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Using Pre-reading Strategies to Provide Historical Context in a Literature Course

Tisha Ulmer

Reflecting on an Initial Teaching Experience

“Boy, talk about a sellout,” a student exhaled after we read Phillis Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” for the first time. This class was hardly shy about voicing their opinions, and other students chuckled and agreed. This was my first semester teaching African-American Literature I, a survey course. We began with colonial era writers such as Phillis Wheatley and Lucy Terry, read the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs and ended with the post-Reconstruction debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois regarding approaches to African-American equality. The class’s initial response to Wheatley reflected one of the biggest challenges I encountered throughout the semester: helping students to appreciate the historical context for the literature we were studying.

This article explores pre-reading strategies I implemented that successfully moved students towards addressing the literature’s historical context in their essay assignments. In particular, students engaged in writing activities designed to help them identify with the life experiences that influenced Wheatley’s poetry. Towards the end of the semester the students engaged in a writing activity that gave them an opportunity to identify with the experiences of students at Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute to elucidate why his ideas about African-American education and equality were so controversial. The goal was for students to have more nuanced reactions to the literature the first time they read it. The historical context would be a part of their critical thinking about the literature. I also hoped that they would be more likely to contextualize the literature in their formal writing assignments.

I teach at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, which has an enrollment of about 17,000 students. 35% of the students are white, 32% are black, 19% are Hispanic, and 14% are Asian. About 75% of the students in my African-American literature course are black, with the rest comprised of white, Hispanic and Asian students. Most of the black students in my course are from the Caribbean, with a smaller percentage from Africa, and a few who trace their roots to the American South. Many of the white students at the college and in my course are from the former Soviet Union, and the Hispanic students hail from countries such as the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. Finally, most of the Asian students are from China or Pakistan. Generally speaking, the students come from working class, immigrant families with over 80% of the students’ household incomes below \$50,000 a year. 55% of the students at the college are female and 45% are male, and these statistics reflect the typical gender composition of my course (Kingsborough Community College Institutional Profile).

Our first work, “Bars Fight,” a ballad by Lucy Terry, was the earliest known work of literature by an African-American. It recounts a Native American attack on two white families in a meadow in Deerfield, Massachusetts in 1746:

August 'twas the twenty-fifth,
Seventeen hundred forty-six;
The Indians did in ambush lay,
Some very valiant men to slay,
The names of whom I'll not leave out.
Samuel Allen like a hero fout,
And though he was so brave and bold,
His face no more shalt we behold
Eleazer Hawks was killed outright,
Before he had time to fight,
Before he did the Indians see,
Was shot and killed immediately.
Oliver Amsden he was slain,
Which caused his friends much grief and pain.
Simeon Amsden they found dead,
Not many rods distant from his head.
Adonijah Gillett we do hear
Did lose his life which was so dear.
John Sadler fled across the water,
And thus escaped the dreadful slaughter.
Eunice Allen see the Indians coming,
And hopes to save herself by running,
And had not her petticoats stopped her,
The awful creatures had not caught her,
Nor tommy hawked her on the head,
And left her on the ground for dead.
Young Samuel Allen, Oh lack-a-day!
Was taken and carried to Canada.

Since I was concerned that the students might transpose images of Southern slavery reminiscent of films such as *Roots* or *Gone with the Wind* onto the Northern landscape, we reviewed a document that gives an account of all of the slaves in Deerfield in the 1700s before we read “Bars Fight” (“18th Century Slaves in Deerfield”). For example, they learned that most of the white families owned only one or two slaves; many of these slaves attended church with their masters, and some even had store accounts. In this way the students noted the differences between Southern plantation slavery and Northern slavery, where the slaves were almost members of the family who were often taught to read and write and usually slept in the same house as their masters. We also reviewed historical documents about the attack, including the recollection of one of the survivors (“The Background of the Fight at the Bars”). Finally, we read about Terry’s life which, after gaining her freedom through purchase by her husband, included acts of resistance such as arguing her case before the Supreme Court in a land dispute with a neighbor and delivering a three hour address before the Board of Trustees at Williams College

regarding why her son should be admitted. Successful in the first instance though not in the latter, she was widely praised for her oratorical skills.

