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Flipping the Coin: Towards a Double-Faced Approach to Teaching Black Literature in Secondary English Classrooms

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Flipping the Coin: Towards a Double-Faced Approach to Teaching Black Literature in Secondary English Classrooms

Critiquing two approaches that English teachers use to teach Black, or African-American, literature in the secondary classroom—one that centralizes races and the other that ignores it—this article proposes a hybrid approach that combines both. This double-faced approach recognizes the culturally specific themes that give the text and the Black author their unique voice while also recognizing commonalities that bridge the text to others—despite the race of the authors. To demonstrate the feasibility of the double-faced approach, the article concludes with an examination of three texts through the lens of this “race both matters and doesn’t matter” perspective.

Keywords: black; literature; multicultural; secondary; race; pedagogy

Introduction

John C. Carr (1972) argued for a perspective towards Black literature that viewed its relevance as a two-sided coin: “‘Telling it like it is and might be’ and ‘telling it beautifully’” (123). In this article, I build on his stance with what I label a double-faced pedagogical approach to literature. From my stint as a high school English teacher, I witnessed the power of tradition, the tendency to teach certain texts in their same, almost role-specific ways. As a beginning teacher, I caught myself having ‘difficulty escaping the cookie-cutter mold of traditional pedagogical methods’ (Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber 2006, 486). For me, Shakespeare was a necessity in my curriculum; and, initially, I taught his plays and sonnets the way I learned them. Also a necessity was Black literature; and, initially, these Black texts served one sole purpose: to make the Black voice heard in the US English classroom. Yet, somewhere between here and there I grew dissatisfied with such a limited use. I began to see Black literature as having more to say than that which was merely coated in Blackness. Thus, I slowly began expanding my usage of Black texts, making extra-racial textual connections with characters, plots, and most importantly

themes. I humbly offer such an approach as an intervention to the two incomplete approaches that, based on my experiences and observations, persist in American secondary school English classrooms. Either Black literature is indelibly marked as *Black* and thereby constrained to topics of Blackness (which I label the Voiced Approach) or Black literature completely loses its particularity and becomes, in essence, white-washed (which I label the Silent Approach).

According to the Voiced Approach, Black literature—which I define simply and comprehensively as literature produced by an individual identified as Black or African American—is viewed as an area requiring specialization and maybe even first-hand experience. Some teachers may feel ‘underprepared and ill-equipped to discuss the non-Eurocentric cultures’ in class (Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber 2006, 487). Consequently, Black authors and their works—among others—have a limited presence in classrooms due to this ‘perceived lack of knowledge’ of Black culture and literature (484). Thus, without the specialized knowledge—so the argument goes—teachers generally cannot and do not teach these texts, which seem so culturally specific. Three results spring from this occurrence—the first two leading to the third: 1) the limited classroom presence of Black literature, 2) the strict adherence of ‘Black talk’ to Black texts, and 3) the implied message that being Black is an marker that typically blots out all other portions of one’s identity, thus making one’s race the only determining factor in everything. It is this act of labelling that transforms a student who is Black, a writer who is Black, a President who is Black, into a *Black student*, a *Black writer*, a *Black President*. While such titles certainly acknowledge—and, in effect, honor—the cultural heritage and worth of the Black population, this specialization goes so far as to perpetuate an inherent difference from the more standard and unexamined White population. Such an approach ultimately discredits the commonalities shared between Black literature and others and, by comparison, between Blacks

and non-Blacks. For this reason, I must clarify that this article particularly addresses the population of English teachers who hold the ‘Black talk for Black texts’ perspective, which limits the literature’s presence and discussion in the classroom. For them, I offer an expansion of their curricular texts, as well as a broadening of their perception.

Contrasting with the Voiced Approach, the Silent Approach runs in the opposite direction. Rather than focusing on cultural particularity, it advocates the general and the common, which allows the literature to blend with the commonalities of the other literature in the classroom, especially the canonized (typically Eurocentric) texts. In effect, the literature surrenders its unique Black voice in exchange for a more ‘universal’ one. In this way, students may encounter a Black text without even learning that the author claims African descent, thus resulting—intentionally or not—in cultural absorption. Returning to the coin metaphor alluded to earlier, I argue that both of these approaches are single-sided, giving much attention to the contours and details of the image facing upward, yet completely failing to acknowledge the existence of its other side. To acknowledge the item as the coin that it is, it is necessary to flip it and to examine both sides. So should it be with Black literature.

