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Socializing with the Ghosts of Our Racial Past: Embracing Traumatic Teaching and Learning in Literacy Education

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Strange Fruit

*Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh*

*Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop*

–Meeropol, 1937

The poem “Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol in 1937 and then later recorded as a [song](#) by Billie Holiday in 1939, captures the haunting imagery of racial violence in the United States. It acts as an extended metaphor, comparing the victims of Jim Crow-era lynching to fruit hanging from trees. The metaphor effectively illustrates the function of racial violence as crucial to the construction and subsequent growth of the U.S. as a racist nation-state (Martinot, 2010). The imagery of blood-splattered roots and leaves, with a slight hint of burning flesh lingering after the sweet

smell of flowers, is an expression of the naturalization of black death as tied to white vitality. The health of the white tree, its growth indicating its strength, bears the strange fruit of black bodies that serve to rot in the sun and become food for the crows once the fruit has perished. Blackness becomes the lifeblood for the tree; the more hanging fruits the tree produces, the more one might comment on its vitality. As the fruit continues to rot, scorched by the sun and blown by the wind, the tree loosens its grip on the fruit and it becomes one with the earth, destined to provide the seeds for new trees to sprout, which will produce new fruit to rot.

The song has had an enduring presence on the national consciousness; it has maintained a relevancy that corresponds with the steadfast presence of racial violence in America. The song has been remade numerous times, most notably in a rendition by Nina Simone in 1965, which became a popular protest anthem. More recently, hip-hop artist Kanye West sampled the song on his track “Blood on the Leaves,” and British singer Rebecca Ferguson publicly declined to perform at President Donald Trump’s inauguration, unless she were given permission to sing “Strange Fruit” (she was not). The song’s fixture within popular culture suggests there is a persistent need to grieve losses resulting from the repetition of death, but there is also a form of haunting present in the melody—at once the song can be both cathartic and melancholic. The function of the song in evoking seemingly divergent emotions related to liberation and sadness resembles black “sorrow songs” sung by slaves, which, according to Du Bois (1995), signified the intense connection between black suffering and a longing desire for black freedom. Cheng (2001) translates this dichotomous relationship to be a form of racial melancholia that “has always existed for raced subjects both as a *sign* of rejection and as a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection” (p. 20, italics in original).

The song is a symbolic embodiment of racial melancholia, simultaneously illustrating expressions of violence, trauma, grief, and hope within the context of a nation-state that is defined and structured by these very same racialized declarations. Recent events in Charlottesville, Virginia reflect these expressions; the white supremacist demonstrators and the anti-racist counter protestors expose the racially melancholic core of America.

“Strange Fruit” ultimately reminds us of the racial ghosts from our past that still haunt us in the present. However, if we were to re-write the song in order to characterize present-day racial violence in America, instead of black bodies being hung from trees we would sing of black bodies being shot or choked, perishing on a city street (representing the murder of Michael Brown), an urban sidewalk (representing the murder of Eric Garner), a neighborhood park (representing the murder of Tamir Rice). We would see bystanders, clutching cell phones with video cameras, recording the loss of black life and posting the evidence on social media for all the world to see. We would see the perpetrators of this violence, police officers who have sworn to “serve and protect,” escape prosecution for their involvement in these murders. The central theme of the song stays the same—black death at the hands of white terrorism—but the lyrics shift slightly, from blood on the trees to blood on the concrete, from rotting fruit to wilting flowers.

In this essay, I explore how racial melancholia can be used to comprehend how our nation’s violent racial past influences teaching and learning about race in the present. I argue that we must embrace what haunts us in order to understand the complexities of racial trauma and engender new visions for racial justice. English and literacy education can play a key role in this endeavor through engaging with trauma novels (Balaev, 2008) that expose how racial violence impacts American society.

Briefly Defining Racial Melancholia in Education

As Marx (1934) once wrote, “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (p. 595). The transmission of past racial violence and the emergence of this violence in the present is illustrative of a racially melancholic nation struggling to exist with generations of ghosts. Racial melancholia can be used as a powerful conceptual tool in education that exposes how the specters of our racial past—the remains of strange fruit sprouting from centuries of racial violence—continue to haunt us. In this context, racial melancholia seeks to welcome and socialize with ghosts rather than hide from them or expel them. This reclamation involves the notion that learning to understand, represent, and interact with racial ghosts can lead to anti-racism through the usage of critical literacy.

Racial melancholia originates because of the rift between the American history of slavery, imperialism, and colonization and the cultural amnesia that occurs from repeatedly normalizing these atrocities in an attempt to expunge them from historical memory (Cheng, 2001). The core of racial melancholia is the fact that the United States was founded on this hypocritical relationship; this form of betrayal serves as a distinctive characteristic of racialization. In particular, I am referring to America's betrayal of its own democratic ideals: a repressed history of racial violence buried underneath a narrative of liberty and justice for all. Racialization occurs through our entangled history of racial violence and the resulting loss that stems from this violence. Thus, how we interact exposes our unacknowledged and unresolved grief stemming from these racial injuries.