When we read “Bars Fight,” the students, as many of Terry’s critics, observed that Terry seems to sympathize with the white settlers. Yet in light of the historical documents, they also noted that in some sections she can be seen as subtly criticizing her captors. For example, Terry uses words such as “valiant” and “brave” to praise the colonists, yet she notes that “John Sadler fled across the water/And thus escaped the dreadful slaughter.” In the historical documents the students learned that John Sadler was in fact a soldier who was supposed to protect the colonists from such an attack. Some students also observed that Terry distanced herself from the colonists, with the lines, “Oliver Amsden he was slain/ Which caused *his* friends much grief and pain.” In these ways, they brought their knowledge of the historical context to bear on their interpretations of the poem.

I transitioned to our second colonial writer, Phillis Wheatley, by giving a brief overview of Wheatley’s biography, noting that a wealthy tailor, John Wheatley, purchased her to be a companion to his wife, Susanna Wheatley. When Susanna recognized Phillis’ intelligence, she encouraged her to study the Bible as well as English and Latin literature. I also noted that Wheatley wrote in the context of the burgeoning American Revolution, and we reviewed the causes of the Revolution. Despite this brief background, the historical framework we had erected around “Bars Fight” collapsed when the students encountered Wheatley’s controversial poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” for the first time. They seemed to view it solely through a 21st century lens and categorically considered her a sellout.

John Bean describes this dilemma:

Inexperienced readers often do not see what conversation a text belongs to—what exigency sparked the piece of writing, what question the writer was pondering, what points of view the writer was pushing against, what audience the writer was imagining, what change the writer hoped to bring about in the audience’s beliefs or actions—why in short, the writer put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. They have difficulty perceiving a real author writing for a real reason out of a real historical moment. (165)

Similarly, in the anthology *Teaching African-American Literature: Theory and Practice*, several contributors stress the importance of contextualizing African-American literature. For example, two contributors assert that without this context, students will view black literature through the lens of stereotypes. Jane Skelton states that while authors such as Langston Hughes are widely anthologized; they are rarely presented “*in context*” [emphasis Skelton] (54). She laments that after showing her class, primarily composed of black and Latino students, a documentary about the life of Langston Hughes for a unit on the Harlem Renaissance, one student blurted out “I didn’t know black people lived that way back then” (54). The documentary’s depiction of well-educated, well-travelled, middle-class Harlem blacks challenged their historical notions of black life as characterized by slavery and oppression, as well contemporary stereotypes about black life such as the entertainer, the athlete, and the single mother (55). In this way, Skelton aims to provide her students of color with multiple, positive models of black life.

Meanwhile, contributor Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg aims to reattach “cultural and academic texts to their historical and political origins” to develop self-reflexivity in her

predominately white classes, to help students “become more aware of themselves and their positions within culture” (172). She hopes that this critical consciousness will prevent students from falling into the net of viewing a character such as *Native Son’s* Bigger Thomas, who kills his black girlfriend and his white female employer, through the lens of “culturally perpetuated stereotypes of black men as sexually excessive and likely to engage in criminal activity, a net supported by widely disseminated media images” (161). She notes that, “falling into the net remains frightfully easy for students (across race, class and gender lines), even if they never proclaim it as such” (161).

Falling into the net of stereotypes or pre-conceived notions about the past can happen to students of all backgrounds in any literature course. Moreover, as Goldberg articulates it, students of all backgrounds can see literature solely “from their own position within the culture” (172). For instance, to what extent were my students’ negative perceptions of Phillis Wheatley shaped by their engagement with the activism of Black Lives Matter, their generation’s campaign to end police violence against African-Americans? To what extent were their perceptions shaped by contemporary conversations about light-skin versus dark-skin blacks—notions that seem to be rooted in their generation’s understanding of house slaves versus field slaves? To what extent were their responses to the literature shaped by their experiences as first or second generation immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa? All of these perspectives came up in the classroom and may explain their views on Wheatley’s poem and the other texts we studied.

