vesey's rebellion (237), and clever enough to devise a plan to do it (245).

If not to solidify Grimke's position as White Savior, it's unclear why Kidd would have even included Sarah in the escape. The moment should belong to Handful who, not surprisingly, uses her voice to praise Sarah-- reflecting gratefully that Sarah is risking "twenty years for assisting a slave to escape" (355). Yet, apart from making room in her luggage for Charlotte's quilt, she doesn't do much at all (354). Her presence alone casts her as a hero. Again, Kidd's decisions on the plot details of Handful's escape center Sarah's character. She is able, once again, to marvel at the "audacity and authority [her] life had found" (351). The reader never learns Handful's thoughts in the moments before securing her freedom. Of course, upon finally realizing the possibility of freedom, Handful's thoughts are of Grimke: "This ain't the same Sarah who left here. She had a firm look in her eye and her voice didn't dither and hesitate like it used to. She'd been boiled down to a good, strong broth" (355). Sarah is the hero just because she is there, and Handful the lucky recipient of Grimke's benevolence.

### **The issue of genre**

It may be tempting to condemn Kidd as racist or teachers as incompetent, but to do so misses the very important point that the racism and the lies are woven deeply into the patterns of genre and curriculum. Well intentioned teachers choose to teach *The Invention of Wings* as an opportunity to learn a bit about slavery, abolitionists, and suffragists. Likewise, Kidd's choices were also likely influenced by the conventions of genre and widely accepted patterns. Throughout the novel, Kidd makes a number of creative choices to write not a "thinly fictionalized account of Sarah Grimke's history, but a thickly imagined story inspired by her life" (Kidd 362). As mentioned earlier, Kidd decides to keep the Handful character alive. Additionally, she gives Sarah's character an imagined speech impediment to explain her historically recorded weak speaking skills. However, she plays very little with time, historical events, or location. For example, Denmark Vesey's failed revolution is closest in time and space

with the rest of her story. Perhaps this is why she didn't choose a different slave rebellion (of which there were 250). If not bound as much with large questions of historical accuracy, perhaps she might have imagined that Vesey's rebellion was successful and the very different course of events that might have resulted from a successful slave rebellion of that size. In this story, perhaps Handful is a leader in the rebellion and can free herself. In so doing, however, Grimke would have to imagine an entirely different society as a result. None of those choices are consistent with what readers expect from historical fiction. Historical fantasy/speculative realism allows the author to turn the readers' "attention to the gap or deficit between the ideals of redemptive liberal democratic national histories concerning inclusiveness, equality, justice, universal rights, freedom guaranteed by rule of law, and the deeds that have constituted nations and their histories as public collective fantasies" (Saldivar 594). Authors play with time and space to encourage the readers to imagine futures closer to the fantasy that has been spun about American democracy.

### ***The Underground Railroad***

It isn't surprising that historical fiction replicates and reinforces racist, sexist, and xenophobic narratives. The country's history is racist, sexist, and xenophobic. Breaking with genre conventions not only allows authors to more explicitly expose the true nature of present day institutions, but also allows them to create for readers a space where they can ponder the possibilities of an alternative reality. Like Kidd's novel, *The Underground Railroad* presents students with an accessible story of slavery and resistance. In its racial messaging, however, it serves almost as the antithesis of *The Invention of Wings*. The author's choices deliberately humanize Black characters, distinguish between White saviors and anti-racists, and pose a possibility for alternative ways to organize society. By breaking with genre conventions, Whitehead not only challenges the way slavery is normally studied, but also disrupts widely accepted narratives of race, power, and government-- encouraging students to imagine power in the hands of those who have always been deprived of it, often violently.

