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2012 Volume IV: Narratives of Citizenship and Race since Emancipation

Exchanging Letters - Changing Legacies

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by Jeffrey K. Weathers

Letter of Introduction, Content Objectives and Teaching Strategies

Dear Readers and Fellow Teachers,

Welcome to an open attempt to enact meaningful and needed change through a curriculum unit inspired by the Yale National Initiative's 2012 summer seminar, Narratives of Citizenship and Race Since Emancipation led by Jonathan Holloway. This unit centers on three primary goals: 1) to awaken students to the persistence of racism and inequality in America, 2) to better understand American history and historical texts through the lenses of African-American experiences and 3) to challenge students to write letters, from narratives to expositions, with the intention of developing their voices and helping them know who they are and what it means to be a citizen, in order to become the change they wish to see in their selves, their families and in their communities.

This is no easy task but education for all people, an education that teaches each individual how to fully function and cooperated in an interdependent society and world, is essential if change is to happen. Beverly Daniel Tatum, in discussing ways to alleviate racism and bring about more equality in her book, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"* offers a place to start. She suggests that the problem is too few people are taught how to address issues of social injustice because they are not taught to critically think or to carefully observe and consider our present situations; however, "we can learn the history we were not taught, we can watch the documentaries we never saw in school, and we can read about the lives of change agents, past and present. We can discover another way." ¹ She further encourages that we are "surrounded by a 'cloud of witnesses' who will give us courage if we let them," and finishes with the challenge that, "we cannot continue to be silent. We must begin to speak, knowing that words alone are insufficient... that meaningful dialogue can lead to effective action. Change is possible." ² If we do not speak up, she says, "we pay a price for our silence." ³ Link TV produced a song and music video, *The Price of Silence*, for Amnesty International that encourages the same message. In it, one of the artists that participates, Hugh Masekela, raps, "If you're not jealous of your freedom / You're going to find yourself in serfdom / If you're not jealous of your liberty / You're going to find yourself in slavery, / Fight for your rights!" ⁴

The way to break the silence is to teach students to ask questions, again, as they did when they were children. This is especially important with literary and non-fiction texts. Lionel Trilling, a teacher, literary critic

and author, points out in his book, *Beyond Culture*, "The function of literature, through all its mutations, has been to make us aware of the particularity of selves, and the high authority of the self in its quarrel with its society and its culture. Literature is in that sense subversive." ⁵ Neil Postman, however, author of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, shows the terrible reality of what happens too often in our schools, "children enter school as question marks and leave as periods."

As a secondary teacher I see this phenomenon each year, where students, parents, teachers, administrators and politicians seem to value grades and test scores more than the human beings in the classrooms. Considering all the pressure to prepare our students for test taking and for the work force, it is no wonder that we unwittingly discourage questioning and rather expect students to know and recite certain answers. Consider the commentary by Mike Rose, author of *Lives on the Boundary* and *Possible Lives*, where he reflects on the reason he wrote another book, *Why School?*:

If we abstract out of education policy a profile of the American student in our time it would be this: a young person being prepared for the world of work, measured regularly, trained to demonstrate on a particular kind of test a particular kind of knowledge. This is not Jefferson's citizen-in-the-making. ⁶

Is it our task as teachers to prepare students to be obedient workers or is it better to show them how to become civic oriented custodians of democracy who continue throughout their life to passionately pursue education? I believe the latter and thus I encourage my students to ask questions, to challenge assumptions and to work towards discovery of truths in their own lives, with their families and in partnership with their communities.

This process of asking questions is fundamental to creating life-long learners and vigilant custodians of democracy, vital attributes of civic oriented people. Socrates claimed that "...the highest form of Human Excellence is to question oneself and others." His sentiment is echoed in Bob Teague's poem to his son, Adam, in *Letters to a Black Boy*, one of the primary texts for this unit:

Question the mysteries that you do not understand
Question the answers that quickly come to hand
Question your teachers, yourself and what you see
Question him, question her
Question me ⁷

The idea of questioning oneself and society is challenging for many people because it requires a serious look into what one believes and how one goes about living their life, and of course we all run the risk of discovering things about ourselves that we might not like so much. Nonetheless, it is necessary if we are to truly create a democratic government and society that aims to instill in its practices liberty and justice for all. "Unchallenged personal, cultural, and institutional racism," writes Tatum, "results in the loss of human potential, lowered productivity, and a rising tide of fear and violence in our society." ⁸ With these latter elements on the increase, liberty and justice inevitably are diminished. Thus, with my students, I will regularly remind them of the power of questioning as a means to enhance their education and enact change.

Awareness of Racism and Inequality in America

In order to achieve the first goal of this unit, which is "to awaken students to the persistence of racism and

inequality in America," I plan to use excerpts from several non-fiction texts that address these issues. The first is *Behind the Dream*, Clarence B. Jones's account of his involvement in the March on Washington in 1963 and his help with writing the "I Have a Dream" speech that Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered so movingly. In it, Jones and his coauthor, Stuart Connelly, question, "What does the concept of equal opportunity to participate in society to the maximum of one's potential without regard to race or ethnicity assume?" Their response:

It assumes that, all other things being equal, African Americans should have access to the same opportunities that whites and other groups have in our country. But that's been the problem; this "all other things being equal" is the 800-pound gorilla in the room of race relations in America. Because our country has not truly leveled the playing field at all. ⁹

So, how will questioning one's society lead to creating a leveled playing field? I believe part of the answer is in Tim Wise's *Dear White America*, a book in the format of an open letter to white people that is "less about people and more about mindsets... less about white people and more about *whiteness* as a social and institutional force—a social category created for the purpose of enshrining a racially divided polity." ¹⁰ He speaks directly to a general white audience in which he counters the white, racist notion that African-Americans, generally speaking, should work harder to improve their conditions in America:

just because a person should work hard and behave responsibly, that does not mean the rest of us have no obligation to ensure a fair and just society within which that first person will be trying to better his or her station. Personal responsibility and collective responsibility are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are each contributory to the whole. ¹¹

