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Reading Against the Grain: English Education Through the Lens of Critical Literature Pedagogy

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Introduction

As restrictions continue to be placed on the liberties once exercised by educators and

hefty cuts continue to slash the federal educational budget, the willingness of secondary

educators to promote meaningful and life-giving instruction is rapidly declining. Though the

high school classroom once epitomized opportunity and access to mobility, it now aches with the

wounds inflicted by standardized instruction to yield standardized performance. Instead of

cultivating classroom environments that equip students to seize knowledge with excitement,

educators are giving way to lifeless curricula that are ravaged by rigidity and fruitless practices.

While the former conception of classroom environments may seem a bit utopian in its

assumption, the latter speaks to the unfortunate posture that many educators have assumed in

recent years. Despite the decrease in morale surrounding education, the clock has not yet run out

for bringing change to the education system.

In order to enact this change, though, it is first necessary to identify the end goal; in other

words, to contemplate what constitutes a meaningful education. In this paper's estimation, the

purpose of education is to teach students content knowledge, while also instructing them on how

to develop social, cultural, and personal awareness in order that they may be critical contributors

to society. Moreover, as this paper speaks to the English classroom specifically, it asserts that the

purpose of English education is to inform students of the influence of words, to empower

students' voices, and to engage those voices in continual discussion about meaningful, relevant

issues. In order to cultivate such an experience, this paper asserts that educators must step away

from the tendency to standardize instruction for the purpose of yielding "strong" test scores.

Instead, it claims that educators must engage their students in authentic contemplation and assessment strategies, which tease out the narratives of identity, privilege, and power that each student brings to the classroom.

One of the foundational elements of constructing an English classroom in this way requires an acute understanding of the power of words. In order to establish an environment which draws out student voices and initiates authentic discussion among students, however, one must operate with the understanding that words are given power through the meaning that is attributed to them. Drawing from Jacques Derrida's assessment of words, this point seeks to communicate that teachers' practice

> with words, any words, has to be based not in the facticity of meanings expressed as words, but in the hope that [they] can use language in the belief and trust that, for all its attendant complex difficulties, meaning may indeed be made (as cited by Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 2).

Essentially, what Derrida aims to articulate is the idea that words are vessels for meaning, but the individuals who use the words control their meaning. Implicit in this evaluation is the notion that, in a classroom setting that seeks to encourage students with diverse backgrounds to speak to one another, the educator must share the responsibility with students of giving meaning to words. Building on this, educators must also make space available for students to contemplate the validity of certain themes and ideas that are presented to them, without the threat of getting the answer wrong or the thrill of trying to get it right. In continuation, as educators allow for students to grapple with difficult concepts without criticism from the teacher, they fulfill the responsibility of their roles as educators, which is to both teach students as well as learn from them. By involving students in discussions that pose questions, which cannot be answered in one

word or with a "correct" stance, in other words, educators not only grant freedom to their students' voices, but they also usher in a more democratic educational experience, in which every person's voice is regarded with worth and the ability to influence.

Throughout this paper, I will explore an educational philosophy referred to as Critical Literature Pedagogy (CLP) that emphasizes open-ended, critical exploration of ideas in the English classroom. As a philosophy, CLP bolsters students' capacities for counteracting social injustices, as it "is a human way of being in the world that does not seek to live simply or painlessly with conditions of affluence and plenty for some and not for all" (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 2). Integrated into English practice, CLP cultivates renewal of thought and reinstates empathetic insight in the minds of high school students by taking them "beyond [their] own boundaries and beyond [themselves] and into realms of respect for those very boundaries and ways of being of others" (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 3).

The purpose of this paper is to communicate the ways in which meaningful discourse can be ushered into secondary English classrooms by employing the measures outlined by CLP. Through an overview of the educational philosophy, an application of its concepts to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* and a discussion of its implications, the paper will unpack the benefits of reading against the grain of widely accepted texts. Moreover, it will challenge educators to consider the value that they place on certain problematic ideologies, and ultimately call for an upheaval of the current way of teaching canonical texts, in order to educate students on how to engage in difficult discourse using respectful means, but powerful claims.

Critical Literature Pedagogy

In the discourse surrounding issues in education, there are numerous proposals for what the best plan of action is, but the most persuasive, and perhaps effective, ideas are those that

focus on the individual classroom as the foundational space for enacting change. One method called *critical literature pedagogy* (CLP) renders an especially effective position on how to transform individual classrooms from lifeless, rudimentary learning environments to fruitful academic spaces. Ultimately building on Paulo Freire's theory about critical literacy, educational theorists Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, and Petrone (2014), developed CLP by taking the elements of critical literacy and applying them to instruction of canonical literature. In the following section, drawing largely from their research, the paper will characterize critical literacy as an educational philosophy and outline how its tenets powerfully transform the study of canonical texts by informing the elements of CLP.

Critical Literacy

In the article "Myths About Critical Literacy: What Teachers Need to Unlearn," Lee (2011) posits critical literacy as a tool to "help the marginalized unveil unequal power relations and transform their lives through the empowerment of literacy education" (p. 96). Using this preliminary definition as a springboard, Lee (2011) delves deeper into the argument that such literacy is intended as a vessel for inspiring and equipping students to take action against injustice, specifically the perpetuation of marginalization in their communities. Throughout his article, Lee (2011) creates a stark contrast between literacy as strictly reading and writing and guides his reader to see that critical literacy requires students to apply critical thinking skills within a sociopolitical context. Unpacking the element of sociopolitical context further, Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) described critical literacy as aiming to

> draw attention to implicit ideologies of texts and textual practices by examining issues of power, normativity, and representation, as well as facilitating opportunities for equity-oriented sociopolitical action (p. 123).

The product of this type of critical learning environment is students who not only strengthen

their foundational literacy skills of reading and writing, but are also equipped to become active,

vocal members of society. More specifically, critical literacy produces students who learn to use

language to "question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and

power [...] to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider

actions being taken to promote social justice" (Lee, 2011, p. 97).

Although the concept of critical literacy is clearly defined and widely accepted in the

field of education, it is often not implemented by teachers for a myriad of reasons. This approach

to literacy is often neglected due to the fact that many consider this practice to be an instructional

theory, instead of a philosophical mindset. In this light, educators view critical literacy either as

one of many sets of ideas that they are unfamiliar with and do not know how to execute or an

optional adaptation to their current practice. The general misunderstanding of critical literacy is

that it represents a set of practices to be implemented in the classroom. While this perception is

not completely unfounded, as it does call for specific methods in generating strategies and

assignments to engage critical thinking, it implies that teachers do not understand the crux of

critical literacy. In an effort to elucidate further on the purpose of critical literary, Lee (2011)

summarizes Freire's estimation, which nurturest the ability "to read both the word and the world

critically, that is, to transform the world through literacy education" and "pursue humanization,

which is constantly 'thwarted by injustice, exploration, oppression, and the violence of the

oppressors'" (p. 99-100). These words communicate a crucial aspect of critical literacy, which

illuminates that if teaching through the lens of critical literacy was left only to instructional

practice, students would not receive it. Rather, only when educators choose to walk in this

mindset, guiding their students into the practices of calling normativity, power, and other

sociopolitical constructs into question will they begin to experience the benefit of critical literacy.

One implication of this pedagogical frame of mind points to the reality that sociopolitical awareness and action-oriented classroom practices must supersede standards or other formally-mandated guideposts of education if education is intended to yield proactive, culturally communicative students. Furthermore, it illuminates the fact that unless teachers are willing to cultivate educational spaces and opportunities, in which their students can explore complex ideas without retribution, they will seldom yield the kind of students who leave high school prepared to engage in the discourses of their social and public spheres.

