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Sourcing the Imagination: Ta-Nehisi Coates's Work as a Praxis of Decolonization

At a time when some high school English classrooms erase and distort experiences and identities, it is vital for educators to explore pedagogies that provide radically reimagined forms of liberatory thought. This article explores ways the work of Coates can serve as "blueprint liberation" in the English classroom.

Colonizing the imagination is a far less noisy catastrophe. Or so we are led to believe. That the imagination is ethereal, slippery, industrious, and presumably safely tucked "inside" creates various hopes that it will survive unscathed. It is anointed twice over because it erupts from and roots into the same place: the cosmos. Often, imagining is an act of liberatory adventure since it feels borderless, boundaryless, and free of the constructs that bind. To imagine is to transcend. The imaginer can time travel, hover, disappear, and multiple selves can be constructed, observed, and nurtured. Imagining allows then and now to merge into "the(n)ow" or some such other configuration that mocks human expectations. Imagination, in all its unwieldy forms, is what fosters a child's curiosity and ushers in their urgent inquiry. It is, then, no coincidence that so often it is the image of a wondering child that represents the visual symbol for "imagination."

When I entered a teacher preparation program at an urban university in Chicago in 1995, I was repeatedly told how important it was for new teachers like me to encourage students to "dream." At the time, I did not possess the insight or understanding to ask what "dream teaching" was; furthermore, I looked askance at the desperation from both veteran classroom teachers and university professors when they mentioned this idea of "teaching children to dream." They seemed to be urgently pleading and I didn't even know what dream(s) they were talking about or why their voices quivered as they thrust this charge upon me. I knew

nothing about colonizing imaginations, and I certainly did not know that there were ways a high school English curriculum could become a steady force of decolonizing practices.

The following work, presented in two parts, first chronicles select experiences, based on observations of classroom practices, which inadvertently severed and, at times, eradicated student imagination. Second, the article presents the practical ways I have used the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates as a tool to reclaim stolen imagination about Blackness and beyond.

Part 1: Watching Robbery

As a new teacher, I gratefully inherited lesson plans, strategies, and classroom management methods from the seasoned educators in my English department. There was no time to reflect or fully design lessons I felt were rich enough to bring to students. Between the deluge of paperwork, rereading novels, grading, lesson planning, and endless meetings, I was crushed. By the third year of teaching I had developed patterns and practices that helped me manage the practical parts of the job.

At that same time I started to closely examine how classroom teachers framed and contextualized the texts they were teaching. I immediately noticed how the works authored by white writers were bolstered and lauded for a wide variety of reasons while the works by and about people of color, especially Black Americans, were presented with taut narrowness and airs of diminishment.

When I was able to observe other teachers in their classrooms I saw that although many would teach texts with Black characters or teach about “the Black experience,” those same teachers rarely, if ever, attempted to contextualize the way Blackness, race, and racialized oppression shaped or affected the text or influenced the present-day reading of that text. Often, students’ dynamic questions about race, racism, and race-based patterns of power were disregarded, minimized, or under-addressed by these teachers. Though many of those same colleagues reveled in contextualizing Nathaniel Hawthorne, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Albert Camus, they were uncertain and/or unwilling to racially contextualize a body of work. Furthermore, it became deeply apparent that these seasoned educators viewed the student inquiries about modern-day manifestations of race and racism with trepidation and resentment. The predictable yet cruel irony was that the same teachers who often wrote report card comments indicating that they wanted increased student participation began to systemically problematize the students who were thinking deftly and asking critical and necessary questions about complex oppressions.

It was the first time I observed students, en masse, demanding applicable, transferable answers. They were looking to their teachers to make sense of the increasingly observable race codes, and they longed for far more than a mystically romanticized reading of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. The teachers could not satisfy those requests, and often those teachers remained ragefully silent.