Therefore, I think it is important for students of all backgrounds to reflect on their position and how it may shape their view of the past. Indeed, I find the suggestion of Thein, et al. particularly useful when they observe:

Teachers who have earnestly tried to teach multicultural literature in a manner that fosters change often find that when they push students to see differences between their experiences and the kinds of racism and oppression depicted in multicultural texts, students push back and resist our efforts, often because they do not want to be implicated in institutional or systemic racism. (54)

They accordingly discuss approaches that allow white students “to increase their understandings of *how* their beliefs and values are formed and *why* other people think differently” (55). For example, students can take on the perspective of characters in a novel by creating monologues. They can search the text to find “beliefs, thoughts, actions and social contexts” of the characters and begin their monologues with the words, “You think you know me, but you don’t!” (58). The authors also have students take on the perspective of characters by placing the characters in contemporary situations. For instance, when the class read Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students took on the roles of Janie, her grandmother, and her three husbands and one student performed the role of counselor to ask questions about their perspectives and actions. Before this activity, some students were critical of the fact that Janie’s grandmother forced her to marry a man she didn’t love. But in role-playing Janie’s grandmother, a student explained her experiences of “slavery, sexual abuse, and poverty” that led her to seek security for her granddaughter (58). The authors report: “Students explained that while they had read those details in the text, those role play meetings encouraged them to frame the details in terms of characters’

internal motivations for their actions” (58). Thein, et al. acknowledge that while they may not see significant change in a student’s beliefs and attitudes during the course, “a different and no less powerful kind of change can be imagined when students read, discuss and write about multicultural literature—a willingness to ‘try on’ different perspectives” (55).

Applying Lessons Learned

In response to the foregoing teaching experience and research, I thought it might be useful to have my students engage in a pre-reading activity in which they “tried on” the position of the historical other. I’d already seen how low stakes pre-reading activities “immerse students in complexity without being threatening,” so I designed a pre-reading activity in which the students would try on the perspective of the historical other before reading Wheatley’s poetry (Bean 121). In other words, I wanted them to engage in a personal transaction with the past.

The next semester I gave the students Wheatley’s biography. I then asked them to imagine what they might write about if this was their life story. I gave them a few minutes to respond to this question in writing. The biography and free-writing question are below:

You were purchased by Peter Gwinn as part of a cargo of slaves in a region his employer describes as ‘Sinagall,’ most likely today’s Senegal. Your age was unknown when you were brought to Boston, but you were around seven years old. Diminutive and sickly, you were purchased at the slave market of John Avery by a Mrs. Susanna Wheatley.

You came to the colonies speaking no English, but quickly learned to read and write Latin and English. You learn to read the Bible fluently in sixteen months. Susanna Wheatley and her daughter Mary do not have a scholarly interest themselves but foster your interest in Alexander Pope, Milton, and Homer. You join the Old South Meeting House in 1771, solidifying your Puritan faith. The Wheatley family takes pride in their “experiment” and show you off to other prominent families in the Boston area.

Your role as a young person in the family is complex. You have few domestic tasks, but are still the property of the Wheatleys. You have privileges that most other slaves don’t have, such as a lighted and heated room. You dine modestly apart from the rest of the company...where you cannot give or receive offense. Your role is unclear in the family and in society in general. You inhabit a strange, ambiguous twilight zone between black society and white society, cut off from any normal contact with either, denied the sustenance of group identity.

The year is 1765, you are now 18 and you have a desire to write poetry. Given your life circumstances and what is happening in the colonies, what do you want to write about? (“Phillis Wheatley Biography”)

This low-stakes assignment challenged students to take on the position of the historical other (considering race and gender, in particular) and express their opinion from that perspective. Since Wheatley’s birth year is unknown, I settled on age 18 as the year she began writing poetry as I felt many of the students would be able to relate to that age. Sixty percent of the students at the college are under age 22, and this age is generally representative of students taking my course.

We discussed what they might write about, and I put their responses on the board. Then we read, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” a poem that made her “a pariah in black political and critical circles” (Gates 74) because Wheatley seems to express

gratitude for her experience as an American slave:

‘Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
‘Their colour is a diabolic die.’
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train. (143-144)