One of the leading threats that this educational philosophy poses to classrooms is changing the existing order of things. With critical literacy, teachers are challenged to set aside their own understandings of the world and engage in collaborative, tough conversation with students. As one article puts it, critical literacy redefines "literacy as a form of cultural citizenship and politics that increases opportunities for subordinate groups to participate in society" and "as an ongoing act of consciousness and resistance" (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). In this light, critical literacy is a tool for lifting marginalized students into society, which indicates the amount of work that must be done on the educator's part. Although there are many other elements that make incorporating critical literacy difficult in the classroom, they all merely distract from the truth that, regardless of how challenging it may be to implement, teachers must start instructing in a critical literacy mindset.

Critical Literature Pedagogy (CLP)

While some teachers put the elements of critical literacy into practice, there is still lacking much research on applying critical literacy to canonized literature. Pushing against this

dearth of research and practice, the theoretical framework of CLP requires a pedagogical exercise that "weaves together two stances [when reading literature]: reading *with* and *against* a text" (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 124). In doing so, critical pedagogy emphasizes a practice in which English teachers and students detach themselves "from the order of things as they are and […] speak critically unto power. It requires refusing the language of the dominant, the functionalist, the positivist" (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 2). Despite its call to read *against* a text, CLP also maintains that there is validity in studying *with* a text, as doing so provides the foundational content for students to read *against* it.

First, this section will speak to the component of reading *with* a text. In the majority of high school English classrooms, this method of instruction is commonplace. Students read their assigned pages, complete comprehension questions on either homework or quiz assignments, and every now and then, they write an application piece or present on a portion of the text that relates to them. In some cases, the assignments that assess understanding of canonical texts challenge students to think critically about a text and apply their understanding of the main themes in a creative assessment. Regardless of how creative the assessment, though, there continues to be a lack of actual critical literacy at work. Essentially, the practice of reading *with* a text equips students with the necessary "skills and strategies for traditional textual analysis and production," but denies them the opportunity and application skills to step beyond the text and question what biases and ideologies informed it, who benefitted from these contexts, and so on (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 123).

The component of CLP that sets it apart from other pedagogical framework's of literacy initiates that, while students must learn to practice reading with a text, they must also be given opportunity and instruction on how to read *against* a text. Though this word, *against*, seems to

imply that classrooms must train students to develop contrarian mindsets, the practice that it aims

to capture, in actuality, is one that does not accept material as truth until it has been evaluated

within the social and ideological contexts in which it was originally created. Educating students

to hone this skill can and should take place in all subject areas. Nevertheless, as CLP focuses

specifically on English education, this paper will focus solely on its influence on the English

Language Arts classroom. Continuing, reading *against* canonical literature means

> reading between the lines to expose and interrupt embedded, dominant narratives, power
>
> dynamics, and perceived normalcy espoused by and hidden in the text, including its
>
> inclusion in school curricula (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 125).

Implicit in the final segment of this statement, CLP creates an opportunity for students to not

only "question how and why their own beliefs, values, and assumptions are formed," but also to

evaluate the required texts in schools that are informing these beliefs, values, and assumptions

(Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 125).

Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) provide examples of what this looks like based on their

exploration of the canonical novel *Of Mice and Men.* The following graphic organizer (Figure 1)

outlines the questions that Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) present as ways to investigate the

embedded, dominant narratives and power dynamics that are commonly reinforced in the study

of canonical texts.

FIGURE 1 Questions to Guide Critical Literature Pedagogy			
Dimension of Literary Study	**"With"**	**"Against"**	**Key Ideas from CLP**
Canonicity	Consider the merit of the book: • What is a/the canon? • What titles are included in "the canon"?	Challenge the text's prominence: • What are unintended consequences of a/the canon? What does it reflect about cultural values? • What debates surround this book?	• No text is ideologically neutral • Canonical novels—by virtue of being canonical—reinforce cultural values that should be examined and questioned. • Literary canons have historically privileged some

	• What do literary critics say about the value of this title/author? • Why is it important we read this book?	• What factors contribute to a text being considered canonical? Who decides what is canonical? • What other texts written within the same historical context are not included in the curriculum? • Who benefits or gets marginalized from the inclusion of this novel? • Should we read this book?	voices and marginalized others. • How we read books matters just as much as what books are taught.
Contexts	Identify the book's contexts. • What major historical movements or events took place when this book was written/takes place? • What are the familiar "stories" of this historical period? • How does the novel reflect these familiar stories? • How does the novel reflect the author's life experiences?	Identify counterstories from the book's contexts. • How does this text perpetuate and/or subvert dominant understandings of its historical context? • What version of the historical period does this book tell? What are other versions? • How would the story be different if someone of a different race, gender, or ethnicity wrote it?	• Many canonical novels reinforce dominant narratives of history. • Some canonical novels interrupt dominant narratives. • Literary canons have typically privileged White and male voices; counterstories can make dominant ideologies visible.
Literary Elements	Identify literary elements. • What are the major plot points of the story? • What are the major symbols of this book? • How are the characters developed? • How do the literary elements contribute to the theme or universality of the text?	Consider embedded values or ideologies the text reproduces. • Are characters from historically marginalized populations complex or stereotypical? • Whose story is emphasized or valorized? Portrayed as a victim or hero? • How do the plot and themes support or challenge normative ways of thinking about topics being portrayed? How do these themes support certain belief systems, or ideas of "normal" or universal? • How do the symbols reflect particular cultural knowledge? What would someone need to know in order to understand the symbols used?	• Canonical novels often represent individuals from marginalized populations as flat or "token" • Characters from marginalized populations often play a secondary role in the plot of a novel, in support of a culturally dominant main character and hero. • Themes of canonical novels often reinforce dominant ideologies about topics like class, achievement, sexual orientation, etc.
Reader	Connect text to personal experiences. • How do I relate to characters or themes on a personal level? • How does my (lack of) connection shape my reading of this novel?	Consider perspectives other than your own or consider your own perspectives in a new way to examine power and privilege. • How does my identity (e.g. ability, sexual orientation, age, religion) shape my reading? • Do I relate more with characters in power or with marginalized	• Just "relating" can undermine attempts to engage students with power and difference. • Readers from culturally dominant backgrounds often struggle to identify and question dominant ideologies because they often remain

		characters? How might this positionality shape my reading of the text?	invisible to individuals in privileged positions
Assessments	Standard literary analyses. • What analyses or literary criticism have been written about this book? How might I write about my interpretation of the text in relation to them? • How might I write a Reader Response, New Critical, or New Historical interpretation of this novel?	Opportunities to create and distribute texts that critique normativity for real audiences. • How can the ideas and information developed in reading with and against canonical texts be used to inform, persuade others about oppression and injustice, particularly in my local contexts? • How can I effect change based upon my critical learning?	• Connect critical understandings of issues in canonical novels to similar issues relevant to other contexts. • Transfer the critical literacies used to analyze canonical novels to analyze other texts (e.g. popular culture, media).

Modified from Borsheim-Black et al. (2014)

Applying Critical Literature Pedagogy to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The scholarly discourse surrounding instructional practice and teaching philosophy is abounding with commentary on critical literacy and how to apply it. Despite this, there is a shocking scarcity of peer-reviewed literature that points specifically to how to apply critical literacy in the English classroom. CLP brings a unique element to the discussion by viewing this philosophy through the lens of canonical literature. As aforementioned, the concept of critical literacy necessitates that educators instruct their students to consider the context in which course content is created and taught. Therefore, in applying this concept to canonical literature, the process of executing a curriculum effectively mandates certain procedures. In order to unpack the pedagogical framework in a more specified yet comprehensive way, the following portion of the paper will employ the elements of CLP to analyze Zora Neale Hurston's canonical text, *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

Summary of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

To provide a foundation for constructing and understanding the following framework, this section will briefly outline the plot of Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* The

novel tells the story of Janie Crawford, whose journey through the novel is characterized by her quest to find true love. Told by Janie herself, as a reflection to her friend Pheoby, this tale enumerates the details of her trials and triumphs that arose through her three marriages. Janie's grandmother, Nanny, raised Janie in her mother's absence and married her off to an older man named Logan Killicks as soon as she understood that Janie was developing into a woman. Though Nanny's intentions were to protect Janie from the wiles of lusting men, her action to keep Janie from other men squelched her spirit. In turn, instead of cauterizing the desire to experience love, Nanny inspired a stronger will in Janie to seek true love, which led to her leaving Killicks for another man named Joe Starks. Together, she and Starks move to Eatonville, Florida, which is the first all-black town in America.

