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The Gradual Release of the Canonical Grasp: An Exercise in Excavation

Kelli A. Rushek and Ellie MacDowell

Abstract: Disrupting the canon of Eurocentric literature often used as a whole-class novel study in the secondary English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum is needed in order to push back against white hegemony in and out of ELA spaces. This disruption needs to occur at the teacher preparation level through discussion, examination, and curriculum development, including contested and nostalgia-laden texts such as Harper Lee’s (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird* (TKAM). In this paper, we draw on Sealey-Ruiz’s (2019) concept of the archaeology of the self, Vygotskian perspectives on literacy instruction (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000), and the gradual release of responsibility in teaching and learning to interrogate the metaphor of the “grasp” that the canon has on the ELA community. We examine the epistemological shifts and evolutions between a preservice ELA teacher and an ELA teacher educator in a two-year study that focused on developing Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017) aiming to disrupt the teaching of TKAM. We found that releasing ourselves from the canonical grasp of TKAM, placing it not as a centered novel, but as a literary artifact, was imperative in disrupting our own whiteness and developing culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining critical literacy instruction surrounding themes of present-day racism and (in)justice.

Keywords: canon disruption, canonical texts, curricular Whiteness, secondary ELA, teacher education



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“Sentimentality about [*To Kill a Mockingbird*] grew even as the harder truths of the book took no root . . . What is often overlooked is that the Black man falsely accused in the story was not successfully defended by Atticus . . . [Tom Robinson] is found guilty. Later he dies when full of despair, he makes a desperate attempt to escape from prison. He is shot seventeen times in the back by his captors, dying ingloriously but not unlawfully” (pp. 23-24).

– Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014)

Now

“[*Just Mercy*] is every bit as moving as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and in some ways, even more so . . . a stirring testament to the salvation that fighting for the vulnerable sometimes yields.”

– *The New York Review*

Introduction

Collaboration Snapshot

Sitting in comfortable silence, it is evident that deep thought is in motion. The room is decorated in our writing—from outlines on the room’s whiteboards to the scribbles on poster boards that aren’t large enough, to the papers spread out on the conference room table which is peppered with our Diet Coke cans (we’re trying to quit) and lunch takeout cartons. Ellie, a preservice secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, tells Kelli, a university-based ELA teacher educator, about the surveillance of teachers in her field placement district.

“The school district is plagued by parents who are upset with teachers about the texts being taught and the way in which they are teaching class materials. There was even a community member who snuck into one of the schools to take pictures of classrooms and to listen in on what was being taught so they could target specific teachers.”

“WHAT?!” Kelli responds, mouth agape and eyes wide.

“Yes! The community member is targeting specific teachers for what they are teaching and how they are teaching it. Have you seen the ‘Divisive Concepts’ Bill they’re trying to pass? Basically, the bill states that teachers can’t teach any topics seen as controversial. Slavery, the Holocaust, LGBTQ+ literature!”

“[Explicative]. Well, this makes this work (motions to the curriculum writing on the white boards) even more important.”

After more dialogue, we return to said work—the work of interrogating the question Ellie emailed Kelli the second week of the Fall 2021 semester:

What do I do if I have to teach TKAM? I know there are much better texts to highlight social justice, but in my field placement, it is a required text for ninth grade—they have to teach it. It made me think—how do I go about teaching “classic” texts like TKAM in a way that centers student identities and addresses social justice topics that are relevant to student lives? I’d love to pick your brain.

Purpose

Recently, there has been an influx of state legislatures that attempt to censor, ban, limit, and prohibit the teaching of and reading about issues some deem controversial. These legislative efforts of censorship and book banning target stories by and about people of Color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and the histories and lived experiences of systemic racism in the United States. Book banning has only intensified in recent years, according to research conducted by PEN America (2023), a human rights advocacy group that intersects with free speech and education. When book bans and censorship fears affect the context of

ELA teaching, we see a returned, reinvigorated focus on the Eurocentric texts that comprise the Western canon of literature. This is evidenced in the decision of Florida's state university system approving the Classic Learning Test (CLT) for undergraduate admission to their universities in September of 2023. Despite objections, these learning institutions approved the CLT in addition to the SAT and ACT. Unlike English portions of the SAT and ACT which require test takers to interpret discrete fiction and nonfiction passages, the English portion of the CLT emphasizes "Christian thought and excerpts from the Western canon - C.S. Lewis, St. Augustine, Erasmus" (Goldstein, 2023, p. n.p.). While this is only one state, we see this small microcosmic example as an effect of continued implicit and explicit anti-Blackness and anti-queer educational policy enforcement in Florida and elsewhere. We realize we stand at a political and ideological juncture in which the Western canon of literature is being (continually) upheld through and by testing companies, legislature, and those who wish to maintain a white supremacist status quo.

"How can a preservice ELA teacher and an ELA educator release themselves from the grasp of canonical texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the teaching and learning of ELA?"

do I do if I have to teach To Kill a Mockingbird?, which then evolved into the research question, *How can a preservice ELA teacher and an ELA educator release themselves from the grasp of canonical texts such as To Kill a Mockingbird in the teaching and learning of ELA?*

This manuscript will highlight the answer that arose to this inquiry question through our qualitative, epistemological analysis of our two-year study. We begin by situating ourselves and our positionalities within the inquiry before moving to the review of the current theoretical and empirical research regarding canon disruption and specifically the teaching and whole-class study of *TKAM*. Our embedded research methods are highlighted through our findings, which follow our knowledge production process (See Figure 1), the entry points and collaborative moves that lead to our Critical 'Aha!' Moments. We end this paper with discussion and closing understandings for ELA teaching and learning, future literacy education research, and ELA teacher education.