We began by attending to the poem’s diction, using the Smart Board to define words such as “mercy,” “pagan,” “benighted,” “redemption,” “sable,” “scornful,” “diabolic,” and “refined.” We also reviewed the footnote regarding the biblical reference to Cain and Abel, in which the editors of the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* note that, “Because he murdered his brother Abel (Genesis 4:1-5), Cain is said to have been ‘marked’ by God. Some readers of the Bible thought that Cain thereby became the first black man” (144). Following this I asked the students to free write in response to the question, “Did she write about what you thought she would write about?” We discussed the answer to this question as well as their reactions to the poem. The first semester that I did this pre-reading assignment I found that the students had mixed responses to the poem. While some of the students certainly considered Wheatley “brainwashed,” other students used words like “sarcasm” when we discussed the poem. For instance, during the Spring 2014 semester, while most of the students argued that, “her owners brainwashed her,” that “they used religion to mess with her head,” that she was a “show trophy” and “exploited,” other students noted her “sarcastic undertone” or argued that the poem can be seen as, “giving the slaves hope.” Indeed, as evidenced in their free writing and class discussions, engaging in a personal transaction with the past, taking on the position of the historical other, led the classes to have more nuanced reactions to Wheatley’s controversial poem the first time they encountered it.

But would the students account for Wheatley’s historical context in their graded essay? For the formal assignment I provide the students with quotes from four of Wheatley’s critics from the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. For example, Seymour Gross wrote, “This Negro poetess so well fits the Uncle Tom syndrome She is pious, grateful, retiring and civil” (Gates 76). Meanwhile, Amiri Baraka proclaimed that Wheatley’s “pleasant imitations of 18th century English poetry are far, and finally, ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights with their hollers, chants, arwhoolies, and ballits” (76). The students responded to the question, “Do you agree with these critics? Why or why not?”

When I began teaching the course, very few students addressed the history of the period in their initial drafts. I have found that since I introduced the pre-reading activity in which they take on the position of the historical other, many more students consider Wheatley’s historical context in their first drafts. Indeed, 75% of the students did so during the spring 2014 semester. This was also the case during the spring 2015 semester.

Below are three examples of students’ writing from the pre-reading activity to the first draft of the formal essay. All student names are pseudonyms, and I have only altered the

students' language to make it clearer.

After reading Wheatley's biography, one student, Camila, said that if this were her life story she would write about her migration experience, growing up with the Wheatleys, gaining literacy, and her place in society. She began: "I would like to write about my experience from being brought to the United States as a slave, also being able to learn how to speak English, read and write and what it was like growing up with the Wheatleys. Where I see myself socially."

After she read "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Camila was disappointed by Wheatley's passive tone, and she did not see the poem as containing any autobiographical elements. She wrote: "She did not write about what I thought she would. This is more like having a little anger towards the whites. However, she does [say] that she learned something from her owners through this literature. I was kind of shocked at this poem because I thought she would [have] written about her life."

Consistent with her informal writing, in her formal essay Camila agrees with the critics who claim that Wheatley was submissive: "Based on all of Wheatley's works the critics are right; she accepts the wrongs that were done to blacks. When reading her poems you don't get the feeling of someone who is standing up for her people; you see a woman who doesn't really think of herself as a black slave." Camila supports her thesis by asserting that Wheatley belittles her origins in "On Being Brought from Africa to America," as "she thinks little of the religion in her homeland and she accepts the Christian religion." She also discusses Wheatley's passive tone in "To His Excellency, George Washington," in which she "never mentions that Washington is contradicting himself being that he was an owner of slaves; yet he was fighting for freedom." In her conclusion, however, she contextualizes her thesis by accounting for the difference between slavery in the North and the South and even makes a concession:

What people must understand is that Phillis Wheatley did not experience working in a cotton field and being beaten by her masters. She cannot write about what she did not endure. We have to keep in mind that she was also in the North where the slaves had more rights than the ones in the South. Even though reading her poetry doesn't make you feel any of the struggles that black slaves in the south went through, we must give Phillis Wheatley credit because she is a part of the foundation of African American literature.

After reading Wheatley's biography, another student, Andrew, said that he would write about his perplexing position in society and his life story, focusing on key incidents in his life.

- My confusion of my life with society
- My life thus far
- Experiences/defining moments

Unlike Camila, Andrew felt that Wheatley's content was what he predicted in that she wrote about key moments in her life: "She did write about what I spoke of. She described defining moments. Such moments, being 'saved' from sin, her pagan land, and being educated. I find it interesting she talks down to her old self, and praises her new identity."