His point is that we must all work towards liberty and justice for all, but more so that white people must "ensure a fair and just society." In other words, address the 800-pound gorilla in the room. How do we do that? Again, Beverly Daniel Tatum:

We need to continually break the silence about racism whenever we can... But talk does not mean idle chatter. It means meaningful, productive dialogue to raise consciousness and lead to effective action and social change. ¹²

The way I intend to break the silence about racism with my students is through a discussion of *Fahrenheit 451*, the book that I will teach before this unit. It contains themes that are parallel to the struggle to awaken people to the behavior of its governments and societies. Its protagonist, Guy Montag, much like my own students, slowly awakens to the ills of his society. Strangely, though, and what will serve as my starting point for breaking the silence, is that *Fahrenheit 451* contains no characters of color and is conspicuously made up of an all white society, especially for a book published in America in 1953 during the Civil Rights Movement in America. I will ask such questions as how would the book be different were it to include people of color? Why might the author have included only white characters? Are there ramifications for leaving out so many people of color?

One last book that will serve to guide my students and I to discoveries of modern racism and inequality, via excerpts, is Michelle Alexander's alarming, *The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Her thoroughly documented argument is that "we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it." ¹³ That is, with the War on Drugs, black men and communities of color have been targeted and decimated, and ultimately controlled by our U.S. criminal justice system, causing millions of black people to

remain under a "second-class status." ¹⁴ Alexander provides numerous, real stories about black citizens who have unjustly suffered under this system. In chapter three, Alexander begins by placing the readers in the shoes of Emma Faye Stewart, a victim of the War on Drugs, a war she argues is the New Jim Crow system. She challenges us to imagine being Emma Faye Stewart, a thirty-year-old, single mother of two who was likely arrested for being black in a drug sweep in Hearne, Texas. ¹⁵ She was innocent of all charges but eventually, after a month in jail with no one to take care of her children, plead guilty under pressure from her court-appointed attorney. Michelle Alexander continues the narrative of Ms. Stewart in second person to great effect:

...you are sentenced to ten years probation and ordered to pay \$1,000 in fines, as well as court and probation costs. You are... branded a drug felon. You are no longer eligible for food stamps; you may be discriminated against in employment; you cannot vote for at least twelve years; and you are about to be evicted from public housing. Once homeless, your children will be taken from you and put in foster care. ¹⁶

The narrative continues: the defendants of the drug sweep who did not plead guilty eventually saw their cases dismissed by a judge; the entire sweep started from the lies of a single informant; "You, however, are still a drug felon, homeless, and desperate to regain custody of your children." ¹⁷ Alexander's inclusion of real people, targets and victims of systemic exclusion with roots that go deep in American history, give names and faces to the statistics and vast evidences that support her claims.

Clarence Jones and Stuart Connelly, in *Behind the Dream*, sum up other causes of continued inequality and injustice. Because America is, for the most part, a capitalist society, "each individual's market power is key to how he is treated. There remains an enormous division between the races when it comes to median income, home ownership, education, life expectancy, the incarceration rate, drug use, and death rate." ¹⁸ With more and more black youth being incarcerated, and with schools failing to speak out about the inequalities that perpetuate these conditions and circumstances, everyone's civil liberties are compromised, but blacks and other non-white people continue to suffer the most.

An Understanding of the African-American experiences towards Citizenship

To create a better understanding for my students of American history, as well as narrative and historical texts, we will examine experiences of African-American people who struggled and fought for rights and equality much like Montag begins to do in *Fahrenheit 451*. The themes in Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel are similar to those in the writings of Frederick Douglass and fugitive slaves, especially Douglass's "Letter from the Editor," published in the *New National Era* on June 13, 1872, in which Douglass ponders the motives of the arsonist(s) who burned down his "old home in Rochester, New York": "It is the spirit of hate, the spirit of murder, the spirit which would burn a family in their beds. I may be wrong, but I fear that the sentiment which repelled me at Congress Hall burnt my house." ¹⁹

It is a related sentiment in *Fahrenheit 451*, although not one based on skin color or culture, that likewise burns down the homes of literate and freethinking people, or anyone who strives to be, simply because the houses contain books. Frederick Douglass knew too well the sentiment that sought to keep him illiterate. In fact, he risked his life by learning to read, which he recounts in his first biography, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. What led him to do this can be found in an open letter he wrote to his former owner, Captain Thomas Auld, on the tenth anniversary of his self-emancipation from slavery, published in both the *North Star* and *The Liberator* in 1848, in which he illustrates the power of questioning, the root of his

"determination to run away":

Why am I a slave? and with this question my youthful mind was troubled for many days, pressing upon me more heavily at times than others. When I saw the slave- driver whip a slave woman, cut the blood out of her neck, and heard her piteous cries, I went away into the corner of the fence, wept and pondered over the mystery. ²⁰

Later in the letter, in recounting his struggle towards freedom, he meets with William Lloyd Garrison, a prominent abolitionist, who "put it into my head that I might make myself serviceable to the cause of the slave by devoting a portion of my time to telling my own sorrows, and those of other slaves which had come under my observation." ²¹ In this manner, I will put it into my students heads that their own narratives of awakening, like Douglass's and Montag's, can inspire others to become more attuned to continued injustices in our communities and in America at large.