The pedagogical and psychological results of the teachers’ silence were a kind of academic and systemic “flattening” of Black identity at a time when Blackness was flourishing within some of the most dynamic societal and historical circumstances. By *not* constructing spaces to consider the multifacetedness of Black experiences, students were left experiencing profound patterns of erasure.

The students’ questions about past and present Black identity were glimpses into their imaginings and curiosities. They engaged in rigorous inquiry eager for answers and for ways of grounding their understanding. Those students were encouraged to explore Fitzgerald’s use of the colors yellow, white, and gold in *The Great Gatsby* while the color of their skin was a far more tangible and immediate reality.

Their growing loss of safety within society and their increased awareness of their vulnerability infuriated them. They knew they were targeted because of that skin color, and the recognition that their rapidly emerging racial literacy was not being honed, honored, or heard made them distrust the teachers in front of them. Like any diligent scholar, the students repeated the refrain “Why?” For 14 years I watched as the overwhelming majority of those educators rich in credentials, experience, proper disposition, and refined rhetoric simply refused to engage.

Teaching and Practicing Voyeurism

I monitored more closely how race and Blackness were and were not addressed in high school English classrooms. I noticed patterns of inadvertent disengagement when some teachers declared they were “teaching about race.” One such act of disengagement occurred repeatedly when teachers believed that by exposing students to the anguish of the pained experiences of people of color they were “teaching about the other,” “enlightening students,” and “digging deeper” into race issues. I listened to these teachers as they touted their prevailing logic in variations of, “if these students of color can see how badly ‘X group’ lives/lived, then those students would gain perspective, understanding, a sense of themselves, and then they would be motivated. They need to know how far they have come.”

What I quickly recognized was that too often the focus of the learning was on the defectiveness, delinquency, wretchedness, agony, and manufactured deficiency of the darker characters. There seemed an unwavering study of scenes filled with rape, rage, abandonment, violence, murder, and other heinous acts committed by or onto characters of color. Careful analysis of the parts of the texts that provided important context about a character’s actions were often not discussed or deeply distorted. *Pain-pimping pedagogy*, I scrawled one day while sitting in a faculty meeting.

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Between the systemic pedagogical omissions and excessive exposure to tragic, hopeless, brutalized black and brown characters, an often irreversible mistake seemed to constantly reoccur. There became a festering woefulness assigned to such characters and circumstances. In essence, blackness and darkness became a literary affliction and, by consequence, a real-life affliction. The instructional practices were robbing both students and teachers of ways to imagine blackness in multifaceted ways.

The line of broken, dysfunctional, pained characters of color marched through the entire 9–12 English curriculum from AP to the introductory levels. According to ethicist, lecturer, and

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educator Sherene H. Razack in her 2007 essay “Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses,” “The nearer you bring the pain, the more the pain and the subject who is experiencing the pain disappears” (377). It took years for me to realize that “pain gazing” became a kind of academic/curricular commodity. Teachers seemed to depend on

using the pain of a black or brown character as a way to “reach” students. Often the teachers expressed their satisfaction after engaging in such practices, loudly declaring that they “really connected with the kids.”

A second result from this practice of “teaching” about the “darker defective other” was the normalization of a symbiotic relationship of hyperfocusing on the darker subject while erasing the humanness of said subject. By constantly watching and/or reading about the pain of the darker bodies, students seemed to be learning how to fetishize race-based pain without an understanding of how the dominant population was accountable to and for these dreadful outcomes. What was also erased or was just never addressed in the lessons were the structures, systems, and individuals that upheld and regulated the tyrannical circumstances that reproduced adverse situations for fictional characters and humans of color. Since the pained experience of the darker body shifted to the center of the teaching, the humanness of that character and the underlying

racialized complexity of the situation along with the contributing circumstances simply vanished. As an educator, I was mesmerized and appalled.