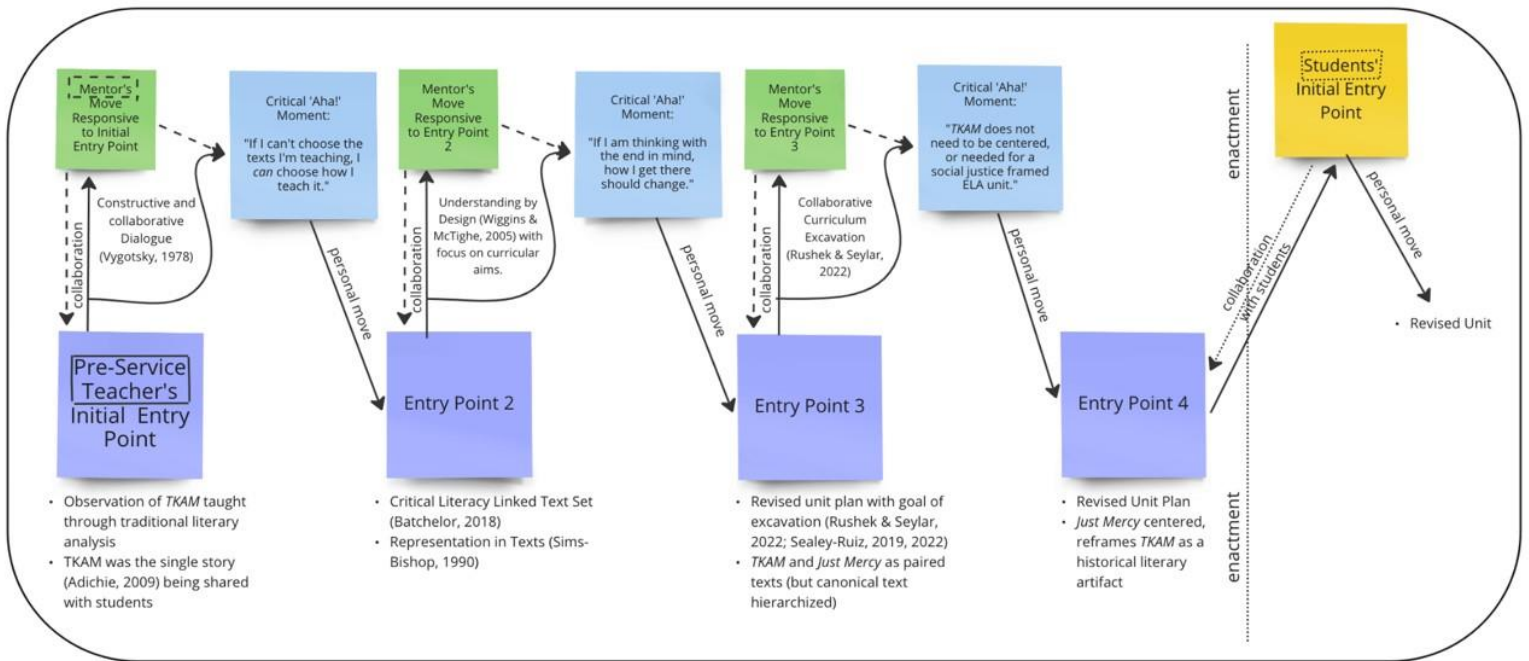
The Canonical Grasp

Ellie:

At the beginning of my journey of release, I was an ELA preservice teacher at a mid-sized public teacher education program in the Midwest. Our teacher education program has a focus on social justice, and I have been engaged in thinking about anti-racist and anti-oppressive social justice education within and outside of it. As a young middle-class white woman, I had been examining and interrogating my individual privileges within larger systems of oppression in and outside of my courses and field experiences. I was—and still am—navigating these tensions as I consider my future within the historically oppressive

Figure 1
Our Knowledge Process Map

The Entry Points and Collaborative Moves that Led to Our Critical 'Aha' Moments



institution of education (Baldwin, 1963; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Love, 2019; 2023), and how I can navigate disrupting whiteness in the curriculum and instruction of schooling while keeping my foot in the door in order to do the disruption. I know that full-text novel instruction is a mainstay of the ELA curriculum, and that as ELA teachers, we all hold varying opinions on and autonomy over how we maneuver curricular decisions. Often, these decisions are local - context-and-school specific - and exist on varying continua of fidelity to the curricula (Ebarvia et al., 2020). During my teacher preparation program, I have been a part of many discussions/debates/heated arguments regarding the inclusion or exclusion (always considered on an either-or binary) of canonical texts, but one text, in particular, sparks the flames of debate more than others: Harper Lee's (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Often referred to as a (if not *the*) Great American Novel (Scalzi, 2016), it is deeply embedded in the canon of ELA curriculum and thus in the discourse of

ELA teacher preparation. However, it was during my first field experience, as a student-teacher-observer in a 9th-grade ELA classroom that was preparing to read *TKAM*, that I started to realize the relationship between *TKAM* and white supremacy. One day, when the teacher left the room, the high school students were buzzing that they'd heard through the school's grapevine that *this was the teacher who read the entire book aloud during class and said the N-word 'for effect'*. After hearing this from the students, I was unsettled - my experience in the actual field was not aligning with the social justice-focused literacy education preparation I was concurrently receiving. I had a *lot* of questions, and I turned to Kelli with them.

Kelli:

I am a white woman who is an ELA teacher educator at a mid-sized public university in the Midwest. A former high school ELA teacher in Chicago Public Schools for ten years, I came to teacher education hoping to prepare future secondary ELA teachers to

be anti-racist, anti-oppressive, critical educators who are worthy to teach my former students. I was new to the university in the Fall of 2021 when we began the work outlined in this manuscript. This project started with the aforementioned email from Ellie that questioned what she should do if she *had* to teach *TKAM*? My eyes lit up - I felt there was a potential for questioning, resistance, and disruption in ELA teaching afoot.

Throughout my own secondary English teaching career, I deeply questioned and pushed back against texts that were positioned merely as acquisitional tools of white supremacy in the name of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), as I taught between two public high schools in hyper-segregated communities within Chicago that served predominantly Black residents. I remembered tensions with my own administration over a critical and engaging year-long 9th-grade curriculum I had written in 2008 that relied on young adult literature and multimodal texts to teach the content of ELA. My administrators, both white women, argued I was gatekeeping, as our students required the cultural capital of the “new” (read: old) 9th-grade curriculum they presented (starting with a canonical short story unit, moving into *Lord of the Flies*, Homer’s *The Odyssey*, *TKAM*, and finishing the year with *Romeo and Juliet*) in order to be viable for college acceptance. I was new to the school, and without the language of critical theories and critical literacy I have now, I had no choice but to acquiesce. I spent a year trying to creatively make these texts relevant, applicable, and engaging for my students, even though the students were critically aware, saying things like “Miss Rushek, we’re sick of all your books about rich white people!” I had become a salesperson of the ELA literature canon, a puppet, and a technician of the state through imparting this canonical curriculum (Giroux, 2011).

Ellie and I are aware of the limitations we have as two white women coming to this work, nor are we the

first to question the hegemony of the ELA canon. At these different stages of our ELA teaching careers, we are both rooted in critical questioning and our strong desires to and actions toward disrupting Whiteness in ELA teaching and learning and fighting for systemic change that reduces the harm in schooling for students of Color and other marginalized identities. Ellie’s email posed the types of critical inquiries I had been preparing to delve into since my relevant 9th-grade curriculum was rejected all those years ago. What *did* we do when we were ‘forced’ to teach the ELA canon when we knew, deep down, it was a deep-seated, replicable churn-of-the-status-quo-to-maintain-white-hegemony? Thus began our two-year-long project that is argued and presented in this manuscript as exploring the gradual release of the grasp of the literary canon on a preservice ELA teacher and her ELA educator mentor.

What We Know about Disrupting the Canon

Toni Morrison (1988) referred to the defense of the literary canon as empire-building and debates on the canon as the clash of cultures. Toliver and Hadley (2021) drew on that metaphor as they argued that disruption of the canon in ELA classrooms is disruption of the deep-seated institutional inequalities that are bolstered by the canon itself. The grassroots, crowdsourced #DisruptTexts movement, started by four women educators of Color, challenges “the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve” (Ebarvia, 2021). Arguing that K-12 students deserve representative texts and literature that show the rich and nuanced lived human experience (Sims Bishop, 1990), the #DisruptTexts movement has brought canon disruption back to the forefront of ELA considerations.