I will continue to challenge my students with questions of freedom and who has it, if anyone, and why and what it means, and can we really escape into it. The challenge for my students is to question the degree of freedom that Frederick Douglass and fugitive slaves had in comparison with that of Guy Montag in *Fahrenheit 451*. I want to be sure not to take for granted in our discussions the freedoms that so many still do without today such as the rights for happiness that Guy pursues. His collaborator, Professor Faber, espouses that they are the right to "quality information" in books, "leisure to digest it" and "the right to carry out actions based on what we learn." ²²

Frederick Douglass, along with four million other slaves, knew well that they actually did not have the right to read. In fact, statutes were common among the slave states. In one, passed by the state of North Carolina in 1830:

any free person, who shall hereafter teach, or attempt to teach, any slave within the State to read or write... shall be liable to indictment... and upon conviction, shall... be fined not less than one hundred dollars, nor more than two hundred dollars, or imprisoned. ²³

This was the punishment for a white man or woman. For a slave caught teaching another slave, punishment was thirty-nine lashes on the back. As the editors of *Let Nobody Turn Us Around* point out in their introduction to this particular document, "Slavemasters understood that their social control of the slaves could not be based solely on physical coercion. Knowledge was power..." ²⁴ I want my students to question and grasp this truth, and consider what they dismiss if and when they dismiss a book.

At this point, I will introduce to my students Earnest J. Gaines's subtle but brilliant short story, "The Sky is Gray," which is the central literary text for this unit. It is taken from his collection of five stories, *Bloodline*, and is about a young boy, James, who travels with his mother, Octavia, from their sharecropper home "down the river" to the rural, segregated town of Bayonne, Louisiana, in order to have his toothache treated by the second-rate, white dentist. James, challenged by many incidents in the story that parallel the long journey and fight for equality by African-Americans and others, is deemed a man by his mother at the story's conclusion, creating the painful irony in which his mother recognizes him as a man while his government fails to recognize or honor him, and other black folk for that matter, as a citizen. This becomes clearer when juxtaposed with the debate that takes place, halfway through the story, in the waiting room of the dentist's office: a young student, in response to a claim that grass is green "because the [white] people say it's green," says "those same people say we're citizens of these United States" and "citizens have certain rights... name me one right

that you have. One right, granted by the Constitution, that you can exercise in Bayonne." ²⁵ Thus, the reader better understands the student's charge to "Question everything. Every stripe, every star, every word spoken. Everything." ²⁶

My purpose for teaching this story is to provide a singular face, voice and person to the struggle for equality and justice in America. Doing so, I believe, will help my students realize the gravity of the matter and how its potential devastation could, and did, affect millions of people in very personal and public ways. More importantly, though, "The Sky is Gray" demonstrates the maturity and bravery of a young boy who becomes prepared to face unrelenting racial and economic barriers with the aid of the stern love he receives from his mother. His journey is somewhat autobiographical as the story's author Earnest J. Gaines grew up on a sharecropper plantation in Louisiana and later escaped poverty by writing, and eventually becoming one of America's great writers. In fact, many of his short stories and novels have similar settings with likewise rich and varied characters who face, and often overcome, exceptional circumstances.

My plan for teaching "The Sky is Gray" is for me to model an introductory exposition, in the form of a letter to my students, the first of its thirteen sections. Afterwards, groups of three students will take turns teaching the next eleven sections, and then the entire class will work through a discussion of the final section. An example exposition from the first section is the very first sentence, "Go'n be coming in a few minutes." ²⁷ Further reading contextualizes the subject to be the bus that will take James and his mother, Octavia, into town; however, additional knowledge of Jim Crow laws and segregation, plus inferences from the readings, reveal that the subject becomes the abstract idea of freedom and the hopeful notion of real citizenship for African-Americans. Thus, the bus with its Jim Crow rules of segregation begins to connote the entire history of the Movement for equality and justice, from Emancipation on up to the future March on Washington and beyond.

In order to provide clear and direct context for this unit, and its central literary text, "The Sky is Gray," I will show to my students the PBS documentary, *Slavery by Another Name*, produced and directed by Sam Pollard and based upon the Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Douglas A. Blackmon. From the book, we will read the introduction and parts of the epilogue, as well as a few, brief passages from the main text. In particular, we will examine a passage that refers to letters from Ezekiel Archey, "a prisoner able and willing to complain of conditions" in the mines, to Reginald H. Dawson, "a nominally sympathetic Alabama official in charge of guarding the welfare of lease prisoners." ²⁸

Both documentary and book are thorough and illustrative expositions of the shift from slavery into peonage under the guise of convict leasing, sharecropping and use of chain gangs that perpetuated the subjugation and abuse of newly freed slaves and their descendants until World War II. Because PBS.org has exceptional curriculum and interactive pages at their site (<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/>), I include only this brief summary of the documentary here.

Additional contextualization for my students, and this unit, comes from W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Salvation of American Negroes Lies in Socialism," an excerpt from "The Negro and Socialism," intended here to bookend the history of the struggle for freedom up to its publication in 1958, five years before the seminal March on Washington in 1963. In it, Du Bois exposes the essence of colonial imperialism: "It was industry organized on a world scale, and holding most of mankind in such economic subjection as would return the largest profit to the owners of wealth." ²⁹ A strikingly fitting point for today's Occupy Wall Street and Education Movements.

The primary supplement to "The Sky is Gray" is what I find to be an overlooked gem, Bob Teague's candid and frank, series of open letters to his son Adam, *Letters to a Black Boy*. It contains the poem at the beginning of

this unit about questioning everything. Many, if not all, of the letters reaffirm the intensity of James's experiences, and the experiences of black people in America. The letters read as if James's father could have written them. Unfortunately, his father was drafted into World War II, never to be seen again, a circumstance that is, yet again, symptomatic of the African American effort to simply be American and to have the right to serve one's country, the rights to which white soldiers were granted. Teague's letters also serve, as one back cover endorsement hopes, to "help white readers to bridge the understanding gap that keeps too many people from knowing what it means to be black in a racist society."³⁰ A selection of Bob Teague's letters, read by him, is also available on vinyl but difficult to come by. Yet, it is worth hearing the actual voice of the author reading his work, to hear his tone and inflections and all that they convey.