While Janie's marriage to Starks began with lofty promises about honoring Janie's freedom, beauty, and mind, he eventually turned away from these guarantees. Requiring that Janie adhere to rigid gender roles and sequestering her to the positions of store clerk and prize wife, Starks reinforced Janie's notion that she had not found love in him as she had anticipated. Their time together is short-lived, however, as Starks grows sick and eventually dies. After performing the mourning that was expected of her by their community, Janie leaves Eatonville to seek for the first time her own desires for love.

Shortly afterward, Janie meets a young man named TeaCake, who finally satisfies who longing for love. Janie and TeaCake marry and move to the Everglades, where they partake in community celebration, playing checkers, and other activities that allow Janie the liberty to express herself and her love for TeaCake. Although they find themselves growing jealous over one another sporadically throughout their relationship, Janie's marriage to TeaCake epitomizes the love that she insisted to her Nanny years earlier that she could one day find. Things turn a bit

darker, unfortunately, when a hurricane hits the Everglades. As Janie and TeaCake are wading through the water, a rabid dog attacks Janie. When TeaCake intercedes to save her, the dog bites him, which results in his contracting rabies. Soon after, TeaCake begins to go mad and eventually tries to shoot Janie. Reacting out of self-defense, Janie turns the gun on TeaCake and ends his life.

Janie is put on trial for this act and as she waits in the courtroom, a group of her and TeaCake's African American male friends arrive to encourage the proceeding of her conviction as guilty. Countering this, a group of white males stand up against their claims to protest that Janie does not deserve to serve time in prison, when she was merely protecting herself. The court decision aligns with the latter opinion and Janie is released to leave. She returns to her former home in Eatonville and, drawing much attention from the townspeople, proceeds to Pheoby's home to tell her the story of what happened.

Though a common reading of Janie's character is one that posits her as a representation of female agency and defying social norms to achieve her own desires, there exists much critique on the nature of her coming-of-age process, as well as her position as the embodiment of what African American female agency looks like. Throughout this novel, Hurston draws on themes of race, gender roles, dreams, language and communication, liberation and free will, and many others. While each of these themes manifests in a different way, they each merit added attention when studying this text in the classroom, as they have the ability to encourage critical consciousness in the minds of students. In other words, instead of accepting these tensions as they are presented in the plot, the themes offer an exciting platform on which students and teachers can grapple with the injustices and dominant narratives that govern the novel.

Reading *With* the Text

In an effort to illustrate the distinction between reading *with* a canonical text and *against* it, the following section will outline a few traditional methods of analyzing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that seek to get students beyond taking comprehension quizzes and regurgitating information in five-paragraph essays. Though there are multiple ways that reading *with* Hurston's novel can manifest in the classroom, for the sake of brevity, this section will discuss a few concrete examples. The first, derived from an article written by Lisa Garrigues (2003), establishes the discussion and analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on the foundation of porch talking. Throughout the novel, Janie—the protagonist—tells her best friend Pheoby the tale of her journey away from home toward happiness. Garrigues considered the common thread of "porch talk" and gossip in the novel and used it as a springboard for discovery in her classroom. She structured a unit on the concept of storytelling, emphasizing the importance of understanding the motive of a storyteller, and eventually tied her class's study to the notion that everyone has a story to tell. Throughout their time with the novel, students uncovered the history of how and why the novel was written, learned the vernacular that characterizes the text, explored the deeper meanings of symbols and themes, and wrote memoirs about stories from their lives.

For a final assessment, Garrigues planned regular occasions for her students to engage in their own "porch talk" discussions, during which they would display their journals on their desks and other students would contribute to them with their own ideas. This exercise culminated in their final day of the unit, when Garrigues invited members of the community to come listen to the students' revelations about Janie's coming-of-age experience and the characters who influenced it. In explaining her assessment, Garrigues (2003) wrote that the porch represents "both the literal and symbolic setting—the stage on which the characters perform and the place

where Janie finds her voice" (p. 24). In setting up the stage in this light, Garrigues informs her students' understandings of the text as being one about Janie finding her voice. Implicit in her framing of what the porch symbolizes, then, Garrigues mitigates any opportunity of forming the opinion that Janie may have never found her voice. The repercussion of Garrigues's assessment is that it robbed her students of the opportunity to contemplate what is at the heart of the novel. While it cultivates a creative alternative to the traditional lecture model of analyzing a text, it perpetuates the ideologies that are at work in the novel and solidifies them as fact, rather than concepts to be questioned and debated.

In another example, high school teacher Shelley NiTuama (2013) constructed a unit that encouraged students to read *with* the novel by asking them to consider the various elements of Hurston's writing style. Throughout her unit, NiTuama (2013) provided her students with the opportunity to "observe how Hurston creates a unique literary voice by combining folklore, folk language, and traditional literary techniques." Introducing the lesson in this way, NiTuama (2013) quickly communicates that her activities and assessments will seek to further her students' understanding of Hurston's text as it is and, consequently, reinforce its place in the canon as inherently virtuous. Validating this claim, NiTuama (2013) addresses that in order to observe such elements of the text, students will "undertake a close reading of passages in *Their Eyes Were Watching* that reveal Hurston's literary techniques and determine their impact on the novel." Again, while NiTuama's (2013) tools for assessing her students' understanding of the novel are not fundamentally negative, they contribute to the blind acceptance of the novel and do not challenge her students in the slightest to engage with the text in a critically literate way.

Why are these lesson plans problematic? Though the former section addresses the fallacy in employing *with*-the-text analyses alone, this paper does not aim to argue that reading

with a text detracts from meaningful learning. In fact, reading *with* and *against* canonical literature is often "reciprocal—learning to read *with* might be seen as necessary to being able to read *against*" (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 125). In this light, none of previously discussed methods are counterproductive, as they challenge students to read between the lines and apply the text beyond connecting plot points, they lead students right to the point of critical evaluation but require no further analysis. This is problematic for a few reasons. First, in structuring unit plans this way, educators prepare students to accept texts and information as they are presented to them. By cultivating a learning experience that is devoid of calling content into question, in other words, educators are depriving students of the skills for critical literacy and thinking, as well as inadvertently silencing their voices. If a student does not know how to exercise his or her voice, and school is the place to develop these skills, then it will be much more challenging, if not impossible, for that student to cultivate those skills on their own.

Second, simply reading *with* a text—or *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in particular—is problematic, because the classroom engagement with it positions Janie's story as the primary representation of the types of struggles and experiences that she lived. In other words, one of the most pressing issues with teaching students to only read *with* this novel is that it allows for hardly any other voices to contribute to the discourse of feminine agency in the canon. Though there are a few other African American female authors who have texts in the canon, high school curricula often only study one text, rendering that author as the only one to speak for the rest of the African American female authors. In this light, the necessity to challenge students to read *against* Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, with supplemental texts or provocative essential questions, becomes all the more pressing.

Reading *Against* the Text

Although CLP is often conceptualized as a framework or a "theoretical and practical attitude" (Luke, 2000), and has been framed as such in an earlier section of this paper, Riley (2015) contends that "researchers have begun to identify classroom practices that support critical literacy" (p. 418). In order to set up a concrete unit plan for studying *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* this section of the paper will explore some of these classroom practices that pedagogues in the field have explored for effectively implementing CLP. Drawing primarily from Behrman (2006) and Riley (2015), this section will unpack various techniques that can be used for analyzing a text alongside CLP as well as expound upon ways in which these techniques can be applied to Hurston's novel.