I argue that to simply embrace differences or commonalities alone—each a noble gesture—risks confining groups of students to their features of difference or, for the sake of maintaining shakeable unity, refusing to value their uniqueness. Guided by critical race theory and my double-faced approach, this article proposes that both differences and commonalities can and should be embraced. Thus, specifically for this article, race both matters and does not matter. Black literature—because of and despite the racial identity of the author—bears two faces that should be recognized: the culturally-specific face and the more standard, more ‘universal’ face (Jarrett 2006; Spivak 1993). To illustrate the possibility of this ideological coexistence, I

examine three pieces of Black literature—Angela Johnson’s (2003) *The First Part Last*, Sharon Draper’s (2009) *Just Another Hero*, and Richard Wright’s (1966) *Native Son*—to highlight their more general, non-race-bound offerings for students and teachers.

A crafting of the story: Critical race theory

My double-faced approach has its foundations in critical race theory (CRT), which seeks to bring into view the ordinariness of racism for the purpose of exploring and challenging the way in which racism is ‘deeply ingrained in American life’ (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995, 55). According to CRT, storytelling is a powerful avenue through which self- and social perceptions are constructed and manipulated. Specifically, critical race theorists focus on the ‘series of tacit agreements mediated by images, pictures, tales, blog posting, and other scripts’ (e.g., classroom literature) that contribute to American ideology (Delgado and Stefancic 2012, 48). Through these means, certain perspectives and perceptions—whether positive or negative—are prioritized and promoted to become, what Adichie (2009) calls, single stories. The perniciousness of these single stories is that they sometimes offer perceptions of ‘merit, causation, blame, responsibility, and racial justice’ that are taken as the truth rather than as the incomplete stories that they are (Delgado 1993, 666). In other words, these disseminated stories become so normalized and uncontested that they, like institutional racism, blend into what is understood as the “‘natural” parts of everyday life’ (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 28).

Acknowledging another dimension to a previously incomplete story, the counter-story then aims to challenge the authority and accuracy of a single story. The restorative power of this dimensioning enables a deeper understanding not only of others but also of ourselves—and how we came to know what we know, believe what we believe (Delgado 1993; Delgado and

Stefancic 2012). It is this feature of the counter-story that led Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie (2009), when contemplating her earlier experiences with literature, to express

I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are. (para. 12)

As Adichie noted, this ‘mental shift’—created by the counter-story of African literature—expanded her world even more than the American and British literature and demonstrated that people like her indeed have a recognized literary presence (para. 11). Thus, the purpose of a counter-story is not necessarily to supplant the single story. Doing so might merely replace one incomplete narrative with yet another one. Instead, it is possible for both the single story and the counter-story to co-exist as a way to complement each other, creating a necessary complication of what is deemed natural.

A charge towards cultural specificity: The birth of the Voiced Approach

Applying critical race theory to Black literature requires a brief retrospective examination of the development of Black American literature—and subsequently the Voiced Approach—during the period of Jim Crow in the United States, a period that worked to restore and maintain the White superiority that the abolition of slavery disrupted and threatened to destroy. Following the years of Reconstruction, this Jim Crow era gave power to the single story of Black inferiority, a story that steadily burrowed into the inner workings of the country’s structure. With such a commitment to this single story of racial hierarchy, it is no wonder that by ‘the turn of the twentieth century, every state in the South had laws on the books that disenfranchised blacks and discriminated against them in virtually every sphere of life’ (Alexander 2012, 35). Black material

was then produced as a counter-story to ‘shatter the mindset’ that was created by this reigning single story (Delgado and Stefancic 2012, 91). Consequently, Black literature expanded into a testament to the collective solidarity of Blacks, their wealth of talent and interests, and their lack of inferiority (Brown, Heilig, and Brown 2013). Charged with always ‘speaking *as*’ their race however, Black works that failed to speak from the seat of race and the *authentic* Black experience received negative criticism from the world of Black writers and critics (Jarrett 2006; Spivak 1990). The job of these writers was simple: to always serve as ‘a voice from the margin’ (Spivak 1993, 55).