In addition to *Letters to a Black Boy*, I will also include as many selections of readings from two anthologies, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around* and *Letters from Black America*, to the degree that students can handle and that time permits. Expositions for several of them are embedded in the subsequent letters; however, for a complete list of works I anticipate using with "The Sky is Gray" and *Letters to a Black Boy*, see the annotated reading list for students in a letter at the end of this unit. Important to mention here, though, are four texts from *Let Nobody Turn Us Around* that are key for "The Sky is Gray" and *Letters to a Black Boy*. First is A. Philip Randolph's *Call to the March, July 1, 1941*, which is both timely to James's walk to Bayonne and to the student's overt condemnation of the hypocrisy in White Americans calling African Americans citizens. The first demand listed on the *Program of the March on Washington Movement* reads:

We demand, in the interest of national unity, the abrogation of every law which makes a distinction in treatment between citizens based on religion, creed, color, or national origin. This means an end to Jim Crow in education, in housing, in transportation and in every other social, economic, and political privilege; and especially, we demand, in the capital of the nation, an end to all segregation in public places and in public institutions.³¹

A second text is an excerpt from an address delivered in 1956 by Roy Wilkins to the NAACP Southeast Regional Convention in which he gladly explains for the benefit of Montgomery whites who "claim not to be able to understand 'their' Negroes" that "'their' Negroes are sick and tired of segregation, of the daily insults and mistreatment and daily humiliations."³² He further recapitulates to his actual audience what African Americans have always sought since Emancipation, which parallels the need made evident and voiced by the student sitting in the dentist office in "The Sky is Gray":

And what do we ask when we say the time is here? We ask the acknowledgement of our status as citizens. We ask the rights and privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. We ask equality with other citizens under the law.³³

A third text is the open letter from eight of the Scottsboro Boys, who were fraudulently accused of rape and subsequently imprisoned and tortured. Their letter was originally published in *The Negro Worker* 2, no.5 (May 1932), and in it, they appeal to the "Toilers of the World":

What we guilty of? Nothing but being out of a job. Nothing but looking for work. Our kinfolk was starving for food. We wanted to help them out. So we hopped a freight—just like any one of you workers might a done—to go down to Mobile to hunt work. We was taken off the train by a mob and framed up on rape charges.³⁴

It is important to distinguish in their letter, I believe, the communist influence and the suspicious tone towards

the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In one sentence that accounts for why they have been sentenced to "burn up on the electric chair," the first emphasis is on their status as "workers," and then that "the color of our skin is black." The reality was likely the opposite, especially in light of revelations about convict leasing in *Slavery by Another Name*. They would more likely have been sentenced to burn for the color of their skin but otherwise put to work for their cheap labor. In a second sentence, additional motives for their letter becomes more clear, which were likely encouraged by the International Labor Defense and that used their predicament as a means to unite workers, with seemingly less concern about their treatment as black boys and men:

"We don't put no faith in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They give some of us boys eats to go against the other boys who talked for the I. L. D. But we wouldn't split. Nohow. We know our friends and our enemies." ³⁵

The fourth, and perhaps the most vital to "The Sky is Gray," is James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time, My Dungeon Shook, Letter to My Nephew on the One-Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation." ³⁶ Baldwin's nephew is approximately fourteen years old while James is eight at the telling of his story. Their youth unites them under James Baldwin's adult wisdom. His stern love for his nephew matches Octavia's stern love for her son, James. In his letter, Baldwin warns his nephew James of the terrible truth, "you were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity." It is the same society that sought to keep James, of "The Sky is Gray," under similar circumstances of low expectations. Fortunately, both young men were challenged to question everything and to fight for their own rights in pursuit of excellence in their lives. James Baldwin encourages his nephew, "Take no one's word for anything, including mine—but trust your experience. Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go." ³⁷ His vital wisdom, to "know whence you came," provides a reason to question everything, for knowing one's history allows one to know one's self and to be confident in one's ability to overcome great difficulties and become a man or woman on one's own terms. This is especially important since the two boys, both named James, will have to learn to cope with white hate and racism. Baldwin warns his nephew, "Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear." ³⁸

One supplemental text that will both provide historical context of African-American experiences in American and prepare students to write narrative and expository letters is *Letters from Black America*, edited by Pamela Newkirk. It contains actual, historical letters written by activists and private citizens. I will cull most of them from the following thematic sections of Newkirk's anthology: Family, Politics and Social Justice, Education and the Art of Scholarship, War, Art and Culture, and Across the Diaspora. A few letters from Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin's letter to his nephew are discussed above. Others we will examine include Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and personal letters from W.E.B. Du Bois to his daughter, Yolande Du Bois, that encourage her in her pursuit of education and life while away at school. Students will read through those that I suggest for them and, hopefully, more.

Three more books that I want my students to explore, and from which I will likely extract quotes for the daily, journal writing that my students and I will do, are *Pauli Murray & Caroline Ware - forty years of letters in black & white*, edited by Anne Firor Scott, *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* and *Remember Me to Harlem - The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964*, edited by Emily Bernard. These are longer collections of correspondences between three sets of friends. [Fortunately, the editor of the latter collection, Emily Bernard, is a friend and high school classmate. My students will have

the pleasure of meeting her via modern technology].