Reading supplementary texts. One of the leading practices that is referenced throughout the discourse of implementing CLP is reading supplementary texts. In discussing this technique, Behrman (2006) cautions that as long as the underlying assumption "that traditional or canonical texts are somehow deficient in helping students focus on social issues" is not what governs the decision to incorporate supplementary texts, then this practice can be very useful. A somewhat non-traditional secondary medium that could be used in conjunction with *Their Eyes Were Watching* God, to provide an example, is Disney's 2007 live-action princess movie, titled *Enchanted.* Throughout this film, the protagonist Giselle exercises an unexpected level of agency for a Disney princess, but her actions at times are still problematic. In allowing students to engage with a time period-relevant movie like *Enchanted,* the teacher would instigate discussion of common themes, such as feminine agency and oppressive ideologies, that infiltrate Hurston's novel. Another form of allowing students to interact with supplementary texts would be to invite them to create "soundtracks" of modern songs that coincide with the development of themes in the novel and then provide rationale for their choices. Though this exercise could result in a

static reinforcement of the text's problematic ideologies, it may also cultivate a more intimate

connection to the novel, as students forge signficant ties from the text to their own interests.

Another option for a supplemental text that could be useful in a unit on *Their Eyes Were*

Watching God is Alice Walker's *The Color Purple.* Integrating this into the unit would draw

students' attention to a text that develops a similar coming-of-age tale about a young African

American female, named Celie, who—like Janie—grapples with her ability to exercise freedom

and access basic human rights. Additionally, this text was written by one of Hurston's most

highly-recognized admirers, Walker, so the text would likely elucidate further some of the tropes

and concepts that Hurston contemplates in her novel. Finally, this text would not only offer a

textual comparison, but also a cinematic representation of the storylines that students would be

discussing. While relying too heavily on this text and its film version could yield yet another

opportunity to simply reinforce the ideologies that are accepted in *Their Eyes Were Watching*

God, it has the potential to offer students a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural

climate that these texts address.

Reading multiple texts. Second to supplementary texts, Behrman (2006) advocates for

the inclusion of multiple texts that handle common themes or social issues when studying a

traditional text. In a unit that includes a supplementary text, similar to the one aforementioned,

providing students with multiple texts serves to "introduce students to the subjectivity of

authorship" (Behrman, 2006, p. 492). By introducing a unit with multiple perspectives on the

main text, teachers usher their students immediately into the practice of challenging what is

being taught and set up a classroom practice that is "intended to disrupt the notion that textual

meaning is fixed" (Behrman, 2006, p. 493). The effect that this practice has on a study of

canonical literature, such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is to displace the text from its being

accepted and taught as inherently right. In other words, reading multiple texts for the sake of

helping students understand that "authorship is a situated activity" serves to both challenge their

acceptance of Hurston's authorship, as well as engage with the voices that go against her

narrative with caution (Behrman, 2006, p. 493). Two texts that could be read in tandem with

Hurston's novel are Alice Walker's 1975 article, titled "Looking for Zora," and Richard

Wright's critique of Hurston's work that appeared in a 1937 issue of *New Masses,* called

"Between Laughter and Tears." Walker's objective in writing her piece was to resurrect

Hurston's legacy and call attention to the brilliance that lies within her pages about feminine

agency, folk lore, and finding true love. In opposition to Walker's claims, Wright ridiculed

Hurston's novel as a force for perpetuating the minstrel traditions of the racist South and claims

that her prose was "cloaked in facile sensuality," which positions her audience in a "safe and

narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears" (Wall,

2009, p. 47). Analyzing Hurston's novel alongside the opposing opinions that Walker and

Wright present not only provides students with scholars' critical analyses of the text, but it also

underscores the value of considering an author's position in writing a novel. Additionally,

studying a novel through the lens of opposing perspectives on the author's authority invites

students to take part in the same discourse, and eventually, defend their positions.

   Reading from a resistant perspective. Adding to the techniques previously mentioned,

reading from a resistant perspective has been reported to be useful in a classroom rooted in CLP

practices. In asking students to read a canonical piece of literature from a resistant perspective,

teachers invite them to consider the novel from a "new or unfamiliar" identity, which sometimes

translates as reading from "an alternative frame of reference" (Behrman, 2006, p. 493).

Ultimately, this practice fosters a sort of empathy with the characters and situations in a text,

with which the students are least familiar. Considering this practice in terms of a unit on *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* reading from a resistant perspective could be a useful exercise when discussing Janie's relationships with her three husbands. Instead of focusing solely on Janie's narration of their marriages, the teacher could ask students to consider the men in her life and challenge them to contemplate what cultural norms they were seeking to adhere to. While there is potential that reading from a resistant perspective could augment the students' empathy with the men unnecessarily—as the purpose of reading critically would be to offset the problematic oppression that held Janie—it could also be a useful exercise for teasing out whether or not Janie truly exemplifies feminine agency.

Another element of reading from a resistant perspective that would be especially effective in a study of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is its emphasis on considering the "author's conscious choice of words, word order, or sentence structure" as well as how those decisions can "position the reader to accept an argument or value a statement from the writer's perspective" (Behrman, 2006, p. 494). Hurston is widely recognized for her distinct language and spirited prose. Her word choice draws readers in and captures their senses in such a way that the character of Janie and her journey feel as if they are the readers' own. The effect of this lends to a blind acceptance of Janie's experience, which can be problematic in a high school setting, because students will likely have no qualms about accepting the language as is and stepping no further into questioning the motive or stance in which it was written. Therefore, in calling Hurston's language into question as something for students to be cautious of, teachers initiate the study of Hurston's work through a critical, alert mindset. This not only causes students to engage more critically with Hurston's text, but also causes students to begin to notice the effect of powerful word choice.

Producing countertexts. Moving into student application of CLP, one assessment tool that can be used in the classroom is inviting students to produce countertexts. Essentially, what this practice calls for is a low-stakes student response, through writing, to how they are engaging with the problematic ideologies that are at work in a text. Whether students produce countertexts through the form of a personal journal or writing short essays to reflect on the text from an unfamiliar perspective, this exercise serves to "validate the thoughts, observations, and feelings of students and other underrepresented groups" (Behrman, 2006, p. 494). Behrman (2006) uses a significant term, *underrepresented,* in his explanation of students in a classroom. This term sheds an important light on the idea that, while students are the reason that educators teach or theorists conduct research to improve education, students' voices are often the ones that become squelched when actually in the classroom. To counter this unfortunate reality, asking students to write countertexts proves to be an effective vessel for giving legitimacy back to the marginalized voices not only of underrepresented communities but also of all students whose opinions have been neglected and even silences in schools.

In tying this practice to *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* students could either keep journals that contemplate the differences among various texts being studied with Hurston's novel or produce pieces of writing that reflect unpopular or unfamiliar perspectives from different characters in the text. These journals could also be governed by provocative questions that the teacher poses about common themes or controversial occurrences, but the students in any case would be encouraged to respond freely. The benefit of allowing students to partake in an exercise such as this one is that there cannot be wrong answers. As long as students are engaging with the text and developing a critical argument of some aspect of the reading, then they reap the benefit of what this exercise is intended to do, which is to empower students to use their voices.

Conducting student-choice research projects. Continuing in the vein of turning text analysis into action, a common practice associated with stimulating critical literacy is having students take up research projects. With this practice, students identify a topic in the text that relates to them personally and conduct extensive research about its relevance and presence in their lives, rendering the understanding that "the everyday events occurring in the lives of students are legitimate objects of academic study" (Behrman, 2006, p. 495). Such an exercise necessitates that students take ownership not only of their interests, and consequently identity development, but also their academic advancement. However, in immersing students in this activity, teachers must be wary of the fact that in order for student-choice research projects to cultivate critical literacy, they must extend beyond choosing a topic and gathering secondary sources from the library or scholarly websites. As Behrman (2006) emphasizes, this exercise taps into critical literacy once students become "engaged participants in a problem affecing them and be able to reflect upon the social and cultural forces that exacerbate or mitigate the problem" (p. 495). Leaning further into the implications of this practice, there is one element that seems especially important: reflect. In order for this type of exercise in assessing student knowledge to be effective, there must be a component of reflection required by the student. Only when the students meditate on their findings and the personal significance that they hold will meaningful learning begin to take place.