However, here is yet another flattening down of the ‘many subject positions which one must inhabit’—to use Spivak’s (1990) words—just as were the stereotypical Black images that initiated this movement of racial realism (Adichie 2009; Jarrett 2006; Spivak, 60). Even though Black literature gained focus and momentum as a counter to the single story of Black inferiority, it quickly resolved into a single story itself—one that prioritized the experiential knowledge of the Black voice and, in turn, essentialized difference based on skin color (Jarrett 2006; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). This pigeonholing result is well-captured in Jarrett’s (2006) observation that

[t]o say that the term ‘African American literature’ signifies literature by, about, and/or for African Americans is not simply to utter a definition. In American intellectual society and culture, it is a determination of the way authors think about and write the literature, the way publishers classify and distribute it, the way bookstores receive and sell it, the way libraries catalog and shelve it, the way readers locate and retrieve it, the way teachers, scholars, and anthologists use it, the way students learn from it—in short, the way we know it. (3-4)

Thus, the attempts to render a new story that promoted a new, positive Black image have, in a way, succeeded in doing so. Yet there is a more dominant image that has also been created: one of exclusivity, one of otherness, one of inherent difference. Because of this unbreakable bond to

cultural specificity—i.e., Blackness and Black culture—Black literature is sometimes seen as a field requiring scholarly or experiential expertise to teach. Such is the image that makes the literature difficult to introduce into and easy to leave out of today's American curriculum.

Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber (2006) reported that, when asked about their classroom inclusion of multicultural literature, some secondary teachers cited 'their own lack of knowledge about multicultural literature' as the reason for its limited or non-existent presence (485). Specificity is so affixed to the literature that 'one teacher noted that she wasn't a historian and felt underprepared and ill-equipped to discuss the non-Eurocentric cultures in her class' (487). While such a response clearly concerns prior educational experiences and pre-service training, much of teachers' views and usage of Black literature derives from a kind of pedagogical genealogy as they typically teach how and what their own teachers taught, who in turn typically did the same, and so on ad infinitum (Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber 2006).

A more standard path: The dangers of the Silent Approach

In an attempt to expand the classroom presence of Black literature, the Silent Approach offers a second counter-story: one that views the literature from a standard, racially decentralized perspective. Such a lens regards the literature as literature, as texts capturing the commonalities of the human experience despite racial difference. Because of the move away from racial discourse, *Black writers* transform back into *writers*, thereby requiring no special cultural knowledge for teaching and discussing their works. This take on standardization parallels Brooks and McNair's (2015) discussion of the universal quality of Black literature. In both their and my contexts, 'universal' essentially describes the reader-connection that exists despite race and ethnicity. Black texts, 'while infused with authentic cultural practices and depictions, [can] still provide readers from all backgrounds ways to genuinely connect to the stories' (17). However,

there is a danger in this single approach of standardization. This danger lies in its potential to replace the Voiced Approach, the counter-story of Black specificity. Doing so, in the words of Morrison (1992), ‘risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both art and the artist’ (12). A loss of voice occurs when Black authors are stripped of their racial/cultural identifier.

Carr (1972) commented on this voicelessness in his discussion of a study examining the treatment and presentation of Black authors and their works in English literature textbooks. In one textbook’s presentation of an essay by James Baldwin, for example, ‘there is no suggestion of what Baldwin, in other places, has documented as the particular problems of the black artist,’ nor is there even any indication of his race (Carr 1972, 128-129). Throughout the study, Carr cited similar situations as this in various textbooks, several of which ‘sanitized’ the Black writer and works ‘so not to offend white readers’ (Dohrer 1998, 105; Carr 1972). Even though it provides a *general* audience with greater accessibility to the literature, such an erased and appropriated literary presence almost seems more pernicious than no presence at all; for it relies on the socialized reflex of labelling as *White* any person or character that lacks such a racial/ethnic marker as name, accent, skin color, or place of birth (Chambers 1997). Therefore, I argue that a necessary co-existence between the two counter-stories—the culturally specific and the standard—is essential to maintaining both a cultural identity and a common identity.