In his graded essay, Andrew made Wheatley's historical period central to his thesis, in which he disagreed with the critics. In fact, he as well as other students highlighted the 1960s in their analysis. Andrew wrote:

As the critics were from the 1960s, time of the civil rights movements, they were looking for poetry from the first black African American. Expecting it to be about the struggles of the harsh life they lived. The critics obtained something completely different than what they expected. Assuming they wanted something inspirational, so they can use it in their speeches and marches. Instead they found works that were more along the lines of a 'white persons' life. One's life style and experiences generally determine a story they would tell of their own life. This is true for Phillis Wheatley She was brought to the Northern part of the colonies where slavery was 'nicer.' She fortunately had a way better life style than those slaves of the south It's obvious that [Amiri Baraka] didn't take into account the life style she had growing up in the north, and the family that 'took her in.'

In this excerpt from his formal essay, we see that Andrew confidently argues that Amiri Baraka was so focused on the exigencies of his historical era that he failed to fully or fairly consider Wheatley's context. Moreover, by placing terms such as "nicer" and "took her in" in quotation marks, Andrew highlights the complex nature of Northern slavery and Wheatley's relationship with the family that purchased her.

These responses reflect how engaging in an informal writing assignment in which the students have a personal transaction with the past before reading the primary text can help them better comprehend the primary text and have more nuanced interpretations of it from the first time they encounter it.

Extending Students' Personal Transaction with the Past

Encouraged by how the activity of personally transacting with the past worked with Phillis Wheatley, I decided to try it again at the end of the semester before the students read Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. When I began teaching the course, I was struck by the fact that most of the students sided with Booker T. Washington's notion that it was best for blacks to eschew direct protest against the critical challenges they faced during the post-Reconstruction era—disenfranchisement, lynching and segregation—and instead engage in manual labor to build a strong economic base, which would eventually lead to political and social equality. As he expressed it in his famous "Atlanta Exposition Address" of 1895:

Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. (574)

During my first time teaching African American Literature I—to place Washington and Du Bois in their historical context as it relates to topics such as minstrelsy, Jim Crow, lynching, the rise of black politicians during the Reconstruction Era, and the Industrial Revolution—the students did group presentations on a selection of these topics for extra credit. This pre-reading activity may have reflected my own proclivities as a child of the Civil Rights movement because I wanted the students to appreciate why Booker T. Washington's gradualist gospel was so controversial in the context of the adversities that blacks faced in the post-Reconstruction era.

The second time I taught Washington's essay in the course, I announced that a group of buildings on campus, trailer-like structures known as the T-Buildings or Temporary-Buildings, were going to be torn down and replaced with a new, state of the art facility. I told the class that the president of our college had put forth a proposal in which students would assist in constructing the new building. In this way, students would have an opportunity to learn a trade such as plumbing, electricity, masonry, and so forth and receive credits towards their degree. In brief, future students would graduate with a trade as well as an academic degree. I informed the class that the president wanted student feedback on this proposal, and our class was one of five chosen to do so in the form of an anonymous letter. After they wrote their letters to the president, we discussed the pros and cons of the proposal. I put their responses on the board. The discussion became quite heated as some students were vehemently against the proposal, while others could see the value of it. Excerpts from letters written by four students are below:

It's been an honor to attend Kingsborough Community College in the time that I've been here. Coming to Kingsborough gave me the college experience I needed right at home. Although there are some things I believe the new president should bring to this school. I do like the idea of having the students help rebuild the "T" buildings up in exchange for 12 credits. Not only is this a great idea it allows more hands on educational experience, which I think many students can gain from so I say go on with this!!

I believe this proposal is a good idea. Though Kingsborough is not a trade school, the skill one would learn can be taken outside the construction zone and taken home for similar problems in the household. My only concern is the re-allocation of the classes in those buildings that use various equipment, such as music. I'm a musician and I know music isn't high up on the list for saving. But I don't want the small music program gone because of the construction But the number of credits for this one class is wonderful for people who don't want to take 'boring' electives. And for the community, I think it's wonderful, having students coming together and rebuilding. Overall it's a good idea, just some fine tuning.

In these letters the students emphasize how the proposal can: 1) expand employment opportunities, 2) create even greater economic independence, as graduates will be able to use the skills they learn in the home, and 3) unify the campus through community service. All of these points mirror Washington's argument for teaching blue collar skills such as brickmaking, farming and domestic service in addition to the liberal arts at the college he founded, the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The second student, however, alludes to the tension between a vocational education and a liberal arts education, which the following students engaged explicitly and emphatically:

I've heard about the proposal and in my opinion I don't think it's such a great idea. Kingsborough is about getting an education. If students wanted to be construction workers, etc. then they should have gone to trade school.