Allowing students to conduct research about their own interests is useful for empowering their voices and ownership of their work; however, it would likely detract from critical literacy when viewing this practice through the lens of a canonical literature study. In continuation, using this exercise as the primary method for encouraging student engagement with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* may not yield the most advantageous takeaway in terms of CLP, because students

will likely be tempted to stray from grappling with issues that make the individual text

problematic. Despite this assumption, using student-choice research projects as a preliminary

assessment tool may provide an necessary opportunity for getting students invested in the themes

of the text before requiring that they dive in with questioning author motive and character

representation.

Encouraging social action. While there are countless exercises that can be employed in

a classroom practicing CLP, one of the most meaningful applications of a unit that assesses the

culmination of a student's understanding is social action. As one of the foundational pillars of

CLP calls for its participants to challenge power structures, social action serves to activate the

most poignant element of critical literacy. By providing students with the opportunity to "engage

in […] projects aimed at making a real differece in their or others' lives," teachers effectively

reinforce the instruction that they preach with practical application. Due to the fact that every

text grapples with different themes and power dynamics, social action projects take on countless

manifestations in CLP units, especially in the study of canonical literature. Consequently, in

order to administer an appropriate social action assignment, instructors should initiate their study

of a text with essential questions, which were discussed earlier in the paper. For *Their Eyes Were*

Watching, social action could take the form of a letter to an administrator, which the following

section will unpack, a debate about who determines the content that students study in their

curricula, a blog that develops a commentary on some of the social issues at work in the text, and

many more. Ultimately, the purpose of the social action assessment serves two purposes. First,

these exercises encourage students to engage intimately with the text in order to produce an

authentic recasting of it in light of social tensions. Second, the occasion to extend their voices

beyond the canonical text provide them with scaffolding for how to move valuable analysis from

within a classroom's walls and apply it to something that influences or informs the larger community.

CLP Planning for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Understanding by Design (UbD) Framework

There are multiple conceptions of how to challenge students to engage with texts or other course content critically. This paper, however, seeks to outline the ways in which designing a curricular structure through the lens of CLP can bring about meaningful learning in a classroom setting. Borrowing largely from *Understanding by Design*, this paper sets up a framework, which provides a foundational structure on which to plan units that not only anticipate critical analysis taking place but also ensure its prominence in the classroom. In the primary stages of planning a unit on a canonical text, one must first consider what social issue is being handled in the text. Does the text discuss marginalization of certain populations? Whose voices are silenced? What characters or situations are given the upper hand? In considering these types of questions, the instructor initiates the book study process by calling the text itself into question. Furthermore, these questions help shape the objective of studying a text and pave the way toward developing provocative essential questions.

Thinking in terms of the word *essential*, these questions promote significant, meaningful contemplation, as they challenge students and teachers alike to grapple with the difficult, and sometimes problematic, ideologies that canonical texts promote. Furthermore, the essential questions inspire an inquiry-based quest for evaluating the foundation of what a text dictates as irrefutable, objective verity. As Wiggins and McTighe (2005) frame it, the aim of essential questions is to "stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry, and to spark more questions—including thoughtful student questions—not just pat answers" (p. 106). In this light, essential questions

carry more responsibility than merely inspiring continued questions; they pose complications

that are "not answerable with finality in a brief sentence—and that's the point" (p. 106). As a

result, while essential questions challenge students to evaluate the underlying principles and

motives of a text, they also spur discussion among students who may not find themselves

engaging in discussion elsewhere. Moreover, because these questions call upon tendentious

topics and themes, they provoke discussion among diverse groups of students about matters that

are both relevant and salient in their lives.

       Building on this understanding, essential questions determine four different types of

engagement with a text. The first connotation of these questions are those that "*recur throughout*

all our lives," dealing with concepts that are broad in scope and "timeless by nature" (p. 108). In

other words, these questions speak to more universal, existential matters that will continue to

affect students for the duration of their lives. Second, essential questions can challenge

exploration of "core ideas and inquiries within a discipline" (p. 108). Questions in this category

take up issue with specifics in each field of study, be they controversial assumptions in theories,

principles, or practices of the field. The third application of essential questions is anything that

helps students effectively learn what is intended in a lesson or serves as a "bridge to findings that

experts may believe are settled but learners do not yet grasp or see as valuable" (p. 108). The

fourth meaning for the term essential, and perhaps the most important, indicates a set of

questions that "will most engage a specific and diverse set of learners" (p. 108). In educators'

efforts to construct curricula that engage students, this final interpretation of the word essential is

most poignant. While the questions need to inspire further questioning and provoke analysis of

problematic assumptions, they also need to consider that not all learners are the same; therefore,

they must capture something that is at the essence of what every person experiences.

Furthermore, these questions must also be relevant to the students' lives, cares, and interests. The effect that such questions has on a study of a canonical text is that the inherent rightness that is often awarded to canonical literature is peeled back and students are invited to question the validity of what they are studying.

Plunging deeper into the specifics of how to approach canonical literature through essential questions, the CLP outlines five primary areas on which to anchor the focus: canonicity, contexts, literary elements, reader, and assessments. In challenging students to call into question each of these elements of a canonical text, teachers inform a curriculum that "becomes not a static entity to be understood, appreciated, or simply regurgitated but rather an active process of meaning making and 'conversation,'" which stimulates meaningful learning (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 125). Such learning, within the framework of *UbD,* can be initiated by asking students to contemplate problematic elements of a text (see Figure 1 for examples).

While the essential questions ground the discussion and analysis of a text, their effect is voided if not followed up by meaningful activity and assessment that draws out further contemplation. In other words, one of the underpinnings of this philosophy of teaching requires more than merely posing provocative essential questions and having clear objectives in mind; rather, it mandates that teachers must also plan a strategic guide for how to help students reach those objectives. Because every text handles different social issues, and therefore contemplates different questions, it is difficult to parse out what a set unit plan should look like universally. Nevertheless, if the guiding principle of constructing curricula for every text is to think in terms of the end goal, then the product will be meaningful. Furthermore, while the tenets of critical literacy should inspire the elements of each lesson, the lessons must also adhere to the principles of scaffolding. The implication of this is that, while no two lessons will look the same, they must

all serve the purpose of preparing students to question the ideologies that they are setup to accept and to step confidently into their final stages of assessment: social action.

In order to verify that students have gleaned from the study what was intended, CLP calls for a summative assessment that creates an opportunity for students to act on the knowledge they have gained throughout the unit. This element of the unit, second to the essential questions, is a quintessential component of measuring the success of a lesson based in critical literacy. In requiring that students demonstrate their knowledge through the form of an action-oriented assessment, the unit's conclusion reinforces the importance of viewing course content through the lens of critical literacy. In other words, units that instruct students on various methods to partake in discourse that questions problematic ideologies and then concludes with writing an essay that only the teacher will read, nullifies the lesson's effectiveness. Creating opportunities for students to both grapple with difficult discourse and then facilitating the occasion for them to exercise their own voices in the real world, on the other hand, sharpens the skills for engaging in meaningful discourse and validates the importance of each student's opinion, voice, and ability to influence change.

UbD Unit Plan for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The previous section discussed various options for how a teacher could approach *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the lens of CLP. In an effort to narrow the scope of applying CLP to Hurston's text, however, the following paragraphs will outline how I would implement the practices of CLP if I were to teach this text in my classroom (see Appendix A for completed UbD unit plan for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). Beginning with the essential questions, I outlined a few main questions that I want students to contemplate and from those, developed secondary questions to encourage further exploration. The main questions include:

1. Who benefits from the inclusion of this novel in the canon?

2. Hurston's novel is regarded as the "prototypical black novel of affirmation [...] the most successful, convincing, and exemplary novel of black love that we have," but is it problematic that this is one of the few black female voices heard in the canon (Jordan, 1990, p. 6-7)?