### **Cora as human**

Whitehead's decision to write from the limited third person point of view has been criticized by both literary gurus and the general public alike. Felice Laverne, Literary Agent and

editor says in her review of the novel, “we should’ve been squarely in Cora’s shoes, not watching her from above in a slightly removed, vaguely clinical 3rd person” (Laverne). Goodreads librarian reviews echo this sentiment: “the writing style is very emotionally detached, almost clinical in feeling (aka giving off those classic textbook vibes). It also doesn’t allow for any sort of connection to the characters” (Jessica). Popular opinion expresses pretty much the same: “I just found it lacking in anything resembling emotion. It’s a cold, distant, impersonal novel and it didn’t pull me in... Perhaps a first-person narrative would have better suited the subject matter and helped warm us to the characters” (May). More scathing criticisms come from the literary experts. In “Genre Trouble and History’s Miseries in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*,” Stephanie Li argues that Whitehead panders to his audience by only touching on the horrors of slavery, but then using the vehicle of the railroad to run away from the harsh realities. These criticisms may be telling of White America’s comfort (if not desire) to be voyeurs to Black suffering-- a tradition that began with 19th century abolitionists who furthered their cause by focusing on Black suffering rather than on Black humanity or resistance (72). Repeated images of brutalized bodies circulated by abolitionists served to cast enslaved people as “disempowered objects” rather than humans with agency (72). Teachers must be both cautious and responsible when choosing which texts are used in the classroom.

There have been well documented links between racism and trauma that teachers must consider when teaching a novel about slavery. Steady images of violence send Black people the message that “the world is not safe” (Williams). To counter this justified fear, teachers must empower students by emphasizing the important role the Black working class has played in fighting against brutality. If Black activist power isn’t highlighted, when students are shown civil rights activists who cling to non-violence in the face of all abuse, activists who “seemed to love the worst things in life-- the dogs that rent their children apart, the tear gas that clawed at their lungs, the fire hoses that tore off their clothes... the men who raped them, the women who cursed them, the children who spat on them, the terrorists that bombed them” they will come to see “the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast” (Coates 33). One of the most powerful features of *The Underground Railroad* is that while the horrors of slavery aren’t avoided, they are clearly written to avoid entertainment or titillation. Like the firsthand accounts of slavery, Whitehead’s prose-- particularly when writing of punishment or suffering-- is written

with a matter-of-fact restraint. In this way, he focuses his reader beyond the pain and onto the people.

The humanization of his characters and the enslaved is perhaps most effectively achieved by including actual advertisements for real escapees from slavery at the outset of every section of the novel. The last section is set apart with a fictional advertisement for his protagonist, Cora, placing her in the company of actual escapees from enslavement. Placing her fight for freedom in the context of real people humanizes and heroicizes both.

His characters are further humanized because they exist not as props for the development of a white character, but as independent and active agents. In the first few pages, characters are resisting oppression. Ajarry, the protagonist's grandmother, "twice tried to kill herself on the voyage to America" (Whitehead 4). She was quick to learn the system and "made a science of her own black body" (Whitehead 6). Ajarry died in the fields, but set the stage for two generations of run-away women.

Each of the women fiercely resist dehumanization. Apart from the obvious act of refusing to be owned, Cora continues to assert her humanity after her escape in the face of endless racist attempts to dehumanize her. When Cora arrives in South Carolina, she is given the name Bessie and is quickly "promoted" from her job as a nanny to a position at the Museum of Natural Wonders. In the museum, she functions as a "type" -- a human mannequin of sorts that rotates between exhibits titled "Scenes from Darkest Africa", "Life on the Slave Ship", and "Typical Day on the Plantation." None of the exhibits were accurate, but instead depicted gross lies of contented slaves and comfortable conditions. She critiques the exhibits, but Mr. Fields, concerned only with the aesthetic, that authenticity had to be sacrificed for economic efficiency--a dozen contented actors working on a field of cotton was preferable, but beyond the budget. Two weeks into her employment when Mr. Fields, the museum curator takes her on a tour Cora notices three important things. The first is that the only "types" were Black actors. The animals were stuffed models, and the "whites were made of plaster, wire, and paint" (117). The second realization is that the white exhibits, meant to "educate the public" about the history of America the "young nation", were as riddled with inaccuracies as those she worked (111). In exhibits with Native Americans, white men "stood in noble postures, their hands open in gestures of negotiation" (118). This image was in stark contrast to the stories she'd heard white men sharing with another, bragging "about the efficiency of the massacres, where the killed women,

and babies, and strangles their futures in the crib” (119). It doesn’t take Cora long to link her condition with that of the Native Americans, and to understand the greedy motive: “Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that would not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood” (119). Made to be a live exhibit, however, doesn’t reduce Cora to a passive object. She realizes the “monsters” are “on the other side of the exhibit...sneering and hooting” and exerts power over her surroundings (119). Every hour, Cora selected one patron-- who she decided was the weak link-- and gave them an “unwavering and fierce” evil eye (129). The patrons always “broke” nearly running away from the glass. She did this not only to pass the time, but to teach “a fine lesson... the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too” (129). In so doing, Cora becomes reasserts her humanity, insists on the difference between her and the mannequins, and forces the visitors to acknowledge the same.

