

THE TOKEN PROJECT

by Kyle J. Flemings

The Token Project, my creative thesis, contains poetry, journal entries, and creative nonfiction. It addresses ways in which blackness, masculinity, and black culture are tokenized while playing on the term “token” in order to reinvent and powerfully repurpose it. Repurposing this term is a way to create agency in a world that widely fails to recognize me in the full human spectrum. The project investigates capitalism, colonialism, entertainment, and love through the concept of the “token.”

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by

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Dedication

For black boys who have never met peace. I pray you find it in within yourself.

For my nephew Brody never let anything to take your joy.

In loving memory of Marcel Flemings, Wayne Downing, and Marshall Vasso.

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I do not have enough space to write the names of all the people who have helped me along the way. There have been so many people who have poured life into me.

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Token Project

I

dream deferred

i seen it happen once

a black boy scream

the sound resembled white noise

hissing underneath a child's place

drowned out in church, prison and school

it deadened in the streets, courtrooms

police stations

it reminded me of a quiet place.

do you ever

listen

to the black boys

screaming?

coming of age

i met violence when i was 5
saw my sister's dad
turn mother
a punching bag

i cried

pulled a knife
out of the drawer
violence was shocked
how quickly i learned

generational curse

stumbling on a conflicted boy
they called him token
he thought himself human

i wanted to show him compassion
since they belittled him
for not knowing
how to receive or give love

but when he does
like the full moon
his embrace will blanket the darkness

chalkboard discipline

after Layli Long Soldier

The following are open sentences.

Here this sentence will be respected.

Black boys do not get erasers

Here he will learn sentences before sentences.

Black boys do not receive the privilege of a learning curve.

Here he will learn sentencing.

Black boy was sentenced period.

Here is a perfectly executed sentence.

Black boy

simmons plantation anecdote

In 1910 somewhere by the backroads of Pontotoc, Mississippi yo granddaddy paid for our land and family estate three times over. Now yo granddaddy no flaw. He an earnest man believed in honoring a man's word. Thatta man provides and conducts himself with dignity and respect. Thatta man take responsibility for his actions and he does whatever need be to protect his family. Yo granddaddy been known around Pontotoc for being a jack of all trades for quite some time now. Speak as fancy as any white man and he built up a reputation for himself as a commodity. Yo granddaddy also had some balls the size all east of the Mississippi. Had the gumpshun to want to own the plantation his family worked on. That was foolish talk back then. It was even crazier to think you would be able to keep it. Way he figured our family earned it. Hell all the cotton and farming we did alluve his daddies, uncles, mothers, and sisters blood that was seeped into this soil here. With all the tilling, clawing, plowing, cultivating we shoulda got something for it. But yah see here, Mr. Simmons, on the other hand—he no flaw either, but he different, way different than yo granddaddy. You see, he was wicked. Old folk lore is the devil spit em out of hell and you gotta be a nasty bastard to make the devil heel. Mr. Simmons been known around Pontotoc for that temper. Even lynched his daddy right in fronta em. Nasty sonfabitch made em watch the whole thing. Yo granddaddy never talked about that much. But back to Mr. Simmons or that his bedmate and our cousin call em, Daddy Devil, he agreed to it. As if it were that easy. Hell, I didn't even know em and I could tell you not in this south. Hell not nowhere here in this place they call America. And sure as hell not in this state of Mississippi. Like I said, Daddy Devil no flaw either. He watched my granddaddy closely. Never really trusted him that much. He didn't like slick-talkin niggas. But my granddaddy was a little wiser than he led on. He had

himself a system in place. Way he figure Daddy Devil goin make em pay a lil interest for this here plantation probably twice over. Probably cuz Mr. Simmons always went on ramblin, bout the white man, and how he 2 or 3 times smarter and stronger than us colored folk. We still ¾'s of a man or some old pig shit he say. So, how yo granddaddy kept track cuz he couldn't read or write or count much. He figured he would put rocks aside for each time he paid. That way he hadda record of it. But Daddy devil caught on, he found out where yo granddaddy was keeping his rocks. And remove one after he make the payment. Now, I tried to told you Mr. Simmons was wicked. He suppose he thought he was a sly lil snake. But yo granddaddy found out after the 3rd payment. He always used to say wicked, goin be wicked. So yo granddaddy made a separate pile and marked the bottom of the rocks with his blood. That way he would know if they were different. Yo granddaddy paid Mr. Simmons one more time and told em I'm not paying you no mo. And then he showed him the rocks with blood on em.. Thats how we got this land here. How many colored folk you know can say that they bought the plantation they family was slaves on?"