These questions are intended to call into the question the more foundational ideologies that come into play with this text. Supplementary to these questions are the following:

1. What are the characteristics of female agency? Does Janie exemplify female agency?

2. What hold or significance does generational experience have on one's individual life experience or understanding of agency?

3. What is love? How does a quest to find love shape agency or discovery of self-identity? Does Janie's quest for love negate or empower her agency?

While the secondary questions establish more of a platform for the main questions to rely on, they also unpack a how I want my students to evaluate the two main questions. This allows them both the opportunity to consider more questions and provides them with useful language for how to frame their discussion of the issues as the unit progresses.

Following the selection of my essential questions, I then decided what the students would need to know in order to meet the objectives and educational standards I had set out to accomplish. Using language from these standards, I developed a list of skills and knowledge that the students would require in order to effectively engage in this unit. I then used that list to identify what students would be able to do by the end of our study. Immediately following this, I began to take steps toward formulating an action-oriented summative assessment. When I considered the standards that we needed to cover, the skills I wanted to students to have gained

through the unit, as well as the essential questions that would drive our study of the unit, I settled

on an assessment of writing a letter to an administrator. Throughout this letter, students would be

required to draw upon their understanding of the essential questions in order to make an

argument about whether or not they think that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a sufficient

representation of the African American female authors in their curriculum. To supplement this

final assessment, students would also be required to keep a journal throughout our study, in

which they would write informal answers to the five essential questions. At the conclusion of our

unit, we would use these journals to compare and contrast the styles, content, and form of journal

writing and formal letter writing. Then, after constructing their arguments and finalizing their

letters, the students would send their letters to one administrator.

   The effect that these assessments would have on students' engagement with *Their Eyes*

Were Watching God may not seem vastly different at first glance. However, the type of reading

that it would inspire in students would yield vastly different outcomes. On one hand, providing

students with essential questions at the beginning of this text would direct their focus toward

common threads or trends that they see. These questions would then cultivate a richer experience

in engaging with Hurston's novel, because the students would not be aimlessly wandering

through its pages, trying to figure out what the teacher thinks is important to gain from the story.

Another benefit of structuring the lesson in this way is that, because students would be invested

in their shared goal of grappling with these questions, they would not be as aware of the

scaffolding that was taking place throughout the unit. As each day unfolded in class, I would lead

students through some type of activity that was always pointing back to the essential questions.

Therefore, by the time I asked them to write their letters, they would not only be sure of their

stance on the issue, but they would also have explored minute details and evidence from the text that would support their claims.

Overall, though this section presents only one way that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can be approached, it becomes evident that through following the principles of CLP, the unit plan takes on a much fuller, more significant structure that will lead students to actively engage in critical thinking and critical action in response to the text.

Implications of Employing CLP

Scholars in education are relentless in their quest of discovering new modes for teaching, understanding learning styles, devising methods for differentiated instruction to meet every student's unique needs, and much more. With each article that is published, each book released, each data set analyzed, the end goal is always the same: improving our democratic educational system so that every student receives a good and fair education. While there are large parties who invest in various theories for learning or instructional practice, inherent in each of these camps are certain implications for how a teacher chooses to conduct his or her classroom time and space. The following section will outline not only the curricular implications of employing CLP, but also make a nod to the effect that doing so has on instructors as well as students, and finally, their participating communities.

Impediments and Risks Involved in Implementing CLP

Transforming the curriculum. In integrating the principles of CLP into the classroom, there are very specific implications for how this philosophy transforms a course curriculum. Where instructors once might have allowed students to come into class and lead discussion about whatever themes, symbols, or other elements of a text that they found important, the CLP curriculum requires an intentional effort in every facet of the unit to steer students toward critical

analysis and social action. While this is not necessarily a negative implication, it does necessitate added responsibility on the teacher's part. Put simply, incorporating CLP into the classroom demands focused instructional strategy as well as teacher preparedness every day in class. This is not to say that CLP does not allow for freedom within a unit plan; rather, it simply indicates that regardless of what activity, discussion, or assessment is taking place, it must serve an important step in reaching the end goal of analyzing a text.

        Challenges for the instructor. Though there are some definite advantages that CLP gives to the curriculum, there are also a few challenges. Namely, the pressure that it imposes on the instructor to not only be mentally and materially prepared before every unit, but also the emotional energy that it requires of a teacher to dedicate to every unit of study. Teaching is undoubtedly an emotional profession. From teaching in the classroom, to advocating for students beyond the classroom, to wading through high school struggles with students between these spaces, teachers serve as a primary constant to adolescents. Tangentially, CLP draws on emotion from teachers, because the questions that it challenges teachers and students to ask are often not easy ones. Instead, the CLP curricula mandates that teachers press into the most challenging issues and ideologies that govern the public discourse of their students' lives. Therefore, adding CLP expectations to the already emotionally-draining profession requires that teachers must willingly gave a little bit more of themselves than they already do for the sake of benefitting their students. In this way, CLP poses difficulty not only to the planning process of teaching, but also to the execution of the units. As Behrman (2006) argues, within the parameters of CLP, students "must become engaged participants in a problem affecting them and be able to reflect upon the social and cultural forces that exacerbate or mitigate the problem" (p. 495). By inviting students into such a space that discusses difficult questions and problematic topics that affect them

personally, then, teachers ask their students to make themselves vulnerable, which is a disposition initiated by the teacher. In essence, the patience, understanding, and empathy, that this type of instructional exercise requires is outstanding. But again, the productivity and positive learning that choosing to engage in this type of critical instruction yields is both necessary and important.

Student responsibility. As aforementioned, the responsibility of stepping into a unit with the willingness to take part in challenging discourse does not lie solely on the educators. Rather, students are also bearers of the weight that ensues from committing to CLP practices. As the curriculum of CLP essentially asks students to take part in "denaturalizing and calling into question the very curriculum they are being asked to study" as well, this type of meditation on a text invites even the cynical students to invest in the study, because they are given a say on what they learn (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 128). While this method of engaging with a text may be more difficult for students to jumpstart at the beginning of the semester, the freedom that it gives them to learn their voices and express those voices extends beyond the English classroom and makes the effort well worth it for all parties involved.

Revolutionizing the classroom environment. Having mentioned the transformation that CLP initiates in a curriculum and in the community of teachers and students who practice that curriculum, it seems fitting to address how the tenets of CLP influences the classroom environment. Ultimately, in any school setting, the goal of education should be to cultivate meaningful learning experiences for students, to co-create perceptions of content among a body of inquisitive learners, and to overall, engage in a fruitful academic experience. However, far too often, English classrooms are devoid of the significant application that CLP makes available for "affirming the role of reading and writing as 'ways of being in the world,'" which results in an

absence of significant learning (Behrman, 2006, p. 497). In other words, traditional English classrooms merely employ practices that reinforce surface-level engagement with language and do not challenge students to apply their class content to anything beyond the classroom. Therefore, as Behrman (2006) summarizes, classrooms that choose to participate in the learning experience that CLP emphasizes frame reading and writing as "not merely communicative acts but part of the habits, customs, and behaviors that shape social relations" (p. 497). The effect that this has, consequently, on the classroom environment of CLP courses is a content load that becomes much less grades-based and much more action-oriented. Instead of classrooms that engage in meaningless discussion that will extend only to the door of the classroom or to the end of the class period, moreover, these courses illuminate fervor for engagement that other course content cannot, by granting students and their ideas with as much esteem as teachers or administrators. When educators invite their students to be a part of not only the analysis of texts but also the decision-making process regarding texts that they study, they indicate that students' opinions are valued and needed in the learning environment. In this light, the learning environment transforms into a space in which all participants are responsible for the learning that goes on, not just the teacher. This shared sense of responsibility, as a result, instigates a change from the static rigidity of traditional classrooms, which position the teacher and her ideas as paramount, and replaces it with a community of learners.