Writing Letters to Develop Voice and Change Legacies

To me, and I believe for my students as well, the act of writing letters will be most vital and life changing because it is the one that is directly challenging to them in regards to writing and becoming civil servants. To learn about history, as James Baldwin wrote to his nephew, is absolutely necessary, but it is the direct action of people in the present moment that can provide the needed change. No matter our culture or gender or age or skin color, we must take direct action today and everyday, wherever and regardless of where injustice is present. Clarence Jones and Stuart Connelly make this point clear, "other people's problems are really the whole world's problems. And if we suffer and struggle as individuals, not units of people sorted by race or income or anything else so arbitrary, we can find solutions as individuals." ³⁹

In this mindset, my students and I will explore our selves, our families and communities, and the greater world to discover histories in order to write purposeful and thorough narratives, and then to condense those narratives into crafted letters of exposition with specific purposes for specific people. Generally speaking, those people will be family members, classmates, characters, authors and politicians, and the purposes will be to transform painful histories into new and healthy legacies.

All people receive legacies from their ancestors, and all Americans are responsible for making democracy work. It cannot be democracy if society and government serve only one set of people while neglecting another. All people must have equal access to justice and freedom, and education and help to make them possible. It is "all of us or none," to use the phrase from the organization of the same name in Oakland, California, just across the Bay from our school. that is actively fighting for the rights of others disenfranchised by the incarceration systems that Michelle Alexander writes about in *The New Jim Crow*. ⁴⁰

It is my hope that my students will embrace this organization and others like it by actively writing to them and, perhaps, getting involved by donating clothing or food, or even writing to politicians on their behalf. Of course, part of this process will center on writing expository letters that, for example, share their hopes and ask, "how can we help?" Other great grass roots movements and organizations are on the PBS.org site for *Slavery by Another Name* and the www.freetheslaves.net site whose goal is "to end slavery in our lifetime," with Desmond M. Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus from Cape Town, South Africa, serving on its Board as International Advisor. We will also explore Michelle Alexander's site, www.newjimcrow.com/action.html, for additional organizations to potentially interact with and support.

A general plan for writing these letters will include vigorous discussions of who we are as cultural groups and individuals, with special emphasis on the individual because understanding of who one is directly affects one's own perception of how they fit into family and society, and who they are and what they can and, perhaps, should do as a citizen. Thus, we will explore what it means to be a citizen and how citizenship is a necessary part of democracy.

The forms of the letters, themselves, will fluctuate from narrative to exposition as students. For example, students will first write a narrative of their life as a draft. Then, I will instruct them on how to extract from that narrative necessary details of their life to be included in expository letters to their parents or older relatives from whom they can request more information about their ancestral histories and even civic activities in which they might have participated. Afterwards, the students will revise their narratives into letters to classmates or more family members, and even to the character, James, from "The Sky is Gray." They can even write return letters from James or other characters as another exercise in narrative and expository writing. After this round

of letters, the process will begin again but this time with living authors and politicians, or organizations and foundations, as recipients. A further explanation of the form of expository letter I will teach to my students can be found, below, in the sample letters that I have written to them.

The idea to make letter writing the central activity of this unit first came to me while reading *Behind the Dream*, the first book I began reading in preparation for this unit. I had glanced at the jacket biography of Clarence B. Jones and saw that he is currently scholar-in-residence and visiting professor at Stanford University's Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Then it hit me, too, that he lives in Palo Alto, thirty minutes from where I live and teach, and immediately my imagination created an imaginary letter to him, asking if he would come speak at my school. And then, I thought, I will have my students write letters. It will be an empowering experience for them to become change agents first in their own lives and then with the lives of others. The imagination is powerful but work brings results. I will write my letter to Clarence Jones and send it. Regardless if he responds, I am already changed, and now I am becoming the teacher I never imagined I could be, though I always wanted it. My letter to him will serve as a model letter for my students, and his words to us will serve to inspire my students as they did me and here close my letter to you:

Ideas are the change agents of our world, and words are the building blocks of those ideas. Their DNA. In effect, I believe not only that words can change destinies but that they are the fundamental path to do so. Not fists, guns, tanks, or bombs. *Words*.⁴¹

May we all create new and better legacies for our students through our words.

Thank you for reading.

Letters of Classroom Activities and Resources, plus an Appendix

Dear Fellow Teacher-Students and Student-Teachers,⁴²

Since the third goal of this unit is to inspire students to become active change agents of their lives and of their families and society through letter writing, I include sample, model letters here that serve as classroom activities. Although much of the student's letter writing will be done at home, nearly all of it will be work shopped in class via peer and teacher led editing.

Before a brief annotation of each letter, and the letters themselves, below, I want to reiterate my hope for my students, that they become strong, independent and capable thinkers and doers. I also want to express my concerns. I have high hopes that this unit will evolve once administered in my classroom, and that my students and I will evolve more; however, I am very aware of Huey P. Newton's warning about actions, which he gives in his essay "On the Defection of Eldridge Cleaver from the Black Panther Party and the Defection of the Black Panther Party from the Black Community":

Any action which does not mobilize the community toward the goal is not a revolutionary action. The action might be a marvelous statement of courage, but if it does not mobilize the people toward the goal of a higher manifestation of freedom, it is not making a political statement and could even be counter- revolutionary.⁴³

I am less concerned with making a political statement or even being revolutionary, but I certainly do not want to be counter-revolutionary in my actions with this unit. I do hope, though, that this unit will, like Clarence Jones encouraged, better the lives of not just someone, someday but many, if not all, people, all days.

One last comment: I hope to supplement these few letters with many more once I actually begin to teach this unit for the first time. It is my plan to add them as an addendum.

Letter to my Students-as-Teachers

This letter is to my student-teachers (students-as-teachers) and it will be delivered to them as a daily-journal writing prompt, which they will long be familiar with by the time I begin this unit. As of last year, my journal-writing program evolved, yet again, where I write an exposition of the texts we are studying, prompted by a relevant quote. Each of my daily-writings to them are about a page long, and they are expected to respond in kind at their skill level but with effort to improve from my example. Too many students struggle with school and in their education, especially if their reading and writing skills are low, but I have found that the practice of collecting their daily writings everyday, with expectations that they have applied what we have recently discussed, naturally makes them write to the best of their abilities. All I have to do each day is quickly read ten responses quietly and hand them back with verbal directions to fix this or add that, etc., and the entire class begins to improve steadily together.