Building the school has absolutely nothing to do with my major. I care very little for the building to come up from the ground. The number one reason being that I had to take classes in the T building, which did not bother me to do so. And now I have to contribute to the comfort of others. Number two we are not all [students] who want to participate in vocational school. My major is Criminal Justice and [I am] transferring to John Jay for forensic science. Construction work does not benefit [me in any] way . . . So don't waste your time or students' time trying to force us to do construction work.

These students are clear in their intention to pursue a liberal arts education and become professionals. They seem to downgrade blue-collar employment. The letters also reflect that our college is primarily a liberal arts institution: over half of the student body majors in Liberal Arts, followed by Criminal Justice, Business Administration and Biology—and over one-third of the students plan to transfer to a four-year college (Kingsborough Community College Institutional Profile). In addition to reflecting the focus of the college, these objections may also be underscored by the fact that most of the students at Kingsborough Community College are first-generation college students. As the students at Tuskegee over a century ago, our students are trying to achieve a foothold on the American dream. While some of the students see the value of learning a trade to achieve this, others are certain that a traditional college education is the only way to do so.

When we concluded the discussion, I informed the students that the proposal was not real. They were shocked and amused to discover that I had been acting, and once the class settled I gave them a brief introduction to Booker T. Washington's ideas and his approach to education. We concluded the day's class session by reading an excerpt from his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, in which the class saw that students at Tuskegee had similar responses to his emphasis on manual labor as they struggled to make bricks to put up a campus building. Washington recalls:

About the time that we succeeded in burning our first kiln of bricks we began facing in an emphasized form the objection of the students to being taught to work. By this time it had gotten to be pretty well advertised throughout the state that every student who came to Tuskegee, no matter what his financial ability might be, must learn some industry. Quite a number of letters came from parents protesting against their children engaging in labour while they were in the school. Other parents came to the school to protest in person. Most of the new students brought a written or a verbal request from their parents to the effect that they wanted their children taught nothing but books. The more books, the larger they were, and the longer the titles printed upon them, the better pleased the students and their parents seemed to be. (72)

The class readily saw that students and parents at Tuskegee had similar objections to an industrial education. Additionally, the final sentence of this passage is a touchstone for the controversial aspect of Washington's rhetorical strategies, as he intimates that the intellectual pursuits of African Americans were not only impractical but also superficial. This mirrors an earlier section of his essay when Washington asserts that one of the saddest

things he saw during his travels through the South, “was a young man, who attended some high school, sitting down in a one room cabin, with grease on his clothing, filth all around him, and weeds in the garden, engaged in studying a French grammar” (58). Did Washington engage in a form of minstrelsy in his writing and speeches? In the *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B Du Bois responds to this passage directly, reflecting on how Booker T. Washington’s rhetoric and work reflected the zeitgeist. He writes:

Next to this achievement comes Mr. Washington’s work in gaining place and consideration in the North. Others less shrewd and tactful had formerly essayed to sit on these two stools and had fallen between them; but as Mr. Washington knew the heart of the South from birth and training, so by singular insight he intuitively grasped the spirit of the age which was dominating the North. And so thoroughly did he learn the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism, and the ideals of material prosperity that the picture of a lone black boy poring over a French grammar amid the weeds and dirt of a neglected home soon seemed to him the acme of absurdities. One wonders what Socrates and St. Francis of Assisi would say to this. (695)

In these ways, I hoped that this low stakes assignment in which the students engaged in a personal transaction with the past—pursuing manual labor in addition to the liberal arts—would be an opportunity to consider the controversial nature of Booker T. Washington’s work and words. But would the students account for Washington and Du Bois’s historical context in their graded essay, integrating realities such as minstrelsy, Jim Crow, and lynching into their analysis? For the formal assignment the students had three choices. They could: (1) come up with a thesis for an essay about Washington and Du Bois, (2) write a letter to Washington or Du Bois, or (3) imagine that the year was 1905 and write journal entries in which they decided between attending Washington’s Tuskegee Institute or Du Bois’s alma mater, Fisk University, where they would receive a traditional college education.