Welcome to my neighborhood

where I conveniently reside two houses down from Death. Lucifer is always my next-door neighbor. For a housewarming gift, he brought over a loaded revolver and a fifth of everclear and told me it's better to self-medicate. Despair stays right across the street. She's usually the first thing I see when I leave my house. She's so damn lustful, always offering herself to replace my peace of mind. My cousin Sorrow's kids, well they stay at Misery's house. They don't know any better. They never met their father Happiness; he's almost like a folk-tale Santa Claus—his presence was never present, so they will never know their gifts. Instead they were raised by Misconception. He really clouded their perception till all they wore were Stereotypes. Self-pity roams from house to house she's the neighborhood dog, so vicious, biting damn near everybody who comes to visit. My aunt Hope moved away in the summer. Self-pity used to terrorize her he even bit her in the leg. That's probably why we never see her walking through the hood. She divorced her abusive ex Insecurity. The last I heard he contracted AIDS from laying with everybody in the city. My aunt Hope so damn gracious and angelic decided to give him a second chance. Then one night he got drunk and shot my uncle Peace all because of a rumor, my uncle's last words were I love you still. Not too long after my aunt Hope got married to Money. We heard they moved to Hollywood. But we only see her in movies, reality TV and music videos. However, she seems to shine brighter in my dreams. Money's only using her profit, such a terrible influence, but I'm the only one who sees through his bullshit. My mother Optimistic used to speak of her, till my father Will died early from self-medicating. I remember Lucifer joking at his wake saying that he served his purpose, that he lived up to his potential. Since then my mother has never been the same and I'm beginning to see a change. I guess it's hard to be Optimistic when the world has taken your Will. My mother now rarely is home. When I go looking for her she never answers, leaving me to fend for myself until I become Innocence no longer. Just another black boy falling victim to his environment.

black boy address token

haven't you became their commodity?
never manifesting
never making ends meet
stomach half empty
this is the cycle
molded in desperation
you must survive the times
such the cycle
accommodate
become fixated on hues

you idealist with your ethos
never practicing what you preach
always seen barely afloat
heart half full
for us "role models"
till self-medicating becomes a must
must be perfect
for us role models
accommodate your mood
aren't you always?

don't they always?
remind you of *color*?

don't you love the blues?
Your mood never modifying.

don't they love your blues?
must gentrify in order to accommodate

aren't you always performing?

such the cycle
never becoming modern

becoming whitewashed
rather paint our old projects

gentrify you

rather paint your old projects
you must practice
perfect performing

again you gentrified
you must practice performing
why are you still performing?

never exiting stage left
even after your curtains close

return to himself

please

sing a psalm

for black boy

his body

collateral damage

molded by rage and destruction

crowned 2nd tier human

displaced from his heritage

let his pain be revealed

remembered

black boy on love

and it didn't bother me until
you framed it
held it over my head
regardless of how bad it pixelates

contorting my face and image
makin me brutish and animalistic
without remorse
you thought

but even animals

are allowed to be loved

8/17/09

Today they volunteered black boy's body. Made you the male version of Sarah Baartman. Paraded for their entertainment. Crowned you brute, freak, masochist, deviant that is both intriguing and taboo. You learned you're a contradiction, a marvel, a black panther who should be skinned alive

2 pm in Oxford, Ohio

black boy only visible when performing
existing within the margin

a dichotomy of their vivid imagination
either the sum of all fears
or the conceptualization of death

neither has been trained for the human eye
nor has a name
this ambiguity has me questioning my own being
i thought i survived
living in the lions' mouths
became adept at being chewed
a pile of bones
buried alive

color bind

You claim you don't see color
 in a world where the truth is never black and white
 your fine print is such a shade of grey that Christians find taboo
your love only unconditionally when the conditions
are over easy
 break so fast over hard-boiled situations
 yet claim it is always i who eggs you on
 It's hard to rationalize my rations
from your point of view
 (that perspective lens never focuses on hindsight)
 you enjoy the luxury of being near-sighted
i'm envious of your inability
to predict the future from the past
 your prophets have always made progress
 never deemed convict barely had conflict
 such a contrast to our prologue
probably why you don't understand our protest
 we had to sing our blues, yours protected your hue
your forefathers were more than just martyrs
 the agent smiths in the matrix they fixed who was broke
seduced us to get high off hope and overdose
 we've seen what happens when King's dream,
 A mural merely left to decorate a balcony
deferred to Rodney TO BE A WORLDSTAR!!!!
 A quick come-up, or to be paid off
 you compensate with hopes we alleviate
but how much is your life worth?
 do you exchange your pain for change?
 has your daughter ever color-coated her shame?
what's your spectrum of beauty? justice?
 is it in the eye of the beholder? or is it who unloads the holster?