Ervin (2022) reviewed the literature on the classroom strategies literacy educators employ to enact

culturally sustaining literacy pedagogies (Paris, 2012) when teaching from a prescribed text list or adhering to a canonical literature curriculum. Ervin (2022) synthesized that many literacy educators use strategies such as teaching through critical theories (Appleman, 2015), aligning with Johnson's (2018) Critical Race English Education tenet of disrupting Eurocentric curricula and Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides' (2019) suggestion of teaching canonical novels through critical race lenses to engage students in complex racial ideologies presented through the narratives of canonical novels. Another strategy often employed is pairing Eurocentric canonical texts with supplemental texts or excerpts that incite multiple cultural, ethnic, racial, or linguistic perspectives - also called "layering texts" (Muhammad, 2020) - to ensure the white perspective is not the only one presented (e.g., Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Dyches & Thomas, 2020; Lechtenberg, 2018; Macaluso & Macaluso, 2018; Sheahan & Dallacqua, 2020; Shipp, 2017). Miller and colleagues (2023) suggest the practice of placing young adult adaptations of canonical novels in conversation with the canonical text during instruction. The research also suggests that English teachers who wish to engage their students in critical instruction when teaching from a prescribed scope and sequence should engage their students in deep, meaningful, and critical discussions around race and oppression (Kay, 2018; Schieble et al., 2020).

Acts of Resistance Teaching TKAM

Specific attention has been given to disruption - or lack thereof - in teaching Lee's (1960) novel. Narrated by Scout, a young white child in Maycomb County, Alabama, who also serves as the protagonist, the plot centers around the trial of a disabled Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman, in which Scout's father is the appointed defense attorney. Most traditional interpretations of the novel frame the white lawyer as the antiracist hero and the Black man

as a helpless, crippled victim, the novel entrenched in the "white savior" literary trope (Borsheim-Black, 2015). *TKAM* is an "American text with easy-to-determine themes, metaphors, and perspectives [that] presents palatable inquiries into the fabric of our society while still coddling its majority white readership" (Tempus & Applegate, 2020, p. 70). Crucially disrupting (Ebarvia et al., 2020) this text in ELA classrooms has considered layering texts for historical context (Muhammad, 2020), including Nina Simone's (1965) song "Strange Fruit" and Nelson's (2009) collection of sonnets, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (Tempus & Applegate, 2020). Other scholars have suggested teaching this book through critical lenses such as race (Borsheim-Black, 2018); new and old racism (Macaluso, 2017); or Panopticism and Othering (Best, 2009).

Most of the published research on disruptively teaching *TKAM* answers Ellie's initial question to Kelli - what to do if an ELA teacher *has* to teach *TKAM*, the novel still maintaining its position as a curricular mainstay. However, Ako-Adjei (2017) stated that *TKAM*, probably the most "widely loved [novel] by teachers and school systems in America," (p. 183) need not be taught in schools, as "America's most prominent book on racism is a mawkish novel" (p. 186). There have been calls for alternative swaps for *TKAM* for other texts within the bildungsroman genre which focus on race and culture, but from the perspective of the identities experienced by the protagonists (#ownvoices texts) such as Falter's (2015) alternative suggestion, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, or Griffith's (2021) realization that not teaching the film *Whale Rider* (2002) in lieu of *TKAM* was a missed opportunity.

This novel and the discourse surrounding it has become something of a calling card, a book at the center of perceived American racial reckoning, between tradition and active anti-racism, much like Morrison argued in 1988. Germán (2018) stated, "this

book is loved by so many white Americans. It's so popular. So many have a deep relationship to it and it lives in a general cloud of nostalgia in schools" (para 3). Griffith (2021) highlights Germán's (2018) words as he also interrogated his relationship with whiteness at the intersection of *TKAM*, calling for a release - to allow the "mockingbird to fly away" (p. 30). In this paper, through recursive collaborative meetings, discussions and dialogues, and cycles of revision of Ellie's unit of study, we interrogate how we, as a preservice ELA teacher and an ELA teacher preparer, metaphorically released ourselves from the grasp of this canonical novel. Despite the fact that neither of us has a nostalgic pull to *TKAM*, nor particularly treasures our time in teaching, learning, or reading it, we found we could not escape it. We still had to contend with the omnipresent, ubiquitous grasp this particular novel has over the ELA curriculum and subsequent discourse community. Therefore, we draw on the metaphor of the journey of being "released" from its "canonical grasp", derived from our data, to highlight our epistemological evolution, from positioning this novel not as a present-day curricular mainstay, but instead as a historical literary artifact.

Theoretical Frameworks

At the heart of this research is the question of what happens when we develop an ELA curriculum that disrupts the canon, specifically the text *TKAM*? To answer this question, we draw primarily on the self-excavation work outlined in Sealey-Ruiz's (2022; 2019) *Archaeology of Self*. Sealey-Ruiz (2019, 2022) works with preservice and in-service teachers to

excavate their lived experiences, power, and privileges in degrees of racial literacy development toward the ultimate goal of critical love. This internal work is viewed through the metaphor of self-excavation, digging deep through layers of personal experiences to uncover the biases and assumptions that dwell beneath the surface of teachers' psyches, and thus affect how they teach students and texts from multiple races and sociocultural backgrounds. Vygotsky's (1978) gradual release model is at the heart of the excavating internal work, as excavation sites

“The Critical Collaborative Curriculum Excavation framework speaks back to taken-for-granted assumptions about ELA teaching that center the “overwhelming presence of whiteness” in teacher education programs in order to analyze and interrogate written literacy curricular artifacts toward the goal of revising them to be more culturally sustaining.”

have physical scaffolding, as this is how the layers are bolstered and the excavation site does not cave in onto itself. The framework of the archaeology of the self serves as the mental scaffolding, the gradual release of responsibility to move down in the excavation process. One of the moves made in the epistemological evolution by the authors draws on a curricular excavation framework by Rushek and Seylar (2022), which was developed from the theoretical concepts of excavation of the teacher's orientation (Sealey-Ruiz, 2019, 2022). Like Sealey-Ruiz's *Archaeology of the Self*, the Critical Collaborative Curriculum

Excavation framework (Rushek & Seylar, 2022) speaks back to taken-for-granted assumptions about ELA teaching that center the “overwhelming presence of whiteness” (Sleeter, 2001, p. 94) in teacher education programs in order to analyze and interrogate written literacy curricular artifacts toward the goal of revising them to be more culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Thus, the collaborative curricular excavation framework (Rushek & Seylar, 2022) that was part of the impetus in our own release from the canonical grasp is also an extension of the gradual

release model, as it guides an “excavation site” in examining written curriculum for the writer’s assumptions and biases.

To guide our sensemaking in answering this question, we also draw on Vygotsky’s (1978) gradual release model as an umbrella of frameworks for understanding this research and its dissemination, in multiple and nuanced ways. A sociocultural teaching and learning theoretical concept also known as scaffolding (Bruner, 1990), the gradual release model highlights the guidance the teacher gives, toward release, as the learner becomes more independent in the targeted learning concept. In this research, we first see this theoretical concept in the examination of the relationship of mentorship and collaboration between Ellie, a preservice ELA teacher, and the gradual release of responsibility in critical ELA curriculum development scaffolded by Kelli, a veteran ELA teacher and current university-based ELA education faculty member.