A necessary balance: The Double-Faced Approach

The double-faced approach echoes Du Bois’s (2009) description of the feeling of double consciousness within the Black American. This seemingly troubled figure ‘ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings’ (8). With an eye on finding an equilibrium, Du Bois (2009) eloquently detailed the ultimate goal of this individual, writing that

he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (9)

Likewise, Black literature carries two faces: it is interpellated *Black literature* as well as general literature (Althusser 2001). According to this double-faced approach, each face has its value, and neither can afford to be lost.

However, to be clear, such an approach does not necessarily argue for a simultaneous teaching of both sides with every piece of Black literature. Instead, recognition of both sides is called for. Classroom discussions would be neither all specific—for fear of pigeonholing—nor all general or standard—for fear of bleaching, of being ‘as little Negro and as much American as possible’ (Hughes 1926, 692; Du Bois 2009). In such a way, the literature, or the teaching of said literature,—being neither one nor the other—would aim to reflect ‘the complexities of humanity,’ an accurate portrayal of reality (Jarrett 2006, 2). As shown in Table 1 [Table 1 near here], the execution of this combined approach hinges on literary pairings. While it is influential to show how such a text as Virginia Hamilton’s (1982) *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* relates to Gloria Naylor’s (1988) *Mama Day*, it is just as significantly influential to show how that same text relates to works like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or H.G. Wells’s (1966) ‘The Door in the Wall.’

For example, when teaching twelfth grade English, I built a connection between Daniel Defoe’s (2003) *A Journal of the Plague Year* and a less standard text for an English classroom, Olaudah Equiano’s (1969) *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*. Perhaps at first thought, these two texts are far from similar—one, a fictional firsthand account of the London bubonic outbreak and the other, an autobiography of an African’s experience as a slave

and his efforts to regain his freedom. Yet identifying textual connections is hardly ever a one-to-one comparison, no matter the texts. For this Defoe-Equiano pairing, I focused simply on rhetoric. My students and I examined how Defoe used logical, emotional, and ethical appeals to convince his readers that he actually witnessed the many events chronicled in the text—despite the fact that he was too young to remember such details. We then turned to a descriptive excerpt from Equiano’s text in which he provides a vivid account of the brutal voyage on the Middle Passage. Both Defoe and Equiano were seeking credibility with their writing, albeit for different reasons. However, through scrutiny of Equiano’s powerful words and images, the students observed that, unlike Defoe, Equiano used very little, if any, logical appeal but relied mostly on emotional appeal to share his experiences. Thus, as I argue in this article, the pairing of these texts provided us with the platform to discuss commonalities in such areas as writing style and purpose as well as differences stemming from intentions and unique experiences. What follows is a discussion of using the double-faced approach with other pairings.

The Double-Faced Approach in action

Three pieces of Black literature were chosen for the illustration of this double-faced pedagogical approach: Angela Johnson’s (2003) *The First Part Last*, Sharon Draper’s (2009) *Just Another Hero*, and Richard Wright’s (1966) *Native Son*. I selected the first two novels for their contemporary status and their authors’ popularity among young adult audiences; Wright’s novel I chose for its growing canonization and presence in US English classrooms. All of the texts to which I link these three novels are canonized works, mostly short stories, that secondary school English teachers are likely to encounter—works I myself encountered—in their school-adopted literature textbooks. Finally, before beginning, it may be helpful to note that, unlike the Defoe-Equiano example, the connections made with these three texts are based primarily on theme,

which in turn renders similarities in plot and character design and motivation.

The First Part Last (FPL)

Johnson's (2003) young adult novel was the Coretta Scott King Book Award recipient of 2004—an award 'given annually to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults that demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values' (American Library Association 2015). Interestingly, the design for the book award, as captured in this general description, echoes the desire for the double-faced recognition as the award encourages the publication of works that are simultaneously culturally specific and applicable to humanity at large.