Dear Fellow Student-Teachers,

Consider the challenge of Dr. Beverly Tatum, "We cannot continue to be silent. We must begin to speak, knowing that words alone are insufficient... that meaningful dialogue can lead to effective action. Change is possible." ⁴⁴

We have learned from Ray Bradbury's powerful story in *Fahrenheit 451* that at least three things must be granted to each human being if we are to have a individual happiness and a valid democracy. One is to have "quality information" in books and from our governments and media. A second is to be allowed "leisure to digest it," which means time to contemplate what we have read, and a third is to be guaranteed "the right to carry out actions based on what we learn." ⁴⁵

If we actively pursue a course of action to ensure that this happens, we, like Montag, are likely to encounter people who disagree with our efforts, perhaps facing open hostility from others as African-Americans have, here, in America. Yet, we are to be brave in pursuing what we believe to be right and just. Consider the open hostility that Frederick Douglass faced from his former owner, Captain Thomas Auld, and recall that he openly confronted him back on the anniversary of his self-emancipation, in a letter published in the North Star and The Liberator. Recall, too, that Douglass shared his memory of facing a great crucible of overwhelming despair and fear, alone, "at the moment which was to determine [his] whole earthly career." He "passed through a scene so trying," his escape to freedom, and, in doing so, became "a free man, young, active and strong." ⁴⁶ More importantly, because he was brave and continued to face equally trying times throughout his life, he became a great man who helped the lives of countless others when he easily could have chosen to relax a little in his freedom.

Like Montag and Douglass who each taught themselves to read, we must be vigilant in increasing our abilities to read deeply and wide for better understanding of so many complex issues we are bound to face in life. It is not easy, and although we will have to face our personal crucibles from time to time, right now we are working together in our classroom families and communities to better all of our real families and communities outside

of Westmoor.

As we begin to read and watch more about the African-American struggle to fight racism and to increase freedom and justice, which is now our struggle too, we must be diligent in our efforts to awaken others and ourselves in ways that avoids harm and idle chatter. We will find greater success if we follow the advice of Dr. Beverly Tatum who warns that confronting racism requires "meaningful, productive dialogue" which will "raise consciousness and lead to effective action and social change." ⁴⁷ Thus, let us continually work to drop all of our assumptions and, instead, remind each other to ask purposeful and meaningful questions, not only of each other but of the texts, for though the authors might be dead, their words are still living and can provide powerful answers.

In your response letter back to me for your daily-writing, please be sure to practice asking your questions of the texts and of me, your fellow teacher as student.

Your Fellow Change Agent and Teacher-Student,

Mr. Weathers

Letter to Jim Wojtak, Friend and Colleague

Jim was once my student-teacher but quickly became my equal and my friend. For many years, along with other colleague-friends, we have vigorously challenged ourselves to improve our teaching practices and our understandings of literature and life. In this letter to him, I request that he respond to questions I have about the use of language as a means to oppress and specific examples from *Fahrenheit 451*.

Dear Jim,

I am continually blessed by our ongoing correspondences, via email and phone, about life, literature and politics as they relate to Education and the consumption of our planet. Your depth and breadth of knowledge about them continue to astound me. In many ways, our first encounters as student- and master-teachers have now become quite the opposite.

In fact, I am writing to you with two specific requests. The first is to respond to this letter as though you, now, are my master teacher and I am your student teacher. The purpose in this is to model for each of our students two important aspects of education: the value of students and teachers being both, mutually, and the power of asking questions of texts and other people. The second request is for permission to include your response in my curriculum unit that I have written for the Yale National Initiative Seminar, "Narratives of Citizenship and Race Since Emancipation." I believe the inclusion of your response will also model for other teachers the immeasurable growth that happens to us as teachers when we collaborate and knock down the walls of isolation that our classrooms can create. Of course, our growth fosters our students' growth, too.

What I am curious about is your thoughts regarding a particular comment made by a student in Earnest J. Gaines' short story, "The Sky is Gray." In arguing his point that being called a 'citizen' doesn't make one a citizen, he reacts to a woman's claim that grass is "green because the people say it's green." ⁴⁸ The people she refers to, according to the student's response, are white, and the implication of this is that oppression is perpetuated by the oppressed people's reluctance to question everything. That is a major theme in the story, and it reminds me of Guy Montag in *Fahrenheit 451* who slowly begins to question his behavior and that of others, and their society, thanks to the gentle but direct prodding by Clarisse, who faces him and challenges

his ways as a fireman who burns books.

Do you have any specific knowledge about governmental efforts to control people with words? Of course, propaganda has played a huge role in countless wars, but I'm curious about more subtle tactics that worked to seduce people like Montag into being complicit in oppressing him and others. Also, I know that Captain Beatty often teases Montag with words, but can you recall any specific passage in the book that speaks directly to this issue?

What I am hoping to do with our shared knowledge and wisdom is to create ways for our students to meaningfully act to reduce injustice and oppression. For as Tim Wise, a fellow high school classmate, writes in his powerful book as letter, *Dear White America*, "our pain and their pain are connected, far more so than many of us may believe." ⁴⁹ Of course, he is directly referring to the connections between white and black people, but inferred is that all people's pains are interconnected in some way or another.

Your time and attention to this are so appreciated, but I think it will also serve you by inspiring ideas for your own curriculum units.

Thanks my friend. Looking forward to your response.

As always,

Jeff

Letter to My Parents

I have had an ongoing dialogue with my parents about this unit and about our lives. In this brief letter, I remind them of my request to write letters back to me, sharing their personal narratives about overcoming difficult times and/or helping fight against injustice.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Thank you for the continued support each of you has given to me in my personal and professional life. I am forever grateful.