Lastly, as will be discussed more in the findings and implication section, we borrow Vygotsky’s (1978) theoretical metaphor of the gradual release model, invert it, and add the critical scope of power and privilege to make sense of the hold canonical texts have on the teaching of ELA. There is a gradual release model that is mirrored in ELA teachers’ journeys toward release from the canonical grasp. In this instance, instead of the onus of the gradual release existing from teacher/mentor to student/preservice teacher, or the scaffolding abilities of frameworks as tools within excavation sites of internal and curricular digging (e.g., Sealey-Ruiz, 2019, 2022; Rushek and Seylar, 2022), here the release is from the grasp of the canon, a messy separation from the hegemony of the literary canon in traditional ELA curriculum. The theoretical frameworks of critical excavation of the self (Sealey-Ruiz, 2019, 2022), critical collaborative excavation of curriculum (e.g., Rushek & Seylar, 2022) and the

sociocultural concepts of the gradual release model (Vygotsky, 1978) and scaffolding (Bruner, 1990 are intrinsically linked through their possibilities of explanation of deep change and deep personal learning. Therefore, the nexus of these theoretical frameworks offers generative entry points and guiding frames in which to make sense of critical praxis experiences in collaborative teaching, learning, and research partnerships between teacher educators and preservice teachers.

Our Knowledge Process Map

Through our collaboration, we developed a knowledge process map that shows the progression of our thoughts, questions, and actions (Figure 1). It also serves as a synthesis of the findings, so it can serve as a road map for the reader. In it, we highlight how we recursively moved through this journey of the release of the canonical grasp. We begin with the preservice teachers’ entry point (here, Ellie), or where they are entering the work. The arrow up invites collaboration with the guide, or mentor (here, Kelli), which led to a *Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment* for Ellie which pushed her to action, or a personal move. The cycle of entry point → collaboration → Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment → to personal move is one building block of a chain of discoveries for the preservice teacher and mentor alike. This is not a straightforward, linear process, as there is constant recursivity in the connections and call-backs to the knowledge development that happened throughout our process of releasing ourselves from the grasp of the canon in ELA contexts.

The agency of the entry points, Critical ‘Aha!’ Moments, and personal moves for the preservice teacher are predicated on the collaborative moments with the mentor, ostensibly moments in which the mentor or guide is moving through multiple series of gradual release and scaffolding, as these are the building blocks of teaching and learning. It is

important to note that we are presenting this knowledge process map not as a replicable tool or sure-fire method for helping others release themselves from the grasp of the hegemonic canon, as the Critical ‘Aha!’ Moments were Ellie’s and happened in dialogic and constructive learning through collaboration with Kelli. For all intents and purposes, this specific chain of discoveries cannot be generalized or replicated exactly in other organic instances of teaching, learning, and curriculum development; however, it is our hope that showing the joint metacognitive path of our epistemological release could potentially guide others into their own entry points, seeking out collaborators and mentors, and subsequently moving toward Critical ‘Aha!’ Moments that spur the ELA teacher into action in their teaching enactment.

Preservice Teacher’s Initial Entry Point:

I was participating in my first teaching field experience on the ninth-grade campus of a large, diverse public school district just outside of a major city in the Midwest. I was observing an ELA teacher instructing high schoolers, and my role involved taking detailed notes about teaching methods, how the teacher built and maintained classroom community, and overall student engagement. The teacher I was observing was preparing a unit on TKAM, and she walked me through the steps of how she would teach it - by reading the text aloud, creating body biographies (Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen, 1998) for main characters, and by “not shying away from talking about uncomfortable race issues” which translated into saying the n-word in her read alouds. The teacher positioned that term as a bygone product of racist language, acting as if it is an antiquated word that no longer holds relevance. It was through this conversation with my cooperating teacher that I began

questioning why teachers were still using TKAM, a text written by a white woman in the 1960s, to teach a diverse group of students about racism. It dawned on me that despite the social justice lens I was developing in my teacher education program, teaching TKAM was probably expected of me at some point in my ELA teaching career, as the text itself is nearly synonymous with the 9th or 10th-grade ELA classroom. I had questions and tensions, and I knew where to take them.

*In the first of many long conversations, I spoke with Kelli about my concerns regarding teaching canonical texts, and I decided that I wanted to come up with a unit on how to teach TKAM so I would be prepared if I had to do so in my future career. In my coursework, I had recently engaged with Muhammad’s (2020) *Cultivating Genius*, which spoke directly to pre-service teachers on developing their personal teaching styles in order to make their classrooms culturally relevant spaces that encourage critical thinking and questioning. Chapter 7, “Implementing Historically Responsive Texts and Lesson Plans,” focuses on ways in which teachers design lessons to encourage student inquiry and questioning within their classrooms. The chapter specifically references how teachers can go about choosing texts that will encourage culturally sustaining literacy to root themselves in the classroom (Muhammad, 2020). My question, as a pre-service English teacher who was witnessing schools mandate that teachers teach specific texts, was, “how can I go about teaching in a culturally sustaining manner if I cannot choose the texts I am teaching?”*

Collaboration:

During our first meeting, we “just talked.” We talked about what we were reading, watching, how our classes were going, where we were from, and how we were raised. We talked about what it means to be an ELA teacher, me sharing my experiences from my years in Chicago, her raising questions and describing her hopes for her own teaching practice. At the core of Vygotsky’s work in constructing meaning through the types of collaborative inquiry Ellie and I were entering into, is the social mediation of learning. Knowledge is not just passed down like an inheritance between generations. It is socially mediated and constructed (Vygotsky, 1978). The well-known process of scaffolding (Bruner, 1975) is “the mentoring provided by more culturally knowledgeable persons, usually elders, who engage in activity with less experienced or knowledgeable persons” (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 2). Ellie and I had to establish ourselves as willing participants in this mentoring process, and I knew that developing rapport through getting to know each other through shared interests and establishing connections was needed before I took on the role of the “more culturally knowledgeable person.” However, I was new to the institution, the state, and the local political landscape, and I was searching for Ellie to take up the role, for me, as the “more culturally knowledgeable person” in teaching me about the new sociocultural sphere I found myself in my new role as assistant professor of ELA. Mentorship (and teaching) is inherently transactional, and the business of learning is predicated on establishing the connection from which the information and knowledge can thus be passed back and forth, freely. Through our introductory conversations, we were able to establish a dialogic for constructing meaning: meaning arises from dialogue, at whatever level that dialogue exists (Bakhtin, 1981). Toward the end of our conversation, once we had established rapport and saw each other as the more knowledgeable person in

the collaborative transactions in which we were searching, we were able to end the conversation with the “next steps” for our collaborative inquiry. Ellie was going to do some thinking about how she could teach *TKAM* to align with Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017), and I was going to do some thinking about how to best guide her through these understandings so that they were long-lasting and ultimately affected her racially and ethnically diverse future high school ELA students.