Brief synopsis of FPL

In *The First Part Last*, the lives of two Black teenagers—Bobby and Nia—experience drastic changes when Nia discovers that she is pregnant. Presented in alternating chapters in the past and present, the novel mostly follows the point of view of Bobby, a sixteen-year-old student scheduled for early graduation, as he gradually explains the events that led to his present situation. Though the couple initially intend on giving the baby up for adoption, Bobby decides to keep the child and raise her alone after Nia suffers complications during pregnancy that place her into an irreversible coma. Through his struggling adjustments to raising his newborn Feather, Bobby realizes that nothing—his relationships with his friends, parents, and Nia among other aspects of his old life—will ever be the same.

Analysis of and application to FPL

To be sure, as Hughes-Hassell (2013) has argued, the counter-storytelling elements that Johnson

offers in this novel ‘def[y] the distorted image of Black males represented in the media’ (217)—those that suggest both that they are inherently marked by a lack of education and responsibility and that such issues as teen pregnancy are found only in lower-class homes. Both Bobby and Nia are college-bound and come from middle-class families that create ‘nourishing home environments,’ yet through the character of Bobby, Johnson (2003) reflects the complex nature of human identity: in addition to these previous qualities, Bobby is also seen ‘skipping school, getting arrested for street art, and leaving Feather with [her babysitter]’ out of forgetfulness (70).

In regards to the more standard face of the text, the novel carries such relevant themes as escape, acceptance of responsibility, unexpected changes and their effect on us, decision-making, family dynamics, and growing up. This is where we will begin. Each of these themes can serve as a non-racialized literary bridge to other texts—White or non-White—in a similarly ‘standard’ fashion. Let us begin with the theme of escape. Again, Johnson’s Bobby gets his girlfriend pregnant; then, she falls into a coma, and Bobby takes care of his daughter on his own. At the introduction of each new concern, Bobby feels an increasing need for an escape from his reality of responsibilities. At one point, Bobby and Nia seriously contemplate putting their unborn child up for adoption, a venue for escape that Bobby eventually decides against. Later, when the mounting expectations become too confining, he desperately and unintentionally retreats into his mind, losing track of both time and space:

And there’s that thing I haven’t done in a long time. Forgot that it used to juice me to do it, and now I need to do it, like yesterday....Haven’t felt this let loose in a while, and I almost can’t stand it. Found this great wall a few weeks ago off the Ave. And it’s time to do some tagging. (Johnson 2003, 57)

So he begins to spray-paint this wall, and while he does so, he slips into a metaphysical escape from his present world and finds himself reliving moments of uninhibited freedom.

I'm feeling colors and seeing things now that I'm against the wall.
 There's flashes of me and K-Boy climbing up a fire escape and tying our kites to a
 clothesline and watching them all day....Then I'm in Jamaica on a beach with my brothers
 burying me in the sand....And when I feel a hand on my shoulder, at first I think it's some
 kind of savior coming along to help me out. Help me find its face....
 Then I notice it's kind of dark and it isn't just dark from the building's shadows.
 I've been here all day. Way past school, and near the night. (Johnson 2003, 57-60)

As it turns out, Bobby experiences this brief release only to be yanked back into reality by a police officer who arrests him for vandalism, thereby creating an even stronger urgency to escape. Ultimately, when he and his daughter move to Ohio with his older brother, Bobby both accepts his responsibilities and escapes some of the stressful pressures of living in New York City with his parents.

The common thread of seeking and, in some cases, finding escape also circulates through H.G. Wells's (1966) short story 'The Door in the Wall.' This tale recounts the experiences of Lionel Wallace, a man who becomes bound by responsibility and mundane expectations. At a young age, Lionel goes through a mystical door that transports him to a seemingly supernatural yet endlessly blissful location:

You know, in the very moment the door swung to behind me, I forgot the road with its fallen chestnut leaves, its cabs and tradesmen's carts, I forgot the sort of gravitational pull back to the discipline and obedience of home, I forgot all hesitations and fear, forgot discretion, forgot all the intimate realities of this life. I became in a moment a very glad and wonder-happy little boy—in another world. (Wells 1966, 148)

Then, like Bobby, Lionel is almost without warning yanked from this world of escape to face his 'harsh reality' (151). Throughout his life, he again sees this door but fails to enter so as not to abandon social and work responsibilities. Yet with each passing by, he becomes increasingly

plagued by ‘the haunting memory of a beauty and a happiness that filled his heart with insatiable longings’ (145). Too, like Bobby, this build-up eats away at him; and too, like Bobby, he makes a step toward freedom. What draws the line of difference between the two characters, however, is that Bobby holds onto his responsibilities while Lionel completely abandons them, ending his life in the process.