The third realization also occurs to Cora at the Native American exhibit. Soon after her arrival in South Carolina, Cora is taken to a doctor for a medical exam. During her physical, Doctor Stevens explains he has been hired to educate Black women on a new surgical sterilization technique. He describes the surgery as a “gift to the colored population” and encourages Cora to consider it (115). As Cora reflects on how the Native American genocide “strangled... futures in the crib”, she also understands Steven’s surgery is the beginning of “stealing futures in earnest” (119). She not only refuses the surgery for herself, but also refuses to take on “the mantle of leadership with the other girls” forgoing the chance to be seen by White bosses as “a true credit to [her] race” (131). Additionally, she doesn’t shy away from confronting Ms. Lucy, the dormitory proctor who tries to pressure Cora into becoming a spokesperson for Steven’s surgery. Rejecting the offer, Cora likens the surgery to the slavery she escaped: “I can decide for myself...Why can’t they? On the plantation, master decided everything for us. I thought we were done with that here” (131). Miss Lucy “recoil[s] from the comparison” and tries to insult Cora by expressing her disappointment. The reader doesn’t occupy Cora’s mind when she’s punished, which drew considerable criticism as described earlier. The reader does, however, dip into her thoughts when the third person narration drops for the single sentence: “I’m not the person you thought I was” (131). Cora’s absolute insistence on her personhood subverts the standard expectation of slaves and suffering, and instead lays the groundwork for a story of heroism and strength.



## Ethel the White Savior

A major problem with most literature that explores interracial friendships is that “rather than promoting strong Black characters and cooperative racial relationships, they further White superiority and anti-Black stereotypes” (Hughey 756). The White Savior archetype is so common in film and literature and so often pretends to be not racist that, without a careful eye, the viewer/reader may not recognize the implicit racist messaging. Whitehead sharpens this contradiction masterfully with his Ethel character. Ethel is the wife of Martin, the Underground Railroad Agent who hides Cora in his attic. She vocally opposes harboring a fugitive, and scarcely tolerates Cora’s presence. Rather than allowing Ethel to disappear into the background, Whitehead devotes a mini-chapter to her character.

More than just providing her back story, the focused chapter opens an opportunity to examine and critique the White Savior archetype. At eight years old, Ethel has muddled ideas about race, reflective of the messages she gets from the media and her father. She loves her best friend Jasmine, the daughter of her dad’s slave, and enjoys nothing more than playing missionary and native or husband and wife with her playmate. When alone, she paints her face black and looks in the mirror “with practiced expressions of amazement and wonder” imagining what it will be like when she’s a real life missionary and “the n----- lift her to the sky, praising her name: Ethel, Ethel” (Whitehead 195). When she’s eventually forbidden to play with Jasmine, she consoles herself by indulging in her missionary dreams that she one day shares with her parents. Her dad responds with disapproval, encouraging her instead to be a schoolteacher.

One of the earliest and most racist interactions students may have are those with their teachers. Media is full of stories about white teachers and coaches who “save” troubled minority students from their “dysfunctional” families, neighborhoods, and schools. The racial messaging delivered by these movies impacts not only minority youth who internalize the message about themselves, but also the white youth who go into the field of education (Schulte 7). A huge benefit enjoyed by racist American culture is that the tradition is so longstanding and deeply entrenched, it passes for natural order. Coates comments “in this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men” (Coates 7). What’s important to consider in connection with *The Underground Railroad* is that racist ideas were carefully crafted during the time of slavery

by both enslavers and abolitionists. Voltaire promoted the idea of polygenesis, arguing for permanent Black inferiority. Buffon argued for one human species, but solidified the idea of race, and placed Africans “between the extremes of barbarism and civilization” (*Stamped*, Kendi 86). Both Voltaire and Buffon were abolitionists, highlighting an important pattern in American history-- with assimilationist ideas that maintain and promote White supremacy, one could be a producer of both racist ideas *and* abolitionist thought (85).