ask the CIA if bullets got names?
ask the grand jury if justice has shades?
 do you attain benefits from the doubt?
 with camera footage or without?
how do you define excessive force?
 is the result living or is it a corpse?
 ask Apple if information is free?
and If all lives matter
 why do you always point the finger at me?

token realizes himself

couldn't seek truth
in native tongue
somewhere i forgot
somewhere fell

through space
where smiles disarm
snowfall in july
and free me
from the oj complex
i thought

i could talk
but don't mention
black boy experience

i no prophet
i black boy
they profit

II

growing pains

ain't no retiring from your skin

black boy

too much responsibility

in your existence

this is initiation

make your reflection hate you

Don't you smile Black Boy!

Look at me, when I'm talking to you

Cat Calling Love

AYOOO

Baby, where you going?
second?

Sweet thang

Can I talk to you for a

Daaaammmmmmmnnnn, you got a fat ass.

You going to be my bitch.

Ma, in the blue dress

you all fucking legs

You got a MAN?

You NEED a man!

WHERE IS YOUR

MAN?

Nobody claimed you?

Where do you belong?

(love clearly states that she's not interested)

FUCKING BITCH!

YOU DUMB BITCH!

NOBODY WANTS

YO ASS BITCH

Thats why my other token hit!

You ugly anyway!

Nobody like

Darkskin

anyway.

Nobody likes

Lightskins

anyway.

Thats why I don't date

black women

Pieces of Token

to the women whose arms felt like home
i apologize, for steel being shattered glass

spent the last 20 years unpacking
how i swallowed suffering and silence
steal trip

to be in this gaze yet invisible

constantly reminded i am broken
i've gone so long without feeling whole

never knew how to climb out one

contrary to popular belief
i feel everything
my perfect is less than average
on most days i pray
one day soon
i burn this house of trauma
i call body

have mercy

i'm still putting myself back together

Re: legion addresses black boy

blood burning crosses

mouths preying on moons

flesh offered sacrifice

2/1/19

Today Token learned how to live in the lion's mouth. He learned how to not get chewed up by comments on his positionality. He learned that his blackness entangled with his masculinity is a lackluster performance, a rivalry game, charade that lions exercises for his leisure.

Black boy black, black boy blue

Black boy ain't safe, he always get chewed

The boy who was given a seed

he mirrored her

on bended knee

she palmed earth

molded clay

set intention

she spoke life

2/10/18

Black boy smiled today. It was the second time he overheard the word “nigger.” Black boy learned how to become invisible, robotic, delete emotions while still cheesing. Black Boy knows if he doesn't smile he becomes visible and the lion thinks he is dangerous. Black boy becomes black threat vomited out of the lion's mouth.

Black boy smile, smile like full moon

Black boy betta smile, or meet your doom.

how to violate a black boy's body

conceive it

treat the woman who pushes it out

as second tier

call it it

call the space it occupies a barren land

a ghetto

depreciate the value

see it walkin down the street

call it dangerous

call it it

never give it a name

4/13/15

Co-workers ask if Black boy knows why black people will riot. Black boy musters up the strength to smile, replies what do you mean? Co-workers say black people are savages, that they are tearing up their neighborhood. That black will accomplish nothing by carrying on that way, good thing you're not that type of black.