As you know from previous conversations, I am writing to inquire more about your personal histories and how each of your individual and collective struggles has helped you both grow into successful people. It is also my hope, though, that you share any wisdom you have for my students, and me for that matter, about fighting injustice.

As you know, I plan to add your responses as addendums to my curriculum unit once it is published. It is my hope that my students will be emboldened to write to their families requesting similar narratives and wisdom. I wan to be able to share with them, and fellow teachers, what you share with me.

One particular quote I want to share with you can be found in the closing page of the book, *Dear White America*, by one of my high school classmates, Tim Wise. The quote, though, is from the mind of James Baldwin in his book, *Nobody Knows My Name*:

"It is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream

he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free—he

has set himself free—for higher dreams, for greater privileges." ⁵⁰

I know that both of you have had to give up certain privileges during your lifetime. Have you found yourself to be freer in any way? Do you agree with his wisdom? My experiences of surrendering dreams have brought many blessings, but I would love to hear of any that you are comfortable sharing here. I believe my students will greatly benefit from them, too.

Love and gratitude,

Jeff

Letter to Clarence B. Jones

This is the first of what I hope will be litany of letters from my students and myself to various leaders and organizations. It is my hope that we can entice them to come witness the work we will (I hope) be doing as a result of participating in the Yale National Initiative Summer Seminar, "Narratives of Citizenship and Race Since Emancipation" and this curriculum unit it inspired.

Dear Clarence B. Jones,

Thank you for the challenge in *Behind the Dream* to step up and be an agent of meaningful change. You have inspired me to further inspire my students at Westmoor High School, in Daly City, a great school with fantastic students who never fail to inspire me and teach me about life.

Would you consider visiting our school and speaking to our students, staff and faculty? We would be blessed with your narrative of experiences working towards Civil Rights and with Martin Luther King, Jr., and hearing selections from *Behind the Dream*. I believe that your statement about "one important key to The Movement... [that] it was never about *me now*, it was always about *someone someday*" is an incredibly valuable lesson for all of us today. And your closing statement is profound: "other people's problems are really the whole world's problems. And if we suffer and struggle as individuals, not units of people sorted by race or income or anything else so arbitrary, we can find solutions as individuals."

I know that your presence at our school will inspire us, but I also believe that our students will likewise inspire you. In particular, my students will be working this semester to learn about the African-American achievements in fighting for citizenship, equal rights and justice. Afterwards, we will write letters to each other, to our families and to people like you, as well as organizations that continue to fight against injustices in America. The curriculum unit we will be working from is one that I developed in the Yale National Initiative Intensive Session this past summer in Jonathan Holloway's seminar, *Narratives of Citizenship and Race Since Emancipation*.

Personally, I would love to share with you my own effort to enact meaningful changes in my classroom. I am developing a teaching system that puts into practice the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire, where students are equal teachers and the teacher is likewise a student, ⁵¹ and also where we operate under the combined philosophies of "We see things not as they are but as we are" (Anais Nin) and "One does not see anything until one sees its beauty" (Oscar Wilde). This way, everyone in the class, regardless of skill level or content knowledge, is equally valuable to all others, including me, the teacher.

I would love for you to meet my students and see them in action. Conversely, I know that everyone at Westmoor would be awed to meet a man who continues to help transform America, and the world for that matter, into a better place.

In gratitude,

Jeffrey K. Weathers

Letter to Students-as-Teachers, a Reading

Dear Fellow Student-Teachers,

Letter to Teachers-as-Students, A List of Useful Materials and a Bibliography

Dear Teacher-Students,

Here is an annotated bibliography of books used in this unit, plus a few others not included that I recommend. Authors are listed alphabetically:

Alexander, Michelle. *The new Jim Crow: mass incarceration in the age of*

colorblindness. New York: New Press ;, 2010. I agree with all the critics: this is a must read! This book documents and tells the story of real people's fight against the not-so-New Jim Crow system of mass incarceration of a particular group of people: African-Americans. Anyone who has ever wondered what they would have done about slavery in America if they lived then, should read this book and do something about this caste system that continues to oppress people of color.

Blackmon, Douglas A.. *Slavery by another name: the re-enslavement of Black Americans*

from the Civil War to World War II. New York: Doubleday, 2008. An engaging and terrible history of continued slavery in America. The depth of hatred that has marred America is sounded in this intense historical expose of how slavery remained, and worsened in America, simply under the guise of convict leasing.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Del Rey Book, 1991. A classic retelling of Plato's Cave. I believe every student of today should read it, although it conspicuously is void of people of color. It is a great read about the awakening to truth about one's society.

Ellison, Ralph, and Albert Murray. *Trading twelves: the selected letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*. New York: Modern Library, 2000. I find Ellison's insights about

writing and life worth teaching to my students. The correspondence between Ellison and Murray is filled with deep love of literature and life, with very humorous observations of other people and events.

Gaines, Ernest J.. *Bloodline*,. New York: Dial Press, 1968. "The Sky is Gray" has long been a favorite story. It is one of five beautiful and rich stories set in rural, Louisiana, and inspired by the varied lives of people, mostly black, struggling to survive in against poverty, human cruelty and injustices. Gaines is a master of the subtle and deep.

Jones, Clarence B., and Stuart Connelly. *Behind the dream: the making of the speech that transformed a nation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. This is the book that first inspired me to write a letter, then to imagine my students writing letters, all for the purpose of actively fighting injustice and racism. This is a very enjoyable read about behind the scenes of the March on Washington and the inspirational speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream." Clarence Jones and Stuart Connelly inspired me with their words, especially in the last chapter, "In the Present, Tense." I highly recommend it.