While not explicitly stated, and perhaps not Whitehead’s intention, the Ethel character offers the antiracist teacher to encourage students to reflect upon and problematize their own educational experience. Allowing students to ask why most of their teachers are white women, why most of what they read is by white men, and why schools remain so segregated even after *Brown v Board* not only allows teachers the chance to teach about racist hiring practices after integration, the indoctrination and profit motives of education, and the practice of redlining, it also allows teachers to understand what, if any, racialized messages about themselves they have internalized. Most importantly, exposing the racist roots of the injustices students experience can help dismantle any deficiency messages they may have internalized. Students must be aware of the racist firing of Black teachers and the resulting impact on the education of Black students in order to understand that the lack of representation in their schools isn’t a race based intellectual deficiency, but a deliberate result of racist practice. By highlighting the White savior archetype, study of *The Underground Railroad* will help students recognize the character in its other varieties and be critical, rather than receptive, of the novels/movies that incorporate the character type. Likewise, it is important for students to see the problems in films like *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*, and *McFarland USA* in order for them to realize that the problem with how they are educated has deep cultural roots that have nothing to do with them.

### **Ms. Garner-- the Assimilationist**

Along similar lines, students and teachers must recognize how acceptance and internalization of these cleverly disguised racist ideas function not only to limit students, but to make true antiracism impossible. A cornerstone of the legitimacy of public education is “the belief that doing well in school creates opportunities—that showing up, doing the work, and meeting their teachers’ expectations will prepare [students] for what’s next.” (*Opportunity* 6). Implicit in this argument is that all students are being prepared in the same way, and that the

education system as well as the world beyond the academy is fair. Interestingly, the more students believe this is true, the worse they do in school. Specifically, system-justifying beliefs and endorsement of assimilationist racial ideology results in negative self-stereotypes, lower grade point averages, lower academic persistence and curiosity, and increased behavior problems. (Godfrey et al 181). Far from being harmless or preferable to the segregationist/White Savior, this assimilationist racism masquerades as progressive and is probably the most common form students encounter. The mask it wears and the frequency with which students must resist this form of racism makes it the most nefarious. Challenging the ideology students have internalized outright can be difficult, and may be threatening to them. Exploring assimilationist racism and the flaws of uplift suasion through the character of Ms. Garner encourages students first to understand how sneaky racism can be, and then make connections to history and their own worlds.

Whitehead exposes the limitations of abolitionist/assimilationist arguments with this relationship between Ms. Garner and Caesar. Ms. Garner has all the trappings of the romanticized benevolent and kind-hearted master. She provides Caesar and his family with their own two-room cottage and is liberal with passes. Caesar and his family tend to a modest crop and basic domestic affairs, and are free to roam the county as they like. Like many abolitionists of the day, Ms. Garner believes that the enslaved need to be prepared for freedom-- merely being human beings was not enough by way of qualification. In order to help Caesar prepare for the freedom she promised to grant upon her death, she encourages him to cultivate a skill. Caesar complies, serving as an apprentice at a nearby woodworking shop. Eventually, he becomes quite a skillful woodworker and sells his creations in town. Upon her death, there are no manumission papers and Caesar's family is sold separately down South.

The tragedy is made worse because Caesar had "grown up believing he was free to choose his own fate" -- to be whatever he wanted to be (237). Instead, he was "reduced to one destination, a slow death in Georgia" all because "the old white bitch had lied" (237). His rancor is laid bare in the mini-chapter named after him and dedicated to his story. Like the rest of the novel, it is told in third person, though not as dispassionate as some of the prose dedicated to Cora's story. His frustration is different than Cora's because he was offered false hope. Ms. Garner kept Caesar believing in something that would never be, making promises she would never keep. Also like Cora's story, there is an insistence on humanity and a decision to make his

own change. There is a brief dip into first person: “I was born on August 14th. My mother’s name is Lily Jane. My father is Jerome” (236). At the end of the chapter, he decides that rather than waiting for a white master to grant his freedom, he and Cora can find their own way “home” (240).