*Black boy a race man
Spokesperson for all
Black boy know that race men
Get shot and they fall*

grandma's love

unwavering without reservation

how hugs made steel

like flesh malleable

a little less numb

her couch was an altar

for crosses too heavy to bear

and black boys in our neighborhood

had early expiration dates

she'd offer guidance

Phillipians 4:13

6/17/17

Today black boy doesn't smile. He is reminded of the myth of Sisyphus. Instead he screams in the mirror asking God why does he forsake him. God is speechless, does.

return to himself

sing a psalm for black boy
for the irreparable
orphan, outsider, outcasted
he inherited the sins from his father

is he not your people?

flesh of your flesh
blood of your blood

isn't that worthy enough for wakanda?

doesn't he bear the mark?

doesn't he deserve peace?

please

offer a psalm

black boy on his daddy shoes

every day staring at your shoes
in my closet
positioned perfectly
near a hamper that carried
the array of demons
handed down like worn-out genes
that wouldn't evolve
remembering days
driving myself
past the brink of insanity
fantasizing
what it would be like to walk in your shoes
in my neighborhood
black bastard's paranoia a plague
more infectious
than viral videos of gunshot lullabies
from sworn officers
paragon absentee father syndrome
runs rampant in urban homes
where teenage boys would kill to have their daddy shoes to fill
most of them die trying to shrink in the ones provided
all suffer from every form PTSD
produced from their fathers shadow
that unforgiving cast of darkness
that engulfs any bit of their self-worth
see i was lucky
lucky to have a father
would come back for me
like Jesus to have a father

who would allow me to spend?
only 12 short years in the wilderness
barefoot, i recall the first time
i tried his shoes on
i couldn't i just couldn't get the tongue right
It was a bit too stubborn
too entitled
to apologize for not rescuing
his only begotten son
from sleeping on
wicked shelter floors
the laces
were dirty
filthy to understand
that you will never find yourself
by going in and out of multiple holes
and that promises as flimsy as weak knots
will never bring forth restoration
the heel is what made it impossible to fit in
the lack of support it provided
made me ill equipped to take even baby steps
and after reducing my foot to that agony
i've learned that
walking in your shoes
was committing suicide

Dear Token

I started to chuckle when your granddaddy would carry on about a deed. He would carry on about once he finally own somethin thats going to make him a man. Talkin bout you aint no man if you don't have no property. As if manhood depended on ownership and it must be acquired, taken, or purchased. He would talk anybody who would listen ear off with his dreams of land to own for himself and his children's children to be free. That his granddaddy was a man because he had something to call his. Your granddaddy fought for his deed clawed tooth and nail, spilled blood, and gave flesh for his deed. So whats a deed token? Some say endin slavery was a good deed. But they just rename it and calls it jim crow. Was jim crow a good deed? The 13th amendment was suppose to be a good deed? Givin all that land to them white folk after the Armstead act. Well your granddaddy was granted his deed. His reward after he took lives for the white man's war. Even got one of them fancy military medals for all that killin he had done. He came back with a letter talkin about he a war hero. How his country forever grateful for his service. All those deeds. He came back here and thought it was different cause his stripes he earned. He finally got his land, 175 acres even able to inquire about purchasin two mules. Till this white man got to walkin on his property. Told him that he doing him a deed by not lettin the klan get after em. That he goin do him a deed by lettin him become his apprentice. That your granddaddy work for him now. I guess he suppose your granddaddy was a flaw. After your granddaddy declined his offer. The white man came back with them good ole boys marched right on his property and did things to him that I will never forget. Clipped him then shot him and spilled blood on his deed and his land. His blood seeped in soil. The reason why i'm tellin you this boy and you better be listenin Token. Cause no paper or possession goin make you free. Cause no paper or possession goin make you a man. As long as you believe that you goin be searchin for something that is never goin to make you whole. You got to look inside for that. But a man token, a man is.

Love Always,

Peace

epistemicide

After Don Mee Choi

i, lack-a-seed, born 3 miles from _____. actually, i don't remember my own inception my legacy is not slated to survive. they said i was born here. here is cell. America. America sells cells. they claim the nobodies across town, just a few acres from here. i, lack-a-seed, nothing to foster this accumulation, growth, this body, a celf that can't evolve pass stagnant, i, lack-a-seed, just a few acres from matter, they said i was born here. here, is barren land, where they mark-a-seed by the soil. they, mark-a-seed, by the blood in the soil. they, mark-a-seed, by blood.