Destabilizing Silences

As the students were using their questions and commentaries to plumb that complexity, I began to see beyond the ways and behaviors of individual teachers. I noticed the distinct impact of what I call *weaponized silences*: the kind of silence practiced by teachers and administrators who were not able or willing to engage with students or colleagues who were investing in critical discourse around race. In some ways those teachers seemed to be practicing a kind of pedagogical “stand your ground.” The teacher silences informed student perceptions about what was worthy of interrogating and what was not. As students began to “read” and internalize the teacher silences, they became less engaged and more reluctant to fully participate in their learning. That disengagement took many forms from increased “spacing out” in class and decreased homework completion to student outbursts and increased student silence. When scholar and activist Dr. Michael Benetiz used the term *noisy voicelessness* in one of his presentations about educational oppression and anti-oppression practices, I realized that learned systemic silencing was what students *and* teachers were practicing in response to student inquiries about race, racism, and systemic oppression.

At this time, I started searching for professional development materials focused on incorporating social justice frameworks into the English curriculum. Though I encountered many options, I was always underwhelmed because the social justice materials seemed sanitized and did not focus on the role of the oppressor. Additionally, those materials did not name the historical or systemic constructs that made the social justice framework a necessity. Again, I observed how wedded teachers were to this “flattened” and unimaginative social justice curriculum. While helpful and informative, these social justice curricula do not encourage students to recognize that such curricula will not end historically oppressive systems of pillage and violation. I became increasingly committed to presenting the most complete frameworks with an emphasis on teaching systemic analysis to understand systemic oppressions. The students’ questions demanded such pedagogy.

As my search for more robust material continued, I started studying the works of Edward de Bono, bell hooks, Augusto Boal, Cherrie Moraga, Paulo Freire, Sharene Razack, Edward Said, James Baldwin, and Audre Lorde. I gingerly inserted their work into the curriculum, and most students became exponentially more curious as they learned about these activists, scholars, and thinkers. At the same time, I began rereading magazines like *Adbusters*, *The Sun*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic*. Ta-Nehisi Coates's writing was both anvil and Blackstardust, a biting reminder that lyrical dexterity was not just a skill and tool for the MC on stage.

Part 2: Praxis

Coates's work affords fiercely precise language that explains how specific acts, truncated beliefs, and intergenerational mythmaking converge to create a thing commonly referred to as America. His writing—steeped in firsthand observation, timeless theory, plain, observable history, and unapology—is a steady and thunderous march of uncompromised conscience. It is necessary for young learners to experience such a voice because it is these same young people who continue to inherit some of the most sophisticated constructs of tyranny in the history of the United States. Most especially since the next wave of oppression hinges on their seemingly benign participation, Coates's work becomes a visceral and viable necessity. His work has served well in my English classes because he acknowledges and writes to complexity and does not capitulate to simplistic homogeneity.

Coates acknowledges that intergenerational constructs of oppression abound and they deserve our keenest attention. In that sense his work is what I call *blueprint liberation*. Just as Black women stitched together quilts that delivered a Black body to Northern freedoms, Coates leaves a blueprint for how to rethink both the content and the process of what we have been trained to believe. His work roars and cleaves right into the heartlessness of the American Dream. He obliterates the imaginings that are necessary to conjure that fictive dream and deftly places the pulsating Black body into the center of it all. What follows are some of the pedagogical practices I have incorporated in my high school English classes using Coates's "The Case for Reparations" and *Between the World and Me*.

Exercising Resistance

After several months of teaching students about power structures, cycles of oppression, and normalized narratives of dominance, our class studied Coates's long-form essay "The Case for Reparations." The first read provided the opportunity to explore the content of the essay. After completing the reading, students wrote a short response (300–600 words) where they predicted the counterarguments to Coates's essay. The skill of predicting counterarguments allows students to anticipate contention and prepare for refutation of future counterarguments. Students then locate, read, and listen to the commentaries against Coates's argument for reparations. This exercise, while chilling, is valuable as students observe the levels of resistance not just to Coates's thoroughly researched work, but they observe the collective resistance to contextualizing oppression in a systemic and historical manner. I teach students that systemic oppression cannot be solved with personal stories or isolated interventions, and this classwide series of lessons about resistance to Coates's work is often a student's first recognition of society's commitment to refusing systemic understanding and rejecting systemic solutions.