Anti-racist teachers are duty bound to expose the empty promises of American capitalism and the public education it provides. Using Ms. Garner to introduce abolitionist upward suasion rhetoric offers a vehicle to examine the limitations of meritocracy and its racist underpinnings. Additionally, integrating non-fiction texts can help students understand how foundational slavery and the accompanying racism is to this country’s institutions. For example, studying abolitionist William Garrison may reveal to students the limitation of the argument that “the nearer Blacks approached the whites in their habits the better they were” (*Stamped*, Kendi 168). Like today, (Anglo centric) education and assimilation was touted as the means to achieving equality. Garrison called for an “increase in knowledge and moral improvement” to counter racism (169). It is important for students to recognize and ponder that “history has not shown a proportional relationship between Black uplift and White respect” (169). Since the abolition of slavery the country has gone to great lengths to oppress the Black working class. In every era since the thirteenth amendment Black codes, vagrancy laws, Jim Crow segregation, and mass incarceration have all contributed to racist inequality-- regardless of the progress of Black Americans in the face of such repression. Within this context, students can understand difficulties they face are carefully constructed and meticulously maintained. The flaw is deeply woven into this country’s history and does not lie within themselves.

### **Mr. Fletcher and Sam as the Anti-racists**

Students of color are accustomed to seeing images of White teachers and coaches coming to the rescue and delivering masterful speeches about injustice. *The Underground Railroad* places the White anti-racists as quiet heroes, dedicated to the cause without glamour or glory-- and always working together with Black people toward common goals. The characters don’t take up much of the story. Their names might even be forgotten by the end of the novel. That might have been Whitehead’s intention-- to highlight the difference between the true antiracist activist and the one with the White Savior complex.

Some may argue Mr. Fletcher is a nearly forgettable character, Mr. Fletcher appearing only at two points in the novel-- once early on, where he and Caesar plan the escape and later in Caesar's chapter where he contemplates his journey. One might consider, however, that perhaps Whitehead used the understated Fletcher character to cast light on the role of a true antiracist-- to help where able, and respect the abilities and leadership of the impacted population. Mr. Fletcher "abhorred slavery", thinking of it as a "monstrous system" (Whitehead 52). He befriends Caesar when he notices him reading in the town square. He quietly warns Caesar, saying if he can spot Caesar's ability to read, so might an enemy. "He took Caesar into his confidence," talking about slavery and working with Caesar to sell his crafts. Ultimately "the duo's true enterprise" was figuring out how Caesar could make his way to an Underground Railroad station (52). It is important to notice that Whitehead uses the word "duo". Fletcher is working with Caesar, not merely telling him what to do. The risks, though not equal, are also intertwined. Runaway slaves are brutally punished, and Fletcher is aware that even sympathizers with slaves are "flogged and abused by mobs, tarred and feathered" (53). He assists in getting Cora and Caesar to the Railroad's station, embraces them with "desperate affection" and exits the story without much fanfare (67).

Sam, the other antiracist in the novel, is a bit more well developed than Mr. Fletcher. Sam is physically present during Cora and Caesar's stay in South Carolina, and then toward the end of the novel in Indiana. The reader is reminded of Sam throughout the novel in Cora's reflective moments. When they first arrive in South Carolina, they are greeted by 25-year-old Sam who gives them papers with their new identities and briefly describes what they should expect. He listens intently as Cora describes a fight with bounty hunters that resulted in the death of a young man and the capture of her friend. He is "genuinely aggrieved" by the story, understands the increased risk, and rather than shy away from friendship becomes more committed to helping make South Carolina a better experience for them (Whitehead 94).

Sam's strongest features as an anti-racist are highlighted in two scenes. The first occurs because Sam has deliberately chosen a job that gives him not only the flexibility in hours required by his work as a Railroad agent, but also information that helps in operation and decision making. Sam is a bartender, and many of his clients become loose-lipped when relaxed or emboldened by alcohol. To place this decision into context, one might consider that a primary stressor for Black activists working with White activists is that White activists often gain social

and psychological benefits from superficial involvement with the movement, but aren't willing to embed themselves deeply or use their resources to advance racial equality (Gorki 797). Sam centers his work with the Railroad, and uses his profession to support it.