12/11/05

13, I called you trembling from the police station, a couple years removed from us being strangers. You saw me and broke down. I imagine you felt helpless. Your only son becoming part of the system that has taken so many of your relatives hostage. While me, feeling worthless thinking I am disposable again. That I have won a prize in a father only to let him down. We didn't speak on the car ride home, too busy suffocating from silence; impaired by shame. We never spoke about it again.

lesson from father

how scared

was always on the tip of his tongue

but could never fit in his mouth

because who would believe the boogie man

gets scared, who believes

in the boogie man

GodBody

here we learned
the value of a body
arm leg leg arm head

bodies ricochet off bullets
the makings of a god

don't you count them?

corpses?

see how many he can make new

how many bodies you got?

walkin blues

heard you a shell
running, flayed flesh full
of bullet holes
puncture wounds.

bones cracked from carryin ya fathers cross
masculinity fooled you to pick it up
persuaded you to become a patriot
for the sake of your daddy's name
you martyr

he migrate north

gone home

you
still lookin

what Love said to black boy

aren't I everything you prayed for?
relentless, unyielding
in this discovery and pursuit of self
for self
i needed it
i needed to become my own master
even if it meant severing ties with you
and taking time to heal
but don't I still transcribe your silence?
don't I still offer an altar for your trauma?
it became second nature
deciphering what you may have never made room to speak
still don't i insist
insist on you speaking
even at the cost of my own ego
even if it means you picking up your pride
where you had us fucked up at
where I had us fucked up at
but don't I still decipher your silence?
create calligraphy in your blank spaces
aren't I the vehicle given to you by god?
to transform yourself?
your community?
the world.

III

did you hear the news black boy stories break

what the machine said to black boy

offer hands of surrender to night sky

for night skin is numbered

days with no face

value a fallen omen

identified black

hums the machine

make more room for plot

videos that don't go viral

i'm not the type of black boy
who dies on the news
my body deserves no memorial
service fee for darkness
or so they'd have it

make it a recurring phenomenon
call it ritual
no coverage for black boys
from numbered blocks

outkasted

swallowed
whole
by silence

return to himself

sing a psalm
for black boy

learned his masculinity
depended on how many
bodies he acquired

so he branded them
on his skin

learned how to kill
before gentle ever
danced on his tongue
before he felt endearment
and joy could fit in his mouth

please

offer a psalm

black boy on drapetomania

crabs

were never meant

for buckets

forsaken sonne

i never claimed
night fathered me
they named
me after
my skin
disheveled
birthed a plot
i knew well

learned to dig deep
unpack barren soil
buried

faith in form
of psalms
reality held my universe
and pain in separate palms

offerings to my moon

what jazz said to black boy

i see you black boy

heard your father an off beat

he aint never taught you how to read music

nobody took the time

to tune you

a freestyle

learned to swing around pain

til it became your instrument of choice

distortion

a primary love language

better be careful

becoming a full spectrum of sound

you know

they like you

only

feeling

blues

BLACK Like

i'm black like sticking batteries in the freezer

like I can never have too much sugar in my kool aid
like I'm always in the mood for chicken
like you damn right I made a mixtape
like once I hear "it's going down, for the 99 and the 2000"
i'll be catching the meanest twerk

i'm black like doing the stanky leg, cabbage patch, dabbing.

Black like writing my name on the orange juice, syrup sandwiches

Black like government cheese and spam,

like banana pudding, collard greens, and ham
Black like house party, like play
NO. I'm black like Sherane
Black like hashtag heroes, IG models, black like twitter
like Facebook like guilty to proven innocent black like
i never really had time to enjoy my innocence black like
asphalt caskets
million man marches
project asylums
i'm black like Pookie, but this black don't crack
i'm black the back of Forest Whitaker's neck
i'm black like Bernie Mac, 45 minutes past midnight
Black like the sunrise
like FUCK your Oscar's, Grammy and award shows black
like revolution, evolution
like beginning and end
i'm black like MA dukes, Big MAMA, TT, and NAN
Black like "go outside and get me a switch"

Black like "you better get your ass in before the streetlights come on"

Black like "shut up before I give you something to cry about"

Black like "do you got McDonald's money?"

like barely making ends meet still having something left over to pay my tithes

Black like child soldiers, fallen soldiers
Black like Malcolm, Martin, Turner
Giovanni, Baldwin, Hampton,

Newton, Trayvonne, Till
Sandra Bland
John Crawford
Mike Brown
Oscar Grant

Black like Christopher Wallace
like biggie gimme one mo chance
Black like Tupac, “Dear Mama,” “Brenda’s Got a baby”
Black like Lauryn Hill “If I ruled the World”

Black like your football team
Baseball Team, Basketball team, even on your hockey team

Debate team, your 44th President, his First Lady
Your dance moves, your swagger
The way you dress In printed in your DNA
Unapologetic.
Prideful.
Brilliant.
Beautiful.
Gracious.