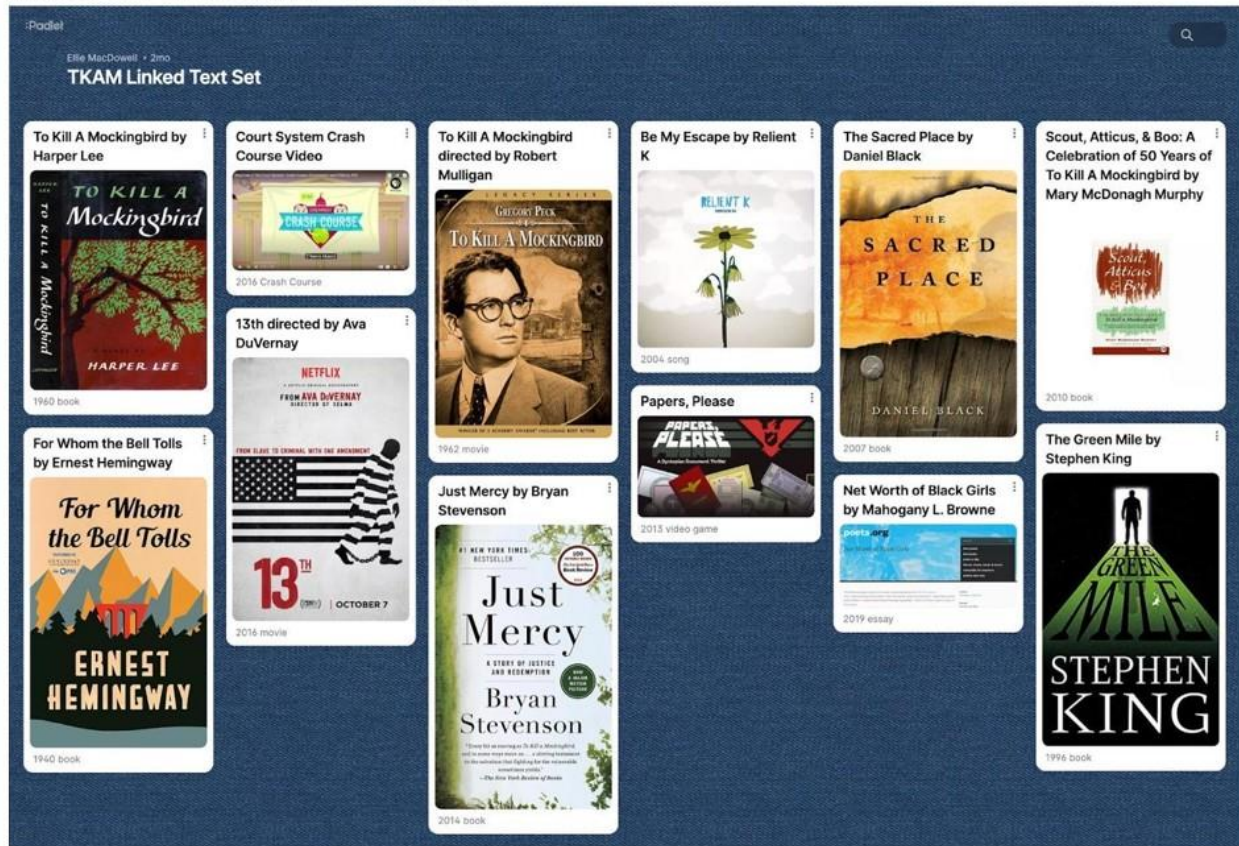
Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment #1

If we can’t choose the texts we teach, we can choose the manner in which we teach those texts.

Entry Point #2: Creating a Critical Linked Text Set to Supplement *TKAM*

*When considering the “how” in the manner in which I would teach *TKAM*, I decided to start by building a Linked Text Set (LTS). I first learned about LTSs from Dr. Katherine Batchelor in a teacher preparation course, Foundations of Critical Literacy. This course provides pre-service teachers with strategies on how to teach literacy in a critical and culturally relevant way. Through this course, Dr. Batchelor taught pre-service teachers about LTSs - collections of texts that work together to provide meaning and diverse perspectives for students (Batchelor, 2019). I decided to create an LTS (Figure 2), with *TKAM* as the foundational text, with themes and concepts that would guide the unit. I then created a collection of supplemental texts, which students could pair with *TKAM* in order to get a more holistic understanding of the themes and historical context: race issues, 1930s culture, and the judicial system. Some of the supplemental texts I curated were Hemingway’s (1940) For Whom the Bell Tolls,*

Figure 2
Ellie's LTS, Created November 2021



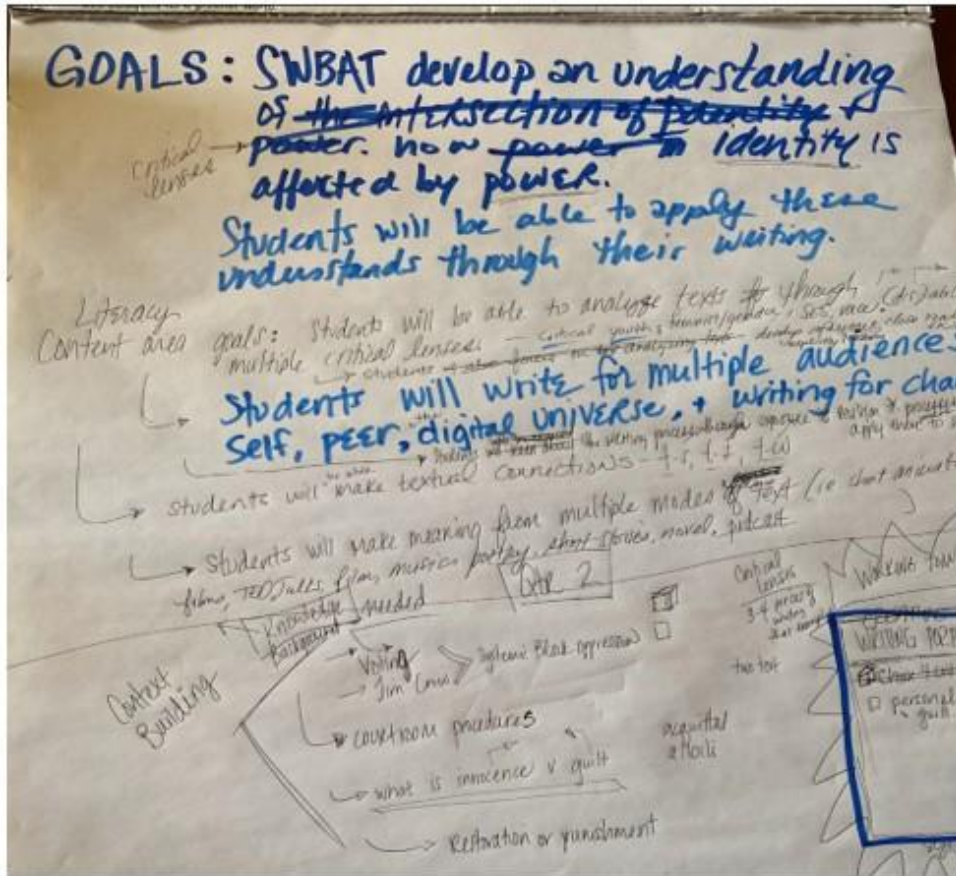
King's (1996) *The Green Mile* and accompanying film clips, Browne's (2019) essay "Net Worth of Black Girls," and Stevenson's (2014) *Just Mercy*. My final LTS had 12 texts on it: books, poems, essays, songs, movies, and a video game. The purpose behind creating this LTS was to supplement my teaching of *TKAM* - layering texts (Muhammad, 2020) that would contribute to historical context and provide diverse perspectives not found in Lee's 1960 novel. With these texts compiled into an LTS, I went to Kelli ready for any generative conversations we may have.