During one of his shifts, Sam learns of a medical experiment that infects unknowing Black patients with syphilis in order to study the disease. When Sam learns of the practice, he is outraged, but thinks beyond himself and does his best to learn more: "He kept his voice neutral, even as his face got hot" (Whitehead 124). He brings the news to Cora and Caesar and "they worked it out at the kitchen table" (126). Together Cora, Caesar, and Sam sit "struggling with the problem of whom to turn to" (127). Sam's cooperative approach stands in stark contrast to "white activists [who] speak over them (Black activists), speak for them, or find other ways to assert [their own] expertise" (Gorki 800).

The second scene highlighting Sam as an antiracist occurs late in the novel. After much suffering and many close encounters, Cora makes her way to the Valentine Farm in Indiana. On the Valentine Farm, harvest is day of hard work, but cooperative and celebratory. To begin the work, residents hold a "shucking bee", a contest to see which team works the quickest. Sam has come to visit Cora, and catch her up on the latest news about Caesar, the slave hunter Ridgeway, and her former master. He stays for three days, living and working with the Black residents of the farm. He is chosen for one of the shucking bee teams, and gladly participates. One of his team members says "he'd never seen a white man work so hard and Sam beamed with pleasure" (278). Perhaps more than a simple "feel good" scene, the shucking bee allows teachers to challenge the idea that racism is permanent. Research on reducing racism has produced the contact hypothesis, "the idea that to reduce prejudice, we must bring groups together (under the right conditions)" (Crisp 1). More specifically, researchers have found that more than just bringing groups together, the contact should be of high quality interpersonal interaction (Brown 330). From the moment Sam is introduced, Whitehead crafts sharp contrasts between him and the White Savior. Sam isn't invested in Cora and Caesar's wellbeing for glory, recognition, or righteous self-satisfaction. Instead every scene, from breaking bread to problem solving to the shucking bee, develops an egalitarian and honest friendship between Sam and the other characters. He lives with, eats with, and works with the community he also helps. He isn't interested in helping the enslaved as charity or for glory. He includes himself in the community he is helping, and is struggling for justice alongside them.

Perhaps the most important ideological lessons for teachers to deliver in discussion of Ethel, Ms. Garner, Mr. Fletcher and Sam is to make is the distinction between “not racist” and anti-racist. The characters of Mr. Fletcher and Sam are valuable for teachers because they help soften the defensiveness of many White students who are quick to argue that not all White people are racist. Sam and Mr. Fletcher demonstrate that “not racist” doesn’t mean much, but anti-racist struggle builds true multiracial unity, a necessary component for a world free of racism.

Ibram Kendi in *How to Be an Antiracist* argues that there is no such thing as racial neutrality. One cannot really be “not racist” only “racist” or “anti-racist.” More importantly, he emphasizes that “the most threatening racist movement is not the alt right’s unlikely drive for a White ethnostate but the regular America’s drive for a “race-neutral” one” (19). Understanding that race neutrality reinforces racism and racist policies is critical to educators because so much of education pretends to be race-neutral. Discouraging use of home language, certain dress code policies, and even text selection is often racist with assimilationist justification. This assimilationist form of racism may be a little more difficult to recognize than the gutter racism of the segregationists (who blame Black people for racial disparities) (*Stamped*, Kendi 2). So much of society is based on the idea that it is to the advantage of people of color to “become assimilated into American culture, [and] to acquire the traits held in esteem by dominant White Americans” that this racist tendency goes unnoticed in education (*Stamped*, Kendi 3). Texts that challenge not only the mainstream racists archetypes and genres, but also help students recognize the racism in assimilationist education offer the perfect vehicle for empowering students by validating their experience with racism, and avoiding a deficiency narrative.