Black.

what the playground said to my nephew

here you learned how to become a warrior

slide head first into danger

molten lava mulch

taught yourself how to fly

by jumping from

mountainous swing sets

your uncle's parachute prayers

guiding you to safety

landing in pools of laughter

here you learned

the difference between

bravery and fear

was belief in self

i was your first taste of freedom

improving your creativity

extending possibilities

all you have to do is

close your eyes

when Drake's hotline bling comes on

12 hours in on being uncle dad
12 hours in of taking a "vacation"
terrified of being this tabloid father
bags of gummy bears for breakfast
mornings morphed to competition
bartering on late bedtimes
improv dance battles
best out of 3
running man and the milly rock
vs cat daddy and the nay nay
in my Mike Tyson voice "my milly rock is impenetrable"
round two
i think i pulled a back muscle
maybe a hamstring
you masterfully do the moonwalk
round 3
hotline bling rings through the speaker
you give me the drizzy hands

interstellar token

look at me in all this space nigga!
look how i operate this space, nigga!

my smile of constellations
be a gravitational pull
free fallin from black holes
found accumulation
orbiting around a dwarf sun
you know dem say
that black life matter

i move through space
like my black life matter

free

no word for survival here

we realized and buried struggle to rest
rejoiced and sang psalms for the dead

black boys
made whole
on the first try

the present

today take a leap of faith
do not be swayed or weighed
for thoughts are gravitational
found on the tips of tongues
is life and death
and words
create reality
with conviction

you are and will be and i am

and i am and will be and you are

because the present

it is a gift

to not be bound by time

and time is now

now is perfection

we are history

and black boys are lost in time

and black boys are doomed by time

our humanity is stuck in time

and i took time to improve on silence

found past bartering my future seeds

trauma was trapping truth

light could not speak through language

and i took time to improve on language

and i took time to improve

and i took time to improve on silence

heard my inner

black boy say that i am

and i am and will be and you are

and i am

because the present

It is a gift

to not be bound by time

and time is

now is perfection

Dear Brody

I love you and I cannot express that enough. It is important for me to openly express my love for you, and for you to know that it is without condition. I have seen countless examples of black boys who grow up not knowing how to receive and give affection. I have seen how it conflicts and afflicts their grasp of masculinity. I have seen how it constricts and boxes their idea of self. I have seen how that notion of self births a seed that festers in the pits of their stomach, consequentially consuming them till all they know is isolation, fear, and chaos. I never wanted that for you. It's important to know that on my happiest days I sit and dream of possibilities for you. Dreams that are not selfish in nature, but rather hopeful that you are given the space to become the best you. Whatever that is, I will still love you, your mother will still love you, Nana and Paris will still love you. It is equally important for you to know this because there will be days where you will question if you are in fact human or rather some other thing that doesn't deserve love. On my worst days, I fear that you forget that there is love for you, and the question if you are the other becomes a reality that you accept. This reality disabled and stifled many black men before you, swallowing their ability to dream. And if there is one thing i want for you, it is to dream and to dream often.

Love Always,

Your uncle

For black boys who have no home

Appendix: Reflective Essay

My anti-curriculum—

Educating while black: Community-building and issues of race in the classroom

It is here, on campuses and in classrooms, where we have been made to believe that change can happen. We are told that if we facilitate and encourage difficult discussions, we can foster environments that move beyond tolerance of differences and embrace inclusion. Inclusive environments allow students to thrive without the trivialization of their narrative and life experiences. Unfortunately, in my own experience, such environments remain an ideal, not a reality. It saddens me that we are only tolerant—not welcoming—of people who have brown and black faces. In higher education, a space that is made to shape our beliefs, habits, and skills, we are visibly absent. In this space, diversity and inclusion seem to be buzzwords rather than actual practices. This shows on campus; it shows in the classroom; it shows in the curriculum.

While engaging with activists, grassroots organizations, and artists that rally around issues plaguing inner city communities, I have become familiar with the way that racism and anti-blackness infect every facet of society. Unfortunately, such issues seem quite distant from the hearts and minds of most students who occupy spaces of higher education. In my experience as a student and teacher, I have found a chilling silence that covers the class when speaking about racism, the systems that perpetuate it, and how that is internalized. That is to say, if race is brought up at all. How do educators facilitate a conversation that most students are not willing to have? More specifically, how do we get students to become more intentional about being informed on issues of race and how they manifest? When race is discussed, students and

professors alike start to fidget, sweat, and avoid eye contact. Whether they are afraid to have a conversation or they fear they will be judged for their opinion, silence is the only constant. It is that silence where non-white students and professors have had to learn to navigate. We had to learn how to navigate being both hyper-visible and invisible, being seen but not heard. We either learn how to navigate silence or risk being swallowed by it.