Influencing the community. When teachers choose to position their students as co-creators of meaning and students are given choice about how they get involved in their own learning experiences, the effect is not merely limited to the classroom. Rather, the teacher's intentionality in constructing a CLP curriculum extends beyond the classroom to affect the community at large. Evinced by Behrman's (2006) positioning the rationale of critical literacy

instruction as something that "should not be limited to the promotion of personalized or internalized reconceptualizations of language, power, and text," he supports the notion that encouraging students to take social action "requires [them] to become involved members of a larger community" (p. 495). One obvious way that a CLP curriculum manifests in the community is through the students' action-oriented assessments. Whether these assessments call for a letter to an important figure in the community, a debate about the importance of what students are being taught, a community-wide event for presenting research on a topic, etc., they involve individuals outside of the classroom. This adds a level of significance to the students' study that a five-paragraph essay would not have the capacity to do and also incorporates the community into what takes place inside the classroom.

The second element of influencing the community that CLP makes available is the types of students that practicing it produces. As previously discussed, CLP provides scaffolding for students to be able to engage in public discourse regarding various ideologies. In challenging students to partake in this type of practice during school hours, CLP equips them as individuals to step into the world and enact authentic, meaningful, important change not only in their own lives but also in the lives of those in their communities. While the social action projects showcase only an immediate representation of the growth that CLP inspires in students, the long-term implication of this type of practice is students who participate actively as adults in social, political, and cultural discourses throughout their lives. Though it could be argued that not every student who leaves a classroom entrenched in the principles of CLP gains the same benefit, this paper seeks to demonstrate that the exposure alone to critical discourse is sufficient for educating a more critically literate generation of young adults. Seen through the lens of Henry A. Giroux's conception of critical pedagogy, this exposure serves to usher students into a "pedagogy of

responsibility," which educates "young people simultaneously for a professional future and for critical citizenship" (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 4).

Why is this so urgent?

Building on Giroux's concept of preparing students for both professional endeavors and "critical citizenship," this final section of the paper aims to explicate the urgency for enacting the philosophical framework of CLP in the secondary classroom. In other words, after acknowledging the tensions and challenges that CLP may pose, it is necessary to identify why it is still vital that educators integrate its principles into their teaching philosophy and practice.

Antiquated methods seem to work. Although it is easy to speak validity and effectiveness into the practices that CLP proposes to a group of vibrant and excited new teachers, it is much more challenging to convince the teachers who have been instructing for decades without this philosophy that CLP is not merely another fad in education. If educators willingly continue to practice the ways of antiquated pedagogical strategy, while they may yield proficient test scores, will produce a generation of students who cannot think critically and, therefore, will not be able to participate in society as informed citizens. In neglecting to teach students the skills that are proposed by CLP, in other words, educators are depriving students of the building blocks that are required for higher-order decision making and developing a critical consciousness.

Moreover, and more pressing, is the implication that continuing to teach in the antiquated way will perpetuate the problematic ideologies formally embedded in and accepted by the current high school English curriculum. In other words, if educators continue to teach canonical texts without questioning their place in the canon, considering whose voices are heard and whose squelched, discussing who benefits from the narratives of these texts, and contemplating many other tensions, then they are effectively perpetuating the power of dominant narratives, unfair

social hierarchies, and controversially oppressive ideologies in their classrooms. The result, consequently, of educators' unwillingness to challenge the accepted norms that permeate canonical literature is students who are both unwilling and ill-equipped to take part in this practice. While this may not seem like an urgent matter, its implications for the generation that is coming out of the U.S. education system is highly problematic.

Current cultural climate. Today's students—while they are required to attend the same amount of school, complete the same assignments, and read the same texts as former generations—are engulfed in a technological whirlwind that necessitates the skills that critical literacy teaches. According to a report published in *The Washington Post,* teens and pre-teens on average are spending nine hours a day on some type of technological device, confirming the suspicion that "media use is getting more and more ubiquitous" (Tsukayama, 2015). One primary symptom of this growing presence of technology is the immediacy through which it can be accessed. While using the internet, or "surfing the web," once denoted sitting behind the screen of a desktop or laptop computer, students are now engaging in online discourse from their beds, at their desks, in between classes, at the movies, and so on. Implicit in this is the notion that students are constantly taking part in discourse, whether they are aware of it or not. Adding to this, then, is the understanding that regardless of whether or not students are trained in how to combat false narratives in online discourse, they are still being goaded to invest in certain dialogues that may be problematic. Therefore, educators—whose responsibility is to equip students with both content knowledge and life skills—must consider this philosophy with the utmost importance.

As Janks (2012) conceives it, "in an age where the production of meaning is being democratized by […] social networking sites and portable connectivity, powerful discourses

continue to speak us and to speak to us and to speak through us" (p. 150). In other words,

students are being fed information constantly, so teachers need to meet the demand and educate

students on how to think critically in response to this. One aspect of Janks's (2012) explanation

that merits added attention is the notion that "powerful discourses continue to speak […] through

us" (p. 150). While the former paragraph positioned CLP as being a necessary tool for protecting

students against problematic discourses, Janks (2012) illuminates the truth that teaching students

critical literacy skills is also necessary in order to strengthen their voices to talk back to these

illogical narratives. Though the omnipresent media in students' lives has the capacity to

complicate, falsely indoctrinate, and manipulate students' ideas, it also can be used for

"disseminating counter discourses, for mobilizing opposition, for questioning and destabilizing

power" (Janks, 2015, p. 150). In this light—made more significant by the current political and

cultural climate of the current United States—teaching through the lens of CLP can no longer be

viewed as an option. In order to equip students to recognize narratives and the ideologies that

inform them, as well as empower student voices to counter these narratives, critical literacy must

assume a position on the frontlines of both instructional practice and overall educational

philosophy.

Conclusion

Throughout the former sections, this thesis has aimed to develop a thorough rationale for

valuing CLP, to outline methods for integrating its principles, and to shed light on both the

advantages and challenges that doing so can bring to an English classroom. In its conclusion,

however, I will evaluate CLP from a personal standpoint to defend the notion that, despite the

risks involved in implementing this educational philosophy, it must happen. I assert that while I

hope to inspire sophisticated writing style in my students by exposing them to the beauty of

words, my utmost concern will be to instill an awareness of the power in their words. Finally, using my own personal experience and personal philosophy on how to participate in a community, I contend that it would not only be foolish but also detrimental to students' growth and well-being to not adopt CLP into the classroom.

Personal experience. Drawing from my time spent in the high school English classroom, I will first defend the notion that CLP is necessary in order to provide students with an understanding of their own voices. My aim in referencing my experience, though, is not to castigate my high school English teachers for their shortcomings in the English classroom. In fact, my English teachers were so outstanding that they inspired my desire to pursue this profession. In their classes, I learned to write brilliantly; I could explicate any passage thrown my way, create a poignant narrative experience with keen awareness to sensory language, or develop an intelligent literary critique with close attention to specifics in the text. They informed my writing technique and groomed my writing style into something that I was proud to call my own. Yet, when I left high school and entered into the larger discourse of a public university, I was still unaware of the power in my words. I possessed a sophisticated control over language, but I did not know how to use that control to generate influence, enact change, or challenge the status quo.

In essence, I knew exactly *how* to say something meaningful but not confident that *what* I said was meaningful or that I even had anything meaningful to say. This, too, was not a symptom of poor teaching on the part of my English teachers necessarily, as I was exposed to opportunities that called for the development of my voice. However, these occasions were few and far between and often challenged me to grapple with concepts that were not necessarily fundamental or addressing significant issues. Therefore, in looking back on my experience

through the lens of CLP, I see that regular exposure to methods for navigating and constructing

my own opinion about how to push back on problematic ideas would have been incredibly

beneficial. Exercises such as these would have not only trained me how to engage in significant

discourses but enlightened me to the fact that my voice was valid, my words valued, my input

important.