### **The issue of genre**

Some of the issues with *The Invention of Wings* are not easy to explain away. For example, using the character inspired by a historical girl who died after a severe beating in order to support Sarah Grimke’s development is problematic with almost any lens. Other issues, however, may have resulted from genre. Whitehead’s decision to make the Underground Railroad an actual circuit of trains and rail calls for the reader to suspend disbelief from the outset, allowing him to play with space and time. Perhaps Kidd selected a failed slave rebellion, not to deprive her readers of seeing Black revolutionaries as successful agents of change, but

because it was the one most convenient to the setting of her story. By abandoning such conventions, Whitehead is able to integrate allusion to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, Freedom Trial, grave robbing, predatory credit practices, the minstrel show, the Trail of Tears, yellow fever, Karl Marx, H.H Garnett, and addiction and social control.

Of particular value in classroom instruction are the allusions to Freedom Trail. In *The Underground Railroad*, Freedom Trail isn't made of the historic monuments symbolic of America's early history. Instead, it's a road lined by the decaying bodies of Black people caught by lynch mobs that extended "as far as there were bodies to feed it" (Whitehead 169). Freedom Trail was made of "putrefying bodies, bodies consumed by carrion eaters [that were] constantly replaced" (169). The function of Whitehead's Freedom Trail is to terrify Blacks and discourage them from making North Carolina their home. This scathing comparison forces readers to understand that much of the country's history serves the same purpose. When education obscures that slavery was foundational to the country's growth, it removes Black Americans from the country's inception altogether. Why then, would students make this their home? When the critical contribution of the enslaved is ignored, students are likely to disengage from an educational agenda that strikes them (rightfully so) as racist and untrue. Many working class students and students of color experience a disconnect from the ideological and patriotic lessons delivered in school. When students' opinions about the United States and justice are invalidated, they are likely to develop a negative opinion of either the educational curriculum or themselves. Teaching the allusion to Freedom Trail highlights that not everyone celebrates the actions of the country's founding fathers, and that to do so is not only acceptable but has its place in academia.

### **Indiana: Humanity and Hope**

Perhaps the most exciting section of *The Underground Railroad* is "Indiana." When Cora arrives in Indiana, she stays at the Valentine Farm. The motto is "Stay, and contribute" (258). On the Valentine Farm, everyone works, and everyone enjoys the benefit of that labor. Food is prepared communally and enjoyed in the same way. Residents have access to literature and art, and decisions are made by democratic centralist procedures. As Cora compares Indiana to the rest of the country she says "Everything on Valentine was the opposite" (277). She laments, that unlike the false hope offered by his former master, Valentine Farm really offered a place where "a beautiful soul like Caesar could be anything he wanted" (277). The entire novel has been



about Cora's quest for freedom. It is not until she is on Valentine Farm that she defines for herself what freedom is: "a community laboring for something lovely and rare" (278).

Revolutionary Marxist teachers interested in empowering students to create and lead a different and better world can use *Indiana* to encourage students to imagine a world where everything is the opposite. Students can begin to see themselves like the character of Elijah Lander, who compares a white education to a "slave pass", but then turns around and "used it for mischief" (Whitehead 259). Imagining the opposite requires that students study and understand what is. It challenges them to see something literature and film don't offer-- a thriving world outside Western capitalism that isn't a cautionary tale. It also challenges them to be prepared to put in the work to build it and then fight to defend it. Just as Valentine explains to Cora, students can also understand that the "White man ain't going to do it. We have to do it ourselves" (283). Teaching the novel through a Marxist lens shows students their teacher has confidence they do it themselves. Contemplating the racist attack on Valentine, and why "too many white people ...don't want us to have it (Valentine/freedom)" can be used to prompt students to consider where their attacks may come from and how they together can either protect themselves or rebuild (281). Recovering from the devastating attack on Valentine, and moving forward, knowing they "started over once, [they] can do it again" develops hope, power, and resilience in students (282).

When Whitehead was asked about his decisions with Cora's characters he said it was important for her to "have the hope that there's a better life for her out there or else you just stay and die on the plantation" (Gross). As teachers, using the book in class allows for the opportunity not just to teach real history that validates and acknowledge students' experience with racism and injustice, but to point with the rest of Whitehead's allusions how the present is the new "plantation". The bosses aren't going to liberate anyone. We have to do it ourselves. A better world is possible. Students can create it. If teachers don't answer the call to work together with them and expose them to the texts that empower them to imagine what this world can be, and how they can be leaders in it, we are condemning them and ourselves to "die on the plantation".

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