To mention very briefly, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*—a popular selection in an American secondary school English classroom—connects to *The First Part Last* as well (Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber 2006). Like Johnson’s novel, *Macbeth* includes a focus on irrevocable actions and their consequences that inevitably transform the protagonist’s life into one that he cannot foresee. Lastly, John Steinbeck’s Pepé in ‘Flight’ too must deal with responsibility as Bobby does. In particular, despite his flight of fear, desperation, and survival, Steinbeck’s protagonist must come to terms with his manhood and accept the consequences of his actions.

Just Another Hero (JAH)

Similar to Angela Johnson, Sharon Draper is also a multi-year recipient of the Coretta Scott King Book Award. Her novel, *Just Another Hero*, is the third in a series—the Jericho trilogy—that focuses on one group of high school students. In a response to the themes in her book, Draper highlights the complexity of identity, saying that she wants her young readers ‘to remember that everyone has a “back story,” a part of their life that might be hidden, but influences how they function in school. We all have problems. Sometimes those overlap into school situations’ (Draper 2016, para. 11).

Brief synopsis of JAH

Just Another Hero follows the lives of a group of high school seniors, each with his/her own

personal issue. Told from the alternating perspective of two students, the book explores the dynamics of fitting in in high school—what it means, what it does not mean, what it requires, what it helps, what it hurts. As the plot progresses, the questions surrounding ‘fitting in’ shift to ‘being a hero’: What makes a hero ‘a hero’? Can a ‘villain’ be a hero? What drives heroes to act? The novel complicates the label of ‘outcast’ as it shows that, rather than being a static identification, being an outcast is simply one part of one’s identity. Like being a hero or a villain, the state of being an outcast comes in various shades and can in fact be transcended, even if only temporarily.

In addition to typical high school issues like dating, bullying, applying to college, and even participating in fire drills, the characters deal with deeper problems such as homelessness, mental abuse, drug addiction, social invisibility, death, and psychotic breakdown—the last of which contributes to the heightened moment of the school shooting in the text.

Analysis of and application to JAH

The double-sided approach pairs well with Draper’s text; while many of the characters are Black, the author seems to consciously choose not to focus on their race. Just like the qualities that define heroes, villains, and outcasts, the qualities that attach themselves to race/ethnicity and the accompanying culture constitute only a single part of who we are. Of the themes that Draper addresses, being an outcast or socially invisible is one of the few that span the entire book and is thus a strong point for textual connection. This strand of the text is carried primarily by Osrick, a student whom Draper labels ‘almost unseen’ and ‘almost forgotten’ (2009, 240; 245). A prey to bullies and a victim of ostracism, Osrick seemingly fades into obscurity in his school and, despite his caring personality and skills with technology, is rarely seen as anything but ‘Weird Osrick’ by his peers (4). Twice, he uses this ‘invisibility’ to his advantage when he helps resolve

serious issues in the school.

Bridging to another text, a teacher could bring in Ralph Ellison's (1952) *Invisible Man*, especially its prologue and epilogue. A psychological examination of social invisibility in terms of race, this novel provides a more developed perspective on being socially ignored:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me....When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me....I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. (Ellison 1952, 3)

Thus, both the Invisible Man and Draper's Osrick find ways to take advantage of their invisibility. Likewise, the two eventually cease feeling powerless and begin taking hold of their circumstances, as Ellison's epilogue summarizes—seemingly for both characters:

And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. (433)

Briefly, on the theme of being/becoming a hero, I provide two textual connections. Eudora Welty's (1941) 'A Worn Path' focuses on Phoenix Jackson, an elderly Black woman who is anything but ordinary. Along her trek through the woods to gather medicine for her grandson, she faces numerous obstacles that try to hinder her progress, yet the unlikely hero that she is, Phoenix rises (pun intended) to every occasion and succeeds at these feats of strength, determination, finesse, and wit. Another tale of heroes, *Beowulf* is Draper's choice for a return to the play-within-a-play device. As the reading selection for her characters' senior English classroom, the epic poem serves as a backdrop for her narrative, questioning and problematizing

the inherent qualities of a hero. Because of Draper's clever usage of this ancient tale, a pairing of *Beowulf* and *Just Another Hero* is a logical pedagogical practice.