Through conversation with Kelli, I learned about *Understanding by Design (UBD)*, a curriculum framework that encourages

teachers to plan curricula with the end goals in mind (Wiggins et al., 2005). This introduction to *UBD* allowed me to consider what my goals were for my *TKAM* unit. I returned to my LTS with this new understanding of *UBD* and considered what I wanted my students to walk away with.

Collaboration:

Batchelor (2019) writes that LTS curation can be a critical tool for preservice ELA teachers to show what's missing from the texts they present to students. However, when Ellie and I met for our collaboration meeting, I wondered if her *TKAM* "disruption" unit was predicated on presenting her future students with myriad texts encircling (and thus centering) *TKAM*. I thought back to my first year

Figure 3**The Mediated Tool, Understanding By Design (Wiggins et al., 2005)**

of teaching ELA, when I would present texts and activities as patches in a quilt, hoping my students would magically see the entire quilt at the end of the unit. I was a piecemeal teacher for that first year, and student engagement, classroom community, and the students' deep literacy learning suffered because of it. It was not until I learned about Understanding By Design (Wiggins et al., 2005) in a professional development meeting that I had my own 'Aha!' moment. I needed to plan my quilt (curriculum) in its entirety before I started sewing squares together (presenting texts for student analysis) just because they looked similar. I thought Ellie would benefit from my own missteps, so we pivoted to creating a UBD unit map. What were her goals for her unit besides figuring out how to teach *TKAM* in critical and culturally sustaining ways? This was a curricular

frame in my teaching and learning tool kit that I could share with Ellie. Expanding on Vygotsky's idea of mediational means, goal-directed and/or tool-mediated actions, Bruner (1990) and Wertsch (1991) discuss a cultural "tool kit" of mediational means that can lead to actions that aren't necessarily mediated through dialogue. Leading Ellie to her next personal move would require a repertoire of tools, and the UBD process of curriculum development was a mediated tool that I could share from my own toolkit. Deciding to share this particular tool, the UBD framework, was born out of response through our collaborative dialogues. It was the tool that she needed for the job at the time.

Planning with the end in mind is messy (see Figure 3), recursive, collaborative, and exciting. In mediating

our knowledge construction in developing this unit of study, Ellie decided that she wanted her students to be able to: 1) develop an understanding of how identity is affected by power; 2) analyze texts through multiple critical lenses (i.e., critical youth, feminist/gender, SES, race, [dis]ability) through the explicit teaching and learning of inferencing and close reading skills; 3) make meaning from multiple modes of text, (i.e., animated shorts, TED talks, music, poetry, short stories, novel, podcasts), and 4) apply these understandings through students' own 'writing for change' for multiple audiences, including self, peer, and the digital universe. Once Ellie laid out the goals she hoped her unit would reach, she was led to her second Critical 'Aha' Moment, which guided her next personal move. She realized that the unit she wanted to teach via the critical goals she had set out was not best served by a whole-class reading of Lee's novel. She decided to completely revise her unit map.

Critical 'Aha' Moment #2

If we are thinking with the end in mind, how we get there should change.

Entry Point #3: Paired Texts w/ Just Mercy and TKAM (Both texts foundational)

My third entry point into this work took place with the revisional collaboration between Kelli and myself, as we began to figure out ways to revise this unit so it would work to meet the goals I set with framing the curriculum through UBD. The revision involved making a personal move that, before this moment, I was not ready for: it was time to have two foundational texts at the heart of this unit. Through conversations about and engagement with the UBD curriculum-building process, I realized that the goals for my unit could not be met with TKAM alone. While TKAM provides a narrative that is beloved by white culture for

its endearing characters and attempt at bringing racial injustice to light, it provides a single story (Adichie, 2009) of racial tension in the context of 1930's southern United States and does so in a way that leaves out Black voices. The curricular goals of my UBD curriculum map were aimed toward students being able to "develop an understanding of critical lenses and how identity is affected by power" [artifact, see Figure 3] by the end of the unit, which I realized would not be possible with TKAM alone. I needed a text that represented Black voices to pair with TKAM so we could engage with more than a single story (Adichie, 2009) on identities in relation to power. I returned to my LTS, locating the text I added because of its emphasis on the agency of a Black male protagonist: Just Mercy (2014) a memoir by Bryan Stevenson. Just Mercy brings to light the true story of the author, a lawyer who worked in Monroeville, Alabama (unironically the setting of TKAM) as a Black man fighting for the falsely accused on death row. Just Mercy takes an in-depth look at one case in particular, that of Walter McMillian, who was wrongfully convicted of killing a young white girl, Ronda Morrison, in 1986. Just Mercy brings to the table perspectives of the injustice inherent within the justice system, specifically in regard to racism and racial tensions, from a first-person account. With my LTS and my new understanding of designing curriculum through UBD, I spent the next two months creating a unit calendar, all the assignment sheets, discussion questions, worksheets, and activities detailing the day-to-day curriculum, while keeping my end goals in mind.

I had written my first unit map.

It was at this point in my curriculum development that I thought I was done. I showed up to a meeting with Kelli, handed her

my unit plan, and sat back as she poured over it. I thought it was ready to take into a classroom full of high schoolers. Kelli read through my unit plan, closed the packet, and then looked at me. I was ready for her to tell me this was probably some of the best work she'd ever seen. Instead, she asked, "have you heard of excavation?"

Collaboration through excavation:

Oh, she was so excited, and I was for her. She eagerly and passionately explained her creative and engaging curricular ideas for her unit, from escape room-like close reading challenges of *TKAM* and *Just Mercy* to the perspective-taking approximations (e.g., (Kavanagh et al., 2020; Schutz et al., 2019) she had planned for students' examination into justice/injustice. She shared with me homework worksheets and prepared questions for Friday Socratic Seminars. It was an in-depth, engaging, and fresh curriculum. At one point I even exclaimed, "Oh, there's a murder mystery activity! I wish I could be a student in this unit! [meeting transcript 2.27.22]". I knew this was an activity-based, student-centered unit map that would certainly engage the students and pair the two whole-class novels together well, but it didn't feel like deep-seated canonical disruption just yet. We weren't fully released from the grasp of the canon. My previous research with early career ELA teachers engaging with anti-racist ELA curriculum reminded me that the teacher's orientation, the curriculum, and the enactment of that curriculum all needed to be steeped in anti-racist understandings and actions (Rushek, 2021). Ellie had been such a reciprocal teaching and learning mentee/cultural guide for me

throughout the school year, that I wondered if she would be interested in testing out the Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogy (CSLP) (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017) collaborative curricular excavation tool that a preservice teacher at my former university and I had recently developed (Rushek & Seylar, 2022). I implored if she had ever heard of excavation.