Stemming from this experience, I find the philosophical guidelines of CLP all the more

pressing to use in my future classrooms as I consider the diversity that will exist among my

student communities. To unpack this, for students like myself—who love learning and engaging

with teachers to better their understanding—failing to instill this impression may not put students

at a detriment, because their inquisitive nature may eventually lead to the development of a

critical consciousness. However, for many of my future students, the will to explore literary texts

that seem irrelevant to them or disentangle the problematic narratives embedded in these texts

will likely be characterized by complacency, if not absolute apathy. Therefore, I cannot view this

philosophy as optional and, in turn, neglect the students whose experiences in school have taught

them to stay silent. By exercising my classroom practice on the pillars of CLP, rather, I will

involve all students in the process of meaning-making and, consequently, the development of

critical consciousness.

Belief in the power of empathy. Continuing on the concept of diversity in the

classroom, I will conclude this paper by addressing the ability that CLP gives teachers to

facilitate discussion among unlike students, as well as the effect that doing so has on the students

themselves and their generation at large. In glancing at any newspaper publication, Twitter feed,

or another type of public forum, it becomes quickly evident the amount of discord that plagues

the American population. Our national existence is characterized by division, animosity, and

ultimately, hatred. Violence has become commonplace, marginalization easy, and hostility the norm. While there are many who are making courageous efforts to fight for the rights of the marginalized and speak against the injustices that riddle our system, there exists an ever-present ideology that the "other" in whatever position is being taken is inherently wrong. This is not necessarily a new trend, but the antiquated way that Americans are choosing to deal with it has resulted in a gross lack of progressive instruction in one of the most foundational spaces for change in our nation: the classroom. In other words, as the American public continues to deal with disagreement by fighting for rightness instead of seeking understanding, the youth in schools grow more accustomed to settling tensions through hostile separation and vicious condemnation. Consequently, for educators to view CLP as "passé" neglects a philosophy that has the capacity to facilitate bridging the gap between opposing experiences and opinions (Janks, 2012, p. 150). Instead of acting as "resources for hope," moreover, these teachers maintain the status quo by positioning canonical texts as the sole purveyor of knowledge (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 1). Ultimately, in choosing to not teach through the lens of CLP, English educators willingly depart from the opportunity to foster healing and cultivate empathy.

Moving away from the idea that CLP is necessary because of the current sociocultural climate in America, though, I will demonstrate the necessity of this educational philosophy by echoing Janks (2012) assertion that even if the U.S. was not up in arms about the current set of conflicts that afflict our nation, discord is not going away. Janks (2012) problematizes the notion that CLP is only currently relevant by claiming that even in a "peaceful world […] where everyone has access to […] a dignified life," the world is still "rich with difference," which elicits a certain "intolerance and fear of the other" (p. 150). In continuation of this thought, Janks (2012) asserts that

because difference is structured in relation to power, unequal access to resources based

on gender, race, ethnicity, language, ability, sexuality, nationality and class will continue

to produce privilege and resentment (Janks, 2012, p. 150).

While Janks (2012) addresses critical literacy more generally, the truth that she communicates is

that conflict will never subside in a nation that is made up of human beings. Therefore, there is

no better time than the present to start equipping students, in one of the most malleable moments

of their lives, to learn the tools that are necessary for speaking into discourse characterized by

conflict.

It is time for educators to do away with complacency in the classroom for fear of the risk

or challenge that it may pose to them. In one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s papers that he wrote

while attending Morehouse College about the purpose of education, he conceded that "we are

prone to let our mental life become invaded by legions of half truths, prejudices, and

propaganda" and added, "I often wonder whether or not education is fulfilling its purpose"

Though King (1992) developed this argument in 1947, which is long before the present tensions

began to take hold of public discourse and education, I contend that education is still not

fulfilling its purpose. Until educators are deliberate in their instruction to point students toward

the study of language as a means for cultivating empathy and enacting change, education will not

fulfill its purpose. Rather, the generations of youth that traipse through the halls of the American

school system will merely add to the ranks of citizens who accept blindly the truths told them

and perpetuate the problematic ideologies that dominate our cultural makeup.

Though the proposal to implement CLP in English classrooms presents an unarguably

challenging task, it offers a necessary avenue for mighty change. Allowing effective change into

the narrative of instructional practice and educational philosophy is long overdue, and I argue

that so, too, is the decision to implement CLP in the English classroom. In choosing to integrate reading against the grain techniques into course curricula, English educators facilitate opportunities for their students to develop critical consciousness. In choosing to incorporate intentional activities that challenge students' ways of thinking, English educators attribute worth to their students' voices. In choosing to involve all voices in meaningful classroom discussion, English educators bring communities of students—who bring vastly different experiences, backgrounds, and ideologies to the classroom—to a space of empathy, understanding, and reconciliation. In choosing to implement CLP in the English classroom, English educators empower a generation of students that refuses to accept embedded ideologies and power dynamics, and instead, uses their voices to enact a discourse that seeks understanding, protects freedom, and establishes access to authentic agency.

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Appendix A
Understanding by Design Unit Plan for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Stage 1 – Desired Results

TN Ready Standards: 11th GRADE STANDARDS

11-12.RL.CS.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings and language that is stylistically poignant and engaging.

11-12.RL.CS.6 Analyze how point of view and/or author purpose requires distinguishing what is directly stated in texts and what is implied.

11-12.RL.KID.2 Determine multiple themes or central ideas of a text or texts and analyze their development; provide a critical summary.

11-12.W.TTP.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning supported by relevant and sufficient evidence.

11-12.W.PDW.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Understandings:	**Essential Questions:**
Facet 2: Interpretation Facet 3: Application Facet 4: Seeing in Perspective	*Main Questions* 1. Who benefits from the inclusion of this novel in the canon? 2. Hurston's novel is regarded as the "prototypical black novel of affirmation […] the most successful, convincing, and exemplary novel of black love that we have," but is it problematic that this is one of few black female voices heard in the canon? *Secondary Questions* 1. What are the characteristics of female agency? Does Janie exemplify female agency? 2. What hold or significance does generational experience have on one's individual life experience or understanding of agency? 3. What is love? How does a quest to find love shape agency or discovery of self-identity? a. Does Janie's quest for love negate or empower her agency?

Students will know…	*Students will be able to…*
- students will know the definition of theme	- students will be able to identify major themes in the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- students will know the definition of diction	- students will be able to identify specific word choice and explain its significance
- students will understand the components of a formal letter	- students will be able to formulate a letter to an administrator with coherent argument and appropriate form
- students will understand point-of-view and how to differentiate between the different types	- students will be able to pinpoint the POV at work in *TEWWG* and explain its significance/implications in how the story is perceived

Stage 2 – Assessment Evidence

Performance Tasks:	**Other Evidence:**
1. Students will write a letter to a person of authority in order to challenge the process of who chooses the books that are read in schools and how they can integrate more into the curriculum.	1. Students will keep a journal throughout the study of this novel, with specific pages dedicated to the individual essential questions. Throughout the lessons that make up this unit, students will be asked to write entries on each of these pages about the development of their opinions regarding the essential questions.

Stage 3 – Learning Plan

Learning Activities:

I.   Pre-Reading Activities:
   a. Free-writing activity about what agency means to them (low-stakes writing opportunity to get students grappling with the essential questions without overtly pointing that out)
   b. Feminine agency anticipation guide
   c. Background video on time period and Zora Neale Hurston's biography
II. During Reading Activities:
   a. Low stakes writing in response to the essential questions via online posts
   b. Read Richard Wright's critique of Hurston's writing, "Between Laughter and Tears" and Alice Walker's article "Looking for Zora"
   c. Video of Alice Walker talking about *Their Eyes Were Watching God:* https://youtu.be/KFW1CQSjWaA
         i. Use both the Richard Wright article and Alice Walker's article to juxtapose the various opinions about whether or not Hurston's writing was liberating or oversimplified the tensions of the racist South.

d. Vocabulary activity: word choice graphic organizer to analyze Hurston's characterization of Janie

III.   Post-Reading Activities:

a. Discuss difference between a formal letter and text messaging

b. Analyze formality of tone and structure in a letter

c. Read model texts (i.e. persuasive letters to authority figures, former students' letters, individual paragraphs in a letter to break it down)

d. Write a sample letter together

e. Write an argumentative letter to an administrator