Educators should insist on students speaking up and writing about their experiences with racism and the systems that perpetuate it. Because it is only then, when we discuss difficult topics, that we can recognize our own biases and work towards moving past them. Instead, we fall victim to the jaws of silence menacing the classroom. The strain, unease, and pain of being chewed by silence is too much to bear. Consequently, discussion is skipped over or cut short, and silence is filled by topics that are easier to discuss. You know the message silence sends to students. You know that silence reinforces erasure and eradication. You know that silence manifests in society.

I believe that education has the power to be transformative. The classroom can be a model for an inclusive community that discusses issues of race, systems of oppression, and silence. It is a necessity to build community. Cultivating that environment is the first step toward actual change. We must make room for each other and show respect for other cultures as they manifest in the classroom. Then we become open to new thoughts and concepts. We empower each other by lifting individual voices with hope of transforming the collective. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks offers a similar sentiment. hooks is explicit in acknowledging the transformative power that education can wield—specifically when it is “rooted in respect for multiculturalism” (40). As an educator, encouraging vulnerability is an important facet in creating an atmosphere

conducive to building community in the classroom. However, educators have historically positioned themselves as dictators (see Freire)¹ that students take orders from, separating themselves from the notion of community and the idea that we learn together. Such teaching practices do not build community. As bell hooks says, “empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who themselves are unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive” (21). So it is imperative that we hold space for mistakes, errors, and dissent—with the understanding that these are how we learn from each other. However, it all starts with being open to becoming vulnerable enough to share perspective.

Like hooks, I “enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build community in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor” (hooks, 40). One activity I begin class with in order to establish community and vulnerability is a call and response—followed by asking students to tell at least three people they are glad they are here and appreciate them. The call and response is a technique I picked up hosting and performing at open mics and shows. The call and response is simple: I say “light” and you say “love,” repeated three times. This allows each person to take up space in the room as individuals while acknowledging their connection to everyone else. I also ask students to get up and greet their classmates to physically recognize

¹ Paolo Freire: “Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teachers existence—but unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher.”

each other's presence. Interacting with every classmate by telling them you appreciate them confirms each other's humanity.

I also intentionally weave the “story platform” throughout my creative writing course curriculum. The story platform is a model of popular education that I learned through practice and participation in grassroots community organizing with the Midwest Culture Lab and Ohio Student Association. It derives from a narrative concept in which a harmony of diverse but connected stories can be told in varied voices through an array of mediums. These stories are authentic ones, created by those in the community speaking on their community issues. The story platform helps students to understand that we should care what happens with each other, regardless of where we came from. When we hold space for multiple stories to exist, we build community. It also leaves room to analyze our similarities and understand our differences. We move forward with the knowledge that all of our stories are entangled.

I use this model to frame writing prompts, readings, and discussions. For example, one writing exercise that was successful in my classroom instructed students to identify three things they were grateful for and three things they forgave themselves for. This prompt allowed everyone to take an introspective look at themselves and recount their experiences as an acceptable subject in class. Participating in this exercise allowed the students to understand that there is an expectation that we all bring our experiences to class and unpack them together. It also reinforced the notion that we are a learning community. Over the course of the semester, the students became more comfortable sharing comments and stories about things like whether they forgave themselves for oversleeping, not rooming with the right people, staying in bad relationships, or arguing with

parents. The dialogue is centered around vulnerability and self realization, and it creates a safe space for everyone to open up.

A second example of how the story platform manifested in my classroom is through reading diverse literature. Literature that does not just speak to a specific existence but rather to a multitude of races, genders, abilities, and sexualities. Through reading literature that is diverse we learn to hear and recognize other people's stories. Ta'Nehisi Coates' memoir *Between The World & Me* contains a powerful description of the way I try to approach curriculum in my classroom: "I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was a jail for other people's interests. The library is open, unending, free" (48). Learning should be fluid and relative, encompassing a community approach: I learn from you, you learn from me, and we learn from each other. We should not only consume mainstream stories. When we read diverse stories we push back against being captive to other people's interests. We are not just hearing from one perspective. We are intentionally practicing becoming more inclusive. In addition it is important to include non-traditional texts—comedy specials, music, spoken word, poetry, speeches, and hybrid forms. By including a variety of texts (for example, I used Danez Smith, Don Mee Choi, Octavia Butler, Christopher Nolan, and Eminem), students' understanding of creative writing as a discipline is expanded. Also, students can learn how different types of texts depict race and diversity.