Drawing on Sealey-Ruiz's (2022) *Archaeology of the Self* and Paris (2012) and Paris and Alim's (2014) CSLP, my colleague and I developed a collaborative tool to mediate meaning-making in aligning an ELA teacher's developed curricular artifacts to be more culturally sustaining. Itself a scaffolded tool, it guides the curriculum developer through the excavation process to align the teacher's orientation, curriculum, and potential enactment through the pluralistic, asset-based, and critical pedagogical tenets of CSLP. Like teachers (Sealey-Ruiz, 2022), the curriculum developed by them should also be excavated in a metacognitive and collaborative practice to embrace the tensions, ambiguities, and potential pitfalls of creating a curricular artifact that aligns with CSLP in order to cultivate more equitable and sustaining moments of teaching and learning (Rushek & Seylar, 2022). She agreed, so we went digging.

"The curriculum developed by teachers should be excavated in a metacognitive and collaborative practice to embrace the tensions, ambiguities, and potential pitfalls of creating a curricular artifact that aligns with CSLP in order to cultivate more equitable and sustaining moments of teaching and learning."

Through the excavation process, the conversational, critical guided curriculum excavation resulted in some Critical 'Aha!' Moments, where Ellie saw how social justice is nuanced and interrogated through her own whiteness and began to question how her perceived limitations as a white teacher could be (re)imagined instead as an entry point to allow more

space – pedagogical and instructional - for her students’ agency and autonomy within her practice as an ELA educator. A snippet from the data of our excavation meeting highlights these takeaways for Ellie:

Ellie: I want to share socially-just stories. But that probably isn’t the most socially-just way to think about that. I can’t do it in a way that’s like ‘Oh question this!’ because it’s also coming from, like, a white [teacher.] *PAUSE*. I’m realizing that I read *Just Mercy* and I’m like ‘Oh my goodness, what a happy ending.’ But I’m not considering the years of trauma, right? He was exonerated, he goes back to live with his family again. That’s not *just* in any way, shape or form. So, it’s just like my personal biases, my personal experiences as a white person are always going to be there.

Kelli: What about opening that vulnerability with your students? Going back to that question [in the excavation tool] like ‘how are you explicitly showing your questioning of these issues? And allowing all of your students, White, Black Latinx, Asian . . . enter that discussion with you?’

Ellie: Yes! I wrote down what I really want - it was in the cultural competence section [of the excavation process] - I really want student voices to be exemplified in my classroom. I don’t want it to be like the teacher talks, the students listen. I know one way I hold tension is regarding my white identity. I can’t understand. There’s no way for me to understand [systemic legal injustice] beyond learning about it. And so, I think one way I can [navigate] this tension is by having student voices exemplified. And I think while it’s hard to put that into writing in a lesson plan, I think in action it’s absolutely worth it. Absolutely I hold tensions and biases. But I

see that I can silence myself a little bit and open it up to how students know and see these things.

It was at this point, bearing witness to Ellie’s decentering of her own whiteness in relation to her ELA curriculum, and interrogating the texts’ purposes and maintenance in the centering of whiteness, that I realized that we had arrived at the most important Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment yet. Through the recursivity of constructive and collaborative dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978), the mediated tools of UBD (Wiggins et al., 2005), and embracing the tensions of collaborative curriculum excavation (Rushek & Seylar, 2022), toward the answer to our collaborative inquiry. There was disruption afoot.

Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment #3

To Kill A Mockingbird does not need to be centered, or really needed at all, for a social justice framed ELA unit.

Entry Point #4: Centering *Just Mercy* Through the Critical ‘Aha!’ Moments of Excavation

With the realization that I could utilize Just Mercy in order to lead students in meaning-making and potentially reach the aims I established in my revised unit map (thinking with the end in mind, of course), I decided to center both TKAM and Just Mercy and teach them both at the same time. While I conceptually tried to lower the pedestal of TKAM by “raising” Just Mercy to be its literary “equal” within the curriculum, I realized that - by having the students read TKAM in its entirety and reading some excerpts of Just Mercy at home - my instruction counteracted this flattened literary hierarchy.

It was through our collaborative excavation - the deep dive into examining my curriculum

(Rushek & Seylar, 2022), that I had this realization. As Kelli and I went through my already existing curriculum, we noticed patterns of social justice that were framed from TKAM, a book written by a white woman in the 1960s. Just Mercy was written in 2014 and is framed from the perspective of Bryan Stevenson, a Black male lawyer representing falsely accused individuals on death row. His work was social justice. And this story was his.

Aside from recentering Just Mercy as the foundation of this unit, I also had a few main takeaways from the excavation process of myself (Sealey-Ruiz, 2022) and the curriculum I wrote (Rushek & Seylar, 2022), which go hand in hand with the personal move to bring Stevenson’s memoir to the center and allow myself to release from the grasp of TKAM. My first realization was that I did not explore the concept of sustaining my students’ linguistic competencies (Paris 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) in my first unit plan. I brushed over the meaningful use of duality of language, specifically how Black English functions in society and thus through literature (Baker-Bell, 2020). Through the collaborative curricular excavation process (Rushek & Seylar, 2022), I saw the role that language intersects with the concept of justice within a geographic space and historical context and saw how Just Mercy brings to light the power of language.

My second takeaway was that I was centering my own questions and ideas about both TKAM and Just Mercy. In my unit plan, I blocked out weekly days for class discussions with my hypothetical future students, and I created in-depth questionnaires and discussion prep pages that I imagined my future students

filling out in order to guide discussions. However, through the collaborative excavation process with Kelli, I realized that in creating guiding questions, I was centering myself and my own perceptions of the text. Social justice in an educational setting is the opposite of this - decentering the “all-knowing” instructor, especially a middle-class white woman such as myself. For my unit to embrace CSLP, I needed to invite my students’ diverse perspectives and lived realities into the conversation. It was through this excavation that I determined that I could not fully create a socially just, CSLP-centered ELA unit without knowing my students. My hypothetical, future students are vital to the creation of a social justice unit. They bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives to the space, and I must center my unit around them and what they’re bringing to the curriculum.

A final takeaway was that TKAM is beneficial when observing it as a cultural artifact and therefore, could be a historical text to bring in during the teaching of a social justice ELA unit. This takeaway stemmed from the geographical location of Bryan Stevenson’s narrative - Monroe County, Alabama - the inspiration for the fictional town of TKAM’s Maycomb, Alabama. It just so happened that the meaningful work Stevenson was engaging with on death row was centered right where the story of Scout and Atticus was imagined. Realizing this through excavation and finding the connection points between these two stories led me to understand that TKAM is a historical literary artifact that can be beneficial when used as such. The racial tensions present in the 1960s are a part of the story of social justice. I believe that we are at a time and place in 2023 that calls for stories such as Just Mercy in order to truly engage

with social justice, but that bringing in historical literary artifacts, such as TKAM, can lead to an understanding of where we have been, where we are now, and where we will go in the future of social justice.

Bringing Just Mercy and my students to the center of my unit was a personal move that I was not ready for before this moment. It took mentorship and excavation for me to truly realize how necessary stories like Just Mercy are at the center of high school English curricula. They provide raw, relevant stories that allow teachers and students to connect and learn about the injustice that permeates our society.