Native Son (NS)

Due to the novel's treatment of the Black experience, Richard Wright's (1966) *Native Son*, initially published in 1940, propelled the author to the forefront of Black writing. According to Tyson (2015), 'he believed that the harsh, inescapable realities of racist oppression should be represented in straightforward, stark language in order to convey as powerfully as possible the evils of racism and the depth of black suffering' (370). Thus, *Native Son* is a reflection of this attitude.

Brief synopsis of NS

In the novel, Bigger Thomas, an angry twenty-year-old from a poor Black family, accepts a job as a chauffeur with a rich White family. After a night of driving Mary, the daughter, and her Communist boyfriend around town, Bigger inadvertently smothers drunken Mary out of fear of being caught in her bedroom after carrying her there. After burning the body, he tries to blame Mary's disappearance on the boyfriend but is discovered when reporters find remnants of bone in the ashes of the furnace. Following his murdering of his girlfriend and a three-day period on the run, he is captured by the police. He is subsequently charged with the rape and murder of Mary—though he is innocent of the former—and is sentenced to death despite the efforts of his sympathetic lawyer.

Analysis of and application to NS

Aligning with one argument of this article, Baldwin (2012) cited Wright's novel as 'a

continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy' (22). However, apart from its dark core of racial and cultural specificity, *Native Son* contains possibilities for broader connections to be made. Within the text, one can explore such themes as freedom, control/restraint, the effects of one's environment on self, justice, cohabitation, survival, outcasts, and coping.

Let us consider the theme of cohabitation and its effect on control. Bigger's issues worsen when he occupies the world of the Daltons, a White family. Once Black and White worlds collide, certain behaviors or performances are expected from each party. Bigger's situation, however, becomes complicated when his performance expectations fuse with uncertainty. For instance, upon reaching the Dalton home for the first time, he gets enraged at not knowing for sure which door the family would expect him to use—the front or the back (Wright 1966). Mary, the Dalton daughter who does 'the unexpected every minute,' especially confuses and discomforts him (64). The unstable and conflicting expectations that Bigger encounters ultimately lead to his demise but not before temporarily freeing him from such restraints altogether.

Relating to this society-induced performance is George Orwell's (1950) 'Shooting an Elephant.' Orwell's narrator, a symbol of unwanted colonial authority in Burma, is nevertheless controlled by the crowd of natives around him. In an attempt to maintain his show of power, he is compelled to kill a now-peaceful elephant that temporarily has created chaos in the village, trampling one man in the process. Similar to Wright's novel, this short story explores the presence of performance in society and calls into question who decides on and ascribes these roles. Is the narrator, like Bigger, both the subject and the subjected (Althusser 2001)?

As seen in the following passage from Orwell, when two opposing groups occupy the same space, who performs and why?

Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind....For it is the condition of [the tyrant's] rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the 'natives,' and so in every crisis he has got to do what the 'natives' expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. (Orwell 1950, 8)

Briefly, an additional text connecting to *Native Son* is another staple of the secondary school English classroom, Arthur Miller's (1953) *The Crucible* (Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber 2006). In the play, innocent lives are lost or disrupted as a network of lies—false accusations of witchcraft—spread throughout the town of Salem. Focusing on the theme of self-preservation, like Wright's *Native Son*, both texts concern themselves with the questions, 'What acts are necessary to preserve oneself?' and, more importantly, 'What *is* the self that one even tries to preserve?'

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I argued for universality among texts. However, my examples explored links only between Black texts and White texts. To some readers, these narrow linkages may then suggest that in order to be *universal*, a non-White text must connect to a White text. This, most certainly, is not my intended argument; yet, since my purpose is to establish a secure classroom existence for Black and other under-represented texts, it makes sense to build connections to the texts that are already secure in the US English classroom, i.e., texts of the Eurocentric canon.