A second assignment based on the first reading of "The Case for Reparations" asked students to interview their parents, guardian, or other adult about their experiences with land grabbing, human removal, and/or gentrification. This assignment is often an oral history since almost all of the students have either had their families leave a neighborhood or country or they have moved because skyrocketing prices forced their parents to seek more affordable living options. As well, there have been students whose parents have been able to purchase and acquire land, schools, businesses, and other valuable resources and commodities because they possessed the prestige, connections, and wealth to do so.

The second reading of Coates's "The Case for Reparations" allows students to analyze the form and structure of the essay and examine how a strong writing proficiency allows Coates to reach his audience. As a multigenre piece of writing incorporating data, graphs, interviews, and firsthand accounts, the piece is simultaneously sophisticated and accessible. Students explore the sentence structures and engage with specific sentences that serve

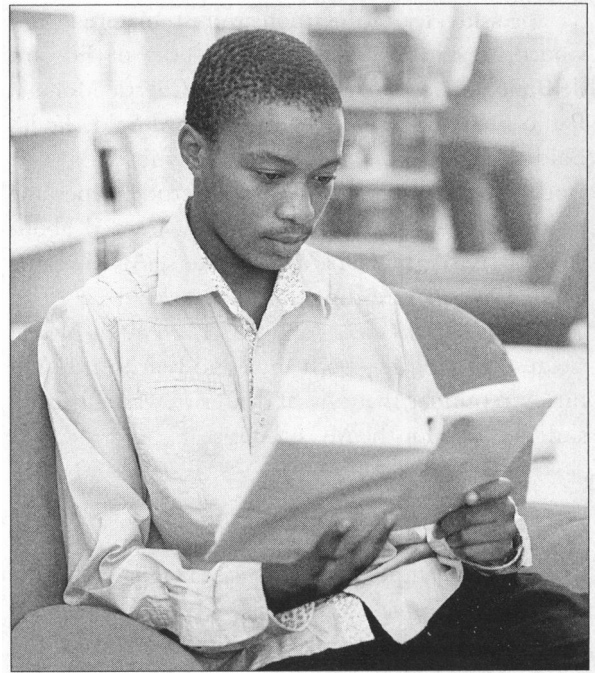
as discourse markers leading to both the deepening and defense of his arguments. Students work in groups to scrutinize whole paragraphs with the intent to later write about the sentences and passages that serve as points of crystallization for their own understanding. The eleventh-grade students struggle with this essay for many reasons, but most recognize the possibility of what can happen when ideas are researched, ordered, structured, formed, cared for, and well presented.

As a final assignment for this reading, the students are asked to place this writing in an even broader context. That Coates positions the essay in the historical habit of Black disposability makes it possible for me as an English teacher to help students place the essay alongside their lived observable experience of present day manifestations of land grabbing, gentrification, and human removal. Coates's essay becomes a historical and temporal blueprint articulating the centuries-old continuum of land raiding, human removal, and systemic destabilization. "The Case for Reparations" is a live document in our English class because Chicago is a city that is erupting from the juggernauts of intersecting oppressions. After our classroom experiences with "The Case for Reparations," students have more language and context to filter and address, if they choose to, the coded narratives they hear about "that new up and coming area" or "the cool new neighborhood improvement project."

From Definitions to Roadmaps

Many years ago, I stopped asking students to tell me what they thought the American Dream was. Instead I asked them to write the steps to achieving that dream and to create their family's roadmap to that dream. I then asked students to begin adding detours and roadblocks to their family's American Dream if they were comfortable doing so. The result was work that revealed rich and complex global-wide American Dream matrixes, mazes, and maps. Some students even started to re-title the assignments as the American Myth or The American Nightmare. This assignment was intended to be the preliminary contextualization assignment before reading Coates's *Between the World and Me*.