Finally, the story platform manifested in my classroom through discussion. After each exercise and reading, we held space for discussion. Discussion is imperative in the learning process. It gives students a chance to speak their opinion and experience. Ironically, one of the most

successful and engaged class discussions about race I had was by accident. I asked students to take five minutes to respond about whether social media has had a positive or negative impact on society and share their responses. The students' answers varied. One white male student replied that he felt social media had a positive impact, specifically economically. He said that technology, now an integral part of our lives, has generated a lot of revenue and opportunities for employment. One white female student responded that social media had a negative impact because it has led people to hide behind masks. She went on to depict her own experience on social media, how people on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram can demean other people without any real consequences. A black female student replied to her by stating that it was both positive and negative. Social media has a positive impact because it has exposed menacing and murderous acts of law enforcement. However, social media has a negative impact because their platforms are making money off the views, even on clicks of murder footage. The class discussion then moved to current events happening in America—topics such as why some black people view the cops in a certain light and if kneeling during the national anthem is disrespectful. Watching and hearing students eagerly wait their turn to share their perspective and voice their opinions put a smile on my face from ear to ear. What started out as a five-minute free-write became a forty-minute discussion. I did not complete what I had originally planned for the lesson because what we did in class that day was more important. The occasion reminded me to leave room for discovery through discussion.

In his article, "Ferguson, Whiteness as Default, & the Teaching of Creative Writing," David Mura talks about the lack of white poets speaking about race and his experience at the

Association of Writers & Writing Program Annual Conference in 2015. None of the white poets, Mura writes, “thought to write a poem alluding to any of the events over this past year which have changed our national dialogue. None of them thought the topic of race was something they needed to address.” Mura’s experience is consistent with my experience leading and participating in creative writing workshops. I wanted to have my students write and talk about race. However, the latter proved to be more difficult than I expected, especially at Miami University. In individual conferences, when asked why they did not want to share during class, students responded that they were terrified of saying the wrong thing. To build familiarity, I assigned at least one writing prompt per week that was rooted in an aspect of identity. These prompts ranged from “Write about a time you were made to feel uncomfortable or scared” to “Do you think racism is still a major problem?” I noticed students found the first prompt easier. They explicitly recounted their experience, whether it was a pressure situation in sports, school, or when they walked home. When I opened the floor to allow them to share their experience with the class most students were eager to share. Most of the class spoke fearlessly and passionately. However, when it came time to share their answer to the question ‘Do you think racism is still a major problem in America?’ there was silence and a stark difference between the ways the students engaged in conversation. Even after shifting to smaller group discussions, there was little to no dialogue or fruitful conversation. Their verbal responses were mostly surface level, contrasting the written responses. This was defeating for me, especially after having students actively engaging in previous discussions.

When I spoke to other black educators, they were able to ground me with perspective. They have all had similar experiences leading the classroom or being in a classroom when topics of race

came up. They assured me that the students' silence was not an indictment of my ability as an educator. Rather my classroom dynamic reflects society's unwillingness to have difficult conversations regarding race. My conclusion was that having a black male teacher asking a predominantly white class to speak up and talk about privilege and systems of oppression was a battle—one that I was consistently losing until I made it a requirement every student had to speak. They were no longer able to hide behind their silence. Although this made me feel as if I was coercing students, I can defend the practice. Class discussions of issues of race ought to be required in order to improve students' understanding that silence is a luxury not afforded to everybody. The students understood this when it started affecting their grades.

I am still trying to find the best way to navigate the silence that holds the class hostage when discussing race. In my experience, we cannot learn from things we are afraid to discuss. We cannot discuss things that we are afraid to recognize. Before significant change can happen in higher education there has to be a shift in the way we approach and discuss race. A campus can offer a true welcome to people of color not by offering lip service support, but by making a commitment to understand how we are all complicit in enabling systemic racism. Finances and resources need to be committed toward creating an inclusive environment. In this way, brown and black faces on our college campuses can begin to be recognized and seen.

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