During the spring 2014 semester, I found that 93% of the students integrated the historical context into their analysis in their first drafts. Fifteen students submitted draft one for analysis. During the spring 2015 semester, 82% of the students made references to the historical period in their first drafts.

One student began her letter to Booker T. Washington by making a personal connection between the slavery and post-slavery eras:

My name is Andrew Lineman and I am a part of the Negro race. I am a practicing Physician in a prominently black area and I make a living; a good honest living amongst my black people and I am a good Doctor. I obtained my education at Fisk University just as Mr. W.E.B. Du Bois has. I, however, had the unfortunate experience of hearing your speech the other day, and I was deeply saddened. My poor grandmother who was born a slave turned in the dirt upon hearing each of your belittling words.

She then couches her criticism of Washington’s “Atlanta Exposition Address” in the context of Jim Crow:

Why must I or any other free man, who can fetch my own water, beg to another vessel? This is the cowardice I speak of Mr. Washington; I will not beg or ask the white

man for anything. Just as he will not ask me for anything; as I am sure Sir, if a white man was dying of thirst and was surrounded by 'BLACKS ONLY' water fountains, he would rather die of thirst than drink.

As I get the feeling you are an accommodating man and make the best of every situation, I can understand why you feel blacks can live among whites under Jim Crow laws. The exception being that blacks be afforded the opportunity to work and make money just as any white man for the benefit of themselves and their country . . . these plans sound like paid slavery. I agree that the world needs tradesmen, but the world also needs brain and skill in other areas than using hoes, plows and hammers.

Another student argued that Washington had the best interest of African-Americans at heart, and as other students she explores how his experience with slavery shaped his views. Indeed, in analyzing their ideas, several students contrasted his upbringing with Du Bois's, who was raised in the North. She then challenges his accommodationist stance in response to the harsh realities that African-Americans faced during the post-Reconstruction era:

Washington, who has close connections to that harsh reality of slavery probably wanted black people as a whole to lay low out of fear of retaliation. I don't think he was inherently against integration or abolishing Jim Crow laws, but that he felt if they were to focus on that now, resistance would be too strong. I think he wanted to play it safe and didn't worry because he knew later generations would continue the legacy and create higher goals. And while I understand his point of view, the militant abuse occurring at the time towards black people needed to be addressed. Lynchings were a daily occurrence in some places, and Jim Crow laws were terrorizing the south. Freedom wasn't peaceful; with no education and limited resources, many people were angry and rightfully so. Sharecropping, while somewhat helpful to recently freed slaves, was very akin to slavery. They worked in the fields and were promised a small portion of the money made, but the land owners got most of the profits and little to none of the work. It was as if slavery had never truly ended.

Later, she alludes to the possibility that Washington was wearing a minstrel mask as she makes an intertextual connection to a reading from another literature course she was taking that semester:

Washington's ideals are a great stepping stone for Du Bois' ideals. In my Intro to Lit class we read a short story called *Battle Royal*. In the beginning, the narrator's grandfather dies, but reminds the boy to always remember to kill them with kindness. Say one thing, but never forget who you are and who they are. This reminds me greatly of Washington. He advised us not to complain and to abide by the rules, no matter how dehumanizing they seemed, but I believed deep down, he was waiting for what felt like the right time to strike. To gain the trust of the oppressor before destroying the walls they built to keep us out.

These are two examples of how students incorporated historical realities such as Jim Crow, lynching and sharecropping into their formal essays about Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Since I began using this strategy, students have been much more likely to consider the historical context in their formal essays. Indeed, in her formal

essay, one student disagreed with Washington's arguments but was still inspired by the challenges he overcame. She wrote, "You inspired me to finish off this semester stronger than ever before. I say this because of the pressures of being a first generation graduate from college. People tend to forget that you are not perfect . . . I thank you for all of the hard work and inspiring many people to keep moving forward when obstacles appear to be impossible."

One of the primary challenges we face in the literature classroom is having students integrate the historical context into their analysis of the literature. Pre-reading strategies in which students engage in "trying on" the position of the historical other can be a key tool in addressing this challenge—a way to help them "keep moving forward" in their appreciation of history and its impact on literature.



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