For instance, an example from my own classroom found a productive conversation about race and European colonization in Nigeria, after the class read *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1984), being thwarted by the presence of racial trauma when the discussion shifted to the history of colonization in the U.S. (Grinage, 2014). We refused to engage with the ghosts that haunt our racial past—we were troubled by the nation-state's racial transgressions. Racial melancholia signifies the “uncanny” (Freud, 1919) experience of haunting which defines the soul of American society. Cheng (2001) illustrates the racially melancholic condition of the U.S. nation-state as the struggle to see and live with its spirits: “*American culture gags on what it refuses to see*, for ‘American culture’ is confronted by ghosts it can neither emit or swallow” (p. 133, italics in original). Many of us would much rather pretend these ghosts do not exist, refusing to acknowledge their presence instead of dealing with their ubiquity. Racial melancholia can help us comprehend how opaque forces, which often make their presence known in inexplicable ways, function to confuse how we share the same space with our racial ghosts. An analysis of haunting in the context of racialization must find ways to make ghosts a *social* component of education.

Critical Literacy and Trauma Novels

A recent article in *The Atlantic* indicated that although teachers felt it was important to have conversations about race in the classroom, they felt ill-prepared to have these discussions, and they typically avoided talking about racial violence altogether within classroom spaces (Anderson, 2017).

Various scholars have also chronicled how education in the United States carries out practices of historical and cultural imperialism by distorting, misshaping, and silencing racial violence through the positioning of the U.S. as a democratic nation free of racial strife and indignation surrounding our racial past (see Brown & Au, 2014; Grande, 2004; Loewen, 1995; Watkins, 2001). If educators are unwilling to teach about racial violence and U.S. curriculum has largely buried this history, how do we teach students about racism?

The answer to this question lies in our embrace of critical literacy as a practice for “unpacking myths and distortions, and building new ways of knowing and acting upon the world” (Luke, 2012, p. 5). Responding to the call for a critical race English education (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017) in the face of recent overt acts of white terrorism, I contend that trauma novels can be used as a type of critical literacy that enables us to socialize with our racial ghosts. Balaev (2008) explains that a trauma novel is “a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels” (p. 150). In particular, black writers such as Toni Morrison have illustrated how traumatic racial experiences are not monolithically pathological, but rather, emphasize the shared strength and resiliency of black communities when challenging the violence of white supremacy (Balaev, 2008).

Native Son written by Richard Wright (1940) is a stark example of a trauma novel that exposes the reality of racial violence in America and the effects of this violence on communities of color. Set during the height of the Great Migration in 1930s Chicago, the novel’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas, directly confronts his fears through Wright’s visceral depictions of Bigger’s conflict with a society that has trapped him because of the color of his skin. The reader witnesses Bigger’s downfall in a way that clearly expresses the trauma at the center of black subjectivity, created by the inescapable reality of whiteness. This distinct portrayal of racial trauma not only makes *Native Son* a “trauma novel,” but the book also creates opportunities to comprehend race through uncovering racial truths that are so often obscured by dominant narratives of American exceptionalism and post-racialism. The novel opens a space for the reader to encounter the ghosts which continue to haunt the nation-state. As Balaev (2008) describes, “significant lessons can be learned and passed between generations through the recital of a story about loss and suffering” (p. 159). The transmission of

stories between generations functions as a pathway for understanding the racially melancholic nation-state as a method to work through what it means to exist in a country built on white supremacy.

A more contemporary trauma novel is the young adult book *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017). The story, inspired by the Black Lives Matter Movement and the murder of Oscar Grant in 2009, depicts the trauma endured by a black community in the wake of a white police officer shooting of an unarmed black teenager, Khalil, during a traffic stop. Starr, the novel's protagonist, is a 16-year-old black girl who witnessed the murder as she was sitting in the passenger seat when Khalil was shot. Thomas is masterful in challenging the dominant Euro-American psychological paradigm that interprets racial trauma as only debilitating and pathological. The novel traverses several present-day racial issues including police brutality, colorblindness, and interracial relationships in a manner that both underscores the complexities of racial trauma and points toward the ongoing resiliency of the community's shared struggle for racial justice. Using texts like *Native Son* and *The Hate U Give* can help us better understand how racial trauma has shaped our lives and aid us in working through this trauma with the aim of increasing racial literacy to resist racial oppression.

To close, I have been mostly concerned with using curriculum to socialize with racial ghosts. What remains are the various pedagogical questions that arise when educators deploy trauma novels in schools and classrooms, the intricacies of which are highly contingent. In other words, these novels by themselves will not solve all of our racial problems. Nonetheless, it is vital for our future work to cultivate this type of critical literacy if we intend to bring about social change and learn to live with the ghosts that prevent us from envisioning racial justice.

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