I must also acknowledge that Black literature serves as a gateway to the incorporation of other under-represented texts. Much like Black literature, the texts of Asian, Native American, Hispanic, and Latin@ cultures often find themselves confined to racial/cultural contexts: Asian talk for Asian texts, Latin@ talk for Latin@ texts, and so on. Thus, the double-faced approach is for more than Black literature. It is for all literature, for it seems that now more than ever we need to realize that we are simultaneously similar and different—a complex dichotomy that makes each voice worthy of being heard. Despite our beliefs, the classroom in general is not okay; education is not okay. When students enter classrooms that serve to promote half-truths as truths, present a dated curriculum, and ignore the role of power in allowing or denying the presence of certain faces and stories, then the state of education is absolutely not okay. We must challenge the norm and provide spaces for the unheard voices and unseen faces.

The double-face approach, therefore, offers a solution to the disproportionate representation in classroom literature. With one leg in the historical enterprise of cultural survival and the other leg in the equally historical striving for colorblind equality, this approach necessarily extends the scope of literature of racial minorities. The two interdependent strands of the approach are equally important. Contrary to followers of the Voiced Approach, it is not enough to focus on the experiences, history, words, or cultural practices that make us different. Likewise, contrary to followers of the Silent Approach, it is not enough to turn a colorblind eye to race for the purpose of highlighting only what we as humans share: love, pain, laughter, determination. Only together do these two strands contribute to revealing more accurate stories; and collectively, these stories weaken the unquestioned authority of the single story. Thus, beginning with Black literature, an educator has the power to change the curricular infrastructure

and, subsequently, the minds of the students as they are encouraged to see themselves and others as complex beings, for which one solitary, “representative” story is insufficient, if not laughable.

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Table 1. *Double-faced Literary Connections*

Focal text		Culturally specific connections		Expanded, general connections	
Title	Genre	Title	Genre	Title	Genre
'Bloodchild' (Octavia Butler 2006)	Short story	<i>Kindred</i> (Octavia Butler)	Novel	<i>American Born Chinese</i> (Gene Luen Yang)	YA novel
		'The Space Traders' (Derrick Bell)	Short story	'Harrison Bergeron' (Kurt Vonnegut)	Short story
'The Haunted Oak' (Paul Laurence Dunbar 1913)	Poem	<i>Beloved</i> (Toni Morrison)	Novel	'Annabel Lee' (Edgar Allan Poe)	Poem
		<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> (Harper Lee)	YA novel	'Young Goodman Brown' (Nathaniel Hawthorne)	Short story
<i>March: Book One</i> (Lewis Aydin, and Powell 2013)	Graphic novel	Civil Rights video footage	Video, nonfiction	<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (Mark Twain)	YA novel
		'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' (Martin Luther King, Jr.)	Letter, nonfiction	'The Lottery' (Shirley Jackson)	Short story

<i>The Other</i>				<i>The House on Mango</i>	
<i>Side: Shorter</i>		‘Everyday Use’ (Alice Walker)	Short story	<i>Street</i> (Sandra Cisneros)	Novella
<i>Poems</i>	Poetry				
(Angela Johnson 1998)		‘Flounder’ (Natasha Trethewey)	Poem	‘Those Winter Sundays’ (Robert Hayden)	Poem
		<i>Invisible Man</i> (Ralph Ellison)	Novel	<i>Beowulf</i>	Epic poem
<i>Pitch Black</i>	Graphic novel	‘The Fiery End of a Life Lived beneath the City’ (Christine Haughney)	News article	‘The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas’ (Ursula K. Le Guin)	Short story
<i>Sweet</i>		<i>Mama Day</i> (Gloria Naylor)	Novel	‘The Door in the Wall’ (H.G. Wells)	Short story
<i>Whispers,</i>					
<i>Brother Rush</i>	YA novel	‘The Rockpile’ (James Baldwin)	Short story	<i>Hamlet</i> (William Shakespeare)	Play
(Virginia Hamilton 1982)					
<i>Tutored</i>		Chapter 1 of <i>The</i>			
(Allison Whittenberg 2010)	YA novel	<i>Souls of Black Folk</i> (W.E.B. Du Bois)	Book excerpt	‘Flight’ (John Steinbeck)	Short story

	<i>The Street</i> (Ann Petry)	Novel	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (William Shakespeare)	Play
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