Lee, Harper. *To kill a mockingbird*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960. This is the follow-up book for this unit. It is my hope that students will grasp this beautiful and humorous glimpse into a fight for justice against hate and racism perceived through the eyes of a girl mesmerized by her lawyer father's heroism.

Marable, Manning, and Leith Mullings. *Let nobody turn us around: voices of resistance, reform, and renewal : an African American anthology*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. This is a must have for anyone who wants to learn more truth about American history as it chronicles specifically, through documents, letters and essays, the struggle towards equality by and for black people. Had I more room in my unit, I would have included countless more texts from this great anthology.

May, Debra Hart. *Everyday letters for busy people hundreds of sample letters you can copy or adapt at a minute's notice*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 1998. I have

regularly returned to this easy to use guide for writing business letters. I include it here simply as a beneficial resource for teachers and students.

Murray, Pauli, Caroline F. Ware, and Anne Firor Scott. *Pauli Murray & Caroline Ware: forty years of letters in black and white*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. A correspondence between two women, one black, the other white, whose friendship resists the oppressiveness of racism and genderism.

Mycoskie, Blake. *Start something that matters*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011. This book, I hope, will be an inspiration for my students to start something that matters, especially against injustice.

Newkirk, Pamela. *Letters from Black America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009. I love this anthology of letters. It provides great insight into people's loves and concerns and struggles while providing a wide view of African-American experiences in America. It includes letters from great leaders to Annie Davis, a slave who wrote to President Lincoln asking if the slaves had actually been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation a year earlier.

Sartre, Jean, John Kulka, and Arlette Sartre. *Existentialism is a humanism = (L'Existentialisme est un humanisme)* ; including, a commentary on *The stranger* (Explication de L'. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. I wanted to use Sartre's essay, "Existentialism is a Humanism" in my unit because, like Tim Wise's *Dear White America*, it challenges the individual to be responsible for his own existence which ultimately means be responsible for all people.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *"Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about race*. New York: BasicBooks, 1997. An absolute must have for teachers. It is a book of wisdom and insight about how to talk openly and honestly about race and racism, and then what to do about them. This book helped me understand how to proceed with the writing of my curriculum unit.

Wise, Tim J.. *Dear White America: letter to a new minority*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012. Every white person who enjoys the privilege of being white in America should read this. It is a letter to us, teaching and guiding us to places of deep wisdom regarding our complicity in racism and injustice simply for being white. Tim Wise writes with compassion and clarity about why we must do something about other people's circumstances.

Letter to Teachers-as-Students and Administrators

The following briefly explains how studying historical texts and literature, as well as practicing the art of letter writing meets Common Core Standards for tenth graders.

Dear Teacher-Students and Administrators

This unit focuses on three primary goals (to awaken students to the persistence of racism and injustice in America, to understand the historical experiences of African-American people and to practice the art of letter writing) that cover nearly all aspects of literature and writing, and thus, also nearly cover all portions of the Common Core Standards for reading literary and non-fictional texts and for writing narrative and expository essays. In this case, the narratives and expositions are in the form of letters. In this way, the writing actually becomes an action towards creating justice and not just an academic practice.

It is the intention of this author to make sure that standards are not just met but exceeded.

If you have any concerns about this unit and its value in regards to meeting standards, please write to me.

Thank you for reading,

Jeffrey K. Weathers

Endnotes

1. Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?", 203-204
2. Ibid, 206
3. Ibid, 200
4. <http://www.linktv.org/silence>
5. Lionel Trilling, "Freud: Within and Beyond Culture," sect. 2, *Beyond Culture* (1965)
6. http://www.mikeroosebooks.com/Site/Why_School.html
7. Bob Teague, *Letters to a Black Boy*, 19
8. Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?", 200
9. Clarence B. Jones and Stuart Connelly, *Behind the Dream, The Making of the Speech that Transformed a Nation*, 158
10. Tim Wise, *Dear White America- Letter to a New Minority*, 12

11. Ibid, 25
12. Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?", 193
13. Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, 2
14. Ibid, Book Jacket Synopsis
15. Ibid, 97
16. Ibid, 97
17. Ibid, 97
18. Clarence B. Jones and Stuart Connelly, Behind the Dream, The Making of the Speech that Transformed a Nation, 159
19. Pamela Newkirk, Letters from Black America,114
20. Ibid, 97
21. Ibid, 99
22. Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451, 84-85
23. Marable and Manning, Let Nobody Turn Us Around, 40
24. Ibid, 39
25. Earnest J. Gaines, Bloodlines, 101
26. Ibid, 95
27. Ibid, 83
28. Slavery by Another Name
29. Marable and Manning, Let Nobody Turn Us Around, 385-395
30. Bob Teague, Letters to a Black Boy, Back Jacket Praise, Whitney M. Young, Jr.
31. Marable and Manning, Let Nobody Turn Us Around, 308-314
32. Ibid, 362-367
33. Ibid, 362-367
34. Ibid, 279-281
35. Ibid, 279-281
36. James Baldwin, The Price of the Ticket, 333
37. Ibid, 334
38. Ibid, 335
39. Clarence B. Jones and Stuart Connelly, Behind the Dream, The Making of the Speech that Transformed a Nation, 179
40. <http://www.allofusornone.org/>
41. Clarence B. Jones and Stuart Connelly, Behind the Dream, The Making of the Speech that Transformed a Nation, 153
42. Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed
43. Marable and Manning, Let Nobody Turn Us Around, 451
44. Ibid, 206
45. Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451, 84-85
46. Pamela Newkirk, Letters from Black America, 97
47. Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?", 193
48. Earnest J. Gaines, Bloodlines, 101
49. Tim Wise, Dear White America- Letter to a New Minority,70
50. Tim Wise, Dear White America- Letter to a New Minority,153
51. Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

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