Enactment: The collaboration happening between the teacher educator and pre-service ELA teacher must eventually transform into the collaboration between early career (formerly preservice) teacher and the students.

Moving to the Students' Initial Entry Point

After the revisions to my unit map, after collaboration, mentorship, and excavation, this unit will be enacted with students in my first teaching job - a 10th-grade ELA classroom in a large city in a Midwestern state. It is at this point that I take over as the guide. The students will begin at their own entry points, bringing with them their questions, lived experiences, and diverse perspectives into the ELA classroom. However, through scaffolding, collaboration, dialogue, and mediated instructional tools, the students will take on the roles of the "more culturally knowledgeable person(s)" (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 2) as we are all led to unique Critical 'Aha!' Moments during the teaching and learning process.

Discussion and Closing Understandings

The pedagogical implications for this work are multifaceted, as they showcase a bridging between the teacher education program and the enactment of the developed curriculum in Ellie's 10th grade American Literature course in her first year of teaching, the 2023-2024 school year. It is the recursivity of the implicit gradual release and scaffolding of the mentorship between Kelli and Ellie, in conversation with the mediated tools used in the scaffolding process, that lead to Critical 'Aha!' Moments that sparked Ellie's action to reach the next entry point, where the cycle continued. This is not a linear process, nor is it replicable, as the understandings arrived at by Ellie cannot be divorced from her agency toward *wanting* to understand and take action in her own ELA teaching. However, to attempt to replicate the release from the grasp of the canon in other preservice and in-service educators requires some prerequisite work that hinges on the critical understandings generated from deep internal work and self-excitation of the biases and assumptions that the educator brings to the teaching of English (Sealey-Ruiz, 2019). In addition, it requires a deeply critical understanding of the innately political nature of curating texts and whole-class novels for study in the ELA classroom, how they're wielded as power in educational policy, standards, and standardized testing, as we have recently seen in Florida. While releasing other ELA educators from the grasp of the canon could potentially arise out of the specific mediated tools we used - open and vulnerable dialogue, creation of a critical linked text set (Batchelor, 2019), the Understanding By Design (Wiggins et al., 2005) curriculum design framework, and a collaborative critical curricular excavation framework (e.g., Rushek & Seylar, 2022) - the tools, entry points, and personal moves will be unique to the collaborative pair or group.

The Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment is also a unique understanding born out of a specific line of inquiry with invested stakeholders, like Ellie. The Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment is like the “lightbulb moment” we educators love to witness - when a student suddenly “gets it” in ways they did not before. However, the Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment is a realization that bridges theory and practice in regard to understanding or “seeing” how power and privilege operate in the given context, and this realization sparks a desire for action, or as we’ve named it, a personal move in practice. For example, when Ellie had her first Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment, she realized that she may not be able to pick the texts she’ll teach in her curriculum, due to canonical forces (powers) and her role as a preservice/first year teacher (not enough power to be a policy-level changemaker), but what she could control was *how* she taught it. This Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment pushed her to take action, or harnessing her own agency and the power and privilege she did have to present a culturally relevant and sustaining curriculum to her ELA students. Her students - a diverse group by all identity markers - will be engaged with a deeply embedded, multimodal, multi-textual, purposeful, backwardly-designed unit of study that foregrounds Ellie’s social justice pedagogical frame. The unit has been collaboratively excavated and revised to more align with the tenets of Culturally Sustaining Literacy Pedagogy, and is awaiting further revision after Ellie engages her students in instruction of this unit. The cycle continues, as she will be the guide inviting her students - all at differing entry points - to recursively use her developed mediated tools to push her students toward differing entry points and hopeful Critical ‘Aha!’ Moments that lead to student action and personal moves. The cycle

“The Critical ‘Aha!’ Moment is a realization that bridges theory and practice in regard to understanding or “seeing” how power and privilege operate in the given context, and this realization sparks a desire for action, or as we’ve named it, a personal move in practice.”

is never complete, the entry points, moves, and mediated tools change based on the teaching and learning contexts. In addition, future planned classroom research will inquire into the enactment of the unit of study born out of this process, how Ellie makes sense of how her students are reaching the targets of her learning goals, and how her students take up the enactment of this curriculum.

Examining the processes of our knowledge construction throughout our two-year-long mentorship and research inquiry experiences, we arrive not at a conclusion but an understanding. Releasing ourselves from the grasp of the Eurocentric literature canon is messy, filled with tensions, ambiguities, questions, and those special Critical ‘Aha!’ Moments when theory and practice collide. The disruption of canonical texts, or the status quo master narratives (Kirkland, 2011) central to traditional ELA curriculum is less about divorcing ourselves from the nostalgic pull of the novels, but instead involves deep introspection of the aims and goals of the

curriculum itself. As an ELA community of preservice and in-service teachers and ELA teacher educators, we first need to move away from compartmentalized curricula centered on the reading of a single fictional novel and integrating the state or national standards through whole-class reading and analysis of said text. Like the “new” (read: old) curriculum given to Kelli in 2008, a year-long ELA curriculum map need not be a list of print-based literature titles to be tackled. Instead, as Johnson (2018) argues, ELA teachers’ pedagogical orientations, and the curriculum we impart, need to disrupt anti-blackness, racism, and oppression, bringing these deep societal issues from the curricular margins to the center of ELA praxis.

TKAM is one novel of many that serves whiteness and maintains anti-blackness, so disrupting the canon cannot be achieved merely through a curricular chess match of repositioning, centering, and decentering these novels as anchor, foundational, paired, or mentor texts. Disrupting the canon is throwing a grenade into the excavation site(s) where we need to do the most work, on ourselves - our assumptions, biases, and whiteness - and on the curriculum that allows whiteness to hide in plain sight. We need to disrupt the whiteness inherent in K-12 schooling by excavating our curricula - whether it is developed at the federal, state, or local level, mandated, or written by teachers for their own classrooms. We need to unpack how we choose the texts we choose and interrogate how we teach them so that our instruction does not further white supremacy, anti-Blackness, or maintain empires of oppression (Morrison, 1988). We ELA teachers need to excavate ourselves and our curricula to ensure we are not complicit reproducers of the status quo.

This work cannot be done alone, without collaboration with more culturally knowledgeable persons (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Through the dialogic approach (Vygotsky, 1978), we begin to see discrepancies between what is being taught through canonical texts and what students need to engage with to understand critical, culturally sustaining literacies. Critical, university-based English educators can continue to guide preservice and in-service teachers toward the Critical 'Aha!' Moments that intersect critical theories with teaching praxis. Critical instructional coaches and department chairs can guide in-service teachers through excavation protocols of the self (Sealey-Ruiz, 2019, 2022) and of their curriculum (e.g., Rushek & Seylar, 2022) to lead them away from the grasp the canon has on our field. The English Language Arts curriculum is more than a list of great books for students to read and acquire like trading cards; it is a

space for deep, critical, and pluralistic meaning-making to help us make sense of the ever-changing world we are living in. Releasing ourselves from the grasp of the canon allows teachers and students to think with the end in mind, preparing them to make meaning in and of a world we cannot yet fathom.

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