Prior to reading the book, students watched Coates's interview from the 2015 Chicago Humanities Festival. In the interview, he referred to the



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events that influenced him to write *Between the World and Me*. When Coates chooses writing as a way to mine the anger he felt at his dear friend's police-inflicted murder, he provides students with an example of one way to harness and manage justifiable anger and outrage. Just as Audre Lorde says there are ways to use anger "before it laid my visions to waste" (124) in her 1981 keynote address, "The Uses of Anger: Women Respond to Racism," Coates acknowledges that writing as truthfully as one can is one way to attend to deep, reverberating rages. While watching that interview, students are charged with collecting Coates's influences for writing *Between the World and Me*, and a journal prompt asks students to further explore one of his stated influences.

Before even starting *Between the World and Me*, our class investigated what it means when the reading of books and other well-crafted written works placed alongside the exploration of one's writing serves as a catalytic moment. It is Coates's revisit to a previously read text, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, and his reflection on his own writing for "The Case for Reparations" that helps to propel him toward writing *Between the World and Me*. For students, exploring Coates's motivations and documenting their relationships with writing, reading, and thinking became the foundation of the most robust class discussions.

I asked the students to create their blueprints of the most pivotal books they had experienced from sixth through twelfth grade and which ones they felt younger students needed to experience. I also asked students to recall the writing they are most proud of and write about what that writing revealed about them. The act of watching Coates be a pupil of Baldwin's writing and a careful examiner of his own body of work became a way for students to observe the ways writing can be cyclical, cathartic, and catalytic.


During my initial preparation to teach the text, I assumed the most transformative moments and "deepest learning" would come from full-class discussions about any of the dozens of Coates's glistening passages. While our class did work as a collective to engage specific passages from *Between the World and Me*, it was clear that examining Coates's experience with reading and writing and asking students to do something similar became the essential learning experience. The intention was that students could begin to track their academic, emotional, and learned experiences within their own reading and writing and begin to create a reading, writing, learning blueprint of their experiences.

Closing

Colonizing the imagination might be one of the final steps before those who are targets of domination begin to autocolonize themselves. Since the person targeted by domination has embodied the beliefs, subtleties, and essential practices of the colonizer, the actual colonizer is no longer necessary in the physical form. Colonized people learn to practice the behaviors of domination and self-subjugation, or else they believe they will lose. The obvious irony is that even those who fully internalize colonized behaviors to save themselves are not safe. It is an equally wrenching horror when one recognizes that those who colonize are in the throes of their own peculiar terror. Ta-Nehisi Coates's writing provided my English classes with examples of writing designed to decolonize and reclaim.

The first part of this article is an attempt to capture some specific classroom practices that

infiltrate and detour those learners who are seeking pathways to freedom both imagined and real. In addition to the taking of land, resources, options, and jobs, theft of thought in the form of weaponized silences leads to theft of momentum. Such incessant thieving is a sharp blade in the colonizers' arsenal, and that theft of momentum occurs in schools at all levels on a regular basis.

The second part of this article explores how Ta-Nehisi Coates's work can usher in ways of multidimensional thinking and understanding. In a time when the interlocking systems of oppression are so volatile and so sophisticated, the answers, explanations, and blueprints must be equally as sophisticated, and Coates delivers a robust matrix of complexity and understandings in his work. He knows the war, the plunder, and the mythologies are as raw and soul-breaking as any before. He writes to, and beyond, that which is broken in a way that can reach the multitude. "They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people" (Coates 149). He arcs to wholeness—of body and especially of imagination. Coates's work in an English classroom is liberation pedagogy. It is an ancient future wisdom inside a pedagogy of decolonization. It is momentum redelivered and returned. 

The act of watching Coates be a pupil of Baldwin's writing and a careful examiner of his own body of work became a way for students to observe the ways writing can be cyclical, cathartic, and catalytic.

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